

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Thursday, 16 November 2006

PRESENT: Councillor MP Howell – Chairman
Councillor R Hall – Vice-Chairman

Councillors:	RE Barrett	RF Bryant
	Mrs SM Ellington	Mrs EM Heazell
	SGM Kindersley	MJ Mason
	DC McCraith	DH Morgan
	CR Nightingale	AG Orgee
	Mrs HM Smith	RT Summerfield
	Dr SEK van de Ven	

Councillors SM Edwards and Mrs DSK Spink MBE were in attendance, by invitation.

Officers:	Patrick Adams	Senior Democratic Services Officer
	Greg Harlock	Chief Executive
	Tim Wetherfield	Head of Policy and Communication

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor CAED Murfitt.

The Chairman welcomed Councillor AG Orgee to his first meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 October 2006 were accepted as a correct record subject to the following amendment:

- The words "Councillor Edwards" be replaced with "The Communications Manager" at the start of the first sentence of the final paragraph on page 6.

Bus Service Sub-Group

Councillor R Hall agreed to arrange the first meeting of the Bus Service Sub-Group, which will discuss the issue of bus services in the District and the consultation strategy with the County Council. It was also agreed that as the Planning and Economic Development portfolio holder Councillor Mrs DSK Spink will be kept informed of any recommendations coming out of the Sub-Group.

Citizen Advice Bureaux using space at the Council Office

The Senior Democratic Services Officer agreed to ascertain whether any progress had been made with regard to the possibility of the Citizen Advice Bureaux hiring out Council office space, which had been raised at October's meeting.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors SGM Kindersley, DC McCraith and AG Orgee declared personal interests as County Councillors.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

None.

5. SCRUTINY & OVERVIEW COMMITTEE AGENDA PROGRAMME

Land drainage

It was agreed that Councillor Dr SEK van de Ven would bring a report to the Committee on a Land Drainage issue in the New Year. Officers from this Council and the County Council had expressed their intention to attend.

Partnership working with the County Council

Due to a number of concerns members had regarding partnership working with the County Council, the Committee agreed to include this issue on the Committee's agenda programme.

Cambridgeshire Horizons

It was noted that this issue would be discussed at Council next week. In view of this it was agreed that a decision on whether to discuss this matter at the Committee's next meeting in December would be made by the Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Councillor SGM Kindersley, who had raised this matter.

Overheads and accounts

With the agreement of the Chief Executive, the Committee decided to scrutinise the Departmental and Central Overhead accounts at its next meeting in December.

General Fund and Revenue estimates

The Committee agreed that the Chairman and Vice-Chairman would meet as usual with the Chief Executive and the Resources, Staffing and Information and Customer Services portfolio holder to discuss the General Fund and Revenue estimates. The monitors of this portfolio were invited to attend. Other members of the Committee were encouraged to examine the estimates and to attend this meeting if they had any queries.

Strategic Risk Register

It was suggested that the bi-annual officer group called the Safety Committee should report its findings to the Scrutiny Committee. It was agreed that the Chairman, Councillor Edwards, Councillor Mrs EM Heazell and Councillor Dr SEK van de Ven would ascertain the most effective way this issue could be scrutinised.

East of England Plan report

It was noted that the Council had already responded to the Inspector's recommendations regarding this report, but that the Government had not yet published its proposed modifications. These were expected by the end of the year. Councillor Mrs DSK Spink reminded the Committee that the Plan detailed what was expected for the next 20 years and the Committee agreed to wait until the Government had responded before deciding whether to scrutinise this issue.

6. REPORTS FROM MONITORS

Community Development

This Group had not met since the last meeting. Its next meeting would be held on 23 November 2006.

Conservation, Sustainability and Community Planning

This Group met on 3 November 2006 and in the absence of the two monitors the Chairman and Vice-Chairman had attended. The Chairman stated that it had been a productive meeting, which had highlighted the lack of choice for portfolio holders, due to

budgetary constraints.

Environmental Health

This Group had met on 24 October and had been attended by Councillors Mrs CAED Murfitt and RF Bryant from the Committee. The monitors had been encouraged to play a full part in the proceedings and were thanked for their input.

Housing

This Group had met on 8 November 2006 and had been attended by Councillors RE Barrett and Mrs EM Heazell. Councillor Mrs Heazell explained that as part of the DLO recovery plan a DLO Strategic Management Board had been set up. The Housing portfolio holder was currently considering the offer made by the Monitors that they attend the meetings of this Board. The Committee **recommended** that the portfolio holder permit the two monitors to attend the meetings of the Strategic Management Board.

Planning and Economic Development

It was understood that the meeting of 21 November 2006 had been postponed to 15 December.

Resources, Staffing, Information and Customer Services

This Group had not met since the last meeting. Its next meeting would be held on 21 November 2006.

7. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2007/08 TO 2010/11

Councillor SM Edwards, the Resources, Staffing, Information and Customer Services portfolio holder, presented this report, which focussed on the General Fund, and highlighted the approach towards achieving a balanced strategy. It was noted that last week's Cabinet had recommended to Council the approval of the Medium Term Financial Strategy based on Appendix 3B and the full savings in Appendix 2.

Risks

Concern was expressed at the list of unquantifiable spending pressures in Appendix 1, as any one of the 20 unquantifiable spending pressures could have serious financial implications for the Council.

Risk: implementing Climate Change Bill

In response to questioning, Councillor Edwards agreed that the possible implications of the Climate Change Bill were a real concern to the Council. It was suggested that the Climate Change Meeting should meet to discuss this issue.

Risk: homelessness

Concern was expressed at the possibility of further costs in providing housing advice and dealing with homelessness cases, especially in the event of a downturn in the housing market.

Risk: financing the restructuring of the second and third tiers

In response to questioning, Councillor Edwards reported that there would have to be a strengthening of the third and fourth tiers as a consequence of the redundancies of staff in the top and second tiers.

The Chief Executive explained that it would be meaningless to try and estimate the savings that will result from the second tier restructuring before the process was agreed and the posts to be made redundant were identified.

Risk: Local Government Pension Scheme

Councillor Edwards explained the changes to the Local Government Pension Scheme. The exact details of the Scheme had not yet been agreed.

Saving: phasing out postal payments

Councillor Edwards explained that the Council will save money by phasing out the acceptance of payment by cheque. He recognised Members' concerns regarding this matter, which was why he had taken the decision to phase it out, instead of an immediate cessation, as this would give the Council time to discuss alternate methods of payment, such as direct debit, with those residents who still paid bills by cheque.

Saving: increasing the cost of a summons

Councillor Edwards explained that the cost of a summons for non payment would be increased from £15 to £65. He hoped that this would act as a deterrent resulting in fewer missed payments.

Saving: bin delivery charge

A new bin delivery charge would be introduced for new properties and this would be paid by the developer.

Saving: reduction in maintenance cost at Cambourne

The budget for Grounds Maintenance around the office in Cambourne would be reduced by 50%.

Saving: cheaper visual impairment software

It was understood that although the Council would not now be paying £4,700 for enhancing the web site for the visually impaired, improvements would be made with the introduction of a cheaper software package, which was currently being used by East Cambridgeshire District Council.

Saving: office space

Councillor Edwards agreed that if possible the Council's available office space should be rented out to a partner organisation and he announced his intention to formalise the process of approaching suitable organisations regarding this opportunity.

Saving: staff buses and travel allowance

It was noted that the provision of staff buses and the extra travel allowance due to the move to Cambourne was due to cease from 30 April 2008. Concern was expressed about the possible loss of staff as a result of this. The Chief Executive replied that he was aware of the issues facing individual members of staff. He explained that the use of the staff bus had been disappointing and so it had been made available to new staff, who now made up half the users. Councillor Edwards added that the cessation date of this service had been known since its inception.

Saving: Milton Country Park

Councillor Edwards stated that the proposed £75,000 savings from Milton Country Park's budget was achievable. It was understood that actually reducing this budget by more than 50% could prove very difficult due to recharges from other staff working in other sections.

Saving: interest from capital reserves

The Council planned to hold back £100,000 of allocations to capital grant reserves, which will lead to an increase in the amount of interest earned. It was understood that for the purposes of the Medium Term Financial Strategy, inflation had been calculated at 2.5%.

Saving: car parks

By passing responsibility for car parks to the parish councils the Council could save £11,500. It was suggested that the Council should retain ownership of car parks in villages that had been designated as rural centres. However, it was countered that in terms of cost and the number of residents it would benefit, this would be an inappropriate use of Council funds.

Saving: Travellers

In response to questioning Councillor Edwards confirmed that he was taking legal advice on the possibility of claiming back legal costs as a consequence of the successful action taken by the Council in the High Court.

The Head of Policy and Communications explained that following a decision taken by Council in January 2006 funds that had been earmarked for planning enforcement on Travellers' sites could also be used for all Traveller related issues.

It was expected that the Council could earn £3,900 by offering staff time on Traveller issues to neighbouring authorities.

Stock Condition Survey

Councillor Edwards stated that he would wait until the Stock Condition Survey was completed before deciding whether he supported a transfer of the housing stock.

Approach to Government

It was noted that the Council was still awaiting a response from the Local Government Minister to Andrew Lansley MP's request for an urgent meeting to discuss the Council's financial situation.

The Chief Executive explained that the Government had calculated that the Council would receive council tax from new homes at the average rate for district authorities, despite the fact that the Council had been capped and had been forced by the Government to levy its tax at well below the average rate.

It was stated that although the Council had areas of deprivation, these were too small to register on the Government indices.

It was suggested that the Council should inform the Government that it will only perform its statutory duties, as the authority did not have the resources to do anything else.

Revising the Medium Term Financial Strategy

Councillor Edwards explained that the Medium Term Financial Strategy was a live document, which would be revised twice a year.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Edwards and the Chief Executive for their informative answers.

8. SCRUTINY AND OVERVIEW COMMITTEE WEBPAGE

The Senior Democratic Services Officer presented this report, which updated the Committee on the development of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee webpage on the recommendation of the Scrutiny Sub-Group. The development of the consultative function on the webpage was highlighted. It was understood that there were no extra financial costs for the improvement of the webpage as the Council already owned the necessary software and storage space.

It was noted that photographs had been taken at this meeting and would be included on the webpage. It was agreed that the Council needed to be aware that not all residents had broadband.

The Committee supported the improvements to the Scrutiny webpage.

9. TO NOTE THE DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee **NOTED** the following future meeting dates:

2006: 21 December

2007: 18 January, 15 February, 15 March, 19 April & 17 May

The Meeting ended at 4.05 p.m.
