

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Thursday, 21 December 2006

PRESENT: Councillor R Hall – Chairman
Councillor RF Bryant – Vice-Chairman

Councillors:	Mrs EM Heazell	SGM Kindersley
	MJ Mason	DC McCraith
	Mrs CAED Murfitt	CR Nightingale
	Mrs HM Smith	RT Summerfield

Councillors Dr DR Bard, SM Edwards, Mrs DP Roberts and Mrs DSK Spink MBE were in attendance, by invitation.

Officers:	Patrick Adams	Senior Democratic Services Officer
	Greg Harlock	Chief Executive
	Simon McIntosh	Corporate Manager for Policy, Performance and Partnerships
	Tim Wetherfield	Head of Policy and Communication

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Mrs SM Ellington, MP Howell, DH Morgan, AG Orgee and Dr SEK van de Ven.

In the absence of the Chairman, Councillor R Hall became acting Chairman and the Committee agreed that Councillor RF Bryant should be Vice-Chairman for this meeting.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 November 2006 were accepted as a correct record, subject to the following amendments:

- In the third paragraph in minute 7, the words “advisory group” were substituted with the word “meeting”.
- The first sentence under the heading “Risk: Local Government Pension Scheme” be amended to read “Councillor Edwards explained the changes to the Local Government Pension Scheme.”
- In the last sentence under the heading “Saving: interest from capital reserves” the figure of 3.5% be amended to 2.5%.
- The word Traveller or Travellers be capitalised throughout the minutes.
- The words “was so” be removed from the second paragraph under the heading “Approach to Government”.

Strategic Management Board

Councillor Mrs DP Roberts responded to the recommendation made by the Committee that the two monitors of the Housing portfolio holder attend meetings of the Strategic Management Board by stating that this was a small quarterly meeting, which she

attended with officers and a tenant representative to check that agreed procedures were being implemented at the DLO. The Board reported to the Housing portfolio holder meetings so the monitors would be kept informed of any developments. For these reasons Councillor Mrs Roberts was declining the Committee's request that the two monitors attend meetings of this Board.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

None.

5. DRAFT AGENDA PROGRAMME AND PROGRAMME OF KEY DECISIONS

Councillor Hall introduced this item on the Committee's agenda programme and invited suggestions for items to be discussed at next month's meeting.

Post Office closures

After a brief discussion the Committee agreed that the organisation Postwatch be invited to report to January's meeting on the number of post offices in the District that were likely to be closed.

Stock Condition Survey

Councillor Mrs Roberts suggested that the Committee should focus on the implications that the Stock Condition Survey would have on the Housing Revenue Account. The Survey was due to be completed in March 2007 and so the Committee agreed to put this matter on the agenda programme, provisionally for April's meeting.

Corporate Government Inspection (CGI) Report

It was agreed that the Committee should examine the CGI report but recognised that it would not be available before January's meeting. This item was put on the agenda programme, to be discussed once the CGI report had been published.

Lettings Policy Advisory Group

It was noted that this Advisory Group had held its first meeting and that the agenda programme needed to be amended to reflect this.

Cambridgeshire Horizons

Councillor MJ Mason expressed concern about a policy statement that had been made by the Council on its relationship with Cambridgeshire Horizons without any input from non-executive Members. He acknowledged that, on the request of the Planning and Economic Development portfolio holder, the Planning Policy Manager had spoken to him on this matter for approximately two hours, but he remained convinced that the Committee should examine this issue.

Partnership with County Council

Councillor CR Nightingale asserted that a Task and Finish Group needed to be set up to examine the Council's partnership with the County Council, especially in light of the positioning of a relief road to Addenbrookes. At the request of Councillor Nightingale, the Head of Policy and Communication spoke on this issue. He suggested that the Committee should focus on service issues which are the District Council's responsibility and that a scrutiny of matters which this authority undertakes together with others should

focus on this Council's contribution to the partnership. The Chief Executive added that a protocol existed between this authority and the County Council, which encouraged executive Members and senior officers to attend other Council's Scrutiny Committees on specific issues of common interest in the spirit of joint working. He requested that any scrutinising of the partnership arrangements with the County Council operate within this protocol.

The Committee agreed that a Task and Finish Group be set up to examine partnership working with the County Council.

Programme of key decisions

It was noted that the version of the Forward Programme attached to the agenda had been superseded by January's Forward Programme, which had been published in the last few days.

6. REPORTS FROM MONITORS

Community Development

This Group met on 23 November 2006 and had been attended by Councillors DC McCraith and Mrs HM Smith. It was reported that it had been a productive meeting with a number of small grants awarded to deserving local bodies. However, although Milton Country Park had been discussed no mention had been made of the proposal, which was agreed by Cabinet on 14 December, to consider the closure of the park if a management transfer agreement with an external organisation could be reached by 31 August 2007. It was noted that this proposal had not been included in the recommendations in the Cabinet report. A member of the Committee made the following points:

- This issue had drifted for 6 months.
- Discussion had taken place at Cabinet that should not have occurred in public session.
- Cabinet's decision had been *ad hoc*.
- It was understood that staff had been notified of Cabinet's decision via the media.

Councillor Mrs Spink stated that the decision had been properly considered and had not been *ad hoc*. Councillor SM Edwards asserted that it was inappropriate to discuss this matter in depth in the absence of the Community Development portfolio holder.

The Head of Community Services explained that staff at the park had been notified of both the decision to make one of the part-time rangers redundant by 31 March 2007 and the need to pass the management of the park to an external organisation by 31 August 2007 if it were to remain open. The media had emphasised the negative aspects of this decision and this had possibly caused the confusion that had been alluded to by a member of the Committee. In response to questioning, the Head of Community Services explained that three staff were required to continue to deliver the service as it is currently delivered. However, these tasks had been carried out by staff based in Cambourne to cover staff sickness and it was envisaged that volunteer staff could be used from 1 April 2007.

It was noted that the park was always accessible on foot, although the facilities of the park were only open in daylight hours.

In response to suggestions that Cabinet's decision should be called-in, Councillor Summerfield explained that both local members had rejected this action, as they both

thought it more important to explore ways in which the park could remain open.

Planning and Economic Development

It was reported that neither Scrutiny Monitor had been able to attend this meeting on 15 December, although the opposition monitor, Councillor JF Williams, had been in attendance.

Resources, Staffing, Information and Customer Services

This Group had met on 21 November and 19 December since the last meeting. Councillor Summerfield reported that the latest performance figures for staff sickness and staff turnover indicated that the Council would meet its annual targets for these two performance indicators. It was noted that the contract for the distribution of South Cambs magazine had been put out to tender. In addition the Council was withholding the final payment to the contractors for the building of the Council Office, as a number of items on the snagging list had not yet been completed.

Protocol for monitors

Councillor Mrs DP Roberts asserted that a protocol should be drawn-up detailing the responsibilities of the Monitors, as it was unclear to her what their responsibilities were and, in particular, whether they should be participating in the portfolio holders' meetings or only attending as observers.

Members of the Committee made the following comments:

- The monitoring process empowered non-executive Members and a protocol, which restricted their right to participate, would be detrimental to the democratic process.
- The portfolio holder chaired their meetings and could determine whether monitors participated or just observed.
- This was a new initiative and so the Committee should wait a few months, review the process, and then decide whether a protocol was necessary.

The Committee decided not to take this matter any further.

7. DEPARTMENTAL AND CENTRAL OVERHEAD ACCOUNTS

The Chairman invited questions from the Committee.

In response to questioning Councillor Edwards explained that there could be a one-off saving of £300,000, as the Council's bill for energy consumption had not been great as had been anticipated.

It was understood that the quote by a Member at the last Council meeting, which had put the estimated value of the Council's Cambourne offices at the £10.7 million, had been based on insurance value only and had not taken account of the value of the land.

It was noted that this report had already been agreed by Cabinet and that further discussion by the Committee would be of limited use.

8. THE FUTURE OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

8 (a) Implications of the Government's White Paper on Local Government

In view of the fact that the Members had only received the Vice-Chairman's report by

e-mail two days before the meeting, the Committee agreed to defer this item to the next meeting.

8 (b) Feedback From Scrutiny Training at Newmarket on 20 November 2006

The Chairman invited comments on the training course attended by 10 Committee members in Newmarket in November. The following comments were made:

- It was disappointing that the course did not cover practical techniques on how to scrutinise issues.
- A course which focussed on the challenges facing district councils might have been more useful.
- The course implied that this authority's scrutiny function required more officer time.

In response to questioning the Senior Democratic Services Officer explained that minutes were expected to include a summary of the topic under discussion, details of the debate, including any alternative recommendations proposed and finally the conclusion made by the Committee. He concluded that reducing the Committee's minutes to a summary or action list would be of limited benefit as an officer would still have to attend the Committee and the production of action points still required officer time.

9. TO NOTE THE DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

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

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

The Meeting ended at 3.40 p.m.
