

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet held on
Thursday, 16 April 2009

PRESENT: Councillor RMA Manning (Leader of the Council)
Councillor SM Edwards (Deputy Leader of the Council and Housing Portfolio Holder)

Councillors:	Dr DR Bard	New Communities Portfolio Holder
	MP Howell	Staffing Portfolio Holder
	NIC Wright	Planning Portfolio Holder
	TJ Wotherspoon	Policy, Improvement and Communications Portfolio Holder
	Mrs SM Ellington	Environmental Services Portfolio Holder
	AG Orgee	Finance Portfolio Holder

Officers in attendance for all or part of the meeting:

Thomas Barrance	Growth Area Project Manager
Alex Colyer	Interim Executive Director, Corporate Services
Catriona Dunnett	Principal Solicitor
Steve Hampson	Executive Director
Greg Harlock	Chief Executive
Richard May	Democratic Services Manager
Jackie Sayers	Scrutiny Development Officer
Paul Williams	Equality and Diversity Officer

Councillors JD Batchelor, SGM Kindersley, MB Loynes, Mrs CAED Murfitt, CR Nightingale and RT Summerfield were in attendance, by invitation.

Procedural Items

118. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Leader was authorised to sign the Minutes of the meetings held on 10 and 12 March 2009 as correct records.

119. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

120. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

There were no public questions.

Recommendations to Council

121. HOUSING RENTS REVIEW

Cabinet considered a report recommending to Council that the housing rent increase for

the 2009-2010 financial year be revisited in light of new guidance from the Government.

Councillor SM Edwards, Housing Portfolio Holder, introduced the report, advising that the effect of the draft proposal from the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) would be an estimated rent increase of around 3.2%, instead of the 6.3% previously agreed. Use of the formula recommended by the CLG would have resulted in an increase in excess of the figure given as a maximum in the draft proposal; however, a revision had been issued since the publication of the report, which addressed this anomaly. The CLG had stated that it would give compensation, through the subsidy system, to councils agreeing to reduce their 2009-2010 increases.

Councillor Edwards drew Members' attention to the likely impact of the reduced increase on any capital receipt in the event of housing stock transfer proceeding, resulting from reduced rental income received by a housing association. Savills had estimated that this was likely to be in the region of £2 million. The associated administrative cost to the Council of agreeing a revised rent increase was estimated to be around £10,000; the Government had indicated that no compensation would be given to contribute towards this cost.

Notwithstanding these implications, Cabinet supported the recommendation that the rent increase should be reduced in accordance with CLG guidance. In doing so, Cabinet noted that members of staff currently involved in visiting tenants in connection with the Housing Futures Project had reported that tenants were expressing concern over the high level of the 2009-10 rent increase previously agreed by Council; put into context, the actual effect on tenants of an increase of around £120 per year was around fifty times greater than that of the district element of the Council Tax increase of 4.5%.

Cabinet **RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL** that a commitment be made to revise rent levels for 2009-10 in line with the final recommendation from the CLG, the final level, once agreed, to be notified to Members via the Weekly Bulletin.

122. CORPORATE PLAN 2009/10

Cabinet considered a report inviting a recommendation to Council that a final version of the Corporate Plan for 2009-2010 be agreed.

Councillor RMA Manning, Leader of the Council, introduced the report and draft plan. In doing so, he drew Members' attention to significant achievements and examples of excellent performance over the past year, making particular reference to the Council Tax and national non-domestic rate collection rates of over 99% and the recycled or composted rate of 53.2% of waste. The Leader congratulated officers in the services concerned for these achievements. The Council maintained the twelfth lowest Council Tax of any district council and had achieved an improved score for its use of resources from the Audit Commission. The district had scored highly as a desirable location in the recent place survey. The plan set out details of the Council's aims, approaches and actions for the coming year, which the Leader considered to be a realistic and achievable programme designed to address the key challenges facing the district.

Cabinet and other Members present commented on the format and content of the draft plan; the Policy, Improvement and Communications Portfolio Holder was requested to review the whole document to ensure it used plain English throughout.

Concerns were expressed at the low figures for customer satisfaction and value for money revealed by the Place Survey, in contrast to the low Council Tax and the district being seen as a desirable place in which to live and work. It was considered that these

figures could be improved through effective communication of the value for money which the district council provided.

Cabinet commented on the draft Corporate Plan, taking into account the questions at paragraph 6 of the report before

- (a) **RESOLVING** that the draft Corporate Plan 2009-10 be approved, and
- (b) **RECOMMENDING TO COUNCIL** that a final version of the Corporate Plan 2009-2010 be adopted, incorporating changes put forward at the meeting and further changes to be agreed by the Chief Executive in consultation with the Policy, Improvement and Communications Portfolio Holder and notified to Council.

In making this recommendation, the Policy, Improvement and Communications Portfolio Holder advised that he welcomed contributions to developing the draft plan from all Members.

123. COMPREHENSIVE EQUALITIES POLICY 2009-2012

Cabinet considered a report recommending adoption of a Comprehensive Equalities Policy for the Council for 2009-2012.

In introducing the report, Councillor MP Howell, Portfolio Holder for Equalities, congratulated the Equalities and Diversity Officer and officers on the Equality and Diversity Steering Group for their hard work in producing a 'doing document' containing tangible, realistic and achievable actions to take forward the Council's equalities and diversity agenda.

He clarified that Appendix 1 to the strategy provided a detailed summary of points raised during workshops held to develop the strategy. It was not an action plan in itself; however, issues raised during the workshops had been picked up in the Equalities Implementation Action Plan.

Cabinet and other Members present welcomed the strategy as a document, which, through its implementation, would make positive differences to the lives of residents in the district. They welcomed in particular recent work to continue the programme of Equality Impact Assessments of the Council's activities and to establish an external Equalities Consultative Forum, which had recently held its first meeting.

In response to a question, the Portfolio Holder advised that he would request officers to send copies of the documents to parish councils.

Cabinet **RESOLVED** that the Comprehensive Equalities Policy 2009-2012 be adopted, subject to the Portfolio Holder for Equalities being authorised to make further minor editing changes prior to final publication.

124. LAND CHARGES FEES 2009-10

Cabinet considered a report explaining the implementation of the Local Authorities (Charges for Property Searches) Regulations 2008 and their impact on the Council, including the fees that could be charged for supplying property information. The report explained the calculation of fees for searches and access to property data on a cost recovery basis, and recommended that Cabinet agree the introduction of new fees whilst amending current land charges fees policy for 'official' searches dealt with by the Land

Charges team.

Councillor AG Orgee, Finance Portfolio Holder, introduced the report and recommendations. In doing so, he drew Members' attention to the detailed breakdown of component costs which made up the overall cost of a CON29R personal search, tabled at the meeting. Councillor Orgee advised that the overall cost of a CON29R electronic search was £63.50, not £63.90 as stated on Agenda page 87. He advised further that the estimated income based on search activity levels from January 2008 to December 2008, referred to in paragraph 21 of the report, was £263k, not £271k as stated, therefore the anticipated increased revenue should be £19k.

Cabinet supported the recommended charging policy in order to meet the requirement of the charges regulations, **RESOLVING:**

- (1) That the menu of charges set out in the schedule of registers and information for local enquiries searches, attached at Agenda pages 89-112, be agreed as the charges to be payable by third parties for access to that information.
- (2) That the revised schedule of Local Land Charges fees be agreed as set out in Appendix A to the report, incorporating the correction of the CON29R fee set out on Agenda page 87 and the detailed breakdown of individual elements of the CON29R charge of £63.50, tabled at the meeting.

125. RESPONDING TO THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN AND REVIEW OF NNDR HARDSHIP RELIEF POLICY

Cabinet considered a report providing an update on the progress made with actions to alleviate the impacts of the economic downturn on the district.

Councillor MB Loynes, Member Champion for the Economic Downturn, introduced the report, thanking the New Communities Service for its hard work in taking forward the initiatives referred to within it. Councillor Loynes made specific reference to forthcoming events for local businesses focussing on public sector procurement and skills and tactics for business survival. In helping businesses to survive, local jobs would be secured. Councillor Loynes requested input and ideas from all Members to assist his work with local businesses, and advised that he would produce quarterly update reports to Cabinet, setting out further progress with actions.

Councillor NIC Wright, Economic Development Portfolio Holder, thanked Councillor Loynes for his work to address the economic downturn before drawing Cabinet's attention to specific initiatives and recommendations contained in the report. In addition to the recommendations set out in the report, Councillor Wright requested a further Cabinet decision to assist important community businesses in rural settlements such as public houses, shops and post offices. Members were reminded that the Council had in place a scheme to provide relief from business rates for businesses fulfilling these criteria, consequently Cabinet instructed the Interim Executive Director for Corporate Services to take steps to encourage greater take-up of the scheme. The view was expressed that the criterion restricting eligibility of relief under this scheme to businesses within settlements with populations of below 3,000 should be reviewed.

During debate of this item, Members supported the proposal to investigate the development of specific planning policy documents relating to economic development, as means of bringing various strands together from different parts of the Council's planning policies to provide a central source of relevant guidance. In addition, the New Communities Portfolio Holder advised that economic development would be taken into account prominently as part of the review of the Core Strategy for development in the

district.

Cabinet supported the proposed revisions to the Council's business rate (NNDR) Hardship Policy intended to make the application process simpler and more responsive to the current economic situation. It was agreed that the revised policy should apply to applications relating to the current rating year, backdating awards where appropriate.

Those present suggested the following further measures be considered to assist businesses during the economic downturn:

- Lobbying brewers' federations to ease the financial burden on public houses.
- Lobbying internet service providers to improve Broadband Internet access in rural areas, to encourage homeworking;
- Establish a support network for small businesses to stimulate the exchange of useful information and ideas.

Cabinet **RESOLVED:**

- (a) To note ongoing work and actions which will be completed during the next financial year.
- (b) To authorise the presentation of a report to the Planning and New Communities Portfolio Holders bringing forward options for the preparation of planning policy documents (SPD or DPD) to address the needs of business and economic development in the district.
- (c) To approve the revised policy for NNDR hardship relief, as attached at appendix B to the report, to apply to applications relating to the current rating year, including backdating where appropriate.
- (d) To request that Councillor Loynes submit quarterly updates on the progress of actions to future meetings, including a year-end report in April 2010 evaluating the work undertaken.
- (e) To instruct the Interim Executive Director for Corporate Services to take steps to promote fuller take-up of the Rural Rate Relief scheme.

Standing Items

126. ISSUES ARISING FROM THE SCRUTINY AND OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

There were no issues arising from the Scrutiny and Overview Committee.

127. UPDATES FROM CABINET MEMBERS APPOINTED TO OUTSIDE BODIES

No updates were given.

**The Meeting ended at 3.35
p.m.**
