

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the Committee held on the
12th February 2004 at 2 p.m.

PRESENT:	Chairman	SGM Kindersley	
	Vice-Chairman	MP Howell	
Councillors:	SJ Agnew	NN Cathcart	Mrs GJ Smith
	RE Barrett	Mrs J Hughes	DALG Wherrell
	EW Bullman	EL Monks	LJ Wilson
	RF Bryant	WH Saberton	

Councillors DR Bard, CC Barker, JD Batchelor, RF Collinson, SA Hatton, Mrs EM Heazell, Mrs DP Roberts, Mrs DSK Spink & RT Summerfield attended by invitation.

Officers:	Cameron Adams	- Strategic Development Officer
	Kari Greaves	- Head of Shire Homes
	Greg Harlock	- Finance and Resources Director
	David Lord	- Assistant Solicitor
	Andy O'Hanlon	- Arts Development Officer
	Stephen Rizzo	- Building Control Manager
	Dale Robinson	- Chief Environmental Health Officer
	Patrick Adams	- Senior Democratic Services Officer

Kate Lawrance from Arts in Cambs on Tour (ACT)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from the following members of the Committee:
Councillors PL Stroude.

2. MINUTES

The minutes of 22nd January 2004 were agreed as a correct record.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor DALG Wherrell declared a personal interest in item 7(h) Revenue and Capital Estimates for Sustainability and Community Planning as his wife was a Mobile Warden.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

None.

5. DRAFT AGENDA PROGRAMME

The Committee **NOTED** the Draft Agenda Programme.

6. ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND, EAST – RURAL TOURING

The Arts Development Officer presented this report which described the role of Arts Council England: East in supporting professional arts touring services in South Cambridgeshire through Arts in Cambs on Tour (ACT) and highlighted possible

reductions in the funding of the company by the Arts Council in 2004 to 2005. He praised ACT for its professional performances at affordable prices. He informed the Committee that the issue of funding was an issue for all arts organisations supported by the Council and he suggested that an Arts Development Advisory Group was set up. It was noted that in the table at page 13, paragraph 9, the years in the final column header should be amended to 2003-2004.

Councillor Mrs GJ Smith expressed concern at the funding of ACT and suggested that an external scrutiny of Arts Council England: East (ACE) be considered. She stated that Regional Arts Lottery Programme (RALP) funding was intended to be temporary and the withdrawal of ACE funding made this an urgent matter.

Kate Lawrance from ACT informed the Committee that ACT was professionally organised but in the control of local people. Audiences averaged around 80, which was impressive considering the size of some village halls. She stated that when ACT was set up, ACE awarded a starter grant of £5,000 and it was hoped that this would increase substantially in future years. However, the grant had only increased with inflation to £5,450 and ACE have now announced that all grants below £20,000 would be scrapped next year. It was understood that this made ACT reliant on the Regional Arts Lottery Programme (RALP) which was time limited.

In response to questioning Kate Lawrance stated:

- Funding would be sought from other organisations, but substantial core funding would still be required.
- This Council contributed more than other authorities, but in return more performances were made in the District of South Cambridgeshire.
- ACT were committed to providing high quality productions at a subsidised price.
- ACT performed in villages that had the facilities and the volunteers to support their performances.

It was suggested that successful applications to temporary lottery funding could prove damaging in the long run as it could encourage other organisations to withdraw their funding.

The Committee **RECOMMENDED** to the portfolio holder for Community Development that

- a) An Arts Development Advisory Group be set up to inform the next District Arts Strategy 2005-2010. The portfolio holder for Community Development to Chair the Group and the membership consisting of the seven Council nominated observers on the governing bodies of arts organisations funded by this Council.
- b) A letter be sent from the portfolio holder for Community Development to East Cambridgeshire, Fenland, Huntingdonshire District Councils and the County Council, who were part of the partnership project that formed ACT, to obtain their views regarding the funding of ACT.

The Committee **AGREED** that a letter be sent to ACE to asking them to explain the change in their funding policy, especially in relevance to rural touring arts groups.

7.(a) REVENUE AND CAPITAL ESTIMATES FOR THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PORTFOLIO

The portfolio holder for Community Development and the Finance and Resources Director were invited to answer questions regarding the Revenue Estimates up to the year 2004/05 and the Capital Programme up to 2006/07 for the Community Development portfolio.

Travellers

The Chairman informed the Group that he had liaised with the Head of Community Services regarding the two Travellers sites at Whaddon and Blackwell which were run by the Council on behalf of the County Council. The Head of Community Services had informed the Chairman that the County Council reimbursed the Council for the cost incurred through the running of the sites. The Community Development portfolio holder stated that the aim was to ensure that the sites were run at no cost or profit to the Council. She asserted that running legitimate sites gave the Council more credibility when attempting to take action against illegal encampments.

It was suggested that the cost of running the Travellers Consultative Group should be shared amongst the relevant departments. The Community Development portfolio holder agreed to raise this matter with the Head of Community Services.

Milton Country Park

The Committee expressed concern over the £272,193 spent this year on Milton Country Park and it was suggested that as 40%-50% of visitors were from Cambridge the City Council should either make a contribution to the running of the park or offer the District's residents a similar discount to that offered to City residents for City Council sponsored facilities. It was understood that the Head of Community Services opposed these suggestions on the grounds that the District's residents used more of the City's facilities than the reverse and as a consequence this Council would lose out in any systematic attempt to redress any imbalance. The Community Development portfolio holder stated that a detailed report examining issues such as staffing would be required to inform any debate regarding sharing the costs of the Park with another authority. She added that Milton Country Park was one of the few facilities that the Council ran and asking the City Council for funding would invite counter claims for City Council facilities. It was noted that previous attempts to secure discounts for the District's residents attending City facilities had failed.

The Committee **REQUESTED** that Councillor Mrs DP Roberts ask the Head of Community Services to approach the City Council and ask:

- a) If the District's residents could be given a discount to City Council facilities.
- b) Whether the City Council would be prepared to share costs of running Milton Country Park.

It was noted that the increase of over £27,000 in the Milton Country Park budget was due to the increase in staffing and IT costs.

Recharging

The Finance and Resources Director explained that approximately £750,000 had been spent on recruitment and retention and approximately £1,500 per member of staff had been spent on IT improvements. These costs had been recharged to the relevant portfolio holder budgets and had caused notable increases. The Sustainability and Community Planning portfolio holder explained that the cuts he

had made in his budget had been obscured by the recharging, making it difficult to highlight the savings made.

The Committee **REQUESTED** that a report be provided on the recharging of staffing and central overhead account (including IT costs) to the portfolio budgets.

7.(b) REVENUE AND CAPITAL ESTIMATES FOR THE CONSERVATION PORTFOLIO

The portfolio holder for Conservation and the Finance and Resources Director were invited to answer questions regarding the Revenue Estimates up to the year 2004/05 and the Capital Programme up to 2006/07 for the Conservation portfolio.

In response to questioning the Conservation portfolio holder explained that any uncommitted reserves, such as those in the Historic Building Grants, would be discussed by the portfolio holder early in the next financial year. It was understood that the purchasing homes at risk was rare and the Finance and Resources Director explained that at the last occurrence the Council made a profit on the resale. The Conservation Manager advised the Committee of the work of Green Belt Project.

7.(c) REVENUE AND CAPITAL ESTIMATES FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH PORTFOLIO

The portfolio holder for Environmental Health and the Finance and Resources Director were invited to answer questions regarding the Revenue Estimates up to the year 2004/05 and the Capital Programme up to 2006/07 for the Environmental Health portfolio.

Pest Control

In response to questioning the Environmental Health portfolio holder explained that the Council's Pest Control section was in competition with the private sector and, after a recent Best Value review, increased its charges to a comparable rate. However, the removal of rats and mice continue to be carried out free of charge. He added that it was in the Council's best interest not to charge for this service as rats and mice could do damage that would cost the authority more in the long run. It was understood that squirrels would only be removed free of charge for residents on benefit. It was noted that the net expenditure for pest control was £146,000 and it was agreed that the Council also provided a useful advisory service on pest control within this sum.

Stray Dogs

The Environmental Health portfolio holder explained that the Council had a statutory duty to collect stray dogs. It was noted that Wood Green no longer accepted stray animals free of charge and this was a reason for the proposed budget increase.

Licensing

The Chief Environmental Health Officer explained that it was unlawful to pass the charge of enforcing licensing rules onto the cost of a taxi licence.

Abandoned Vehicles

In response to questioning, the Environmental Health portfolio holder explained that when removing an abandoned vehicle, little effort was made to attempt to charge the owner as this could encourage arson.

Compost Bins

The Committee suggested that a charge could be made for home composting bins as this would bring the Council inline with other authorities and it would reduce the £10,000 cost to the Council. It was suggested that the Waste Management Advisory Group examine this issue. It was agreed that the provision of Compost Bins should remain.

7.(d) REVENUE AND CAPITAL ESTIMATES FOR THE HOUSING PORTFOLIO

The portfolio holder for Housing and the Finance and Resources Director were invited to answer questions regarding the Revenue Estimates up to the year 2004/05 and the Capital Programme up to 2006/07 for the Housing portfolio.

Rent Increase 2004/05

In response to questioning the Housing portfolio holder asserted that any increase in rents was regrettable but the Council was attempting to address what locally, at this time, were incompatible Government objectives:

- increasing rents to a level more in line with those of other social landlords, and
- retaining rent levels at or below the Government Guideline.

The Housing Portfolio Holder informed the Committee that any additional rent income received, as a result of imposing an increase above the Government Guideline, would involve a rent rebate penalty. This would require the Council to pay to the Department of Work and Pensions, a sum equivalent to the additional costs of housing benefit that would be awarded to tenants as a consequence of an "over Guideline" increase. The size of the rent rebate penalty was expected to be approximately half of the additional rent income received.

The Portfolio Holder went on to explain that in those instances where retaining rents at Guideline prevented otherwise more rapid progress towards rent equalisation (i.e. achieving target rents calculated in accordance with Government formulae), Officers had received confirmation from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister that the Authority would not be criticised for any consequential delay in achieving equalisation. Indeed, Officers of the ODPM were most understanding of the Council's predicament and fully accepted that the Council would not wish to incur a rent rebate penalty, merely to achieve the aim of rent equalisation earlier than would otherwise be the case.

The Portfolio Holder confirmed her expectation that, for the vast majority of properties, target rents would be achieved in the next 8-9 years.

Safety Programmes and Repairs

The Head of Shire Homes explained that the asbestos management programme and the fire safety programme were both statutory. It was understood that repairs were carried out reactively and this made budgeting more challenging.

Tenant Participation

Concern was expressed by the Committee at the increase in the cost of Tenant Participation to an estimated £203,410 in 2004/05. Councillor Mrs DP Roberts added her concern at the cost of this programme as the Council owned 6,000 houses. The Head of Shire Homes explained that the five tenant groups within the District helped to empower the Council's tenants and improved communication between the stakeholders. It was noted that the quality of the tenant participation programme would be examined by the CPA inspectors. Councillor RF Collinson stated that

Cottenham had three resident participation schemes that had resulted in improved communication between home owners and tenants. It was suggested that a detailed breakdown of the cost of tenant participation was required.

Councillor RT Summerfield expressed his concern at a possible housing budget deficit of £1.7 million. The Head of Shire Homes explained that if necessary, revenue savings out of the total Housing, Repairs and Maintenance budget of £9 million would have to be made.

Equity Share Housing

It was understood that the Equity Share Advisory Group would be reformed in the near future to discuss specific problems regarding the inequalities of the scheme. It was noted that the Council should be charging equity shareholders the cost relating to their individual scheme, rather than a set fee determined for the district as a whole.

Bus Services

The housing portfolio holder stated that she had contacted the County Council regarding the removal of a bus service that served the sheltered housing scheme in Meldreth. It was understood that a dial-a-ride scheme was planned for this area.

The Finance and Resources Director explained that a £34 million expenditure was planned on the Housing Capital Programme over the next three years. This would be spent on affordable housing.

7.(e) REVENUE AND CAPITAL ESTIMATES FOR THE INFORMATION AND CUSTOMER SERVICES PORTFOLIO

The portfolio holder for Information and Customer Services and the Finance and Resources Director were invited to answer questions regarding the Revenue Estimates up to the year 2004/05 and the Capital Programme up to 2006/07 for the Information and Customer Services portfolio.

Meeting Rooms & European Elections

It was understood that the meeting rooms at the new office in Cambourne would be larger than the current rooms at 9-11 Hills Road and an extra square footage led to an extra cost. It was understood that there would be extra funding from the Government for the administration of European Elections.

7.(f) REVENUE AND CAPITAL ESTIMATES FOR THE PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PORTFOLIO

The portfolio holder for Planning and Economic Development and the Finance and Resources Director were invited to answer questions regarding the Revenue Estimates up to the year 2004/05 and the Capital Programme up to 2006/07 for the Planning and Economic Development portfolio.

Building Control

Concern was expressed over the recent losses made by the Building Regulation Service, as the aim was to operate at no cost or profit to the Council. The Building Control Manager explained that a growing number of building works were being planned but not completed. From a budgeting point of view it was unfortunate that action taken to reverse the large profits achieved in previous years had combined with a down turn in the market and the filling of vacant posts. It was understood that 7 out of the 8 positions were now filled but three of these staff were still being trained

and the remaining vacant post would remain unfilled for the time-being. It was noted that the Building Regulation Service operates were operating in a commercial market and so an increase in charges would not necessarily lead to a balancing of the budget. The Planning and Economic Development portfolio holder explained that some developers within the District were using their own contractors and as a consequence the Council winning a disproportionate number of less profitable building developments. A proposal that fees for Schedules 1 and 2 would be increased at the beginning of April, in line with the LGA model scheme, was noted.

It was agreed, with the consent of the Leader, that a report on financial matters would be appended to the planned Cabinet report on building regulation service levels in April.

South Cambridgeshire Environment and Transport Area Joint Committee

The Planning and Economic Development portfolio holder explained that this Committee carried out valuable work, encouraged partnership and was relevant to the Council's corporate objectives of improving village life and working to achieve a better future through partnership.

Economic Development Grants

Concern was expressed over the £60,000 allocated to Economic Development grants in an area of sustained economic growth and under employment. The portfolio holder for Economic Development explained that these grants were directed towards charities dedicated to employing those who could have difficulties finding employment elsewhere. It was suggested that the Committee should receive a report on the Economic Development Grants that had been awarded this financial year to determine the worthiness of these grants. It was added that measurable outcomes needed to be assessed. The portfolio holder for Economic Development explained that reports on Economic Development Grants had been discussed by the Finance and Resources Committee under the old political structure.

The Committee **REQUESTED** a report detailing the Economic Development Grants awarded in the municipal year 2003/04, to be discussed at a subsequent meeting.

7.(g) REVENUE AND CAPITAL ESTIMATES FOR THE RESOURCES AND STAFFING PORTFOLIO

The portfolio holder for Resources and Staffing and the Finance and Resources Director were invited to answer questions regarding the Revenue Estimates up to the year 2004/05 and the Capital Programme up to 2006/07 for the Resources and Staffing portfolio.

Land Charges

The Finance and Resources Director explained that he had discussed the increase in net expenditure for the Land Charges section with the Head of Legal Services who had resolved to increase the cost of each search by £15 to reduce the expenditure and aim to operate at no cost or profit to the Council.

Membership of the LGA

It was noted that the results of a consultation on this issue showed varying degrees of support for Membership of the LGA amongst Councillors and senior officers. Councillor Mrs Spink stated that the LGA had allowed Councils to unite against the Government's plans for the abolition of the LASHG grants and ensure an amendment to their plans. It was noted that part of the benefit of LGA training

courses was to meet representatives of other Districts and discuss mutual challenges. It was understood that all District Councils were members of the LGA.

7.(h) REVENUE AND CAPITAL ESTIMATES FOR THE SUSTAINABILITY AND COMMUNITY PLANNING PORTFOLIO

The portfolio holder for Sustainability and Community Planning and the Finance and Resources Director were invited to answer questions regarding the Revenue Estimates up to the year 2004/05 and the Capital Programme up to 2006/07 for the Sustainability and Community Planning portfolio.

Tourism

Concern was expressed over the £67,000 to be spent on tourism. It was suggested that the benefits of tourism to the District was unaffected by this Council's expenditure. The portfolio holder for Sustainability and Community Planning stated that £133.6 million was brought into the region through tourism. He expressed disappointment over reports that Tourist Information at the Guildhall had failed to give basic information on this Districts tourist accommodation as the Council employed a tourist officer and the information should have been forthcoming. In response to questioning the portfolio holder for Sustainability and Community Planning stated that it was important that the information on the web-site was kept up to date as this technology was used by staff dealing with enquiries regarding tourist facilities within the District.

It was asserted that it was important that the Bed and Breakfast within the District was well publicised.

Partnership Working

It was suggested that Partnership Working was ineffective as it resulted in too many meetings and strategies, but little action. However, it was noted that achieving a better future through partnership working was one of the Council's objectives and so should be focused on.

CABs, Mobile Wardens and Council Tax

Concern was expressed that the Council's grants to Citizens' Advice Bureaux were being reduced and Village Mobile Wardens were being inadequately funded. It was suggested that as Council expenditure had increased by 15%, the sensible long term strategy was to increase Council Tax accordingly. It was noted that the level of Council Tax would be fully debated at the Council meeting on 26th February.

8. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABILITY BEST VALUE REVIEW

Councillor RF Collinson introduced this report on the progress made on implementing the recommendations of the Sustainability Best Value Review, which was submitted to the Scrutiny Committee in January 2003.

Department "Mainstreaming"

In response to questioning the Strategic Development Officer stated that all departments were responsible for working towards the Council's Corporate Objective of a sustainable future for South Cambridgeshire. The Strategic Development Officer reported the mainstreaming of sustainability was ongoing throughout the Council. The Council now needs to build upon its achievements to date and encourage further cultural change – a point confirmed by a recent survey of six local authorities which revealed successful mainstreaming remains dependent upon achieving significant

organisational change . Efforts to promote further cultural change in the Council would be enhanced by the provision of additional resource.

Sustainability Checklist

The Strategic Development Officer stated his predecessor had issued a sustainability checklist for report writers across all departments to refer to when submitting reports. The officer would now review the checklist and determine whether its future use could be monitored by the Democratic Services section.

Performance Indicators

When asked how the mainstreaming of sustainability might be improved the Strategic Development Officer suggested the introduction of Sustainability Performance Indicators would help the Council assess how well it is progressing in terms of working towards a sustainable future for the District.

Assistant Strategic Development Officer

Members of the Committee stated that this Council would find it impossible to honour its Corporate Objective regarding sustainability without employing an assistant for the Strategic Development Officer. Concern was expressed at the number of planning applications that were being submitted without being examined for sustainability implications.

The portfolio holder for Sustainability and Community Planning praised the Strategic Development Officer for his work and asserted that a new Sustainability Planning Officer was required to examine the sustainability implications of the new settlement of Northstowe.

9. REGISTRATION OF TITLES OF LAND OWNED BY THE COUNCIL

The Assistant Solicitor introduced this report, which updated the Committee on the process of up-dating the registration of title of Council properties and the legal position of the Council regarding boundary disputes involving tenants.

In response to questioning, the Assistant Solicitor explained that the Land Registry were encouraging all unregistered landowners to register their land voluntarily through public meetings and seminars.

The Assistant Solicitor estimated that the registration of all unregistered land in the District would take approximately 18 months. It was understood that this had caused a great deal of extra work for staff and had led to a secondment of an officer from Development Services.

The Committee suggested that present records be stored in the County archive, to free up storage space in the new office.

The Committee **NOTED** the report.

10. UPDATE FROM GROUNDS MAINTENANCE TASK AND FINISH GROUP

It was agreed that the Task and Finish Group should report back to the Committee after more responses from Parish Councils had been received.

11. FORWARD PROGRAMME

The Committee **NOTED** the Forward Programme.

12. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

It was noted that future meetings would be held on:
2004: 11th March, 15th April and 13th May.
All at 2.00pm unless otherwise stated.

The meeting closed at 5:45 p.m.
