

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Thursday, 19 October 2006

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

Councillors:	RF Bryant	Mrs SM Ellington
	Mrs EM Heazell	MJ Mason
	DC McCraith	Mrs CAED Murfitt
	CR Nightingale	RT Summerfield
	Dr SEK van de Ven	

Councillors Dr DR Bard, SM Edwards, Mrs VG Ford and Mrs DP Roberts were in attendance, by invitation.

Officers:	Patrick Adams	Senior Democratic Services Officer
	Richard May	Democratic Services Manager
	Simon McIntosh	Head of Community Services
	Claire Spencer	Senior Planning Officer (Transport Policy)
	Tim Wetherfield	Head of Policy and Communication

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors RE Barrett, PT Johnson, SGM Kindersley, DH Morgan and Mrs HM Smith.

It was noted that Councillor PT Johnson was resigning from the Committee and that the Conservative Group would be invited to nominate a replacement at the next meeting of Council on 26 October 2006.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 September 2006 were agreed as a correct record subject to the following amendments:

- Councillor DH Morgan's name was included in the list of Members who had sent their apologies and Councillor MJ Mason's name was removed.
- Councillor Mrs SM Ellington declared interest as a member of Swavesey parish council was included.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor DC McCraith declared a personal interest as a County Councillor.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

None.

5. DRAFT AGENDA PROGRAMME AND PROGRAMME OF KEY DECISIONS

Land drainage

Councillor van de Ven agreed to speak to the Chairman of the Land Drainage Advisory Group regarding a risk of flooding in Meldreth. She would bring this matter back to the

Committee if necessary.

Use of IT

In response to questioning Councillor SM Edwards explained that work needed to be carried out to the Virtual Private Network (VPN) to allow Councillors to access the links sent to them informing them of reports and minutes which included key words of their choice. He hoped this would be carried out shortly, but warned that he did not consider it a priority. It was noted that Councillors could access the information on the intranet that the link related to.

Council's letting policy

It was understood that a working group had been set up to examine the Council's letting policy. Councillor Mrs DP Roberts, Community Development portfolio holder, agreed that the working group should report its findings to this Committee. The Democratic Services Manager stated that the working group was likely to report in the spring.

Medium Term Financial Strategy

It was understood that the draft Medium Term Financial Strategy was due to go to Cabinet in November, with the final report to be discussed by the executive in December. In the past the Committee had scrutinised this matter prior to its discussion at Cabinet. The Committee

AGREED to discuss the Medium Term Financial Strategy at its next meeting in November.

Member/officer contract

The Committee understood that research on this matter was currently being carried out. The Committee

AGREED to discuss the member/officer contract at its meeting in January.

6. REPORTS FROM MONITORS

The Chairman presented this item which allowed monitors of portfolio holders to report on items of interest. It was agreed that the monitors should inform the Committee if their portfolio holder had not held a meeting in this reporting period.

Community Development

Councillor DC McCraith expressed his support for the decisions taken at the recent Community Development portfolio holder meeting. It was understood that due to the urgency of the decision, the awarding of a £20,000 grant to Wysing Arts had been published on the same day as the Cabinet meeting to ensure that the funding could be awarded on time.

Conservation, Sustainability and Community Planning

It was understood that the Conservation, Sustainability and Community Planning portfolio holder had not held a meeting in the last month. The next meeting would be held on 3 November at 9am. Unfortunately neither of the Committee's monitors would be able to attend, so it was hoped that either the Chairman or Vice-Chairman would be able to act as a substitute in this instance.

Environmental Health

It was noted that the Environmental Health portfolio holder had not held a meeting in the last month. The next meeting would be held on 24 October 2006.

Housing

It was understood that the Housing portfolio holder meeting had not held a meeting in the last month. The next meeting would be held on 8 November 2006.

Planning and Economic Development

It was noted that the Planning and Economic Development portfolio holder had not held a meeting in the last month. The next meeting would be held on 21 November 2006.

Resources, Staffing, Information and Customer Services

The Resources, Staffing, Information and Customer Services portfolio holder had last met on 17 October and had been attended by both of the Committee's monitors. It was understood that any relevant matters would be brought up by the monitors after the portfolio holder's presentation.

7. SCRUTINISING OF THE BUS SERVICE

The Senior Democratic Services Officer introduced this item by inviting members to consider where they would like to direct their recommendations.

Concessionary fares scheme

It was understood that not all post offices had application forms and bus passes. This was due to a supply problem from the central depot at Swindon. The Senior Planning Policy Officer (Transport) explained that officers were aware of the problem and had been sending forms and passes out to post offices that required them. Members were asked to contact the Office Manager in the planning section if they knew of any post offices that required forms or bus passes.

Frequency of buses

Concern was expressed at the inequity of the bus service throughout the District, as it appeared that the frequency of the service was not necessarily determined by the size of the community. It was understood that the County Council had details of all the bus routes in the District. However, it was noted that it was the bus companies who were responsible for the bus routes. It was also suggested that the improvements could only be made to bus services with more money from Government.

Councillor CR Nightingale stated that he had contacted both members and officers from the County Council about the change to the bus route in Shelford without success and the bus operator had flatly refused to change the route back. He explained that only 17 days notice had been given, when the statutory number was 58. The Senior Planning Policy Officer (Transport) agreed to investigate the change to the Shelford bus route.

Cambridge Area Bus Development Board

Concern was expressed at the cancellation of the meeting of the Board on 19 July 2006 due to a lack of business, even though the concessionary fares issue was headline news at the time.

The Committee **agreed** to form a Sub-Group to liaise with the Senior Planning Policy Officer (Transport) on the issue of bus services in the District. Councillor CR Nightingale, Mrs EM Heazell and Dr SEK van de Ven agreed to serve on the Sub-Group.

8. PRESENTATION BY THE RESOURCES, STAFFING, INFORMATION AND CUSTOMER SERVICES PORTFOLIO HOLDER

The Committee received a presentation from Councillor SM Edwards, Resources, Staffing, Information and Customer Services portfolio holder. Councillor Edwards

explained that he had asked his officers not to attend the Committee as this was his presentation and the Committee should be asking him questions and not his officers.

Councillor Edwards stated that he had taken control of two well-run portfolios and he paid tribute to his two predecessors, thanking them for their advice in his portfolio holder meetings.

Section 151 Officer

Councillor Edwards asserted that the responsibilities of the Chief Executive and the Section 151 Officer should be separated, as it made the Council too dependent on one individual.

Third tier capacity

Councillor Edwards explained that downsizing the first tier from four to two and the second tier from nine to five, inevitably meant a strengthening of the capacity of the third tier.

Performance Indicator ownership

Councillor Edwards hoped that all staff could be made aware of how their jobs affected performance indicators, which would encourage them to take pride in the Council's achievements and strive to raise standards in areas that needed to be improved.

Staff training

Councillor Edwards advocated the employing of younger staff and the training of existing staff as part of succession planning. He suggested that some form of apprenticeship programme could be considered.

Office space

Councillor Edwards reported that unfortunately due to security issues the possible renting of office space by the Police was not being pursued. It was understood that Councillor Mrs Ford was negotiating with Citizen Advice Bureaux with a view to hiring out office space in lieu of grants.

Customer relations

Councillor Edwards agreed that the letter sent to tenants who were in arrears was discourteous and he had brought this matter up with the Chief Executive, who had warned that a more polite missive would lead to more tenants getting into debt, which could lead to more evictions and threaten the excellent record the Council had in debt collection. In response to concerns about the number of errors with regard to rent arrears, Councillor Edwards expressed pride in the Council's Council Tax section which, in a recent audit, had scored either a 3 or a 4 out of 4 for the majority of its services. The section had scored a 2 with regard to rent arrears, but the majority of these were for amounts lower than £1. Councillor RT Summerfield added that a number of authorities disregarded errors of this size in their performance figures.

Size of portfolio

Councillor Edwards explained that combining the two portfolios had made sense and although the new portfolio was a huge undertaking he was in a position to be able to dedicate enough time to this responsibility. He added that in his view it would take him a year to learn all the responsibilities of the new portfolio.

Delivery of South Cambs Magazine

The Communications Manager had sent a strongly worded letter to the delivery company warning that unless their performance improved the Council would employ an alternative organisation. Councillor Nightingale explained that residents of Great

Shelford and Stapleford were willing to provide temporary storage locations for the magazine, to aid its delivery.

Reduction of meetings

Councillor Edwards explained that he aimed to oversee a 50% reduction in the number of Council meetings.

Member training

Councillor Edwards hoped to focus on member training in the coming months. He explained that an overspend in the member training budget was likely and would have to be vired from elsewhere in his portfolio.

Staff sickness

Councillor Edwards presented the data on BV 12, number of days sick per member of staff. He stated that the annual figure for the end of year estimate for 2005/06 should be 10.75, the same as the actual figure and not N/A as shown on page 41 of the agenda. The Committee noted that the Council's performance had improved since 2004/05, although it was too early to determine what the Council's performance would be for this municipal year. It was understood that sickness tended to increase in the winter months. Councillor Edwards stated that a clear and firm approach to long-term sickness was preferable to allowing staff to be off sick indefinitely.

Conclusion

Councillor Edwards stated that he saw the Council as one team and as an Independent member he did not have any political affiliations. He conceded that financial constraints limited what he could achieve, but he could vire money from different budgets, which he intended to do, to fund member training.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Edwards for his impressive presentation and his honest informative answers.

9. PRESENTATION BY THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PORTFOLIO HOLDER

This item was discussed after item 4.

Councillor Mrs VG Ford, Community Development portfolio holder, circulated a handout of her presentation, and thanked the Head of Community Services for his input whilst she compiled her report.

Portfolio holder meetings

Councillor Mrs Ford thanked the monitors for attending her portfolio holder meetings and requested that they raised any objections at that meeting instead of waiting several weeks and then raising it at this Committee.

Milton Country Park

In response to questioning Councillor Mrs Ford explained that she remained committed to keeping the Park open because it welcomed a quarter of a million visitors every year and due to continuing liabilities it would continue to cost the Council money, even if the Council took the decision to close the park. She announced that her aim was to reduce the cost of the park from £200,000 to just over £100,000 in a time period of approximately a year and a half. It was expected that revenue from car parking charges would help to reduce the costs of the park. Councillor Mrs Ford reminded the Committee that although many city residents visited the park, a large number of the District's residents visited facilities in the City and surrounding Districts.

Councillor Mrs Ford explained that a Country Park was planned for Northstowe and there were certain economies of scale that made it more cost effective to run two parks instead of one, as the parks could share officer time and equipment.

Community safety

In response to concerns regarding priorities, Councillor Mrs Ford explained that the South Cambridgeshire Crime & Disorder Partnership focused on the concerns of residents as well as Government targets.

Funding community initiatives

It was understood that a relatively small amount of funding for a community initiative from the Council could encourage funding and support from other bodies.

New development

Councillor Mrs Ford stated that the Community Development team were doing an excellent job with the resources available. It was understood that through a Section 106 agreement, negotiated by the Council, the developers had agreed to fund a full time community development officer for three years to work on the Arbury Camps site. The Head of Community Services reminded the Committee that the Community Services budget had been cut by a third, which had forced an increased dependence on the Council's partners. While the delay was regrettable, the forthcoming appointment of a community development officer, at zero cost to the Council, was a considerable achievement. On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman expressed his admiration for the Community Services team and the work they carry out.

Public arts

Councillor Mrs Ford reminded the Committee that the budget for public art had been substantially cut and an officer had been made redundant. It was clear that there was extensive support for the Arts in South Cambridgeshire and the Council worked with organisations such as Wysing Arts and with schools, in an attempt to meet this demand.

Budget

Councillor Mrs Ford explained that although the Council had to reduce spending, the Community Service budget would not be reduced this year.

Youth debating competition

It was understood that there was insufficient officer time to organise this event and despite generous offers to provide the prizes it was unlikely to take place this year.

Working with schools and youth

Councillor Mrs Ford explained that the Council needed to work in partnership to deliver its strategies and this included working with schools to tackle anti-social behaviour. The Head of Community Services informed the Committee that the Council had a new statutory responsibility regarding youth participation and as a consequence the County Council could request the presence of a Council representative on a partnership body.

Difference

Councillor Mrs Ford paid tribute to her predecessor, who was clearly respected in the community as well as by officers and members of the Council. Councillor Mrs Ford saw the installation of community projects in new development in the District, as the single biggest challenge facing her portfolio.

10. SCRUTINY TRAINING: CONFERENCE AT NEWMARKET RACECOURSE ON 20/11/06

The Committee

AGREED to book 11 Councillors on the Scrutiny Conference at Newmarket Racecourse on Monday 20 November at a cost of £550.

The £550 for this training will come out of the budget for member training, which will be compensated by the Scrutiny Contingency fund. The net cost to the training budget will be £0, but the expenditure will appear in the budget figures.

11. TO NOTE THE DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

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

2006: 16 November & 21 December

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

The Meeting ended at 4.45 p.m.
