

Council – 27 February 2007

Minutes of the meeting of **Council** held on **27 February 2007** when there were present:-

Cllr R A Amner	Cllr Mrs J R Lumley
Cllr Mrs P Aves	Cllr D Merrick
Cllr C I Black	Cllr Mrs J A Mockford
Cllr Mrs R Brown	Cllr R A Oatham
Cllr Mrs L A Butcher	Cllr J M Pullen
Cllr J P Cottis	Cllr P R Robinson
Cllr T G Cutmore	Cllr P K Savill
Cllr K A Gibbs	Cllr C G Seagers
Cllr Mrs H L A Glynn	Cllr S P Smith
Cllr T E Goodwin	Cllr D G Stansby
Cllr K J Gordon	Cllr Mrs M A Starke
Cllr J E Grey	Cllr M G B Starke
Cllr Mrs S A Harper	Cllr J Thomass
Cllr K H Hudson	Cllr Mrs M J Webster
Cllr A J Humphries	Cllr P F A Webster
Cllr T Livings	Cllr Mrs B J Wilkins
Cllr C J Lumley	

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs P A Capon, Mrs T J Capon, C A Hungate, Mrs L Hungate and J R F Mason.

OFFICERS PRESENT

P Warren	- Chief Executive
R J Honey	- Corporate Director (Internal Services)
G Woolhouse	- Corporate Director (External Services)
S Fowler	- Head of Administrative and Member Services
Y Woodward	- Head of Financial Services, Audit & Performance Management
Z Neeld	- Corporate Policy Manager
J Pritchard	- Housing Manager
S Worthington	- Committee Administrator

ALSO PRESENT

Dr G Moody, Consultant

PARISH CHURCH OF ST NICHOLAS, CANEWDON

The Reverend Tim Clay of the Parish Church of St Nicholas, Canewdon was in attendance to officiate for prayers and provide some detail on the Parish Church of St Nicholas and its activity.

The Reverend Tim Clay was Parish Priest for St Andrew's Church, Ashingdon, All

Saints Church, South Farnbridge, St Nicholas Parish Church, Canewdon and St Peter's Parish Church, Paglesham which dated back to the 13th century, with improvements made to the buildings in the 14th and 15th centuries. A lot of the history associated with the churches stemmed from the Battle of Assandun.

The four churches aimed to be community churches within their villages and, particularly in the case of Ashingdon, a centre for the community. In Canewdon the church worked closely with the local community and especially with the local school, which was an Anglican school.

A lot of restoration work was being carried out on the churches, including works to the tower of St Andrew's, which had cost £54,000. A kitchenette and toilet had been built at St Nicholas, as a result of grants donated by Cory Environmental. A legacy to St Nicholas's would enable the church bells to be restored and it was hoped that there would be sufficient funds to supplement the original bells with a peal of 8 to 10 new bells which would make it possible for church bells to be heard again in Ashingdon. The stonework of the tower at St Peter's required considerable restoration, at a cost of around £100,000.

49 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 December 2006 and of the extraordinary meetings held on 30 January and 21 February 2007 were approved as correct records and signed by the Chairman.

50 COMMITTEE MINUTES AND REPORTS

Council received the minutes and considered the reports of Committees/referrals as follows:-

Committee	Date	Minute No.
(1) Policy, Finance and Strategic Performance	18 January 2007	13-23

(a) Independent Remuneration Panel Report

Council considered the report of the Policy, Finance & Strategic Performance Committee on the recommendations of the independent remuneration panel on Members' allowances for 2007/08.

It was observed that item 10 of the agenda, relating to the proposed new political decision making structure, could result in a need for some revision to the proposed remuneration scheme for Members.

Resolved

That, subject to inclusion of the following items, the remuneration scheme proposed by the Independent Remuneration Panel for 2007/08 be adopted:-

- A continuation of £300 per annum allowance for co-optees.
- Standard class rail travel to be introduced under the District Council travelling expenses scheme for Members, to replace that currently of a first class allowance. (HAMS)

51 LARGE SCALE VOLUNTARY HOUSING TRANSFER – PROGRESS REPORT

Council considered the report of the Corporate Director (External Services) on the overall timetable and actions to achieve a successful housing transfer.

The Chairman welcomed Dr Graham Moody, the Council's lead consultant, to the meeting. Dr Moody was in attendance to present the report to Members of the Council.

During Dr Moody's presentation, the following points were noted:-

- It was compulsory for Rochford Housing Association (RHA) to register with the Housing Corporation in order for the housing transfer to go ahead.
- RHA was on schedule to formally apply for registration with the Housing Corporation at the end of March. The application would subsequently be considered at a Registration Committee in May. It would, however, be possible to apply to the Registration Committee in July instead, if necessary, although this would delay completion of the housing transfer by up to two months.
- A key task was to negotiate the transfer price and other contract terms. The minimum transfer price agreed with Government was £1.830 million. The Government would negate the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) debt of £10.2 million, in the event of this minimum price being achieved.
- The Council's project team was aiming to negotiate a position that would minimise the Council's exposure to possible claims, particularly in respect of environmental warranties.
- The Council's project team was seeking to negotiate an agreement with RHA that any future surplus sheltered accommodation might be used to meet the housing needs of other groups of residents unable to access suitable housing.
- It was advisable for the Council to declare unpopular sheltered bedsit dwellings and the vacant temporary accommodation at the Chestnuts as scheduled for disposal and not available for letting in order that such vacant dwellings could be removed from the HRA subsidy system in order to decrease HRA costs.

- Negotiations included the possibility of HRA re-claiming VAT on building works, which over the course of 5 – 10 years following transfer, could total around £3-4million.
- Completion date for the housing transfer was scheduled for 2 July 2007, although this was subject to RHA successfully registering with the Housing Corporation in May.

During discussion a Member observed that caution should be exercised in disposing of sheltered accommodation; life expectancy was increasing and, as such, there might be a demand for this kind of accommodation in future.

Reference was made to the requirement of the Housing Corporation that new landlords wishing to register should be in a robust financial position and able to manage their business effectively. It was considered that the minimum transfer price was achievable and that the RHA Board was making good progress in the area of financial governance.

Responding to questions, Dr Moody advised that the transfer price was determined by taking into account projected rents, the costs of maintaining housing stock, plus investment in building works over a 30-year period. In the initial years, RHA would run at a loss, given that its spend on the housing stock would far outweigh any income from rents. It was anticipated that after approximately 6 years rent income would cover the day to day running costs of the properties, maintenance and paying off debts. The £10.2million debt in the Council's HRA account was as a result of loans largely dating from the 70s. The Government would, however annul this debt, enabling the HRA account to be closed, subject to the agreed minimum stock transfer price being achieved.

Resolved

- (1) That progress to date be noted and the overall timetable and actions to achieve transfer of the housing stock to Rochford Housing Association be noted.
- (2) That the vacant temporary accommodation at the Chestnuts and vacant bedsit dwellings in its sheltered schemes be declared as scheduled for disposal and no longer available for letting.
- (3) That a further report be made to enable the Council to approve the transfer contract, including the transfer price, in June. (CD(ES))

52 PROPOSED NEW POLITICAL DECISION MAKING STRUCTURE

Council considered the report of the Chief Executive outlining proposed changes to the Council's political decision making structure in response to the implications of the Local Government White Paper "Strong and Prosperous Communities" and the emerging requirements of the Local Government Bill

currently making its way through the various parliamentary stages.

During debate reference was made to the proposed Executive Board replacing the current Policy Committees and becoming, in effect, an amalgamation of them. It was emphasised that all other existing Committees (with the exception of Emergency Planning) would be retained under the proposed new structure. It was further highlighted that there would be task and finish Sub-Committees working for the Executive Board, including, for example, a Waste Management and Recycling Sub-Committee, if that was what Members wished.

It was observed that there was already partnership working between Southend on Sea Borough Council, Castle Point Borough Council, Essex County Council and this Council via the Thames Gateway South Essex Partnership and this Authority would be working with Southend Council on the joint action area plan for the land west of Rochford, encompassing London Southend Airport. The emerging city regions agenda could prove as significant to this Council as Thames Gateway has been. It was thus important to have a joint forum for these Authorities to liaise on matters of mutual interest.

Reference was made to the importance of developing the role of Member Champions; it was important that Member Champions had an interest in the appropriate areas and that their knowledge be brought forward for the benefit of the Council.

Some Members, although understanding the need for the Authority to be in a position to deliver and implement the main requirements of the Government White Paper, expressed concern that changes to the Council structure were being proposed too quickly, particularly given that the Bill was still going through Parliament. In responding, other Members observed that the proposals offered the most efficient means of delivering services to residents in the future as the introduction of an Executive Board offered the Authority the means of making informed decisions more quickly. It was further stressed that the proposals would go out to formal consultation and come back to Council in April.

It was observed that those Members who did not form part of the proposed Executive Board would not have an opportunity to discuss District-wide issues and policies. While, on one hand it was indicated that there was the possibility that the Council could end up with an inexperienced Executive Board in the event of a change in the Council's administration in the future, it was also recognised that over 80% of Councils in England operate under this type of structure. The point was also raised that in the case of most Councils operating this type of decision-making structure, it was usual for the Scrutiny Committee to be chaired by a Member of the Minority Party.

A Motion was moved by Cllr T G Cutmore and seconded by Cllr Mrs H L A Glynn that minor amendments be made to the second and third

recommendations of the report to clarify that the joint Committee proposed with Castle Point and Southend Councils would have no decision-making powers and that it was for liaison purposes only. Also, that Essex County Council be invited to participate on an 'as and when' basis, as appropriate. This was won on a show of hands.

A further Motion was then moved by Cllr C G Seagers and seconded by Cllr T G Cutmore that the first sentence of paragraph 3.5 of the report be expanded to clarify that the Chairmen of Area Committees would be Members of the Executive Board and would have voting rights on their Area Committees. This Motion was also won on a show of hands.

Resolved

- (1) That the proposed changes to the Council's decision making process, as outlined in the report, be agreed for formal consultation and that final proposals on a new political decision making structure for 2007/08, together with the appropriate revisions to the constitution, be received at the next Council meeting in April.
- (2) That Castle Point Borough Council and Southend on Sea Borough Council be approached with a view to establishing a Joint Liaison Committee to discuss items of mutual interest.
- (3) That Essex County Council be invited to the Joint Liaison Committee with Castle Point Borough Council and Southend on Sea Borough Council, as appropriate.
- (4) That the Independent Remuneration Panel be recalled to look at appropriate Member remuneration levels in the context of an Executive Board and with respect to the Member Champion roles.
- (5) That the first sentence of paragraph 3.5 of the report be amended to read: "The Executive Board would comprise 9 Members, including the Leader and Deputy Leader and the Chairmen of the three Area Committees, who shall each be voting Members of their respective Area Committees". (CE)

(Note: Cllrs C I Black and R A Oatham wished it to be recorded that they voted against the above decisions.)

53 KEY POLICIES AND ACTIONS FOR 2007/2008

Council considered the report of the Chief Executive formally setting out the main areas of policy development for 2007/08, identifying the main projects to be progressed and implemented, highlighting the main areas of service development/change, identifying possible issues for consideration by the Review Committee and outlining the timetable for establishing the budget for 2008/09.

During discussion of the report Members complimented the Chief Executive on producing such a comprehensive and useful report. It was observed that there would be merit in re-visiting this report in 12 months' time to assess how the Council had performed in these areas against the indicated timescales.

Resolved

- (1) That the work programme for 2007/08, as set out in Appendices A, B, C and D and the public notification of its content, as outlined in the report, be agreed.
- (2) That those areas of work for consideration by the Review Committee, as outlined in Appendix E, be agreed.
- (3) That the programme for the monitoring of the 2007/08 budget, as outlined in Appendix F, be noted.
- (4) That the main events timetable outlined in Appendix G be noted. (CE)

54 THE POST OFFICE NETWORK – CONSULTATION

Council considered the report of the Chief Executive advising Members of the main points of a current Government consultation on the future funding and structure arrangements of the post office network.

During debate Members expressed their gratitude to colleagues at Chelmsford Borough Council for drawing this matter to the attention of this Authority.

Particular reference was made to page 12.6 of the report which illustrated that there had been a 37% decrease in post office branches in Rayleigh since 1999. It was clear that the proposals would result in further closures. It was also stressed that the Government was taking away business from the post offices, making them less financially viable, with television licences now being issued by supermarkets being cited as a particular example.

It was observed that post offices performed a valuable social function within the community, pulling together the elderly, in particular. Members concurred that a robust response should be sent in response to the consultation echoing the sentiments of Chelmsford Borough Council and that a letter should be sent to Chelmsford Borough Council confirming this Authority's support.

Resolved

- (1) That the Government be called upon to halt further closures of Post Offices in both rural and urban locations in recognition of the important community and socio-economic functions they fulfil over and above their normal operation.

- (2) That a letter be sent to Chelmsford Borough Council confirming this Authority's support. (CE)

55 ROYAL GARDEN PARTY

Council considered the report of the Chief Executive on the nomination of four representatives, including guests, to attend one of this year's Royal Garden Parties to be held in July.

Resolved

That Cllr S P Smith plus guest and Cllr P A Capon plus guest be nominated to attend one of the Royal Garden Parties to be held in July, using the civic car and driver. (CE)

The meeting closed at 9.10 pm.

Chairman

Date

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