

**CONSTITUTION TASK GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 5.00 pm on 8 MARCH 2007**

Present:- Councillor D J Morson – Chairman.
Councillors S V Schneider and A R Thawley.

Officers in attendance:- A Bovaird, M J Perry, M T Purkiss and T Turner.

CTG75 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C M Dean, E J Godwin and G Sell.

CTG76 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 29 January 2007 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

CTG77 CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW

Alasdair Bovaird referred to the issues which Members had asked to be reviewed and said that officers were looking for a steer from the Task Group at this meeting. The next step would be for officers to present a draft of the proposed changes at the next meeting on 20 March 2007 and for the report of the Task Group to go to the Council meeting on 17 April 2007. It would then be open to the new Council to adopt the amendments at the Annual Council meeting on 22 May 2007.

He set out the following items for discussion:-

(i) Area Panels

Alasdair Bovaird said that whilst policy committees could delegate powers to Area Panels and it was expected that as they arose they would make decisions to do so, on the whole this had not happened. He suggested that options for dealing with this were:-

- Leave as it is but add question “do you wish to delegate to Area Panel” in committee reports.
- Attempt to define matters for delegation more specifically.
- Introduce a general power of competence.

In relation to the budget, it could be possible to have a general purpose area budget and provide Area Panels with the opportunity to vire.

Councillor Schneider said that the powers of Area Panels needed to be clearly defined both for Members and the public. Councillor Morson added that there

was a need to look at incorporating feedback from suggestions made by the public at Area Panels to policy committees.

The Task Group supported the suggestion of a general power of competence.

(ii) **Committee Delegation**

Alasdair Bovaird said that the main problem was stopping items bouncing between committees. He considered that the real problem was that different committees had different remits as issues overlapped. The sequence of meetings was designed to assist, but not all stages were necessary. He said that it was important that officers did not bring items to committee until the sequence of actions had been thoroughly thought out.

(iii) **Length of Meetings**

Alasdair Bovaird said that he had looked at the causes of this problem and had analysed the work of the Community Committee from March 2006 to January 2007 and had concluded that only 24 of the items which had been submitted actually required a committee decision (4.8 per meeting).

He suggested that the following areas could be looked at:-

- Lead Officer's report as first substantive item (this could sweep up progress since last meeting and business arising).
- Items for information at the end of the agenda.
- No discussion on items for information unless 1/3 of Members present request it.
- Avoid going through reports of Task Groups in great detail.
- Notifying declarations of interest in advance.
- Put a timescale for each item on the agenda (as a guide).
- Introduce a procedural rule on the length of meetings (similar to Harlow Council).

Councillor Schneider felt that training on public speaking for Members and officers was important so that points were made more succinctly. Councillor Morson said that many of the items on the agenda were merely for information and often it was better for officers to take questions rather than read from the report. He also considered that the prioritisation of items on the agenda was important.

(iv) **Workshops**

Alasdair Bovaird said that it was clear that both Members and officers agreed that what was being done currently did not work. He suggested that 30 minute briefing sessions could be held before committee meetings and on

three days each year there could be more intensive briefing days to replace the existing timetable of Member workshops. He added that it would still be necessary to retain the option for one off meetings on key topics.

(v) **Housing Board**

Alasdair Bovaird said that the main problem seemed to be an overcrowded Community Committee agenda, the lack of political steer on housing strategy or both.

He felt that the issue of the agenda could be dealt with as suggested in the section on length of meetings. He added that budget setting and rent must remain with the main committee or Council and acting as the landlord was an officer management role. He said that the Members' role was setting policy and ensuring co-ordination of the estate with overall planning framework and dealing with the housing strategy generally.

He said that a suggested remit for a Housing Board could be:-

- Development of the housing strategy.
- Liaison with tenants' forum.
- Co-ordination of local development framework with housing policy.

Recommendations would be made to the relevant policy committee which could be either the Community or Environment Committee.

He said that he was not convinced that there was a need for a fixed cycle of meetings for the Housing Board and concluded that the scheme of delegation should include provision for officers to inform local Members on non-routine decisions about the housing stock in a Members' ward.

(vi) **Generally**

Councillor Thawley asked that the role of project teams, such as the Waste Management Team, should be clarified in the review.

Councillor Morson thanked the Chief Executive for the excellent presentation and asked that Members of the Task Group advise Alasdair Bovaird of any further ideas prior to the next meeting on 20 March 2007.

The meeting ended at 6.15 pm.