

CONSTITUTION TASK GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 3.00 pm on 19 OCTOBER 2007

Present:- Councillor A J Ketteridge – Chairman.
Councillors R H Chamberlain, E J Godwin, J E Menell,
D J Morson and H S Rolfe.

Also present:- Councillor J F Cheetham.

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

CTG81 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C M Dean and S V Schneider.

CTG82 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting on 20 March 2007 were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

CTG83 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute CTG80 – Constitutional Review

It was noted that the proposal for a Housing Board had been substituted by the appointment of the Housing Initiative Task Group. There was some consequential difference in the terms of reference to the two bodies.

In relation to Part (II), Members discussed the relative merits of workshops (now called Member briefing days) taking place on three Saturdays a year. A number of Members did not like attending workshops on Saturdays and as a compromise it had been agreed to limit these to half day only. One further workshop had been booked to take place on Saturday 3 November and the matter would be reviewed after that date to assess whether the experiment should be extended.

The Chief Executive asked Members to take on board that a sensible programme of Member workshops was required to give Members a policy insight into key decision making areas. In relation to the problem identified of agenda items “bouncing” between different committees, Councillor Menell asked why a specific matter relating to parking on green verge areas around Saffron Walden had not been referred to the relevant Area Panel. It was agreed that officers would check to see what had happened in this instance.

CTG84 REVIEW OF AREA PANELS

Councillor Cheetham was present at the meeting to report her findings following a recent review of Area Panels. She said that a small Member

Group had been established to carry out this review with the remit to examine costs and to try to ensure the area panel system worked more efficiently. She referred to the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill, currently under consideration in the House of Lords, that would require a mechanism for community involvement.

The challenge was to ensure a greater involvement for parishes by enabling them to set the agenda. The group had tried to establish the best way for area panels to operate. A visit had been made to North Hertfordshire District Council where area panels operated in conjunction with a cabinet system. A further visit to Braintree had been organised on 13 November.

One key to ensuring that area panels operated more effectively was to devolve more budget and decision making powers. This could work better with a cabinet system as there would be less duplication between area panels and policy committees. In some cases, as at North Herts, individual councillors had been allocated their own budgets.

Reference was made to one fourth option council – Oadby and Wigston – operating an area panel system.

Councillor Menell referred to the changes in structure she had made to meetings of the North Area Panel to incorporate a specifically themed question time. For example, at the meeting held on the previous day, the County cabinet member for Highways had attended and answered questions. This change had resulted directly from feedback offered by parish representatives.

Councillor Rolfe agreed that the idea of a specific theme was useful, but questioned the need for all Members to attend. He felt that account should be taken of parish liaison meetings and a structure put in place to provide a link to parishes while at the same time avoiding duplication and overlap. He felt there were a number of areas where there was potential to devolve budget making decisions to an area level while eliminating the parish liaison element of the meeting. In this context, it was noted that parish liaison meetings had now become planning workshops.

A discussion took place about the existence of the Essex Police Authority neighbourhood areas and the desirability of incorporating these into the Council's Area Panel system. The obvious difficulty with this aim was that boundaries did not coincide and a degree of liaison with other bodies would be needed to make this concept work.

Another view was that area panels were doing parishes a disservice by discussing matters best considered at parish council level. It was suggested that this had left parish councils feeling marginalised and ineffective. The recent meeting at Elsenham to discuss the core strategy was felt to have been worthwhile because it had served a specific purpose and satisfied the public need for further information.

The Chief Executive confirmed that it was likely the new regulatory framework following passage of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill would provide a strong encouragement for the existence of a

neighbourhood mechanism. He felt that this might best be allied to the recognition of local catchment areas that did not necessarily affect the whole district and could be considered on a case by case basis.

In summary, the Leader said that he was sceptical about the costings that had been produced for area panel meetings. He was sure these had been understated and he asked for the figures to be checked. The timetable for the review of area panels had slipped because other priorities had arisen, but he still felt that it would be possible to put a new structure in place from May 2008.

After further discussion, the following broad themes emerged:-

- Localised matters affecting a single parish should be considered at parish council level.
- The consideration of specific themes should be developed.
- The Member group should continue to explore other, more meaningful, structures.
- Account should be taken of other bodies in deciding on suitable area arrangements, such as the West Essex Forum and the Police Authority's neighbourhood areas.
- Explore the possible separation of villages and towns in any future structure to recognise the existence of different interests.
- Whatever was decided should attempt to engage the whole community and not just parish councils.
- Examine the possibility of providing a separate budget for local determination.

CTG85

REVIEW OF COMMITTEE STRUCTURE

The Leader indicated that he intended to take a fresh look at the committee structure and asked the Chief Executive whether he would be able to utilise the services of the Executive Assistant to undertake some research into the various structures operated by councils of a similar size to Uttlesford. One possibility was to move towards the introduction of a cabinet system and, whatever was decided, the target date for change remained May next year.

It was recognised that in view of other priorities affecting the Council's performance, it might not prove possible to meet this target. It was nevertheless agreed that there was a pressing need to examine the existing committee structure and that there should be more focus on service and subject matter.

Not all Members of the Task Group agreed that a cabinet structure would necessarily be appropriate to this Council but it was one option that needed to be closely examined.

The Task Group agreed that it was clearly premature to make any decisions in principle at this time and that the review of structures would continue. It was noted that, in order to agree a revised structure at the April 2008 Council meeting, the intention to make changes would have to be tabled at the February meeting. The Assistant Chief Executive advised that work on a new constitution would have to commence well in advance of the February 2008 meeting and it would be helpful for a steer to be provided by November to enable this to happen.

For this reason, Members agreed that the next meeting of the Task Group should take place at a date to be agreed in November.

CTG86

EVALUATING LOCAL GOVERNANCE – NEW CONSTITUTIONS AND ETHICS

The Task Group was advised of a programme of seminars running from October 2007 to April 2008 on the broad themes of new constitutions and ethics under the auspices of the Department for Communities and Local Government. This was noted and would be kept under consideration as part of the Council's constitutional review.

CTG87

ISSUES ARISING FROM COUNCIL MEETING

Consideration was given to an exchange between the Leader and Councillor A Dean about the role of the Scrutiny Committee. There was general agreement that a well run and defined Scrutiny Committee had a useful role to play in evaluating policy decisions and that one advantage of a cabinet system was that the scrutiny role was considerably clearer.

The meeting ended at 4.10 pm.