

**CONSTITUTION TASK GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 6.30pm on 19 MARCH 2008**

Present:- Councillor A J Ketteridge – Chairman  
Councillors R H Chamberlain, C M Dean, E J Godwin, D J Morson and S V Schneider

Also present:- Councillor J F Cheetham

Officers present:- J Mitchell (Interim Chief Executive), M Perry (Assistant Chief Executive) and P Snow (Committee and Electoral Services Manager)

**CTG88 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J E Menell and H S Rolfe.

**CTG89 MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 19 October 2007 were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

**CTG90 BUSINESS ARISING**

**(i) Minute CTG83(i) – Constitutional Review**

Councillor C Dean asked whether it was intended to programme further Member briefing days on Saturdays. The Interim Chief Executive responded that he intended to reinstate such a programme as it was important to brief Members about important issues on a non-party basis. Holding Saturday briefings was probably the best way to achieve this.

Councillor Morson congratulated Councillor Chamberlain on his excellent work in connection with the Housing Initiative Task Group. He referred to the rural excellence programme and the need to appoint a housing champion, especially in relation to affordable housing. This matter would be discussed later in the meeting.

**(ii) Minute CTG84 – Review of Area Panels**

In referring to the work of the informal Member group established to examine the area panel system, Councillor Cheetham said it had always been intended that a Liberal Democrat member should be invited to join the group but this had not been Minuted. Councillor Morson confirmed that he had not been aware of this invitation and so it had not been taken up.

Councillor C Dean asked whether the group had been appointed by the Council. The Chairman confirmed that this was not the case as the group

was an informal one feeding into this Task Group. The former Chief Executive had been aware of the group's activities and had offered officer support.

Councillor Dean asked for any future invitations to attend such groups to be channelled through the relevant group leader.

### **(iii) CTG85 – Review of Committee Structure**

The Chairman confirmed that it had been the Administration's intention, following last year's election, to revisit the whole of the committee structure but that this intention had been sidetracked in the light of subsequent events. The Administration had also wished to move towards a cabinet system but this was not a viable option under existing legislation. It now appeared that no progress could be made other than on area panels and that no other changes would be made, excepting housing, in the next year.

A short discussion took place on the role and status of task groups and working groups. It was noted that task groups were time limited and would cease to exist either at the date of producing their final report, or on the date that a final report was required. They could be re-appointed but could not recommend their own continuation. Unlike task groups, working groups could be appointed only by Full Council, and were also reviewed at the Annual meeting.

The Interim Chief Executive said it was helpful for task groups to be given a clear timetable and unambiguous terms of reference.

One solution might be for this task group to be re-established as a working group, as its role was to review the constitution on a continuing basis.

RECOMMENDED that, as part of its annual review, the Council consider the advisability of re-appointing the Constitution Task Group as a working group.

### **CTG91 REVIEW OF AREA PANELS**

The Chairman circulated a paper produced by the informal Member group on the future of area panels, drafted by Councillor Cheetham.

The paper proposed the appointment of two area forums instead of the present three panels, to be based on a north/south split, which would embrace a multi agency approach to include Police, Highways and other County representatives, and possibly the PCT as well. Saffron Walden and Great Dunmow were proposed as the permanent locations for these forums, and there would be three meetings of each per year. One further meeting could be held if required.

Councillor C Dean thought that a single fixed venue for each forum might be too remote for many residents and parish representatives, especially in the south-west of the district.

Other Members, including Councillor Godwin, felt that the arrangement of holding meetings in remote village halls had not been well received and a fixed venue would be preferable. The Chairman agreed that more flexibility might be helpful in the South area forum, so that occasional meetings might take place in Stansted, as well as at Dunmow.

Councillor Schneider asked whether an east/west division had been considered. Councillor Cheetham said that a north/south division was better suited to the other agencies involved, particularly the Police, who were keen to pursue a multi agency approach.

She expected that, if approved at this meeting, the proposal would be tabled at the April Council meeting and considered formally at the Annual Meeting in May.

Councillor Morson said that area panels had been an extension of the decision making process and had attempted to bring the work of the Council to local people. If that aspect was lost it would diminish their authority. He asked who would be responsible for setting the agenda under the proposed arrangements?

The Chairman acknowledged these points but argued that parish and public representatives did not wish to attend another committee meeting where councillors debated. He felt they would prefer to attend a forum where questions could be put directly.

Councillor Godwin agreed and said that the present system served only to delay decision making because of the need to refer matters from the area panel to the relevant policy committee and sometimes back again.

Councillor Morson said that the previous administration had been keen to devolve decision making but he acknowledged there had been teething problems.

Councillor Chamberlain said the most important thing was that agencies would be brought together in such a way that questions could be addressed in the same place. The agenda could be based on contributions from those agencies and from the parishes.

Councillor Schneider said that when the panels started it had been the intention that the agenda would be set by the public but that had not worked. There was a need to change because much of the Council's work was of a routine nature and not suited to the area panel concept. A multi agency approach would help to overcome this deficiency.

Councillor Cheetham agreed as she felt that parishes were resentful of their non-voting role and referred to West Essex Area Forum meetings where members formed part of the audience. If the voting element were taken out of area meetings she felt this would solve many of the problems of public perception.

Councillor Morson said that he accepted much of what had been said but was nevertheless disappointed by the outcome of the discussions. He asked for some clarification of how matters raised at panel meetings would be progressed within the Council.

Councillor Cheetham said the intention was that matters would be referred to the relevant policy committee. No other suitable forum now existed to take these matters forward as the local police and highways committees had disappeared.

The Chairman thought that the West Essex Area Forum had a very broad remit and the proposed area forums would provide a more localised focus to discussion. This would help to place parishes at the heart of the agenda.

He proposed acceptance of Councillor Cheetham's paper and said that appropriate consultation would be carried out.

At this point the Interim Chief Executive offered an officers' perspective of the area panel system. He said that servicing the panels had not always proven helpful in decision making and they had sometimes been difficult to staff. Some guest speakers, especially those from the area highways office, had shown reluctance to attend future meetings, because of the nature of the public examination. He thought there would be a sufficient resource to staff meetings under the proposed structure.

After the motion was put to the vote and carried, the Assistant Chief Executive confirmed that the next stage would be for him to draft an amended constitution to lay before Members at the next Council meeting. His report would include details of consultation undertaken.

RECOMMENDED to Council that:

1. the existing area panels be replaced by two area forums, covering the northern and southern parts of the district;
2. the North Area Forum to comprise the following wards: Ashdon; Clavering; Littlebury; Newport; Saffron Walden Audley; Saffron Walden Castle; Saffron Walden Shire; Thaxted; The Chesterfords; The Sampfords; Wenden Lofts; and Wimbish and Debden;
3. the South Area Forum to comprise the following wards: Barnston and High Easter; Birchanger; Broad Oak and the Hallingburys; Elsenham and Henham; Felsted; Great Dunmow North; Great Dunmow South; Hatfield Heath; Stansted North; Stansted South; Stebbing; Stort Valley; Takeley and the Canfields; The Eastons; and The Rodings;

4. the forums to be non-decision making bodies and to adopt a multi-agency approach involving police, highways and health representatives;
5. each forum would meet three times annually at fixed venues (Saffron Walden and Great Dunmow), except that the south forum would occasionally meet at Stansted, or another defined venue where required, and that one further meeting of each forum be held if circumstances demanded;
6. the chairman of each forum would always be a district councillor, to be appointed at the annual meeting; and
7. the arrangements proposed above be reviewed after 12 months of operation.

The Task Group proceeded to consider how housing matters could best be dealt with at Member level. The Community Committee had established the Housing Initiative Task Group last year to discuss specific housing issues. This group was time limited to the Annual Council meeting.

In the capacity of Chairman, Councillor Chamberlain commented that he felt the Task Group had achieved a great deal and had provided a secure forum for the discussion of major projects. It was difficult for the Community Committee to devote the time needed for these matters in view of the broad range of responsibilities covered.

He felt the Council had lost by not having a dedicated housing committee and hoped that the Task Group would be allowed to continue its work, possibly as a working group. He asked Members to agree that the Task Group itself should review the present process to see whether it could be improved upon, and to report back to this group with its conclusions by the summer of 2008.

The Chairman agreed that a review was needed and acknowledged that any such review would be likely to have an effect on one or more of the policy committees.

RECOMMENDED to Council that the Housing Initiative Task Group carry out a review of the appropriate Member mechanism to carry out the housing service and channel any recommendations through the Constitution Task Group, such review to be completed within six months.

CTG92

## **CALENDAR OF MEETINGS 2008/09**

Members gave consideration to a suggested calendar of meetings for 2008/09. In response to a question, the Committee and Electoral Services Manager explained that it was not possible to fit five cycles into a quarterly financial reporting system. The timetable had been drafted to enable the proposed bi-monthly reports to be submitted to policy committees during the third week of the month with summary reports to Finance and Administration during the fourth week of the month, to co-incide with when they became

available. For the most part, Performance Select meetings fitted with the timetable for the submission of performance monitoring reports.

An extra Council meeting had been scheduled in February for budget setting and a longer gap allowed between the Finance and Administration Committee meeting and the other policy committees in the budget setting cycle. The proposed Scrutiny Committee meeting on 10 February would have to be moved to avoid a clash with Finance and Administration.

No account had yet been taken of the proposal to change the number and structure of area panel meetings.

Subject to the adjustments mentioned, and a change to the proposed Performance Select meeting in August, Members were happy with the draft timetable as submitted, and agreed that it should be submitted for approval.

The meeting ended at 7.30pm.