

CONSTITUTION TASK GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 6.30pm on 13 OCTOBER 2008

Present:- Councillor H S Rolfe – Chairman for the meeting
Councillors R H Chamberlain, C M Dean, E J Godwin, J E Menell,
D J Morson and S V Schneider

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

CTG93 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor A J Ketteridge.

CTG94 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 19 March 2008 were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

CTG95 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute CTG90(ii) – Review of Area Panels

There was a brief discussion on the role and format of area forums under the revised arrangements agreed at the Annual Meeting. It was noted that a review of the new arrangements would take place after 12 months of operation. Councillor Rolfe referred to the recent White Paper on empowering local communities and said that the area forums were a key element in this process. The White Paper would be considered at the forthcoming Council meeting.

CTG96 REPORT OF THE HOUSING INITIATIVE TASK GROUP – COMMITTEE STRUCTURE RELATING TO HOUSING MATTERS

On 22 April, the Council had approved a recommendation from this Group to invite the Housing Initiative Task Group (HITG) to carry out a review of the committee structure relating to the consideration of the housing service, and to report back within six months. The HITG had now recommended that a separate housing committee should be formed and that the functions of such a committee should comprise housing strategy, the Housing Revenue Account, and all other housing functions including management of the housing stock.

The Chief Executive outlined the rationale for SMB's decision not to support a separate housing committee. He said that Members may wish to revisit the

committee structure at some point but it was generally felt that three policy committees was about the right number. The housing function was important and must be enhanced especially in the present economic climate, but this did not presently justify an additional committee. The resource required to service the committee was one element of that view but was not the sole determining factor. The Council should instead aim to raise the profile of the housing service whilst continuing to manage the housing stock in an effective manner.

Councillor Chamberlain spoke in support of the recommendation as Chairman of the HITG. The Task Group had been invited to examine this matter and had taken the view that the size and importance of the housing service was the principal reason for proposing a separate housing committee. He felt the Council had been mistaken three years ago to change from having five main committees and this had diluted the housing service.

There were a number of major issues affecting the housing service at present such as negative subsidy, sheltered housing, the stock options appraisal, and homelessness provision. He felt the Community Committee did not have enough time to give full consideration to all of these matters and that six Members on the HITG was insufficient to consider housing matters in enough detail. However, he recognised that there would need to be a long lead-in period before a new committee structure could be adopted. For this reason he did not expect any change to take place until after the next Annual Meeting.

In conclusion, he asked for a clear steer to be provided as to when the Council would address the issues raised by the Task Group.

Councillor Dean said that she did not support a separate housing committee as the HITG was doing a good job. She suggested that incorporating housing into the name of the Community Committee would help to raise the profile of the housing service. The Community Committee was not overburdened and the Task Group could continue to meet as and when necessary. Another solution would be to place strategic housing functions with planning strategy within the Environment Committee's terms of reference.

Councillor Morson said he did not disagree in principle with the recommendation, but this would have an effect on the arrangements for other committees and he would prefer to see a proper review. The present structure was working well as the HITG was able to utilise the expertise of Councillor Chamberlain and housing officers, as well as the tenant forum representatives.

In his view, there were previously too many mundane housing matters being referred to committee and a more strategic view was now being achieved.

Councillor Godwin said there was a need to raise the profile of housing and felt this could be achieved by renaming the committee as 'Community and Housing'. Councillor Menell agreed with this view.

Members discussed the present relationship between the Community Committee and the Task Group. It was agreed that it might be necessary to redefine the terms of reference of HITG to make the role of that group clearer.

Councillor Schneider thought that Community Committee meetings worked well as they were succinct and to the point. The existence and role of the HITG enabled her committee to operate in that way. She would prefer to see a review of the entire committee structure rather than undertake a piecemeal review.

The Chairman summed up the discussion and suggested that Councillors Schneider and Chamberlain should jointly draw up a suggested work programme for the HITG to undertake and report back to the Community Committee for this to be agreed. It might be helpful for the Committee, at the same time, to redefine the Task Group's terms of reference.

Members went on to consider the possible future realignment of the committee structure. A number of options were available, in both the medium and the longer term, including the adoption of a cabinet system. Councillor Rolfe emphasised that this was just one option and that a great deal more discussion was needed before any conclusions could be reached.

The Assistant Chief Executive clarified that any intention to change to a cabinet model would have to be flagged up by resolution of Full Council before 31 December 2010 which would not be effective until immediately after the next ordinary election of councillors. A minimum 12 week period of consultation would be required before any such resolution. However, interim arrangements could be introduced earlier if there was consensus among all of the political groups.

It would be helpful to align this process with consideration of the new Corporate Plan following the workshop the previous weekend.

The Working Group agreed that it should start work now on the process of considering changes to the Council's committee structure. This would also help to meet the need to renew the commitment to a sustainable communities' strategy as outlined in the recent White Paper.

RECOMMENDED to Council that:

1. the Community Committee be renamed as the Community and Housing Committee and that this proposal to amend the Constitution be tabled at the Council meeting on 21 October and then adjourned without discussion to the next meeting of the Council on 16 December 2008;
2. the Working Group believe that present committee and other Member representation arrangements should be reviewed now, as part of the process of considering a new Corporate Plan, to make those arrangements as effective

- as possible in alignment with officer responsibilities and structures; and
3. the Independent Remuneration Panel be asked to examine the case for making a payment to committee vice-chairmen as part of the next review of the remuneration scheme.

The meeting ended at 7.30pm.