

CONSTITUTION WORKING GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 4pm on 23 MARCH 2010

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

Officers present: G Bradley (Community Partnerships Manager), S Hayden (Community Development Officer), J Mitchell (Chief Executive), M Perry (Assistant Chief Executive), R Procter (Democratic Services Officer) and P Snow (Committee and Electoral Services Manager).

CWG4 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 23 November 2009 were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

CWG5 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor H Rolfe.

CWG6 REVIEW OF AREA FORUMS

The group considered the report of the Community Partnerships Manager, reviewing the terms of reference of the Community Forums, in order to report to Annual Council in May. The report also asked Members to consider whether Forums should administer the community project grants scheme and whether links with the Local Strategic Partnership should be strengthened, either through a regular feedback item at forum meetings, or by transferring administration of the Forums to the LSP.

The group discussed administration of community grants. The Assistant Chief Executive advised that as this was a function of the Council, it therefore could not be dealt with by the Forums unless they were politically balanced. Councillor Ketteridge said Forums would nevertheless be able to consider grants and make recommendations. Councillor Godwin felt the system should not be changed, as the likelihood of obtaining a grant could be influenced in favour of the more vociferous applicants. She said that for small groups, administration of the scheme by existing means was perceived as more equitable.

Councillor Morson suggested the Community and Housing Committee could accept recommendations from the Forums for making grants under the scheme. Councillor Menell suggested decisions for awards could be announced by the Forum Chairman at Forum meetings, and Councillor Godwin agreed this was a good idea.

Councillor Chamberlain proposed retaining the existing terms of reference for the community forums, with full council continuing to be the parent committee for the community forums, and no change being made to the forums in terms of either administering the community grants scheme or LSP involvement. In his view it was appropriate to leave the system unchanged for the next year, as it would be up to the new Council to decide whether to review area forums in light of the possible structure changes.

Councillor C Dean asked about measures to improve parish council engagement with community forums. The Community Partnerships Manager said conflicting meeting dates had sometimes been an issue, and although officers worked hard to try to find suitable dates for forum meetings, it was inevitable there would be clashes.

The Community Development Officer said she had sought feedback from parish councils on reasons for not attending forum meetings. The main reason seemed to be that parish councils were already familiar with obtaining information directly from agencies, and therefore did not feel it necessary to attend forums. In response to a question she confirmed officers notified the parish councils of meetings in advance.

Members discussed the operation of the forums, making the following points:

- there was an element of duplication at meetings - often the same agencies gave updates, resulting in a feeling that no new ground was broken.
- some parish councils perceived the forums as no more than 'talking shops'.
- District councillors could encourage parish council representatives to attend.
- different agencies should be invited, such as the water and electricity supply companies - it was noted it was originally agreed that agencies to be invited would be statutory bodies, however, Members felt there was no reason why other services could not be invited, perhaps for specific themes.

Members then discussed the community project grant scheme. Members noted the chairman of Community and Housing Committee had delegated powers to make awards. It was suggested a list of grants awarded could be made available at forums.

Members considered a suggestion that those attending forum meetings could be involved in determining grants. However the point was made that it might be difficult to ensure a fair approach as many grants were specific to local areas.

Members asked several questions about the recent policy of themed forums. Councillor Chamberlain said notice of themes well in advance would be helpful to agencies such as the PCT, to get them to think ahead. However, it

was important to retain flexibility to deal with ad hoc issues which might come up.

Members then considered how the LSP should be linked to the forums, and suggestions were made as follows:

- issues regarding the LSP should feed into the relevant committee, and vice versa.
- Councillor Ketteridge suggested the chairman of the LSP and LSP sub-group chairmen could attend the forums to report on their groups' activities.
- Members questioned levels of awareness among parish councils about the role of the LSP. Councillor Ketteridge suggested the LSP could be the subject of a theme for the forums. Officers explained there had been a presentation on this topic.
- Councillor Morson suggested people should be encouraged to get more involved in informing future strategies by giving feedback to the agencies making presentations. Councillor Menell replied that interaction already occurred to some extent at the North Forum.

In conclusion, the Group agreed the proposal moved by Councillor Chamberlain to leave unchanged the terms on which the community forums operated.

RECOMMENDED

- 1 The terms of reference of the Community Forums remain unchanged, and be subject to further review at the appropriate time.
- 2 The community project grants scheme continue to be administered under delegated powers.

CWG7

NEW STRUCTURE CONSULTATION

The Committee and Electoral Services Manager updated Members on progress regarding the consultation now taking place, following Council's decision to explore the merits of changing to a cabinet model.

A timetable had been agreed for the consultation, which had started on 4 March 2010 with a press release and advert in local newspapers. A leaflet had been produced which had been sent to partner organisations and parish councils with a letter asking them to comment. The leaflet included a link to information on the Council's website, and also included a telephone number and dedicated email address for those wishing to comment. It was too early in the day to give Members any indication of responses, as only one or two had so far been received. Councillor Ketteridge passed officers a letter he had received, to be included in the consultation.

Members asked various questions. Officer explained members of the public would also be made aware of the consultation through publicity which was to be carried in the next edition of *Uttlesford Life*. Towards the end of the consultation period, there was a final opportunity for publicising the consultation during the May community forums.

The Committee and Electoral Services Manager said Members of the CWG would have the opportunity to visit two councils which already operated cabinet arrangements, Braintree District Council and Chelmsford Borough Council. The visit to Chelmsford would take place during the afternoon of Tuesday 8 June, with the opportunity to observe a cabinet meeting in the evening. Refreshments would be provided.

Officers would check with Members of the Constitution Working Group their availability for the dates offered by Braintree. [Subsequently the morning of Thursday 27 May was identified as the most suitable date for the majority of the CWG.]

Members agreed these visits would be useful opportunities to learn from other councils operating executive arrangements. It was noted that Rochford District Council had also been approached for such a visit, but that no invitation had yet been forthcoming.

Officers advised a meeting of the CWG was to be arranged on 14 June to analyse responses to the consultation, in order to make a recommendation to Council. Whilst the consultation related to the principle of changing the structure, if the recommendation was to progress to a change in structure, then the advice of the Assistant Chief Executive would be relied upon for the detailed proposals. Three Council meetings would be needed: at the June meeting Council would decide on whether to move to executive arrangements; if so decided, then at the September meeting Council would need to approve the detailed proposals, which would be worked up by officers beforehand; and at the December meeting Council would have to make the formal decision to change the constitution from May 2011.

It was agreed that:

- officers would circulate a timetable to Members of the Constitution Working Group.
- if the decision was made to go ahead with structural changes, further meetings of CWG would be arranged in July.
- officers would confirm arrangements for the visits to Braintree and Chelmsford, with Members to arrange their own transport.

The meeting ended at 4.45pm.