

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD
SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30 pm on 9 DECEMBER 2008**

Present: - Councillor A Dean – Chairman.
Councillors S Anjum, D M Jones, G Sell and L A Wells.

Officers in attendance:- J Mitchell (Chief Executive), C Rockall (Interim
Change Manager) and R Procter (Democratic Services Officer).

SC9 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R M Lemon, S V
Schneider and A M Wattebot.

*Councillor Dean declared a personal interest as a non executive director of
the Princess Alexandra Hospital, in relation to the item on health scrutiny
(Minute SC16 below).*

SC10 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 8 July 2008 were received.

Councillor Sell said he recalled a report was requested by the Committee on
decisions around the extension to the concessionary fares scheme. The
Minutes did not reflect this, but others present at that meeting could not recall
this specific point. The Committee therefore agreed to note that a report had
in any event now been received, to be discussed at Minute SC13 below.

The Minutes were then confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct
record.

SC11 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute SC4 – scrutiny handbook

The Chairman said that training on scrutiny was still to be arranged.
The Interim Change Manager said he had discussed Member training
with the new lead officer for this Committee, who would organise
training via Essex County Council.

(ii) Minute SC8 – officer support for Scrutiny Committee

The Chairman asked that the job description for the post to provide
officer support be circulated.

SC12 CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

The Chairman said he had attended a successful and well organised scrutiny
training event arranged by the Essex Scrutiny Network. The event was for
both Members and Officers. Useful scrutiny techniques discussed included a
scoping pro forma, which was in use at East Hertfordshire District Council.

There had also been a session on chairing. He had taken notes, and would be willing to make them available to any Members who wished to find out more. Councillor Dean said in conclusion there was a vibrant scrutiny network in Essex.

SC13 **CONCESSIONARY FARES**

Councillor D Jones declared a personal interest as holder of a bus pass.

The Chief Executive presented a report on events around a proposal to extend the concessionary fares scheme. The proposal had originated with a recommendation to Environment Committee. Subsequently it had been referred to the Finance and Administration Committee as it was considered to be 'ultra vires'. The recommendations in the Chief Executive's report sought to address concerns of the Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee.

The Chief Executive said that the concessionary fares scheme was now operating from the earlier start of 9.00 am until midnight across Essex. The operation of the scheme would revert to the County Council from 2011.

Councillor Sell asked whether there was yet any feedback on take-up of concessionary bus passes following introduction of the extended hours. The Chief Executive said an update would be provided at the next meeting of the Environment Committee.

Regarding the proposals in the report, the Chief Executive confirmed that all Committee Chairmen would be briefed accordingly.

RESOLVED that

- 1 all reports with financial implications be cleared with the Chief Finance Officer or equivalent person as he or she may nominate.
- 2 reports are not presented in such a way as to lead Committees to make 'ultra vires' decisions.
- 3 officers will not seek unilaterally to expedite procedure where a Committee decision is flawed.

SC14 **REVIEW OF FEES AND CHARGES – INTERIM REPORT**

The Interim Change Manager presented a report on the work being carried out by the Scrutiny Task Group. He said the Council was looking at all fees and charges. The Task Group was keen to ensure there should be a consistent approach and would look at underlying principles on prices and concessions. It would carry out a benchmarking exercise, possibly starting with members of SPARSE (a special interest group set up by the Local Government Association for authorities covering large rural areas).

The Interim Change Manager went on to say whilst good progress had been made, it had become evident that there was more detailed work to be done.

The Group's preference was to complete the task by mid 2009, to avoid repeating the exercise for the following year's budget.

The Chairman said the fundamental principles for levels of charging should be considered, rather than going by what had been charged in previous years.

Councillor Jones said it would be helpful to have a comprehensive list of services for which fees and charges were levied.

Councillor Sell said a degree of pragmatism should be employed, and the exercise should have regard to whether the service intended to cover costs or to make a profit. He referred to the Lifeline service, which he said had not been reviewed for nine years. If a decision was made to increase costs, there could be adverse publicity. It was important to monitor charges regularly. He was concerned also that increases to certain charges could have an adverse impact on the local high street during difficult economic times.

Councillor Wells said the Task Group's remit was to consider formulae to be applied, and not to set charges. The Committee agreed that this was the intention.

RESOLVED

- 1 to note the interim report of the Scrutiny Task Group on Fees and Charges.
- 2 to confirm the approach set out in the report, which would involve
 - i. The development of a pricing and concessions policy.
 - ii. Benchmarking information from a selection of authorities of a similar type and nature to Uttlesford.
 - iii. Consultation with representatives of appropriate voluntary sector organisations.

SC15

REVIEW OF PUBLIC CONVENIENCES

The Committee considered the report of the Lead Officer, presented in his absence by the Interim Change Manager. Following brief discussion, it was

RESOLVED

- 1 to note progress to date.
- 2 to agree that the task group should explore the feasibility of a community toilet scheme, initially on a pilot basis, a report to be brought before the Committee at the meeting on 14 April.

Councillor Sell said the Council's ability to provide public conveniences was limited financially. He referred to examples such as the WC at Hill Street, Saffron Walden; the automated WC in Stansted and the transfer of the amenity at White Street in Great Dunmow. A great deal of money had been

spent providing these facilities. There would be decisions to be made regarding refurbishing or abandoning them.

The Chief Executive confirmed the Finance and Administration Committee had resolved to proceed with the transfer of the public conveniences at White Street, Great Dunmow, on a reducing programme. He agreed that decisions on all automated toilets would have to be made, and that Officers were looking into all implications.

The Committee briefly discussed possibilities for terminating or transferring the annual WC cleaning contract. Officers would look into the options.

SC16

JOINT PCT SCRUTINY IN WEST ESSEX

The Committee considered the report of the Lead Officer. The report sought confirmation that Members were in favour of undertaking an exercise in service level health scrutiny of West Essex PCT with Harlow and Epping Forest district councils.

The Chairman invited questions. Councillor Sell said the proposed exercise should not duplicate any health scrutiny work currently being undertaken by the County Council's Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Councillor Jones enquired about the legal framework within which the joint PCT scrutiny group would operate. Officers confirmed that the proposed arrangement was legally valid, provided the scrutinee had no objection. The Chairman sought expressions of interest. Members who would be potentially interested were Councillors Sell, Jones and Wells.

The Chairman asked that Members give consideration to the areas which should be examined. An initial suggestion was the issue of access to health services, particularly in rural areas. The Committee noted that a meeting between the three authorities would be held in the New Year to discuss the topics and method of review with the PCT. It was

RESOLVED that

- 1 the Committee participate in a pilot joint scrutiny arrangement, with Harlow and Epping Forest district councils, for West Essex PCT on the following basis:
 - i. the Council having an equal stake in the membership of the group;
 - ii. the topic and objectives of any scrutiny be agreed by all three district councils and the PCT;
 - iii. Essex County Council's Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee to be informed of the proposed scrutiny, scoping document and objectives of any review.
 - iv. the Committee put forward ideas for areas of review to be considered further by the Joint Group;

- v. the Committee appoint three Members to the Group.

SC17 **DECISION LISTS**

Community Committee 18 September 2008 – Housing Policy Land Disposal

The Chairman queried the reason for transferring land to a registered social landlord at nil value, rather than at full market value. The Chief Executive said this transfer was in accordance with the Council's policy decision to offer land at nil value to housing associations for the purposes of social housing development.

Councillor Jones asked about affordability of housing schemes provided as a consequence of this policy. He queried whether the housing associations were required to pass on the full value of the gift. It was noted that rents were usually set at market value. The Committee then briefly discussed whether the Council would be entitled to recover the full value of the land if it were later sold on. It was agreed that Officers would look into this question.

SC18 **WORK PROGRAMME**

It was agreed that a work programme would be discussed at the February meeting.

The meeting ended at 8.25 pm.