

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD
SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30 pm on 14 APRIL 2009**

Present: Councillor A Dean – Chairman.
Councillors D M Jones, R M Lemon, S V Schneider, A M
Wattebot, L A Wells and A C Yarwood.

Officers in attendance: R Harborough (Acting Director of Development), S
Martin (Head of Customer Support and Revenue Services) and
R Procter (Democratic Services Officer).

SC19 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D J Sadler and G Sell.

SC20 **MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 9 December 2008 were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

SC21 **MATTERS ARISING**

(i) Minute SC11 – scrutiny training

The Chairman asked for an update on training for Members. The Lead Officer said this matter would be dealt with in his verbal report (Minute SC22 below).

(ii) Minute SC13 – reports with financial implications

The Chairman referred to previous discussion of a report on a proposal to extend the concessionary fares scheme. He asked whether committee chairmen had been briefed in accordance with the resolution arising from that discussion. The Head of Customer Support and Revenue Services said to his knowledge this was the case, but he would seek confirmation.

(iii) Minute SC14 – fees and charges

Whilst lists of fees and charges had been made available to the working group, these would be circulated to all Members of the Committee as requested by Councillor Jones.

(iv) Minute SC16 - joint PCT scrutiny in West Essex

The Chairman reported on his investigation of possibilities for joint health scrutiny with Harlow and Epping Forest, but a response had been deferred until the end of May 2009. He asked the Lead Officer to pursue this matter.

(v) Minute SC17 – housing policy land disposal

The Acting Director of Development clarified the comments recorded. He said land intended for social housing had to be transferred at nil value, since if it

were to be sold at full market value the proposals would be invalid. Contrary to the statement in the Minute, social housing rents would not be set at market value. The Chairman asked that he be provided with written clarification.

SC22 **LEAD OFFICER'S REPORT**

Regarding scrutiny training, the Head of Customer Support and Revenue Services said he had made enquiries with both Essex County Council and the Centre for Public Scrutiny. The former had unfortunately not been in a position to offer training support, but a potential opportunity with the CfPS had been proposed, in July 2009. The Chairman asked that views be sought in advance to establish what subjects Members of the Committee would prefer to cover at this session.

The Head of Customer Support and Revenue Services said he had been approached coincidentally by Essex County Council (ECC) with regard to health scrutiny. He was engaged in discussion with ECC officers at this stage, as they would prefer to make use of any existing forums or committees. If other districts and boroughs were in favour, a proposal would be taken to the Essex Leaders' meeting.

SC23 **TOURISM DEVELOPMENT**

The Acting Director of Development presented a report on behalf of the Chief Executive, which focused on the role of the Tourist Information Centre ("TIC"), following the transfer of management of the facility to Saffron Walden Town Council. The TIC had retained its accreditation and still provided a local service, except that it no longer produced a hard copy accommodation guide. Hard copy documentation was costly and time-consuming to produce. This item would have been subject to scrutiny in any event, as there were grounds for questioning whether the product remained relevant to the market, in view of widespread internet use.

The Chairman said he was concerned that visitor accommodation in this district was not as well publicised as it could be. He was aware that Stansted Airport did not have a local tourism guide for this area, although it stocked a guide for the Bishop's Stortford area.

Councillor Schneider said that in the course of a best value review of tourism some years ago, the prospect of establishing a TIC at the Airport had not been encouraged by BAA. In her experience of running a bed and breakfast, the great majority of clients booked online. There was therefore no need to print an accommodation guide. There was no reason why the Airport should not obtain a list of bed and breakfast businesses if it wished, as the Council could supply this.

The Chairman was concerned there should be a concerted approach between all agencies as he feared there was a lack of overall co-ordination. It had been a struggle to get parish councils together at a recent meeting to address this issue.

Councillor Yarwood said that meeting, on which he had received a report from his Parish Council Vice Chairman, was extremely unlikely to have succeeded in addressing those aims. The issue was not one which could readily be tackled at that level, and there were other agencies already fulfilling that role.

Councillor Wattebot said there were issues other than tourist accommodation which should be publicised, such as the network of public footpaths across the district. Members noted that several parish councils had placed maps of public footpaths on their websites. The view was expressed that consolidating maps would be valuable, and co-ordinating such information would form an appropriate task for the TIC. Resources for this task would be required, which would need to be explored with the Town Council. In view of the role of this Committee in overseeing functions which had been outsourced, it was proposed to invite the TIC to report to the Committee, to ensure that the level of service was being maintained.

RESOLVED to invite the Tourist Information Centre to attend a meeting of the Committee to report on the tourism service since its transfer from the District Council to Saffron Walden Town Council.

SC24

REVIEW OF FEES AND CHARGES

The Committee considered the report of the Interim Change Manager giving an update on the current review. The Chairman said, as a member of this working group, further dialogue would take place in order to test some provisional ideas. It was planned to engage further with the voluntary sector, as it was important that if the Council were to change its policy, it should do so in an open manner.

Councillor Schneider said it would be useful to obtain information on neighbouring councils' charges, as variations were difficult to explain to people living near the borders of the district.

Councillor Yarwood agreed to join the working group, which was now one Member short.

RESOLVED

- 1 to note the interim report of the fees and charges scrutiny working group.
- 2 that Councillor Yarwood be appointed to serve on the group.

SC25

PUBLIC CONVENIENCES

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Customer Support and Revenue Services, who invited Members to bring this review to a conclusion.

Councillor Wattebot raised a concern regarding consultation by another Officer and Member with Thaxted Parish Council. The issue of public conveniences had been attached to discussions relating to the transfer of a

car park, and in her view had not been dealt with democratically. This was a separate issue. The two ward Members had not been kept informed, and the way the information was put out was surreptitious. She was very concerned at what appeared to be a 'cabinetisation' of due process.

The Acting Director of Development said that a series of discussions had taken place with councils to establish their views regarding local amenities. Decisions should be dealt with by Committees. He would take back to those involved in this process the fact that ward Members should be kept informed as a matter of courtesy. There had been a report on local amenities to both the Environment and Community and Housing Committees.

Members expressed firm support for the principle that Members and Committees be kept informed of business relevant to them. The Chairman said these concerns would be recorded and that he would take up with the Chief Executive a better means of dealing with such issues. In any event he thanked the Head of Customer Support and Revenue Services for his report.

RESOLVED to note the report and review outcomes and to sign off the review as completed.

SC26

SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered a draft programme of work for 2009/10 and were asked to prioritise potential reviews for the year ahead. Regarding day centres, Councillor Jones said fees charged for venues for social events were relatively costly for members of the public, and merited review.

Regarding grants and donations, Councillor Schneider said this process was already transparent, as certain criteria were laid down. The officer for grants reported to Community and Housing Committee. However, Members considered this area would be a valid one for scrutiny, as there could be issues of priority and consistency in exercising discretion.

Regarding Neighbourhood Watch, Members queried whether the Committee's remit extended to this initiative. However, it was noted that community safety was a valid area for enquiry, and as Members had concerns that the function of this service had diminished, it was agreed to keep this topic in the list.

Regarding the Leisure PFI, Councillor Jones said this subject ought to justify a formal review via an executive report. Councillor Schneider said this matter was monitored by the Community and Housing Committee which received an annual report and presentation. Councillor Jones replied that it was important to ask how planned outcomes were standing up in the recession. Councillor Lemon said confirmation should be sought from the Community Partnerships Manager whether such a report was again due this year, and that she should be invited to help draw up terms of reference for scrutiny purposes.

Councillors were aware that free swimming was currently being offered at the leisure centres. *Councillor Jones declared an interest in that a member of his family was trying to find information on free swimming.* It would be interesting

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to know how this offer was being promoted to those who would benefit, as it did not seem to be advertised at GP surgeries.

Regarding allotments, Members agreed this was a suitable topic for scrutiny, as demand was currently outstripping supply. It would be beneficial to know whether legislation applied to provision of allotments, and to ascertain what plots were available.

Members debated whether trading standards should form part of this year's scrutiny work programme. This was an important and interesting area, but could form a very detailed and extensive piece of work. Therefore in view of the extent of the programme for this year, it was agreed to defer consideration of this subject.

Cllr Jones said the Committee should also consider its own effectiveness and what it had or had not achieved through the scrutiny process. Other Members agreed and the Chairman added that this could perhaps be dealt with as part of producing an Annual Scrutiny report for Full Council. The Lead Officer highlighted the fact that such a report was included in the Committee's terms of reference.

In discussion of further valid subjects for scrutiny, Members questioned whether governance procedures throughout the Council were sufficiently transparent. There was a need for a corporate approach to governance, as was apparent from the concerns discussed earlier that Members be consistently informed of issues affecting their wards. Members agreed to add this subject to the programme.

Councillor Schneider referred to public consultation by the water companies which unfortunately had been poorly attended in the past. Proposals for all houses to be metered had been put forward. Consultation exercises were imperfect in that those being consulted could find they were presented with a fait accompli, despite the companies' compliance with consultation procedures. It was agreed to invite the water companies to present these issues to the Committee.

RESOLVED the scrutiny work programme for 2009/10 to comprise the subjects set out below.

Working Title	Overview
Day Centres.	Review of day centre ownership, management, maintenance and use.
Grants & Donations.	Review of process for awarding grants & donations to voluntary and community sector organisations.
Neighbourhood Watch.	Role, coverage and contribution of Neighbourhood Watch to crime prevention in Uttlesford.
Leisure PFI.	Review of the Council's Leisure PFI to confirm planned outcomes and general status report.
Allotments.	Review of the provision of allotment land in Uttlesford.
Corporate Governance.	Review of corporate governance within the Council.
Water metering.	Review of proposals by water companies for meters to be installed in all houses.

The meeting ended at 9.05 pm.