

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN on 5 JULY 2011 at 7.30 pm

Present: Councillor E Godwin (Chairman)
Councillors G Barker, P Davies, I Evans, S Favell,
D Morson, J Rich and D Watson.

Also present: Councillor J Ketteridge (Leader); Councillors
S Barker, R Chambers, J Cheetham, K Mackman,
V Ranger, J Redfern and H Rolfe.

Officers attending: S Martin (Divisional Head: Customer Support and Revenue Services), R Millership (Divisional Head: Housing and Environment Services), L Milns (Project Officer), J Mitchell (Chief Executive), R Procter (Democratic Services Officer), N Shephard-Lewis (Tenant Participation Officer), B Tice (Project Officer) and A Webb (Director of Corporate Services).

SC1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor S Howell.

SC2 MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 5 APRIL 2011

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 April 2011 were received and approved, and signed by the Chairman.

SC3 STATUS REPORT ON REVIEW OF DAY CENTRES

Bruce Tice gave a verbal overview of the review which had been carried out of the District's five day centres under the previous Committee. The conclusions of the review were that the management committees of the day centres, which were composed of volunteers, many of whom were fairly elderly themselves, faced various challenges; and that there were several differences in the way each day centre was run. In most cases the buildings from which the day centres operated were owned by the District Council, but in Stansted's case it was owned by the Parish Council.

The Scrutiny Committee had recognised that some form of shared support would be appropriate for day centre management committees; and that the management agreements should be revised. It was envisaged that the support might be provided by a shared manager

whose time would be split between all five day centres. Currently only Stansted Day Centre had a paid manager.

The Divisional Head of Housing and Environment Services said meetings had taken place with Stansted Parish Council to discuss funding for maintaining the building; that new draft management agreements had been drawn up; and that the benefits of a shared resource had been much debated but eventually rejected by one of the day centres. It had been anticipated that the shared resource would have looked at ways of generating more income for the day centres through lettings and bulk purchasing to enable them to operate more commercially. The additional income would have been kept by the day centres and some used to contribute towards this resource. Without the involvement of all five, it would be more difficult to operate on a commercial basis. It should also be noted that as the Stansted day centre building was not owned by the District Council, any additional income from lettings would pass to Stansted, so theoretically there were two day centres which would not contribute.

She said in order to offer immediate help to the management committees she had asked staff from across the Council to assist the day centres. For example, environmental health officers had designed a training course tailored to the day centres. As a result of the initiative of various officers, she was pleased to say the day centre management committees seemed to feel more supported.

Councillor Rich declared a personal interest as a member of Stansted Day Centre management committee.

He said he had recently attended a meeting of the management committee. There had been concern expressed regarding continued provision of resources now that ownership matters had been resolved, and he welcomed the assurance that such resources would continue.

Councillor Godwin asked a question about the sustainability of providing additional support using existing staff.

The Tenant Participation Officer explained that training for day centre volunteers was taking place, and that this was being accomplished by including them in courses run for officers, so that no significant additional resource was required. For example, she said it had been arranged that volunteers from day centres would take part in a first aid course for Sheltered Housing Officers.

The Divisional Head of Housing and Environment Services paid tribute to the efforts of officers to provide this support, some of whom were giving up their own time.

The Chairman asked whether this course of action was proving successful in encouraging a greater degree of commitment from the

management committees. Officers replied that whilst the support was helpful, one of the main problems was that many volunteers were aging.

Councillor Morson said a shared resource had nearly been agreed by the previous Committee; that this had been an excellent project for Scrutiny, and that the drawing up new management agreements was a step forward. He said he had under the previous administration asked for a resource of £10,000 to be put forward, but this proposal had not been accepted on a procedural point. However, if the Council's officers were content to provide support, this was a good outcome.

The Divisional Head of Housing and Environment Services said there was still the possibility of increasing income from the day centres by encouraging them to charge more for their services. For example, some day centres had been providing lunches at prices which scarcely reflected costs. There had been a recent opportunity to take on a volunteer who was prepared to fulfil without pay the role of the shared resource being considered, but one day centre had rejected this possibility.

Councillor Davies questioned the sustainability of continuing to provide support when officers were in some cases doing so in their own time.

The Divisional Head of Housing and Environment Services agreed that it was important to educate the volunteers so that they felt equipped to fulfil their role without relying excessively on officers.

The Chairman asked that an update on day centres be brought to the December meeting.

Councillor Watson asked about the day centre which had rejected shared assistance, questioning whether there were activities which officers felt they should be undertaking.

Officers said there were significant differences in the buildings occupied by the day centres; and in the varying skills and abilities of those running them; furthermore, the client bases were different, varying from 18 diners to 40 diners per session. All of these factors affected the capacity of the day centres to generate income.

Councillor Rich asked whether, as day centres were a public resource, there should be a level of surveillance of the centre which had rejected the help of a volunteer manager.

The Tenant Participation Officer said the management committees and day-to-day volunteers were often not the same people, and she felt very strongly that the service provided to their clients was indispensable. It was aspects such as health and safety, which were the responsibility of the management committees, which had proved more awkward.

The Divisional Head of Housing and Environment Services said many of the problems had now been resolved.

The Chairman thanked officers for their presentation and said the Committee would look forward to receiving an update at its meeting in December.

SC4

OUTLINE OF FORWARD PLAN FROM THE CABINET

The Chairman said it was much appreciated that members of the Cabinet were present, and invited them to speak about their respective portfolios.

The Leader reported on the first meeting of Cabinet. The agenda for Cabinet meetings would include standing items, such as items referred from the overview and scrutiny committees. He referred the Committee to the Forward Plan, which set out the Cabinet's rolling programme of business for the next four months, and spoke briefly about the items currently listed within the Forward Plan.

Councillor G Barker declared a personal interest in that his wife Councillor S Barker was the Executive Member for Environment.

Councillor Chambers described his role as Executive Member for Finance. He said the Council needed to save a further £1million over the next three years, in addition to the £1million already saved. He said he was happy to make himself available to Members for discussion on any financial matter.

The Chairman said she intended to take a proactive approach to scrutiny. Accordingly she wished to question an aspect of the proposed Revenues and Benefits partnership with Harlow Council: why was the proportion of set-up costs payable by each authority not split equally?

Councillor Chambers said a 50:50 division of set up costs was fair, as each authority faced the same charges, but that due to the greater number of claimants in Harlow a split of 68:32 was appropriate for the division of returns. He was confident this authority would benefit as much as Harlow Council, and in terms of the savings, £190K would be achieved, which was close to the amount the Council had hoped to gain from the partnership.

The Chairman asked about redundancies. The Leader said this was a difficult question to answer, as it depended on factors such as whether staff were willing to go to Harlow, or were able to be re-trained in other areas. Whilst this was a fair question, it was the task of this authority to deliver this project and to negotiate with partners. In his view this would be a good project for Uttlesford. This would be the first authority in

Essex to produce such a partnership, and he hoped other partners would come in and improve the economies of scale.

The Chairman said she was delighted that this council was in at the start, rather than coming in later.

Councillor Redfern spoke about the Housing Portfolio for which she was responsible. This area currently involved several major issues: buying out of the Housing Revenue Account; the change to home options; the change to paperless applications for housing; and photovoltaic cell installation. A further major area was homelessness, the budget for which had had an extra £9,000 allocated to it. Finally, she mentioned that further work was being done on the possibility of building new council houses in the district, which was an area about which she felt very positive.

The Chairman said she welcomed what Councillor Redfern had said about there being a good process in place for following up those who might be vulnerable in re-registration. She was also pleased that further sites for new build were being considered, as in her opinion there were village sites across the district which the council owned and which could potentially be put to better use.

Members asked about the reasons for and definition of homelessness; and about the locally determined housing policy to which the Council had agreed, and which permitted people to expand their housing choices outside their own district.

Councillor Redfern said the process of finding oneself homeless was usually a protracted one; and that homelessness was defined as just that: having nowhere to live. The role of the department was also to help people to avoid homelessness. Regarding housing options, there were criteria which had to be fulfilled; and a housing options booklet was to be made available very shortly.

In response to a question from Councillor Watson, Councillor Redfern said she understood the technological aspect of the photovoltaic cells being installed on the roofs of tenants' houses would result in 25% more efficiency for tenants' energy bills.

Councillor S Barker then spoke about the Environment portfolio. She said the main areas for which she was responsible were travellers; development, including the Local Development Framework; and waste.

Councillor S Barker declared a personal interest in that she was a Member of Essex County Council and that her husband was a Member of the Scrutiny Committee.

She said she would be exploring the raising of additional money from car parking, and proposed to bring this matter to Scrutiny Committee in September before taking it to Cabinet.

The Chairman said she was pleased that Scrutiny Committee would have a prior opportunity to consider this issue.

Councillor S Barker said the draft affordable housing policy would be brought to Cabinet in August, as would the green belt policy. There would also be discussion at Council on the inter authority waste strategy.

Councillor Rolfe, Executive Member for Communities and Partnerships, gave an outline of his responsibilities. His portfolio included issues such as 'The Big Society', localism, Uttlesford Futures, community forums; the Essex Partnership, economic development; leisure and public health. He looked forward to working with the Scrutiny Committee to ensure the Council had a 'joined up' approach in addressing these areas.

The Chairman agreed there was a great deal to do and said she was in particular concerned about inadequate health provision in certain areas of the district.

In reply to a question from Councillor Morson, Councillor Rolfe said structures were not yet in place for the Essex Partnership and that a response to the Council's consultation response was awaited.

Councillor Cheetham gave an overview of her role as Deputy Leader with responsibility for aviation. She said a meeting of the Stansted Airport Advisory Panel, which had been arranged for this week, had unfortunately had to be re-scheduled due to the high number of apologies received. It was important that this first meeting of the group should be well-attended as an important item needed to be considered. This was a scoping report on the Department for Transport consultation on Developing a Sustainable Framework for UK Aviation. She said she looked forward to all Members taking a cross-party active part in considering aviation matters.

The Leader said Cabinet Members would be willing to be approached at any time for questions. On a more formal basis, Members were welcome to attend Cabinet, but he would prefer questions to relate to items on the agenda. There was still the opportunity at Full Council to put questions on record, and there should be no need for any Member to feel they had not received a full answer.

Councillor Godwin thanked the Leader, and said it was much appreciated that Cabinet Members had attended the first meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

SC5

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE DRAFT WORK PLAN

The Committee considered a draft work plan, which required further content to be allocated to the next few meetings.

Members put forward the following topics as potential areas for scrutiny: public health - including childhood obesity; ambulance cover and response times in rural areas, road traffic accident figures; the provision of GP surgeries in new estates across the district; the status of the relocation of the GP surgery in Stansted Mountfitchet; parking; the Revenues and Benefits partnership; the annual review of Bridge End Gardens; and the review of the payroll arrangement with Bedford.

In relation to discussion of public health and doctors' surgery provision, Councillor Davies declared an interest in that his wife worked as a Health Care Assistant at the Angel Lane Surgery in Great Dunmow.

During discussion Members made various observations, including: the importance of keeping in mind whether scrutiny of a particular topic would have an effective outcome; concern that the ring-fencing of section 106 monies was time-limited for provision of community facilities including doctors' surgeries; that a previous Scrutiny request that the Ambulance Service attend to answer questions had been a useful exercise, and could again be helpful.

The Divisional Head of Customer Support and Revenue Services advised building in flexibility to the programme of work. He suggested that as health provision appeared to have emerged as a major theme, it would be wise to check there was no risk of duplicating work already undertaken by Essex County Council's Health and Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Regarding the revenues and benefits partnership, the Director of Corporate Services said he would be happy to address questions, but that as certain aspects were not yet in the public domain he asked that Members approach him outside the meeting,. He suggested bringing to the Committee in September a Part 2 update report.

Regarding the a suggestion which had arisen from scrutiny training for the Committee, that it should scrutinise partnerships by looking first at Bedford Council's administration of the Council's payroll; the Director of Corporate Services said a team of officers was already carrying out a service review, which if the Committee agreed, could be reported at its October meeting. It was agreed that this should be done.

Councillor G Barker commented on the fact that periodic service reviews took place, and asked how officers undertook such scrutiny. The Director of Corporate Services offered to give a verbal update on which areas were the subject of such reviews and the process by which this was done at the meeting in October.

SC6

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Councillor Godwin asked Members for their views on an earlier start time of 7pm for meetings of the Committee. It was agreed to continue to hold meetings at 7.30pm.

Councillor Watson said he had been concerned to read in the local press criticism of this Committee before it had even met, by a Member of the Council. He asked that consideration be given as to whether there had been a breach of the Code of Conduct. Councillor Godwin said if necessary the matter could be referred to the Assistant Chief Executive-Legal.

The meeting ended at 9.40pm.