

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD
SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30pm on 3 MAY 2016**

Present: Councillor A Dean (Chairman)
Councillors G Barker, P Davies, M Felton, T Goddard, B Light and
G Sell.

Officers in attendance: R Auty (Assistant Director Corporate Services), M Cox
(Democratic and Services Officer), A Knight (Assistant Director -
Finance) and A Webb (Director of Finance and Corporate
Services).

Also Present: Councillors S Howell.

SC48 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Asker and Harris.

SC49 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting on 15 March 2016 were agreed as a correct record
subject to the following amendments to minute PC44

- i) P.8 typographical change to the last paragraph '**when** to use planning obligations'
- ii) Resolution point 1 – remove the reference to the Locality Board
- iii) Resolution point 3 – add the word 'consultation' and delete the word 'call-in' .

SC50 MATTERS ARISING

(i) Minutes SC39 – Cabinet Forward Plan

The Chairman said he would speak to officers about whether a mechanism could be put in place for members of Scrutiny to follow through on items of particular interest, as it wasn't possible for the committee to scrutinise all the items in the Forward Plan.

(ii) Minutes SC47 – Building Control Partnership

This item would be considered again at the meeting on 6 July. The additional financial information requested would be circulated to Members, together with the detailed notes taken at that meeting.

(iii) Minutes SC44 – Relationship between UDC and ECC scoping discussion

Council Light queried the first bullet of the recommendation. The Chairman said the wording was unclear but he had asked for members' comments on their experiences with ECC and these would be reported later in the agenda.

On the 4th point of the resolution, officers said that ECC had been contacted but information on the performance data had not yet been supplied.

SC51

CABINET FORWARD PLAN

The Chairman invited comments from Members.

Councillor Howell answered questions about the SPV item. He said this project was still at an early stage but it was hoped that this would be the subject of the workshop on 13 June, where Members would be taken through the whole process. The initial report concerning the details of setting up the holding company and subsidiary companies was expected to be considered by Scrutiny on 5 July and Cabinet on 14 July 2016.

It was confirmed that the initial focus would be on property and rental income. Councillor Light said that the council should also investigate other options to generate income. Councillor Howell replied that this initiative was a platform to a more commercial approach to providing services but it was still at a very early stage and should not be rushed.

The Committee was advised that the item on Fairycroft House had recently been added to the Forward Plan. This concerned a proposal to support the retention of this facility.

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SC52

SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The work programme was noted.

The committee was due to receive the report from the CWG Chairman on the review of the Cabinet system at the next meeting. Cllr Barker said that as not many current members had experience of working under the committee system, it would be useful to have details of how the system had worked before the change to Cabinet in 2011. This could include information on the structure, decision making and the degree of Member involvement. It would also be useful to look at those councils who had recently decided to return to the committee system, the reasons for this change and the type of system they had adopted.

SC53

ENFORCEMENT REVIEW

Councillor Sell reported progress on the work of the Enforcement Task Group. There had been a useful meeting with the Enforcement Manager, who had explained structure of the service and the resources available within the team.

Individual members of the task group were arranging meetings with the taxi operators, the portfolio holder and Michael Perry the Head of service. The group had also requested background information, and comparative data on various areas of the enforcement service. The group would meet again to

discuss all the information received and consider recommendations to put forward.

In answer to members' questions, Cllr Sell confirmed the group would be considering the effect of operating a generic rather than a specialist service, and looking at the trend in the number of complaints received over a period of time.

Members commented that Enforcement was generally a reactive service and there were areas where regular visits were not carried out, for example inspection of taxi premises.

All members agreed that it would be useful for ward members to be informed about live enforcement cases in their wards, and asked the task group to consider how this could be achieved.

The Chairman commented that he hoped the relationship between the council and other organisations with Enforcement responsibilities would be considered by the group during their review.

SC54

LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME

The Assistant Director Finance presented a report which gave an overview of the Local Council Tax support scheme.

She explained that the local scheme had been introduced in 2013 to replace the Government council tax benefit scheme. It had been prepared within the framework of an Essex wide scheme that sought to achieve cost neutrality where the cut in government funding was offset by making reductions in the amount of support certain households received. All Essex LA's had adopted common principles when designing their own schemes which included the protection of pensioners and vulnerable working age groups. In addition a £10,000 hardship had been set up in 2013/14 to support residents in severe financial difficulty and this was then increased to £15,000.

The scheme included a discretionary grant for major preceptors and parishes to cover the financial implications of the reduced tax base.

In 2014 the minimum contribution from non-working age people claiming support had been increased from 8.5% to 12.5% but the discretionary funding support for major preceptors and parishes continued at the same level. The LCTS scheme and the councils discretionary grants had remained unchanged for both 2015/16 and 2016/17.

The Assistant Director said the report showed that the council has seen a year on year reduction in the number of claimants since the introduction of the LCTS scheme. It also compared the Uttlesford scheme with other LA schemes and this demonstrated that Uttlesford continued to have the lowest contribution.

In terms of financing the scheme, the Assistant Director explained that this had been supported by the Revenue Support Grant from central government. This grant had reduced over the years and significantly in 2016/17. It was noted that

2017/18 would be the final year that the council received any RSG. The discretionary grant to the parishes had been a reducing figure in line with the reduction of claimants. As the scheme had developed the impact on the major preceptors has been absorbed within the collection fund and the council has not been required to fund this grant. The forecast financial impact of the LCTS scheme for the council in 2016/17 was £283,000

The council was required to carry out an annual consultation with residents on the scheme and any amendment proposals. Officers had put forward the following suggestions; which could form part of the 2017/18 consultation.

1. No change
2. Increase the discount on empty homes
3. Increase the contribution rate. For every 2.5% increase there would be a reduction in cost to the council of £15,000
4. Reduce the discretionary grant given to parish councils.

The draft scheme would be reported to Scrutiny on 5 July and Cabinet on 14 July. The consultation period would run from 1 August – 30 September, with responses considered by Cabinet on 30 November. The final scheme would be presented for approval by Full Council on 8 December.

Members asked questions on the content of the report and received a detailed explanation on the calculation of the percentage contribution.

A question was asked about whether there was a correlation between the level of contribution and the number of claimants. Also, as the purpose of the scheme had been to encourage people back to work, was this possible to prove. The Assistant Director replied that although the number of UDC claimants had decreased there were too many variables to make this connection.

Cllr Felton referred to the 50% additional council tax payment for properties that had been left empty for over 2 years. She said she understood the rationale, but spoke about the effect of this policy on a young family, who were staying with relatives whilst renovating their property. The work had taken over two years and the extra payment was causing real hardship. She was concerned that there were no exceptions allowed to this policy. The Director of Finance and Corporate Services said he had made a note of this point and would discuss this outside the meeting.

The meeting had a detailed discussion around the suggestion to reduce the discretionary grant to parish councils. There was a view that it would be better to adjust the precept, rather than recycling money between the various authorities. Looking at the table of figures, the sums to be absorbed by most parishes were relatively small. The amount was more significant for the larger villages and towns, but this was still in the region of 5% of the precept. Some members commented that this practise had been part of the transition scheme and should therefore be reviewed.

Cllr Barker said it did not seem fair to protect the parish councils but not Uttlesford residents. This was more pertinent now in the light of the reduction of Government support and it appeared that the council could not keep supporting

the scheme without losing money. He had noted that a number of Essex authorities had reduced their contribution in line with the Government's funding reduction. The Director of Finance and Cooperate services confirmed that this was the line taken by most authorities.

The Assistant Director Corporate Services said that the 2015 consultation survey had revealed that 93.3% of responses had supported the protection of the parish council grant. However, they would not necessarily have been aware of the financial implications of this arrangement.

Some Members pointed out that the changes to the arrangements could have a major impact on some parishes. There was also a conflict between who was making the decision and who was paying for it and the parish council could be aggrieved to be filling the funding gap. Any proposal would need to be carefully set out in the consultation and raised at the parish forum. The meeting also understood that all authorities were facing funding cuts and were required to consider different ways of increasing their income.

The meeting then discussed future changes to the individual contribution. The Chairman said that although the council was under some pressure, there was no argument for changing the scheme in 2017/18, but asked officers to consider a timescale for when this might have to happen through the MTFS.

Other Members felt it would be better to impose a small, say small increase now, to implement a gradual step by step approach rather than imposing a large increase when the funding situation became critical.

The meeting was informed that the consultation would be on the Administration's preferred scheme, but Cabinet would be informed of the Scrutiny Committee's views. Any proposals would be included in the public consultation in the summer.

The Chairman summed up the discussion and put forward the committee's main priorities as follows

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- To consider the future funding of the parish council discretionary grant.
- In the medium term look at an appropriate adjustment of the 12.5% contribution.

SC55

QUIET LANES – SCOPING REPORT

The Committee received the scoping report for the review of quiet lanes. The main areas of investigation were to understand the initiative, the criteria for designating, the role of district/parish councils, the current provision and whether it was an appropriate initiative for the district. The committee noted that this was a county function and a discretionary services and that UDC had no direct role between the county and the parishes.

For the next meeting, Members requested information on ECC's current position with regards to the provision of these lanes. It was understood that there was currently only one green lane in the district.

Cllr Felton said this lane in Felsted was well regarded by residents. It gave the impression that the lane was used by walkers and cyclists and as a consequence car drivers were more careful. She supported the initiative as fitting with the wellbeing agenda of providing safer routes for walking and cycling.

Members thought there might be a role for the district council to promote these lanes in their communities. Councillor Davies was reassured that the green lane signs were discreet and the routes wouldn't be subject additional street furniture.

RESOLVED to approve the scoping report

SC56

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UDC AND ECC – SCOPING REPORT

Further to the scoping discussion at the last meeting, members received further information on the areas where UDC had a working relationship between ECC. The committee also received copies of email replies from other members of the council about their experiences of working with ECC.

Although there were numerous areas of interaction between the two authorities, it was clear that Members' major concerns centred on the Highways service. The committee was asked to consider which particular aspects it wished to discuss and the expected outcome of the review.

Members noted that highway issues had been discussed by Scrutiny in 2012 and 2013 and the committee had received a presentation from the Highways Strategic Partnership. It had also discussed County Highway's responses to planning consultations. Members thought it would be useful to find out whether this relationship had improved over the last few years and seek the views of the Chairman of the Planning Committee.

The Chairman said there appeared to be two main areas of concern, which should be investigated before compiling a formal scoping document and determining the desired outcome of the review.

1) Reporting of maintenance issues

The committee said there was inconsistency in the response from ECC highways when reporting highway problems. It would be helpful to establish whether this was a failure of the service within ECC or if residents/district councillors were not approaching this in the right way.

Councillor Davies agreed to investigate this area, covering the following points: to understand the lines of communication, ECC processes, who was receiving

the information and how was it prioritised and how should the public/district councillors be reporting the problems.

2) Progressing projects submitted by parish councils

Councillor G Barker said he would investigate this area. He would obtain anecdotal evidence from parish councils, and examine the ECC process for dealing with these schemes.

Councillors Barker and Davies would report back to a future meeting of the group.

SC57

LAST MEETING

As this was the last meeting of the council year, the Chairman thanked both Members and officers for their support during the past year.

The meeting ended at 9.40pm.