

# SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1 April 2008

\*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

AGENDA ITEM No.

**8B**

## TITLE OF REPORT: QUESTIONS

The following interim response to a question has been provided.

### (I) Social Inclusion Strategy

“On 15 March 2005 Cabinet recommended to Council that a more detailed Social Inclusion Action Plan is prepared following consultation with partner agencies, the Local Strategic Partnership and Area Committees prior to submission back to Cabinet later in 2005.

The recommendation was accepted by Council on 26 April 2005. Could you please explain what actions have taken place following this?”

**The following interim response has been provided by the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement & Rural Affairs.**

“I apologise that it has not been possible to provide a full response for this meeting.

The social inclusion action plan which should have been agreed by the end of December 2005 was not completed because of competing demands on resources.

However various actions relevant to social inclusion have been and are being undertaken. For example officers have already mapped the local results from the new Index of Multiple Deprivation which was published in December 2007.

A meeting is in the process of being arranged with officers to discuss a full response and the way forward for this important work. This will help us explore the nature of social inclusion in North Hertfordshire. It could be said that social inclusion will be achieved when all the risk factors associated with social exclusion (e.g. low income, unemployment, poor health, poor living conditions, low educational attainment) have been addressed and when democratic engagement / community cohesion / citizenship have been enhanced.

I will circulate a further response once this meeting has taken place.”

The following answer to a question has been provided.

### (M) Planning Decision Notices

“Why does the Council charge £20.00 to produce additional copies of a planning decision notice to members of the public?”

**The following response has been provided by the Planning & Conservation Manager.**

“Following a decision on an application under the planning legislation a copy of the relevant decision notice is sent to the applicant or agent but further copies requested by any interested party are subject to a charge.

At the present time this is £20.00 per decision notice. This may consist of a single or multiple sheets.

The cost that we charge reflects the average cost of the following:

- Locating and retrieving the file ( some go back to 1948)
- Producing a copy of that decision notice – this can be from microfiche, hard copy files or from the IT systems
- Handling the payment of fees.

As would be expected the biggest element of the charge is officer time and this has been calculated at the appropriate grade. With each request there is the cost of retrieving the document . At the present time, with storage space a premium, some files are in the Town Hall and at a building next to Town Lodge as it is not possible to keep all the older records at the DCO. Sometimes the cost of time taken to research the history and locate the correct decision notice on a property, particularly where there are multiple decisions is often significant. For example, a recent request for a decision notice and associated Section 106 agreement together with a Section 38 agreement under the highways act involved two A1 size plans, two A3 plans and some thirty copies at A4 size for which there was a charge in accordance with the fees of only £60.00.

It tends to be thought that it only costs x pence to produce a photocopy and that is correct if the original document is to hand. The retrieval time to find the file or microfiche, looking for the decision notice document in the file or on multiple fiches, photocopying the document and then re-filing the documents and file soon adds up and may exceed 3/4hour. The calculation is based on an hourly rate of £20.40.

The request for payment is in advance of the dispatch of the decision notices requested by telephone, e-mail or post and is handled either by a cheque or card payment. The required documents are sent out within 24-48 hours thus providing an efficient service. A similar payment system is in place for visitors to the Customer service centre. This is to avoid the further time and resources that would be involved with the need to produce invoices and in some cases follow up action. This present process would appear to acceptable to those that use the service and has not resulted in any complaints.

It is accepted that as an average cost is being applied some requests will be getting a good deal in terms of the time taken to retrieve the information and others will be subsidising that. However, there is a balance to be struck between being able to give individuals some certainty about how much they will have to pay and finding an equitable way to charge that allows us to publish the charge that will apply and to provide an efficient service.

It must also be noted that details of any decision on applications since 2002 are available on the Council’s website. As with other Authorities, the decision notice itself is not accessible to avoid any fraudulent activity. This may be sufficient in some cases to provide the information required and avoids incurring any costs.

The fees applicable to the provision of copies of decision notices and other documents are currently under review to apply to 2008-09. This review will again be assessing the average research time, cost of photocopying and postage and payment handling."

The following additional question has been submitted by Councillor Martin Stears.

**(N) Plastics Bring Banks**

"A concerned resident passed a Plastics Recycling Bring Bank in St Johns Road on Saturday evening to see 2 black sacks full of plastic bottles being blown across the road causing a serious danger to road users as it was raining and dark, and visibility was not good. He kindly stopped his car and put the sacks in his boot, as the weather was too bad for him to stay and put the contents in the bank. Next morning he took the sacks to Woolgrove Road to find that bank overflowing and mounds of bags full of plastic around the banks there. He also found that milk had leaked from the black sacks into the boot of his car onto a blanket and leaving a smell which will take some time to clear. He is consequently furious with the Council for placing a Bring Bank at such a dangerous position on St Johns Road.

Next day, Sunday, the St Johns Road Bring Bank was full and overflow sacks were again piled up against the bank. On Tuesday morning an irate neighbour informed me that plastic bottles were strewn across the road. The bank was only emptied later that day (i.e. today).

In the meantime I have had complaints from several residents of Bearton Ward complaining of the appalling state of the bring banks and the failure to empty them for days after they become full.

(1) When will the dangerous bring bank in St Johns Road be removed or resited to a suitable position?

(2) What steps are being taken to ensure that bring banks are not left full for several days allowing overflow plastics to build up?

(3) Are considerations being given to providing fencing to ensure that any overflow at bring banks can be left tidily and safely?"

**The following response has been provided by Head of Leisure & Environmental Services.**

"The current siting of the Plastic Bottle Bank at St John's Road will not be changed. The site has been deemed safe as from a servicing point of view and more importantly a public use perspective. We do understand that loose plastic bottles do and will cause a safety hazard if left blowing around the street in the dark. A cleansing team will be sent as soon as possible to the site to ensure all loose items are removed from site.

It is often not the case that the banks are full, more that residents who dump full bags of bottles at the base of banks give the impression that the banks are full. Once one resident has left bags in this manner more have the same idea and the problem grows.

However, we will look at the servicing frequency to ensure banks with perceived problems are serviced at a frequency to ensure adequate capacity within the bank at all times.

Fencing is not recommended at such Bring sites as this encourages fly tipping and other anti-social behaviour behind the screens which are often dark and provide suitable conditions for other environmental crimes e.g. graffiti etc. On-going costs of replacing smashed fencing is very expensive and often when left in a smashed state causes greater Health and Safety issues than if not provided at all."

SCRUTINY (1.4.08)

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