

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES

**Meeting held at the Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City
on Tuesday, 1 April 2008 at 7.30p.m.**

PRESENT: *Councillors Martin Stears (Chairman), R.L. Shakespeare-Smith (Vice-Chairman), David Billing P.C.W. Burt, Paul Clark, Sal Jarvis, S.K. Jarvis, H.M. Marshall, Alan Millard and M.R.M Muir.*

IN ATTENDANCE: *Chief Executive, Strategic Director of Customer Services, Head of Revenues & Benefits, Head of Housing & Environmental Health, Head of Strategy & Customer Services, Scrutiny Officer, Senior Committee & Member Services Officer and Committee & Member Services Officer.*

ALSO PRESENT: *Councillors Bernard Lovewell (Housing & Environmental Health Portfolio Holder) and L.W. Oliver.*

85. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors John Bishop, S. Bloxham, Melissa Davey and David Kearns

86. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 22 January 2008 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and signed by the Chairman.

87. NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

No other business was submitted for consideration by the Committee.

88. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

No requests to speak were received.

89. URGENT/GENERAL EXCEPTION ITEMS

No urgent or general exception items were received.

90. CALLED-IN ITEMS

Since the last meeting, no decisions had been called-in by the Scrutiny Committee.

91. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

(1) Members were reminded that any declarations of interest in respect of any business set out in the agenda, and the nature of the interest, should be declared as either a prejudicial or personal interest at the commencement of the relevant item on the agenda. Members declaring a prejudicial interest should leave the room and not seek to influence the decision during that particular item;

(2) The Chairman gave a further reminder that any advice from a Member of the Committee concerning a party whip direction should also be declared.

92. QUESTIONS

The following were responses to questions raised by Councillor Paul Clark at the meeting of the Committee held on 22 January 2008.

(A) Plastics Recycling

"Given that our recycled newspapers go to Aylesford and our garden waste to Cumberlow Green, where does our plastic recycling go and what is it used for?"

The following response had been provided by the Head of Leisure & Environmental Services:

“All plastic waste is collected via our contractor Recresco and taken to Mansfield in Nottinghamshire where it is processed and made into plastic park / on-street furniture, posts, bollards etc.”

Councillor Clark asked if this was a permanent and sustainable contract.

The Strategic Director of Customer Services explained that it was a short term contract that had been extended for 12 months, however a written summary can be provided to Members. He also advised that less plastic than expected had been collected and that the contract was flexible, allowing for bins to be moved and/or more bins being provided.

RESOLVED: That the Strategic Director of Customer Services be requested to circulate a written summary of the plastics recycling contract to all Members of the Scrutiny Committee.

REASON FOR DECISION: To ensure that all Members of the Scrutiny Committee are kept fully informed of the contract regarding plastics recycling.

(B) In-Vessel Composting - costs

“How much financially is being put aside to publicise the change to the brown bin scheme to allow food waste to be included, when the in-vessel composting arrangement have finally been sorted?”

The following response had been provided by the Head of Leisure & Environmental Services:

“Publicity for the move to include In-vessel composting within our collection arrangements will need to be contained within present budgets.”

Councillor Clark asked when In – Vessel composting would start.

The Strategic Director of Customer Services advised that confirmation from the County Council was awaited, however it was anticipated that it would start during May 2008.

(C) Change to Bin Collections

“In advising residents of the change to the bin collections in the District what percentage of household across the district were advised of this change?”

The following response had been provided by the Head of Leisure & Environmental Services:

“All district residents should have received the publicity DVD, Booklet and collection calendar. There was extensive communication through local newspapers, Outlook magazine and via broadcast media.”

Councillor Clark asked whether quality checks had been put in place to ensure delivery of publicity to householders.

The Strategic Director of Customer Services advised that quality checks had been put in place, however he was not sure that every householder in the District had received the information. He was satisfied at the level of delivery.

(D) Collection of recycling Items from Flats and Houses of Multiple Occupation

“What arrangements have been put in place and at what cost to collect recycling items from Flats and Houses of Multiple Occupation?”

The following response had been provided by the Head of Leisure & Environmental Services:

“Recycling from flats and multiple occupancy dwellings is currently being investigated by the waste services team to determine the best methodology. Once the options and costs have been produced the option that provides best value will be selected.”

Councillor Clark asked when the collection of recycling items from flats and houses of multiple occupation would be likely to start.

The Strategic Director of Customer Services advised that flats still received weekly waste collections. The project for collection of recycling items was likely to be deferred to late summer or autumn 2008.

(E) Arcade Toilets, Hitchin - Lack of dedicated toilets for women

“What evidence base did this Council use to justify the lack of a dedicated Toilet Provision for Women in the new refurbished Arcade toilets in Hitchin?”

The following response had been provided by the Head of Leisure & Environmental Services:

“The refurbished toilets at the Arcade have been designed to enable greater access for more people. The nature of the unisex design is one that is being used in many new public conveniences. The old style of toilets with males and female split can encourage anti social behaviour, which is difficult to manage. The new design ensure each cubicle is separate, therefore, reduces the level of anti social behaviour, enables parents to supervise their children easier which ensures better management control.

The male only facilities are restricted to gender because they consist of urinals only. Based on specialist research the configuration of toilets provided has been designed to maximising the opportunities available to all users and restrict waiting times.

Although the Council has received some complaints regarding the new toilets, we have also received a similar amount of compliments.

The British Toilet Association is Britain’s leading organisation that is representative of many local authorities and the private sector that as an interest in public toilets. Their web site is:

www.britloos.co.uk

One of the main suppliers that have a linked web site is

www.interpublicurbansystems.co.uk/home.htm

Although NHDC have not used their products, there web site illustrates the changes from the old to the new ways of provision. All examples, show unisex provision with direct access and separate male urinals.”

Following debate upon this answer, it was

RESOLVED: That the Chief Executive provide an answer to the Hitchin Community Development Officer, for Hitchin Members, regarding the dedicated toilet provision for women in the Arcade Toilets, Hitchin.

REASON FOR DECISION: That the Hitchin Committee is kept apprised of the details regarding the dedicated toilet provision women.

(F) Arcade Toilets, Hitchin – Health and Safety

“What Health & Safety audit was conduct by this Council prior to the decision to install door opening on to a public through fare at the new toilet facility in the Arcade in Hitchin?”

The following response had been provided by the Head of Leisure & Environmental Services:

“Many factors were taken into consideration regarding the design and style of new toilet provision at the arcade toilets. One of the main factors is the design and size of the facilities was to improve customer safety and accessibility. Most of the modern designs that are currently being used to replace public toilets have toilet doors opening outwards.

We believe that the new facilities incorporates good design principles and are far safer and accessible for the public than the old.”

Councillor Clark expressed concern regarding the outward opening doors and the hazard this caused to passers by.

The Strategic Director of Customer Services advised that the refurbishments had complied with appropriate standards. He also advised that no complaints of incidents with the outward opening doors had been reported.

RESOLVED: That details of any changes to be made to the Arcade Toilets, Hitchin be placed in the Members’ Information Service.

REASON FOR DECISION: To keep Members apprised of the details of any changes to be made to the Arcade Toilets, Hitchin.

(G) Hitchin Town Hall – Market Testing

At the Committee meeting on 22 January 2008, Members regretted that precise cost information regarding officer time spent on the Hitchin Town Hall Market Testing exercise was not available, but asked that officers report back to the Committee with an indicative estimate of such costs.

The following response had been provided by the Head of Financial Services.

“As detailed in the original response, we do not record officer time to the level of detail required to provide a costing as it is not cost effective to do so. The Scrutiny Finance Sub-Group will receive a report on this in due course. Any indicative figure provided therefore would be meaningless as it would be based on officer recollection several months on of how much time they think was spent on a particular item. It would not therefore be possible to place any reliance on the figure. The best indication we could give is that hourly rates for Heads of Service would equate to £38 per hour, for Strategic Directors, £59 per hour and for other staff involved in this work, a range of hourly rates from £19 to £28 so if a team of 4 say were involved comprising a Strategic Director, a Head of Service and two other staff, the cost per hour could be £144.

It should be borne in mind, however, that the Council sets its required number of staff based on an assessment of the services to be provided and the affordability of providing those services. It employs a range of staff to meet its overall objectives. The cost is incurred when the number of staff required is agreed and those staff are appointed to posts. Projects are agreed by Council and staff allocated accordingly to achieve the project aims. Working on one particular project represents an opportunity cost to the Council in that the staff are unable to spend time doing something else.

As an example, the possible opportunity cost of the response to the original question required two Heads of Service to spend approximately 3 hours (6 in total) at £38 per hour = £228 (this excludes overhead charges such as Premises, IT, Management charges etc). The follow up response has required further work by two Heads of Service for approximately 2 hours and the involvement of two strategic directors for approximately 1.5 hours (7 in total) = £329.

In total the response to this question and follow up to reiterate the point that we do not keep such information may have cost 13 hours of time equal to £557. If, however,

any of the officer recollections of time input were inaccurate by 30 minutes either way, the cost might be as little as £422 or as much as £692. This has not increased costs to the Council but has meant that these staff have not been spending 13 hours on other work.”

A discussion took place regarding the need for Members to understand affordability of projects and being aware of costs for any particular project.

RESOLVED: That the Head of Financial Services provide the Scrutiny Finance Sub-Group with a report regarding how officer time on projects is costed.

REASON FOR DECISION: To allow the Scrutiny Finance Sub Group to assess costing methods for officer time on future projects.

The following question had been submitted by Councillor David Billing.

(H) Area Visioning

"Please could we be updated as to the continuance of the work of the various Visioning Groups. In particular, when did each of them last meet formally, when were their Action Plans last updated, how many of their intended projects which were due to be completed by December 2007 were completed and how many still are unfinished, what is the total (aggregated for all years to date) of the budgets (revenue and capital) for each which have been spent to date, and what budgets remain unspent?"

The following response had been provided by the Head of Community Development & Cultural Services:

1. Visioning Funding

The Area Visioning programme was time limited to four years April 2002 – March 2006. The budget allocation each year was £50,000 revenue, allocated on a pro-rata demographic basis. The capital allocation was £375,000 As of 30.01.08, the budget position is:

Revenue Budgets

Area Committee	Allocation	Committed	Spent (not spent)	Unallocated
Letchworth	55,570	11,354	39,867	4,410
Hitchin	59,850	3,010	56,840	0
Baldock	34,210	1,053	33,157	0
Royston	17,709	1,493	16,216	0
S. Rural	35,405	5,910	29,495	0

Capital Budgets

Area Committee	Allocation	Committed	Spent (not spent)	Unallocated
Letchworth	120,100	75,232	28,000	16,355
Hitchin	112,600	110,350	0	2,250
Baldock	75,000	75,000	75,000	0
Royston	62,700	62,700	0	0
S. Rural	79,600	41,900	5,000	32,700

2. Area Work Programmes

Each Area Committee did develop a three year work programme, based on the initial visioning consultation. These programmes were last formally reviewed during November to February 2005/6. Thereafter, all the outstanding projects that were deemed achievable were transferred to the Area Committee report / budget process.

Monitoring of progress on these issues is now carried out at Area Committee meetings, via the Champion News and Delegated Budget reports.

As part of the implementation of the new Sustainable Community Strategy, consideration is being given to refreshing the work programme approach for Area Committees.

3. Visioning Groups

Each Area Committee developed its own approach to visioning and not all set up specific visioning groups.

Baldock

The original visioning group became the Baldock Bypass Consultation Group which evolved into the Town Centre Stakeholder Consultation Group that meets periodically to address Town Centre Developments and the Town Partnership Group that meets monthly to look at initiatives of raising the Town's profile with regards to business and tourism.

Revenue commitments and expenditure:

Consultants for Land associated to By-Pass £23,400
Streetscene Improvements (HH funding) £14,000
Town Centre Conservation Area £1,275
Tree Works £4,500

Capital commitments and expenditure:

Feasibility study for new railings £15,000
Two CCTV cameras £60,000

Hitchin

Established 3 local visioning groups – Youth, Transport and Planning.

The last formal meeting of the Planning Group was in June 2006 and there remain a number of outstanding issues, eg: Churchgate.

The 2020 Transport Vision for Hitchin was presented to Hitchin Area Committee in March 2007 by the Visioning Transport Sub Committee.

The Youth Visioning Group became the Voice of Hitchin Youth and still meets on a regular basis.

Revenue commitments and expenditure:

Woodside Screening £10,544
Town Centre Strategy £927
Visioning Presentations £443
BMX Dirt Bike Track £1,372
Tree Planting Butts Close £1,500
Voice of Hitchin Youth £1,500
Churchgate Project £2,635
Community Centre leaflet £700
Cabbies Hut, Market Place £1,300
Community Centres Leaflet £700

Capital commitments and expenditure:

Refurbishment/rebuild of Bancroft Hall (£67,500) & improvements to Windmill Hill (£42,850).

Southern Rural

No specific visioning group has met. There were visioning representatives pre 2003 who fed in to the overarching Visioning document. To develop the Rural Strategy (2004/5), a Rural Members Group and multi-agency Strategic Rural Partnership Group were established, but these have not met since 2006.

All Parish Councils/Parish Meetings are consulted on many district wide issues/strategies and there is an annual Rural Parish and Town Council Conference.

Revenue commitments and expenditure:

Reduce vandalism in Breachwood Green, St Ippolyts and Kimpton £3,000
Drugs and alcohol project for young people £500
Anti fly tipping measures £2,000
Produce Village Halls booklet £1,350
Rural detached outreach youth provision £6,000

Capital commitment and expenditure:

SCooTS 2 Wheels Scheme £15,000.

Letchworth

The original visioning group was wound up as a result of the evolving a Town Council and the Letchworth Town Centre Partnership.

Revenue commitments & expenditure:

The Grange Improvement Forum £500
The Grange Youth Club £10,190
Jackman's Youth Initiatives £6,263
Street Tree Planting £5,000
Letchworth Youth Council £2,000

Capital commitments & expenditure:

New Youth Facility within the proposed Ivel Court development £30,000
The Grange Community Garden Project £45,745
Letchworth Open Air Pool – enhancement works £28,000

Royston

Set up one visioning group of about 11 people, ranging from 15 to 80 plus.

Revenue commitments and expenditure:

Young People's events £4,000
Bus stop seating £1,400
Royston Town Council – East of England £2,000
Youth Council £790

Capital commitments and expenditure:

£62,700 to transport related projects.

4. Outstanding Projects

Other than those listed below, all projects identified through visioning are either completed, ongoing or mainstreamed.

Baldock

The Area Committee committed the remaining revenue balances of the visioning programme to the future Town Centre enhancements £2,470 (this was area committee visioning, not main visioning)

Letchworth

Unallocated capital funds of £16,355 are being proposed for a range of projects associated with Norton Common .

Youth Activities Wilbury Area £5,000

Southern Rural

Revenue visioning - £1k project for volunteers yet to complete, £4,150 agreed (£3,368 yet to allocate) in support of Parish Plans, £990 underspend against Village Halls Networking events as project now completed. Awaiting re-allocated project

Capital visioning - £32,700 yet to allocate on other projects.”

Following debate upon the response, it was

RESOLVED: That the answer provided by the Head of Community Development & Cultural Services be circulated to the Area Committees.

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable the Area Committees to make any further decisions required regarding the follow-up of outstanding projects and any under spends.

The following questions had been submitted by Councillor Martin Stears.

(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 had 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.”

Councillor Stears stated that he found it disappointing that an action plan agreed in 2005 had not yet been implemented.

RESOLVED: That the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement & Rural Affairs be requested to provide a full response regarding the Social Inclusion Strategy to the Scrutiny Committee.

REASON FOR DECISION: To ensure that the Scrutiny Committee was kept fully apprised of the actions taken in respect of the Social Inclusion Strategy.

(J) Slippage of strategic reports to Cabinet

"In view of the slippage of a number of strategy reports to Cabinet, is sufficient attention being given to prioritising the strategic management of the authority to ensure that leading officers and elected Members are able to make their contributions?"

The following response had been provided by the Chief Executive.

"The Council is required to publish a forward plan each month to give brief details of the key decisions it is likely to take over the following four month period. The plan is an indication of a possible decision time frame and is intended to raise public and member awareness of potential key decisions. The plan is reviewed by the Corporate Management Team prior to its publication.

Following concerns raised by the Scrutiny Committee about some items appearing late on the forward plan, the Corporate Management Team considered how the process could be improved to maximise the period of notice given. It was considered prudent to ensure that items appear on the plan in good time and slip rather than appear on the plan late. As a result, all report writing officers were instructed by the Corporate Management Team to ensure that they erred on the side of caution and put things on the plan with an anticipated earliest possible date for decision. In doing this, it was recognised that items might slip from the indicated date and it was considered better to have public awareness of the potential for a decision to be taken rather than risk criticism for lack of notice. The Forward Plan provides contact details for an officer and the relevant portfolio holder and this enables Members and the public to make early contact on items of interest to them.

The Forward Plan published for the 1st March 2008 showed the following strategies due for consideration by Cabinet at its April meeting

- Green Space Strategy
- Revised Rural Strategy
- Climate Change Strategy
- Communications Strategy
- Annual Review of Procurement Strategy
- Housing Strategy

In all cases the appropriate portfolio holder has been kept informed of progress and in some instances the items have slipped as a result of additional questions raised by the portfolio holders.

The April Cabinet meeting now has a report outlining the approach to the Climate Change Strategy and the review of the Procurement Strategy is being dealt with under delegated powers by the Finance Portfolio holder and will be considered by the Finance Scrutiny sub group on 31st March.

In terms of those strategies which have slipped, the Green Space Strategy needs to tie in with the LDF timetable and members of Scrutiny will be aware that consultants were appointed to carry out necessary work. When officers reviewed the work provided by the consultants, they were unhappy with the quality and, following consultation with the portfolio holders have required the consultants to redo the work. This has had implications for the timetable and the report is now expected to come to the June Cabinet.

The Revised Rural Strategy is the incorrect description of the decision required and has been corrected for the April Forward plan. The actual piece of work required is a review of the rural strategy action plan in light of the outcomes of the Working with Parishes Task and Finish Group. This work has been delayed by staff absences in the Policy, Partnerships and Performance team and redirection of available resources to focus on work on the Sustainable Communities Strategy consultation. A meeting is being arranged with the Community Engagement portfolio holder to review the position in time for a report to June Cabinet.

The Communications Strategy is being improved at the request of the portfolio holder, Councillor Strong, who had raised some queries on the draft strategy and asked officers to carry out some further work. It is anticipated that the June Cabinet should receive the report.

The draft Housing Strategy was produced and is currently out for consultation. The original plan saw the consultation end in time for report to April Cabinet. Following representations from Parish Councils and discussion with the Housing portfolio holder, the consultation period has been extended to allow a greater opportunity for interested parties to respond and this meant that it was not possible to meet the deadlines for reporting to April Cabinet.

Therefore the answer to the question is yes and as explained above some of the timetable changes actually allow more time for people to contribute to these important issues."

Following debate, it was

RESOLVED: That the Chief Executive and Corporate Management Team be requested to look again at the Council's Work Programme for 2008/2009 in an endeavour to produce a more even spread of strategic items throughout the year.

REASON FOR DECISION: To allow the Committee to comment on the slippage of strategic reports to Cabinet.

(K) Graffiti removal standards

"How well is the authority meeting its standards for the removal of graffiti and are these standards sufficiently challenging to meet the aspirations of residents?"

The following response had been provided by the Head of Leisure & Environmental Services.

ANALYSIS OF GRAFFITI 2006/7 AND 2007/8

Snapshot taken from Council database

	2006/2007		2007/8 (still ongoing)	
	Incidents	Notification of cleaned & closed cases	Incidents	Notification of cleaned & closed cases
NHDC owned	49	49	102	76 ^{*(1)}
Private	220	160	319	209 ^{*(2)}
TOTAL	269	209	421	285
Priority 1 (extreme racist graffiti) Policy: to clean within 1 hr	1	1	0	0
Priority 2 (other racist/offensive graffiti) Policy: to clean within 24 hours	5	5	2	2
Priority 3 (general graffiti that is not racist, offensive or poses danger:				

(i)	on NHDC property: policy to clean within 7 days of report	47	102
(ii)	on private property: to clean within 14 days of permission being granted	216	317

*⁽¹⁾ With graffiti on NHDC properties, cleaning is always actioned but cases are not closed until notification of actual cleaning is received. Sometimes Youth Offenders' team are commissioned; NHDC need to accept that when they clean, this cannot meet the 7 day target.

*⁽²⁾ With graffiti on all private properties; this is notified to owners, where known. NHDC will offer to clean subject to written permission via signed indemnity form. With residential properties, owners are offered a free cleaning service. On commercial property we have built up a contact list and we notify owners. A quote is offered although some large companies have their own maintenance teams (electrical/rail) and will not instruct us to clean nor will they notify us when they have carried out cleaning. Therefore cases have to remain open for long time. However we are proactive & have negotiated with NTL and are in process of agreeing a cleansing policy with HCC to clean their underpasses. With other HCC depts and companies eg NHH and Transco we have built up an adhoc arrangement for cleaning. Hence number of incidents on database have increased.

The public are encouraged to report graffiti on our website and the current copy of Outlook, which has already gone to print, re-affirms how the public can inform us of graffiti. They can contact us by via phone, post or email. Each incident is photographed and placed on database (as evidence, in case prosecution results) and NHDC will then endeavour to arrange cleaning. Enviro-Crime audit will soon be published that will provide an independent view of this service. Funding has not been an issue with regard to graffiti."

Following debate, it was

RESOLVED: That the Strategic Director of Customer Services be requested to provide Members of the Scrutiny Committee with a clearer representation of the statistics supplied in the answer to this question.

REASON FOR DECISION: To clarify the statistics relating to graffiti removal.

(L) No Cold Calling Zones

"This Council now has experience of a few "No Cold Call Zones" in the District. What plans do we have with the Police to create them in other areas of the District where they are needed such as the Oakfield Estate in Hitchin?"

The following response had been provided by the Head of Policy, Partnerships & Performance.

"Hertfordshire Constabulary have been working with the local Crime Disorder and Reduction Partnership, in particular Trading Standards, to introduce NCCZ as a tactical response to Bogus Caller, Rogue Trader and Artifice Burglary.

A NCCZ gives out a message to would be criminals that the door will not be answered unless prior arrangements have been made. Neighbourhood Watch Schemes (NHW) operate within the Zones and the residents look out for each other. The Zones are a way of empowering a local community. The residents within the Zones receive additional support from the Police by way of increased patrols, additionally vulnerable residents are referred to the Easter Area 'Safe' scheme where a representative of 'SAFE' will fit any locks and bolts required, additionally smoke

alarm referrals are made. Trading Standards are very involved and offer a hot line for reporting to residents.

When deciding where a NCCZ is to be placed firstly Hot Spots are determined as follows:

- The analysing of Bogus Caller, Rogue Trader and Artifice Burglary activity (Any Repeat Victimisation)
- The demographics of the Area, identifying where clusters of older more vulnerable people live (This is important as over 70's are at a greater risk of these crime types)

This alone is not enough information to constitute a zone. The residents within the Zone must be committed to it's introduction and be involved in NHW. Therefore resident surveys are an important part of the implementation process.

To date the cost of zones have been supported by Trading Standards and the Police. However each time a zone is introduced the funding has to be sought. The funding pays for:

- Signage
- Customer packs, providing key contact numbers, stickers for doors and other crime prevention / Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA) advice.
- Public consultation
- Post evaluation

Our Neighbouring County of Bedfordshire have announced the whole County as a NCCZ, however this approach has raised some concerns within Whitehall as the decision not to allow people to knock at the door should be one the resident makes rather than the local CDRP. Trading Standards are not advised to operate in this manner , nor would they not be able to cope with the increase in calls. Hertfordshire Constabulary are in agreement that a targeted approach is the best and most effective way forward.

NCCZ are currently in the following areas:

- Knebworth
- Codicote

There are plans to add NCCZ to the areas listed below during 2008. These areas have been identified through the analysis stated above, however residents commitment still needs to be sought.

- Hitchwood
- Gravely
- Wymondley
- Kimpton"

Councillor Clark asked whether any work was being done in urban areas regarding No Cold Calling Zones.

The Strategic Director of Customer Services advised that NHDC was working closely with the Police regarding this matter. Members noted that Ward Members, Parish Councils and Area Committees had not been advised of work in their area regarding No Cold Calling Zones.

RESOLVED: That Ward Councillors, Parish Councils and Area Committees be advised of work being undertaken in their area regarding No Cold Calling Zones.

REASON FOR DECISION: To keep interested parties informed of the work being undertaken in their area regarding No Cold Calling Zones.

The following question had been submitted by Councillor Alan Bardett.

(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 had 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 question had 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 Back 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 had 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."

Following debate, it was

RESOLVED: That the Strategic Director of Customer Services be requested to refer the matter of the siting of the St Johns Road Bring Bank, together with other general issues regarding Bring Banks, to the Waste & Recycling Project Board.

REASON FOR DECISION: To further investigate issues relating to Plastic Bring Bank sites.

93. NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL – THE DRAFT FORWARD PLAN: 1 FEBRUARY 2008 –31 MAY 2008

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee presented the Draft Forward Plan to the Committee, which covered the period 1 May to 31 August 2008.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Draft Forward Plan, covering the period 1 May to 31 August 2008, be noted;
- (2) That the item entitled “Financial Strategy 2009 – 2014” be considered by the Scrutiny Finance Sub-Group;
- (3) That the item entitled “Great Ashby District Park and relocation of Countryside Management Service” be considered by the Southern Rural Area Committee;
- (4) That the item entitled “Adoption of a new Homelessness Strategy” be considered by the June 2008 meeting of the Scrutiny Committee;
- (5) That consideration be given in 2008/09 to the method for potential scrutiny of the items on the pending list relating to the Local Development Framework;
- (6) That, in view of the large number of strategic items scheduled for June 2008, the Chief Executive and Corporate Management Team be requested to give consideration to the possible re-scheduling of some of these items and amending the Forward Plan accordingly.

REASON FOR DECISION: To ensure that the Scrutiny Committee could identify any matters it wished to consider prior to consideration by Cabinet or Council.

94. HERTFORDSHIRE PATHFINDER - PROGRESS REPORT

The Chief Executive gave an oral report on the progress of the Hertfordshire Pathfinder. He highlighted the following points:

- The Pathfinder was still in an early stage of development;
- It was intended to improve and enhance the work of Local Government;
- It arose out of a response to the 2006 Government White Paper in 2006 – “Strong and Prosperous Communities”;
- The Herts Pathfinder allowed a better framework for productive partnership working;
- NHDC was a leading player in new partnerships, including Meals on Wheels and the Audit Partnership;
- In January 2008 a Partnership Director was appointed, who worked with all 11 authorities involved in Herts Pathfinder;
- There would be a NHDC Member workshop in June 2008 to consider progress and future plans;
- The area covered by the Pathfinder included sustainable service provision and efficient and effective local government;
- New projects were being considered for partnership working, including business rates administration, improving customer access and children’s services.

Members asked a number of questions which were answered by the Chief Executive.

RESOLVED: That the oral report of the Chief Executive on the Hertfordshire Pathfinder be noted.

REASON FOR DECISION: To keep Members of the Scrutiny Committee updated with progress on the Hertfordshire Pathfinder.

95. PRESENTATION BY HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH PORTFOLIO HOLDER

The Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Housing and Environmental Health, Councillor Bernard Lovewell, gave a presentation to the Committee on the key achievements and issues facing him in relation to his portfolio area, which included:

Housing

- The significant attempts made to comply with the Government's requirement to halve the number of people in temporary accommodation;
- A change in the allocations policy;
- Choice Based Lettings
- Working with Stevenage on a homelessness strategy, which should be available in June 2008
- Task and Finish Group on Sheltered Housing
- Working with Registered Social Landlords

Environmental Health

- The Introduction of the Gambling Act. NHDC had 20 licensed premises;
- Fixed penalty notices for fly tipping, fly posting and littering;
- Environment Actions Days;
- Dealing with the litter following the introduction of the Smoking Ban in public places;
- Pest problems caused by litter;
- Food Premises inspections (100% of high risk and 75% of non high risk inspections had been completed during 2007/08;
- The introduction of "scores on the doors" regarding food premises, which was planned for June 2008;
- Recruitment and retention of staff in Environmental Health;

Strategy and Customer Services

- The joint venture of Meals on Wheels with Stevenage and Watford
- The business review of Careline working towards ways for this service to be financially successful
- Customer Service Centre working towards achieving 80% customer satisfaction (currently 74%).

Members asked several questions which were answered by the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Environmental Health, assisted by officers.

The Chairman thanked the Portfolio Holder for Housing & Environmental Health for attending the Committee and answering Members' questions.

96. SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2007/2008

The Scrutiny Officer submitted a report detailing the Committee's Work Programme for 2007/08.

Members were advised that the first meeting of the Local Economic Development Task & Finish Group was held on 12 March 2008.

Members discussed the Scope document for the Local Economic Development Task & Finish Group, attached at Appendix A to the report.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2007/2008 be noted;
- (2) That the scope of the Local Economic Development Task and Finish Group, as attached at Appendix A to the report be confirmed with the following amendments:
 - (i) A revised Key area of focus stating " the effect of Council Policies on business and employment;
 - (ii) An additional Key area of focus stating "the importance of ensuring the vibrancy of town centres"

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable the Scrutiny Committee to plan and carry out its workload efficiently.

97. SCRUTINY FINANCE SUB-GROUP

No recommendations were received from the Scrutiny Finance Sub-Group

98. SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT

The Chairman presented the Scrutiny Committee Annual Report 2007–2008, which was intended for submission to Annual Council on 15 May 2008.

RESOLVED: That, subject to the insertion of a paragraph regarding the work carried out on the Review of Task & Finish Groups, the Scrutiny Committee Annual Report be approved for submission to Annual Council on 15 May 2008.

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable continued development of the effectiveness of the Scrutiny Committee.

99. CHAIRMAN'S REMARK

Councillor Martin Stears announced that this would be his final meeting as Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee, as he was stepping down from this role. He took the opportunity to thank his various Vice-Chairmen, Members of the Committee and officers who had supported him throughout his six years as Chairman.

The meeting ended at 10.35p.m.

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Chairman