

**NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**MINUTES**

**Meeting held at the Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City on  
19 July 2005 at 7.30 p.m.**

**PRESENT:** *Councillors: Martin Stears (Chairman), M. Paterson (Vice-Chairman), J.F. Barry, David Billing, S. Bloxham, Geoff Hollands, Sal Jarvis, David Kearns, Lorna Kercher, H. M. Marshall, R.L. Shakespeare-Smith.*

**IN ATTENDANCE** *Strategic Director of Financial and Regulatory Services, Strategic Director of Customer Services, Head of Leisure Services, Head of Community Services, Scrutiny Officer and Committee Administrator.*

**17. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P.C.W. Burt, D.J. Horrell and M.E. Weeks ..

**18. MINUTES**

**RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 7 June 2005 be approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

**19. NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS**

No items were presented for consideration by the Committee.

**20. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING PARTY WHIP DIRECTIONS)**

No declarations of interest were made and no notification of any party whip directions were given at the meeting.

**21. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

No items were presented under public participation for consideration by the Committee.

**22. URGENT/GENERAL EXCEPTION ITEMS**

There were no urgent or general exception items to report to the Committee.

**23. CALLED-IN ITEMS**

No decisions had been called-in by the Scrutiny Committee since the meeting of the Committee held on 7 June 2005.

**24. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chairman reminded Members that at the last meeting of Scrutiny Committee on 7 June 2005 they were advised that the Scrutiny Officer was drafting two guides aimed at welcoming people to the Scrutiny Committee and sub groups. The Chairman thanked all those who had responded with comments on the drafts and advised the

Committee that the amendments had now been made and the finished articles were now in use. Copies of the guides were available at the meeting.

## 25. QUESTIONS

No questions were received for consideration since the meeting of the Committee held on 7 June 2005.

## 26. NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL – THE FORWARD PLAN AT 1 AUGUST 2005

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee presented the Forward Plan to the Committee. He advised Members that since publication of the report, two further items had been added.

**RESOLVED:** that;

- (1) the Forward Plan, dated 1 August 2005, be noted;
- (2) the item concerning the Clean Neighbourhood and Environment Act 2005 be referred to the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee scheduled for 13 September;
- (3) the item concerning the review of the Asset Management Plan and Capital Strategy 2005 be referred to the meeting of the Scrutiny Finance Sub-Group to be held on 15 September 2005.

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

## 27. EVERY CHILD MATTERS

The Head of Community Development gave a presentation that advised the Committee about the progress that had been made to date towards meeting the Government's Every Child Matters initiative.

**RESOLVED:** That the content of the presentation be noted.

**REASON FOR DECISION:** To ensure that the Scrutiny Committee was kept informed about the progress made on the Government's Every Child Matters initiative.

## 28. WORK PROGRAMME 2005/2006 – SCRUTINY COMMITTEE & SUB-GROUPS

The Scrutiny Officer submitted a report that updated the Committee on the progress being made on the various topics under scrutiny.

**RESOLVED:**

- (1) That the progress being made by existing sub groups be noted;
- (2) That the outline scopes for the new Task and Finish Groups as at 3.7 of the Scrutiny Officer's report be agreed subject to the addition of another bullet point under the Affordable Housing heading, reading;
  - Processes for promoting the building of affordable homes in addition to the use of S106
- (3) That the Conservative Group be asked to identify a lead member for the Residents Parking group, the Labour Group be asked to identify a lead member for the Affordable Housing Group and the Liberal Democrat Group be asked to identify a lead member for the Engaging Young People Group;

- (4) That each Sub Group now meets to discuss scope and timescales, in order that a report may be considered at the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee to be held on 13 September 2005.

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

## 29. PRESENTATION BY THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR POLICY

The Portfolio Holder for Policy gave a presentation that informed the Committee about matters related to his Portfolio. He listed the following areas of work during the coming twelve months:

- Monitoring the council's six strategic objectives.
- Electoral boundaries – there might be a role here for Scrutiny to help build a robust response to the Electoral Commission.
- The Government's 10-Year Vision for Local Government - this would be discussed with all Members over the coming year.
- Area Governance – progressing the useful work done by the Scrutiny Committee.
- Partnerships - the Portfolio Holder agreed with Members' view that he should consult with the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement to explore any scope for reducing and rationalising the number of partnerships according to their effectiveness over time.
- Supporting rural areas and parishes - the Portfolio Holder agreed with Members' suggestion that a North Herts Association of Parish Councils might be formed to cement real partnership working and effective communication. Town councils could be invited to take part once a year.
- Town centres.
- Visioning.
- The Corporate Plan - fulfilling targets and activities.
- Looking at different ways to consult – developing new consultation strategies.
- Fundamental Service Reviews: Museums, Street Scene and Transport. Members welcomed the news that the Portfolio Holder intended this latter review to begin in 2005/2006.

The Policy Portfolio Holder was asked how he ensured that policies were implemented; he said that they would be in the Corporate Plan that was regularly monitored.

On the question of a youth council, he said that the council would work with schools and other partners to develop a youth council which reflected the spectrum of ages and geographical spread. The Scrutiny Committee will be invited to comment on the framework during 2006/2007.

The Policy Portfolio Holder was asked who was responsible for checking that the council was meeting its promise to be 'a learning organisation'. He said that this was covered under Strategic Objective 6 in the Corporate Plan; the Director of Financial and Regulatory Services added that this was monitored by the Corporate Management Team via the HR strategy.

**RESOLVED:** that the content of the presentation be noted.

**REASON FOR DECISION:** To ensure that the Scrutiny Committee was kept informed about matters that related to the Portfolio Holder for Policy.

**30. THE ROYSTON, BUNTINGFORD & BISHOP'S STORTFORD PCT AND THE NORTH HERTS & STEVENAGE PCT JOINT SCRUTINY COMMITTEES**

The Scrutiny Officer submitted a report that advised the Committee about the joint committees that scrutinise the Royston, Buntingford & Bishop's Stortford PCT and the North Herts & Stevenage PCT. The North Herts District Council had representatives on these committees and the Scrutiny Committee asked the representatives about their perceptions of the committees' effectiveness.

The report also looked at the reporting lines for these joint committees.

**RESOLVED:**

- (1) That the report be noted;
- (2) That the following concerns be expressed regarding the effectiveness of the Joint Committees, specifically the:
  - infrequency of meetings;
  - lack of information from meetings;
  - lack of direction regarding the work programme;
  - lack of a reporting mechanism and proactive reporting;
  - lack of openness by the PCTs;
  - need to share good practice between the joint committees and their sub groups
- (3) That a report from the Royston Buntingford and Bishop's Stortford PCT Joint Scrutiny Committee meeting of 26 July regarding Royston Hospital be circulated to Members of the Committee.
- (4) That a report regarding the general level of PCT debt be brought to the meeting of the Committee to be held on 13 September 2005.
- (5) That a report on GP recruitment regarding the continuing lack of G.P./Health Centre Services in Great Ashby and Beechwood Green, be brought to a future meeting of the Committee.
- (6) That the chair of the County Council's Health Scrutiny committee be consulted on how to reinvigorate the districts' joint health scrutiny committees and improve their effectiveness.

**REASON FOR DECISIONS:** To enable the Scrutiny Committee to be kept advised about the joint committees that scrutinise the Royston, Buntingford & Bishop's Stortford PCT and the North Herts & Stevenage PCT.

**31. REVIEW OF CRITERIA FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS**

The Head of Community Development presented a report of the Strategic Director of Customer Services that sought agreement to recommend to Cabinet new and

amended criteria for the allocation of financial assistance to voluntary and community organisations including that for a new Village Hall Capital Grant Improvement fund.

**RESOLVED:** That the report be noted.

**RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:**

That Cabinet:

- (1) Agree the new criteria for the Village Halls Capital Grant Improvement Fund as set out in Appendix 1 subject to the deletion of the words "for general hire" at paragraph 1 of section 2;
- (2) Agree the amendments to the criteria for Parish Challenge, Parish Playground and the Parish Enhancement & Improvement Fund as set out in Appendices 2a, 2b and 2c;
- (3) Agree the revised criteria for development activities/schemes that are eligible for funding as set out in Appendix 3;
- (4) Note the recommendation from the Parish Challenge Member Panel that there should be an inflationary uplift for the Parish Challenge, Parish Playground and the Parish Enhancement & Cleansing Fund and that this should be considered within the context of the Service and Financial Planning process for 2006/2007;
- (5) Note that further work will be carried out to assess how best financial assistance might be given to Parish Councils to improve children's playgrounds in the rural areas;
- (6) That Area Committees take a more strategic and pro-active approach to the allocation of funding. [Partick Candler to add detail].

**REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- (1) To ensure that the programmes of financial assistance help the Council meet its strategic objectives and contribute to delivering the vision of North Hertfordshire as a vibrant place to live, work and prosper. In addition, the process would improve the effectiveness of targeting both identified need and agreed priorities;
- (2) To ensure equity and a 'level playing field' for all applicants;
- (3) To ensure transparency and objectivity in decision making.

**32. SUPPORT FROM OFFICERS TO MEMBERS**

The Scrutiny Officer presented a report of the Chief Executive that gave details of Members' responses to a questionnaire that asked how well they were being supported in respect of constituents' enquiries and issues in their ward.

The Committee compared the findings with the service that Members should have expected according to the Council's constitution.

The Committee then considered Members' suggestions for improvement and looked at the service promised to Members in the constitution of another authority.

**RESOLVED:** That the report be noted.

**RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:**

- (1) That Head of Legal Services be asked to redraft and circulate to members of the committee the Officer/Member protocol section of the constitution using the wording of the Norwich City Council constitution, amended to reflect local circumstances and adding a requirement to identify one officer to take responsibility for resolving cross-service or cross-agency issues;
- (2) That the Corporate Management Team investigate ways to improve mechanisms for members to be kept more generally well informed about ward issues as they arise.
- (3) That Members' suggestions for improving other aspects of the support they receive from officers be referred to the Corporate Management Team for action as appropriate;
- (4) That, once the revised protocol has been in place for twelve months, Members be surveyed again to measure any improvement in the support they receive in respect of constituents' enquiries and ward issues.

**REASON FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:** To improve the support received by Members in respect of constituents' enquiries and ward issues.

**33. ITEM REFERRED FROM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FINANCE SUB GROUP 13 JUNE 2005 AND CABINET RESPONSE**

The Scrutiny Committee considered the recommendations made by the Finance Sub-Group at its meeting on 13 June 2005 and Cabinet response regarding revisions to Financial Regulations and Contract Standing Orders 2005/2006.

**RESOLVED:** That the recommendations made by the Finance Sub-Group at its meetings on 13 June 2005 and Cabinet response regarding revisions to Financial Regulations and Contract Standing Orders 2005/2006 be noted.

**REASON FOR DECISION:** To enable Members to make informed decisions on service and financial planning processes.

**34. INFORMATION NOTE – WINDFARMS**

The Scrutiny Committee considered an Information Note from Financial and Regulatory Services - Planning Policy and Projects that sought to provide a response to a question raised by Councillor Howard Marshall at the previous meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on 7 June 2005 in relation to Wind Farms.

**RESOLVED:** That the content of the Information Note be noted.

**REASON FOR DECISION:** To enable Members to be advised about the Council's policy regarding Wind Farms.

**35. HITCHIN FRIDAY FRANCHISED BRIC A BRAC MARKET**

The Project Manager, Leisure Division presented a report of the Head of Leisure Services that updated the Committee on progress that had been made on issues related to the Hitchin Friday Franchised Bric a Brac Market.

**RESOLVED:**

- (1) That the report and appendices to the report be noted.
- (2) That the setting up of a Task and Finish Group be considered at the meeting of the Committee to be held on 13 September 2005.

**REASON FOR DECISION:** To ensure that the Scrutiny Committee was kept advised on the progress that had been made on issues related to the Hitchin Friday Franchised Bric a Brac market.

36. **SUGGESTED RESOLUTION**

This item was withdrawn following debate. The Chairman asked for a report to be brought to the next meeting regarding the impact of the Freedom of Information Act on the council's ability to withhold information as defined in Paragraph (9) of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 Act

37. **HITCHIN FRIDAY FRANCHISED BRIC A BRAC MARKET**

This item was withdrawn due to members' concern regarding the uncertainty about the item being included within part two of the agenda.

The meeting ended at 10.10 p.m.

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Chairman