

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES

**Meeting held at the Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City on
Tuesday, 21 February 2006 at 7.30p.m.**

PRESENT: *Councillors: Martin Stears (Chairman), M. Paterson (Vice-Chairman), David Billing, P.C.W. Burt, Paul Clark, D.J. Horrell, Sal Jarvis, David Kearns, Lorna Kercher, H.M. Marshall, M.R.M. Muir and Michael Weeks.*

IN ATTENDANCE: *Strategic Director of Financial & Regulatory Services, Local Development Framework Manager, Scrutiny Officer and Senior Committee & Member Services Officer.*

101. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor J.F. Barry.

102. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 10 January 2006 be approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

103. NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

No items were presented for consideration by the Committee.

104. 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.

105. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

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

106. URGENT/GENERAL EXCEPTION ITEMS

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

107. CALLED-IN ITEMS

No decisions had been called-in by the Scrutiny Committee since the meeting of the Committee held on 10 January 2006.

108. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

There were no Chairman's announcements.

109. QUESTIONS

(a) Women's Resource Centre - Grant

The following question had been submitted by Councillor Lorna Kercher:-

“Could you please explain by which process officers can cut grants such as the Women’s Resources, without notification to Members or their NHDC representatives on such bodies?”

The following answer was provided by the Head of Community Development and Cultural Services:-

The process for considering the Council’s Service Level Agreements (SLA) with Major (more than £5,000) and Minor (less than £5,000) funded community projects was set out in the reports to Cabinet of 26th July 2005 and 18th October 2005.

The Service Level Agreements are presently for a three year period which is due to time-expire on 31st March 2006.

The recommendations agreed by Cabinet at its meeting on 18th October included the following:

- ‘9.2 That subject to the final decisions on budget issues that emerge from the Service and Financial Planning process, the strategic financial and policy direction for the next three year tranche of Service Level Agreements for the period 2006/9 will be a continuation of the current base estimate that includes an annual inflation award.
- 9.3 That the proposed timescale for implementing the new Service Level Agreements and that the detailed negotiations with individual projects will be conducted by relevant officers, in consultation with the Community Engagement Portfolio Holder, be noted.’

Since October 2005, consideration has been given to the Service Level Agreement for each individual project following an evaluation of its performance for the first two years of its operation. The work of projects has also been reviewed in relation to their ability to fit as a priority within the new Strategic Objectives of the Council.

The Council’s proposals for the 2006/9 SLA programme were sent out in early February, following the budget decisions on the Service and Financial Planning Process for 2006/7. Negotiations are now underway with each individual project to finalise the details of its SLA.

When these negotiations have been concluded (anticipated in late March), the decisions on the SLA programme for 2006/9 will be notified to all Members via MIS.

With respect to the Member representative on the Stevenage and North Herts Women’s Resource Centre, it was a management oversight on my part that I failed to advise her in advance on the proposed reductions to the project. This was, at the very least, discourteous, and I most sincerely apologise for any inconvenience, upset or uncertainty that I may have caused.

Furthermore, as I was only made aware of this question on 20th February 2006, I have only had time to prepare a written response. As I already have a prior commitment on 21st February, I also apologise that I will not be able to attend the Scrutiny Committee to present the response in person.”

RESOLVED:

- (1) That no action be taken on this matter until Councillor Kercher had had the opportunity to take it up with the Head of Community Development & Cultural Services and the Manager of the Women’s Resource Centre;
- (2) That Members of the Scrutiny Committee be advised of progress on plans for the training of councillors and officers in the use of the approved Protocol for Member/Officer Working Arrangements;

- (3) That the Head of Community Development & Cultural Services be requested to ensure that any proposed changes to the Service Level Agreements towards the end of the next three year period be the subject of consultation with the Council's Member representatives sufficiently in advance.

(b) No Cold Calling Zones

Councillor Paul Clark referred to a supplementary response he had received from the Strategy Officer for Community Safety following the last meeting of the Committee on 10 January 2006, regarding No Cold Calling Zones (Minute 94 refers) and, in particular, the vulnerability of elderly residents to doorstep distraction burglary. The supplementary response had implied that such burglary was ceasing to be a problem, but the following day an article had appeared in one of the local newspapers highlighting it as a continuing problem for elderly residents.

RESOLVED: That, in the light of the above information, the Strategy Officer for Community Safety be requested to provide a further reply to Councillor Clark regarding the problem of doorstep distraction burglary.

**110. NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL – THE DRAFT FORWARD PLAN:
1 MARCH 2006 – 30 JUNE 2006**

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee presented the Draft Forward Plan to the Committee, which covered the period 1 March 2006 – 30 June 2006.

The Committee expressed concern over the fact that a number of items for March 2006 had only just appeared on the Plan, and that there were no items at all listed for May and June 2006. Members asked for a number of items to be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee, in advance of their consideration by Cabinet.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Draft Forward Plan, covering the period 1 March 2006 – 30 June 2006, be noted;
- (2) That officers be requested to ensure that, wherever possible, items are placed in the Forward Plan sufficiently in advance of the date on which a decision will be made, in order to prevent a recurrence of the 1 March – 30 June 2006 Plan, which had a number of items added for March which were not included in February and no items at all for May and June;
- (3) That the following items be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee on 21 March 2006, in advance of their consideration by Cabinet:
 - (a) Public Conveniences – Options Appraisal.
 - (b) Changes to Summer Play Scheme delivery and services for young people.
 - (c) Adoption of Sports Strategy.
 - (d) Policy for the Management of Cemeteries (provided the report is general and not focussed solely on the Wilbury Hills Cemetery development proposals).

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

28.111. 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: That the progress being made by past and existing sub-groups be noted.

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

112. THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK PROCESS

The Local Development Framework Manager presented a report seeking Members' comments on which stages of the Local Development Framework (LDF) process, if any, should go before the Scrutiny Committee.

The Local Development Framework Manager advised that certain LDF documents, because of their local nature, were anticipated to go before the Area Committees. Indeed, this had already occurred in respect of the Car Parking Zones Supplementary Planning Document, and it was planned that a similar exercise take place with the future Land Allocations Local Development Document.

The Committee was reminded that the existence of the Local Development Framework Working Party ensured that all relevant work in the production of the LDF was considered and scrutinised by a cross-party group of Members before being submitted to Cabinet.

The Local Development Framework Manager drew Members' attention to the fact that any reporting to an additional committee on a regular basis would have an implication on workload and resources, and would be likely to jeopardise the timetable included in the agreed Local Development Scheme. This, in turn, could be detrimental to the amount of Planning Delivery Grant the Council received from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

The Committee debated the type of information relating to the LDF that it would wish to receive for scrutiny purposes.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the role of the Local Development Framework Working Party and the Area Committees in scrutinising and advising Cabinet on the production of the LDF be noted;
- (2) That the Scrutiny Committee be afforded the opportunity of considering the key documents forming the basis of the Local Development Scheme before they reached final submission stage;
- (3) That the item on the Forward Plan concerning the Planning Obligations Supplementary Planning Document – Draft for Public Consultation, be submitted to the Committee on 11 April 2006, in advance of its consideration by Cabinet on 25 April 2006;
- (4) That the latest draft of the Local Development Scheme and a proposed timetable showing when key elements were scheduled to be considered by the Working Party and Cabinet, be sent to all Members of the Committee;
- (5) That the Local Development Framework Manager consider the possibility of producing an executive summary for each of the key documents of the Scheme for inclusion in the Members' Information Service a week or so before each one is published.

REASON FOR DECISION: To obtain clarity with regard to which elements of the LDF process, if any, are to go before the Scrutiny Committee.

113. MEMBER DEVELOPMENT FOR SCRUTINY – OUTCOMES FROM THE SCRUTINY WORKSHOP – 7 FEBRUARY 2006

The Scrutiny Officer presented a report on the outcomes from the Member Scrutiny Workshop held on 7 February 2006.

In terms of the Scrutiny Committee's Work Programme for 2006/07, the Workshop had agreed that the number of reviews should be restricted to three or four major topics, with one topic being linked to the strategic objectives in the Corporate Plan. For 2006/07, it was suggested that "Safer Communities" should be chosen.

The Workshop had also agreed that there should be the capacity for review of a current topic, and the suggestions had included:-

- Health in the community;
- Relationship with Planning;
- Wind Farms;
- Partnership working with Parishes;
- Recycling and waste minimisation;
- NHDC and NHH working relationship;
- External work with partners;
- Emergency Planning;
- CCTV effectiveness;
- Town Centre strategies;
- Service @ North Herts effectiveness.

Members had further agreed to leave space for a "hot topic" to be identified during the year, and it was suggested that a report on caravan sites should be submitted to the Committee in the new Civic Year.

The work of the current Scrutiny Task and Finish Groups was reviewed, and it was agreed that prior to starting any new Groups, the current Groups (Engaging Young People, Usage & Promotion of Markets, and Residential Parking) would need to finish. It was noted that although the Affordable Housing Task & Finish Group may undertake some preliminary work this in 2005/06, most of its work would be carried out in the 2006/07 Civic Year.

In respect of the list of topics outlined above, the Committee was informed that the one relating to CCTV effectiveness was being dealt with as part of the Street Scene Fundamental Service Review, and that quality assurance of the Service @ North Herts project was being overseen by the Performance, Audit & Review Committee.

RESOLVED: That the following be confirmed as the basis of the Committee's Work Programme for 2006/07:-

- (1) The number of reviews should be restricted to three or four topics, with one topic being linked to the "Safer Communities" Strategic Objective in the Council's Corporate Plan;
- (2) That "Partnership working with Parishes" be selected from the list identified at the Workshop as a topic for review in 2006/07;

- (3) That capacity be made for the consideration of a “hot topic” which could be identified at any time during the year;
- (4) That a report on caravan sites be submitted to the Committee in the new Civic Year;
- (5) That work on all of the current Task & Finish Groups be completed prior to the commencement of any new reviews;
- (6) That the first meeting of the Affordable Housing Task & Finish Group be requested to consider the likelihood of any duplication of work to be undertaken on affordable housing as part of the Local Development Scheme process, and that the Local Development Framework Manager be invited to this meeting to participate in the debate upon this matter.
- (7) That the previous practice whereby Members of the Committee assembled at 7.00pm immediately prior to the meeting to discuss items on the agenda be resurrected, and that a reminder of this pre-meeting be included on the front page of all future agendas.

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

114. COST AND SUBJECT OF TASK & FINISH GROUPS

Members considered the content of recent correspondence between Councillor H.M. Marshall, the Chairman of the Committee and the Head of Finance in respect of the cost and subject of Task & Finish Groups. This was pursuant to a question raised on the matter by Councillor Marshall at the meeting of the Committee held on 1 November 2005, to which he had only recently received a response.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the content of the correspondence relating to the cost and subject of task & finish groups be noted;
- (2) That the Finance Sub-Group be tasked with monitoring progress on cost of democracy savings agreed by Council and their effect on engagement with the public as part of the 2006/07 Budget.

REASON FOR DECISION: To fulfil the Committee’s role of budget scrutiny.

115. ITEMS REFERRED FROM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FINANCE SUB-GROUP – 26 JANUARY 2006

The Scrutiny Committee considered a number of recommendations to Cabinet made by the Finance Sub-Group at its meeting held on 26 January 2006, in respect of the Final Revenue Budget Setting 2006/07.

RESOLVED: That the recommendations to Cabinet made by the Finance Sub-Group at its meeting held on 26 January 2006, in respect of the Final Revenue Budget Setting 2006/07 be noted.

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

The meeting ended at 8.55pm.

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Chairman