

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES

**Meeting held at the Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City
on Tuesday, 28 August 2007 at 7.30p.m.**

PRESENT: *Councillors Martin Stears (Chairman), John Bishop, S. Bloxham, John Booth (substitute), P.C.W. Burt, Paul Clark, Sal Jarvis, S.K. Jarvis, David Kearns, H.M. Marshall and M.R.M. Muir.*

IN ATTENDANCE: *Head of Revenues & Benefits, Head of Housing & Environmental Health, Local Development Framework Manager, Senior Planning Officer, Scrutiny Officer and Senior Committee & Member Services Officer.*

ALSO PRESENT: *Councillors I.J. Knighton (Leisure & E-Government Portfolio Holder), Mrs C.P.A. Strong and R.A.C. Thake and 1 member of the public.*

21. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors David Billing, Melissa Davey and Alan Millard. Councillor John Booth was substituting for Councillor Millard.

22. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meetings held on 19 June 2007 and 16 July 2007 be approved as true records of the proceedings and signed by the Chairman.

23. NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

No other business was submitted for consideration by the Committee.

24. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING PARTY WHIP DIRECTIONS)

Councillor David Kearns declared a personal and prejudicial interest in respect of Item 16 on the agenda – Review of Sheltered Housing in North Hertfordshire, in view of his appointment by the Council to the Board of North Hertfordshire Homes. He announced that he would be withdrawing from the meeting during the Committee's consideration of that item.

25. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Chairman welcomed Parish Councillor David Reavell (Chairman of Kimpton Parish Council) to the meeting, and stated that he would be invited to address the Committee at the commencement of its consideration of Item 16 on the agenda – Review of Sheltered Housing in North Hertfordshire (See Minute 36 below).

26. URGENT/GENERAL EXCEPTION ITEMS

The Committee noted a report providing the details of an Urgent Item accepted by the Chairman for consideration at the Cabinet meeting held on 15 August 2007 entitled "Proposed changes to the Organisation delivering the Meals on Wheels Service in North Hertfordshire".

The Chairman announced that he had recently agreed to an Urgent Item going forward to the Cabinet meeting on 4 September 2007 in respect of the Hitchin Swimming Centre – Café and Reception – Improvements Project.

27. CALLED-IN ITEMS

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

28. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

There were no Chairman's Announcements.

29. QUESTIONS

(A) Freedom of Information Act

The following question had been submitted by Councillor Paul Clark:

“Freedom Of Information Act (FIA) - What checks do North Herts District Council have in place to ensure any ruling made under the Freedom of Information Act is correct?”

The Head of IT and Transformation had supplied the following answer:

“NHDC operates in accordance with the Freedom of Information Policy and guidance from the Information Commissioner. NHDC have officers trained and many years experience of case handling .Their role is to deal with the initial request and the process of preparing and issuing a response. Any technical response (and/or information relating to the request will be provided by the Head of Service responsible for the enquiry. Where necessary additional legal advice will be sort. This information is displayed on the NHDC website.”

Councillor Clark and other Members commented on this answer. The question had arisen as a result of the recent Freedom of Information request for details of the tenderers bidding for the management of Hitchin Town Hall, in that the request had originally been denied, and then subsequently allowed. Accordingly, Councillor Clark asked the following supplementary question:

“What checks and balances have been put in place for the future to address the failure to deal with the above Freedom of Information request in the correct manner in the first instance?”

RESOLVED: That a response be provided by officers to the supplementary question raised by Councillor Clark, as detailed above.

(B) Contractual/Tender Agreements – Financial and Ethical Standards

The following question had been submitted by Councillor Paul Clark:

“What process of vetting does North Herts use to ensure those attempting to enter into a contractual and Tender agreements with us in regard to their financial and ethical standards?”

The Head of Legal & Democratic Services had supplied the following answer:

“We check the legislative compliance of contractors, eg anti-discrimination legislation and Health & Safety, and provide a clause to ensure they comply with the relevant legislation. We also provide them with our Whistleblowing policy but there is no check on their ethical standards - this is not always a relevant matter as companies operate under a very different framework.”

The Head of Financial Services had supplied the following answer:

“There are a number of approaches made by the Council to ensure those attempting to enter into a contractual agreement with us in regard to their financial and ethical standards meet the Council’s expectations and help reduce the risk of future contractual failure:

Where contracts for the supply of services or works are sought and as a means of reducing the number of tenders at an early stage of the process, the Council favours the use of a pre-qualification questionnaire (PQQ). The document is designed to support an “ad hoc select list” or “restricted tendering procedure”, where notice/adverts is given to invite contractors to express their interest in being selected to tender. They are then required to fill in one of these questionnaires, and the

replies are used to evaluate the capability and standing of contractors and to assist in the process of selecting those to be invited to tender.

Sections within the questionnaire cover matters relating to financial and anti-discrimination standards.

Where land or property contracts are involved an informal tendering process is adopted where matters listed in the PQQ are dealt with through a process of interview and or correspondence.

With both methods where possible information supplied by the tenderers is checked at some stage of the evaluation process, examples are:

- Conduct a financial evaluation of the tenderers on their published/audited accounts.
- Confirm the identity of the company (or other legal entity) which it is proposed to enter into a contract or lease with and what their status is.
- Ensure that sufficient guarantees and references have been obtained and what the relationship of the guarantors/referees is to the tenderers.
- When applicable, establish that there is a viable and realistic business plan and that all necessary sources of funding have been identified and put in place.”

The Committee noted the answers given, but a number of Members expressed continued concerns about the robustness of the Council’s tendering process, and the apparent pre-eminence given to the financial standing of contractors over their business standing.

(C) Community Assets

The following question had been submitted by Councillor Paul Clark:

“Community Assets - The Big Lottery Fund are having a number of Regional Seminars to inform Local Authorities of the details of the £30 Million Community Asset Fund. Has this authority received its invitation and will anyone be attending the Eastern Regional Seminar on 4th September 2007. If someone from this authority is attending what will then happen to the information received and how will Councillors be informed?”

The Head of Community Development & Cultural Services had supplied the following answer:

“The Council has received an invitation from the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) regarding the Community Assets Programme and will be attending, together with representatives from the third sector (voluntary and community), the Eastern Regional Seminar on 4th September in Cambridge.

The purpose of the seminars is to outline the key elements of the programme but also for potential applicants to ask questions and feed into the process, eg: about the funding criteria.

When the details of the Community Assets Programme have been finalised by BLF these can be made available to all Councillors via MIS.

The Council will then need to consider whether it wishes to prepare an application (or applications) to the BLF as part of the programme.

The Council is also preparing a report on the Quirk Review and any changes that this might mean to the current asset disposal strategy.”

Councillor Clark asked the following supplementary question:

“Which body of the Council would be empowered to consider whether it wishes to prepare an application (or applications) for submission to the BLF?”

RESOLVED: That a response be provided by officers to the supplementary question raised by Councillor Clark, as detailed above.

(D) Nottingham Declaration on Climate Change

The following question had been submitted by Councillor Paul Clark:

“Following the decision by this Council to sign up to the Nottingham Declaration on Climate change at its meeting on January 18th 2007, what actions has this Council taken to take a lead in and reduce its carbon emissions?”

The Head of Policy, Partnerships & Performance had supplied the following answer:

“The signing of the Nottingham Declaration by the Authority in 2007 made an express commitment by the Council to deliver actions which could make a positive impact on our local sustainability and contribute to the national climate change, recycling and green issues agenda.

Part of that commitment was to produce a climate change strategy within two years of signing up to the Declaration and it is intended, and indeed within the Policy/Partnerships and Performance service plan, that the development of the strategy will commence in March 2008; the team are currently working on the development of the Sustainable Community Strategy, the highest level strategic document for the authority and its partners, to be presented to Cabinet in February.

In preparation for the creation of that strategy, I have been successful in securing the services of an excellent research student, working alongside the PPP team for the last two months, under my direction. This student is in the process of preparing for us a detailed report which will cover:

- Examples of good practice from other ‘beacon’ authorities which North Herts could consider adopting
- Research evidence regarding persuading communities and individuals to change their current habits for new initiatives and whether incentives for those changes are also required
- Evidence regarding North Herts’ current carbon footprint and areas where actions (often small) can make most impact on the future carbon emissions for the district
- Review of current evidence of aspects to be tackled, using the Government’s new ‘Getting on Target’ toolkit, which identifies the considerable number of areas on which the Council will need to concentrate to bring about change; these range from motivating staff to alter their working habits, travel to work, use of resources etc through the purchase of fuel and efficiency of buildings to the use of volunteers and community sector organisations to promote the message wider.

Whilst we know that the Government target for climate change and carbon, methane etc reductions for 2020 are already available, we are also awaiting a number of other measures which will be introduced next year as part of our Comprehensive Area Assessment, the replacement for CPA (Comprehensive Performance Assessment); it is therefore important that the timing of agreement for a final strategy should align with those targets being established by central government in order to be most effective.

There will also be a requirement placed on Heads of Service to integrate climate change into their service plans from April 2008, in order that the capacity and

resource to take this issue forward is fully considered by all service areas. A working group to develop the strategy will be convened in March 2008.

However, I can assure members that we cannot simply 'park' green issues and deal with them as the workload permits, since often circumstances require us to act more quickly, and I list below a number of actions currently underway which will in turn form part of the overall Climate Change Strategy for the authority;

- We are advocating the use of reusable bags, and reducing the impact of plastic carriers going to landfill. Our waste team are distributing a considerable number of jute shopping bags in support of this initiative.
- We are continuing to promote our British Gas Insulation Scheme, including targeted advertising on envelopes used for bus pass renewal etc.
- We have built in sustainability requirements to the regeneration schemes at Ivel Court and Westmill
- All social housing is now required to achieve the Housing Corporation ECO3 standard
- We are already running, and have increased, recycling workshops within schools
- We will introduce the recycling of kitchen waste into our waste collection scheme in early 2008, reducing further the tonnage sent to landfill
- We are working through the Herts Waste Partnership to lobby government for more stringent targets to be imposed on suppliers to reduce their use of non-recyclable packaging, and over-packaging in general
- Our Local Development Framework and Local Transport Plans, are currently being prepared in line with new sustainability guidance
- It is proposed that our People Strategy, dealing with the employment, skills and requirements placed on our staff, will be reviewed and that a complimentary green travel plan for staff will become part of that document.
- The Authority has already promoted the government 'Bikes for Work' scheme and hopes to extend this further in the future; we are also providing the opportunity for those officers who can work flexibly, either from home or mobile across the district visiting homes, etc, to do so, thus reducing unnecessary travel (by either customers or officers) and therefore ultimately carbon emissions.
- We have established a 'Green Issues' Officer group to develop effective means by which we can reduce our carbon footprint by developing new ways of working – reducing unnecessary printing, promoting recycling within Council buildings, as well as promoting the sustainable consumer message to staff who shop locally."

Councillor Clark thanked the officer for a full response, but was disappointed that the Climate Change Strategy had not moved forward at a quicker pace.

30. NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL – THE FORWARD PLAN: 1 SEPTEMBER 2007 – 31 DECEMBER 2007

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee presented the Forward Plan to the Committee, which covered the period 1 September to 31 December 2007.

The Chairman commented that a number of items had been included in the Plan at a late stage, and asked for a reminder to be sent to officers reminding them of the need to enter items onto the Plan at a much earlier stage.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Forward Plan, covering the period 1 September to 31 December 2007, be noted;
- (2) That the item entitled "HCC Highway Environmental Maintenance Agency Agreement" be considered at the next meeting of the Committee to be held on 9 October 2007, prior to its submission to Cabinet;

- (3) That the item entitled "Strategic approach to car parking" be considered at the meeting of the Committee to be held on 11 December 2007, prior to its submission to Cabinet;
- (4) That the item entitled "Revised Rural Strategy" be considered at the meeting of the Committee to be held on 11 December 2007, prior to its submission to Cabinet;
- (5) That officers arrange an All-Member Workshop on the Local Development Framework: Site Allocations – Issues and Options Consultation item, in order to ascertain the views of Ward Members regarding this issue;
- (6) That officers ensure that the appropriate Area Committees are consulted in respect of the items entitled "Baldock Town Centre Enhancement", "Future Management Arrangements for Bancroft Hall" and "Royston Town Centre Strategy".

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

31. PRESENTATION BY LEISURE AND E-GOVERNMENT PORTFOLIO HOLDER

The Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Leisure and E-Government, Councillor I.J. Knighton, gave a presentation to the Committee on the key issues facing him in relation to his portfolio area.

In respect of the Leisure area, the key issues were:

- The adoption of a strategic approach to ensure a more effective use of finances and expenditure on leisure facilities in the District;
- The development of an enabling role, which recognized that the Council was not necessarily the best provider of all leisure facilities in the District;
- Project Management – the development of Project Boards for each of the major leisure initiatives taking place in North Herts;
- Continued Partnership working – with organisations including the National Lottery and Football Foundation, to deliver projects such as the Howard Park and Gardens redevelopment in Letchworth Garden City and the Astro turf pitch at Knights Templar School in Baldock;
- The agreement of a profit share arrangement with the contractors operating the Council's leisure centres in order that a certain percentage of the profits is re-invested in each centre;
- The commencement of work in 2008 towards the re-letting of the leisure centre management contracts in 2010;
- Further investment in the Hitchin and Letchworth Garden City Outdoor Swimming Pools;
- Completion of the tendering arrangements to facilitate possible outsourcing of the management arrangements for Hitchin and Royston Markets;
- The development of strategies for sports pitches/facilities;
- On-going Capital investment in the District's Sports Pavilions;
- The development of an Allotments Strategy, involving a closer working relationship with the various Allotment Associations.

The Committee asked a number of questions, which were answered by the Portfolio Holder. He also undertook to look into a number of specific issues raised by Members.

In relation to the E-Government area, the key issues were:

- The second year (of three) of the Council working with its strategic partner, Anite, to deliver the E-Government programme;
- The development/expansion of the Customer Services Centre;
- Implementation of a Document Management System across the Council;

- The expansion of mobile/flexible/home working for employees;
- Standardisation of the Geographical Information System (G.I.S.);
- Development of support systems (eg) Human Resources/Payroll;
- The establishment of a Business Process Improvement Team, a Service@North Herts Project Board and an IT transformation Board;
- Development and improvement of the Council's website;
- Enhancing IT facilities and access to IT for Members.

Again, the Committee asked a number of questions, which were answered by the Portfolio Holder.

The Chairman thanked the Portfolio Holder for Leisure and E-Government for attending the Committee and answering Members' questions.

32. SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2007/2008

The Scrutiny Officer submitted a report detailing the Committee's Work Programme for 2007/08, and seeking the Committee's agreement to the number of Members on each of the two 2007/08 Scrutiny Task & Finish Groups and who would Chair each Group.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Scrutiny Committee Work Programme for 2007/2008 be agreed;
- (2) That the Social Inclusion Task & Finish Group (focusing on areas of deprivation) be chaired by a Conservative Group Member and the Local economic Development Task & Finish Group be chaired by a Labour Group Member, both Groups to comprise a maximum of 4 Conservative Members and 2 each from the Labour and Liberal Democrat Groups.

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

33. SCRUTINY FINANCE SUB-GROUP

The Scrutiny Committee was informed that the next meeting of the Finance Sub-Group would be held on Thursday, 30 August 2007. The Sub-Group's recommendations in respect of the reports it was considering would therefore be tabled at the meeting of the Cabinet to be held on 4 September 2007.

RESOLVED: That the Finance Sub-Group be given the authority to make recommendations on behalf of the Scrutiny Committee to Cabinet at its meeting to be held on 4 September 2007.

REASON FOR DECISION: To ensure the Cabinet received the representations from the Scrutiny Committee to enable informed decision-making, in accordance with the Scrutiny Referrals Protocol.

34. LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK – PREFERRED OPTIONS PAPERS ON CORE STRATEGY AND DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

The Local Development Framework Manager presented a report of the Head of Planning & Building Control to the Committee which detailed the Core Strategy and Development Policies Preferred Options Papers, which would form part of the North Hertfordshire Local Development Framework (LDF).

The Local Development Framework Manager informed the Committee that the Preferred Options Papers were to be considered by Cabinet at its meeting to be held on 4 September 2007, prior to public consultation.

The Local Development Framework Manager advised that the Core Strategy would set out the guiding principles for development in the District, whilst the Development Policies Development Plan Document (DPD) would give more advice on detailed

matters, such as the Council's approach to renewable energy and design of development. The process by which these documents were required to be prepared was set out in the Town and Country Planning (Local Development)(England) Regulations 2004. Under these regulations, there were three stages of consultation for each DPD:

- the Issues and Options stage (which had been completed);
- the Preferred Options stage (this stage); and
- the formal Submission stage.

The Committee noted that, once the DPDs had been submitted to the Secretary of State, they would be subject to an independent examination by an Inspector. The Inspector would determine whether the DPDs were "sound". The Inspector's recommendations would then be issued in a binding report to the authority. The changes directed by the Inspector must be made before the document could be adopted. The Inspector may also direct that the document was unsound and therefore that work needed to start again at the beginning of the process.

The Local Development Framework Manager stated that the Preferred Options Papers were first presented to Members in December 2006. At that time it was reported that the first two local authorities to progress their core strategies through to submission and examination had been found unsound. In light of this it was decided to appoint an external "critical friend" from Planning Officers Society Enterprises to review the Core Strategy and Development Policies preferred options papers before public consultation took place.

The "critical friend" had reviewed the preferred options documents and in the light of lessons learnt from the early DPD examinations had made a number of recommendations to amend the preferred options documents. The significant changes which had been made to the preferred options documents from the draft presented to Members in December 2006 comprised:

- the inclusion of a spatial portrait for the District;
- a discussion of the 'discounted options' – those which had been considered but not pursued;
- the addition of a series of five small area analyses;
- a clearer explanation of how the policies related to the Community Strategy and the Corporate Plan; and
- the deletion of many development policies which repeated national or regional guidance.

The Local Development Framework Manager briefly outlined the Chapter headings, which were the same for both the Core Strategy and Development Policies documents.

The Committee considered a number of proposed amendments to the documents submitted by Councillor David Billing, which had been tabled at the meeting. With advice from the Local Development Framework Manager, assisted by the Senior Planning Officer, a number of these proposals were accepted, whilst others were considered inappropriate for inclusion in the documents. The Committee raised a number of further matters regarding the documents, which were dealt with in a similar manner.

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:

- (1) That following suggestions be considered regarding items that could be altered or inserted in the Preferred Options Paper on the Core Strategy:
 - (a) Paragraph 2.16 (table) and throughout: Spatial Strategy – a consistent approach should be adopted for the designation of Great Ashby as a neighbourhood centre;

- (b) Paragraph 3.37: Housing – to be brought into line with Core Policy G, which has adopted the stepped approach to affordable housing percentages and thresholds;
 - (c) Paragraph 3.38: Housing – no change, but Cabinet’s attention be drawn to the forthcoming Strategic Housing Market Assessment, which should identify areas of need in the local housing market;
 - (d) Paragraph 3.55: Royston Transport – deletion of the final two sentences, and their replacement with a form of words better reflecting the status of any likely Royston south eastern bypass, following previous consideration of this issue by Planning Inspectors at NHDC Local Plan Inquiries;
 - (e) Key Issue 6: Housing – (b) the reference should be 3.30 not 3.29 and in (d) the replacement of “all medium and large” with “all but the smallest”;
 - (f) Core Policy B: Design and Sustainability – insertion of “and enhance” before “local distinctiveness”;
 - (g) Core Policy F: Provision and Distribution of new housing – (1) add after “Oughtonhead Common”, in line with Paragraph 3.30, the words “although not breaching the ridge line west of Lucas Lane and Crow Furlong”;
 - (h) Core Policy I: Healthier Communities – no change, but Cabinet’s attention be drawn to the urgent need for the Council’s Allotments Strategy to be enhanced, in order to tie in with this policy;
- (2) That following suggestions be considered regarding items that could be altered or inserted in the Preferred Options Paper on Development Policies:
- (a) Development Policy 2: Biodiversity – no change, but Cabinet’s attention be drawn to the ongoing work seeking evidence to justify the possible future inclusion of a policy for the planting of multiple numbers of trees as a replacement for each tree required to be felled as a result of development proposals;
 - (b) Development Policy 4: Protecting Amenity – an additional (5) to read “pollution, including light pollution”;
 - (c) Development Policy 5: Design, Safety and Sustainability – an additional section to be worded by officers with the aim that gated community developments will not be permitted;
 - (d) Development Policy 14: Density and mix of dwellings and mixed uses – no change, but Cabinet’s attention be drawn to the possibility that the thresholds relating to the mix of dwellings for various sizes of sites may require amendment as a result of the completion of the Strategic Housing Market Assessment;
 - (e) Development Policy 21: Open Space – this policy should be expanded to include retention of open spaces within the villages in the District, as well as the four major towns;
 - (f) Development Policy 24: Small and medium sized businesses – the definition of small and medium sized businesses detailed in the supporting text be incorporated into the policy wording;
 - (g) Development Policy 28: Local Centres – the map relating to Redhill Road (Hitchin) should be changed as it is a duplicate of map relating to The Parade (Letchworth Garden City).

REASON FOR DECISION: In order that the Committee can comment prior to Cabinet’s decision to allow the public consultation to progress in accordance with the Local Development Scheme.

35. APPROVAL OF THE HERTFORDSHIRE SUPPORTING PEOPLE STRATEGY 2007-2012

The Head of Housing & Environmental Health presented a report outlining the proposed Hertfordshire Supporting People Strategy 2007-2012, which would be considered by Cabinet at its meeting to be held on 4 September 2007.

The Head of Housing & Environmental Health stressed that the Strategy related to support with housing-related care and not personal care. The client groups for which support was provided through the programme were:

- People with Mental Health Problems
- Young People
- People with Learning Disabilities
- Homeless People
- People with Substance Misuse Problems
- Gypsies and Travellers
- People Escaping Domestic Violence
- Older People
- People with Physical or Sensory Impairment
- Offenders and those at Risk of Offending
- Other Vulnerable People and Housing Support

The Committee was advised that, on an operational level, the Strategy sought to promote services that, wherever possible, would be delivered irrespective of the tenure of the user. In practice, this would result in more 'floating support' services being delivered to users that resided in private as well as public sector housing.

The Head of Housing & Environmental Health commented that, in addition to providing a clear framework for the programme over the next 5 years, the Strategy specifically responded to a number of criticisms made by the Audit Commission in 2006. For example, the Strategy contained a new approach to the assessment of service provider Value for Money (VfM), as this had been a consistently weak area for the Administering Authority. The Strategy proposed a new VfM framework that sought to identify those services which were offering poor value for money; the providers of these services would be approached by the Administering Authority with view to reducing service costs or, if this was not achievable, the decommissioning of that service and its re-provision (via the greater use of competitive tendering).

It was noted that a further Audit Commission criticism concerned the definition of eligible expenditure (as provided by the legislative framework for the national Supporting People programme), which had been open to some inappropriate interpretation, with Supporting People funding being used to purchase non-eligible services, such as personal care. Accordingly, the Strategy now provided a clear statement that, in future, the programme grant would only be used to fund eligible services (with a few authorised exceptions) which closely followed the definition as published in legislation and national guidance.

The Head of Housing & Environmental Health responded to a number of questions raised by Members on the report.

In debating the item, and whilst supporting the Strategy, the Committee expressed concerns with regard to the potential impact of the Strategy on services for older people, particularly in respect of the proposed 10% reduction in Supporting People funding for sheltered housing.

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:

- (1) That the Hertfordshire Supporting People Strategy 2007-2012 be supported;
- (2) That the Scrutiny Committee's concerns with regard to the potential impact of the Strategy on services for older people, particularly in respect of the proposed 10% reduction in Supporting People funding for sheltered housing, be noted.

REASON FOR DECISION: To provide comments to Cabinet in advance of a decision being made on this matter.

36. REVIEW OF SHELTERED HOUSING IN NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE

The Scrutiny Committee considered documentation relating to the current review of Sheltered Housing in the District being undertaken by North Hertfordshire Homes (NHH). The documentation comprised a letter from the Chief Executive of NHH to the Chairman of the Committee regarding the review, together with a copy of the presentation given by NHH to Ward Councillors on 11 July 2007.

The Chairman advised that NHH had been invited to send a representative to the meeting, but had been unable to do so due to annual leave commitments. He stressed that, in such circumstances, the Committee should not come to any firm conclusions regarding the review without allowing NHH the right of reply.

At the Chairman's invitation, Parish Councillor David Reavell (Chairman of Kimpton Parish Council) addressed the Committee in respect of the review, with particular reference to NHH's proposed closure of Probyn House in Kimpton.

Parish Councillor Reavell began by referring to the distress caused by the proposal on the residents of Probyn Court and the residents of Kimpton, many of whom had relatives at the Home. There had been little or no consultation by NHH with the residents, and a 1,000 signature petition of protest had been gathered and submitted to NHH. In addition, a public protest meeting had attracted almost 100 residents.

Parish Councillor Reavell questioned the District Council's role in the process, bearing in mind it had a 33% stake in NHH, and appointed five representatives each year to its Board. He asked if those representatives, together with the Scrutiny Committee, could bring some pressure to bear on NHH to reverse its decision to close Probyn House.

In respect of the latter point, the Chairman stated that the Council appointed representatives to external organisations, such as NHH, on an annual basis. The role of such appointees was to act in the interests of those organisations and not in the interests of the District Council. The Chairman added that the Council had no direct role in reviewing the activities of NHH, as this was a matter entrusted to the Housing Corporation.

Councillor John Bishop supported the comments of Parish Councillor Reavell, and referred to a document he had tabled at the meeting regarding the review. The document contained reasons why, in his view, the review appeared to be flawed, and he requested the Committee to seek a way forward in the matter.

The Committee debated the issue, and it was

RESOLVED: That an ad hoc Scrutiny Task and Finish Group be set up to investigate further the NHH Review of Sheltered Housing in the District, comprising representatives of each of the three Political Groups on the Council and appropriate Parish Council representation, and that this Group meets urgently with representatives of NHH to consider the review and possible procedures and methods to improve future consultation processes.

REASON FOR DECISION: To scrutinise issues raised by a Member and local residents regarding the NHH Review of Sheltered Housing in North Hertfordshire.

The meeting ended at 10.35p.m.

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Chairman