

ENVIRONMENT SELECT COMMITTEE

DRAFT MINUTES OF THE ENVIRONMENT SELECT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 11 MAY 2010 AT COUNCIL CHAMBERS, COUNTY HALL, TROWBRIDGE.

Present:

Cllr Chuck Berry, Cllr Rosemary Brown (Vice-Chair), Cllr Nigel Carter, Cllr Peter Colmer (Reserve), Cllr Peter Doyle, Cllr Mollie Groom (Chairman), Cllr Alan Hill, Cllr Chris Humphries, Cllr Tom James MBE, Cllr Ian McLennan, Cllr Stephen Oldrieve and Cllr Leo Randall

Also Present:

Cllr John Brady, Cllr Howard Greenman, Cllr Bill Moss and Cllr Toby Sturgis

61. **Apologies and Substitutions**

Apologies were received from Cllr Brian Dalton.
Cllr Peter Colmer substituted for Cllr Brian Dalton.

62. **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 2 March 2010 were approved as a correct record.

63. **Declarations of Interests**

No declarations of interest were received.

64. **Chairman's Announcements**

Concern was raised that in a number of items the Committee was asked to note the report. Members agreed that in future it was important that recommendations called on the Committee to take a positive action rather than to just note the report.

65. **Public Participation**

There was no public participation at the meeting. However a letter was received by the Chairman from the Association of Kennet Passengers, a copy of which was made available to members of the Committee.

The letter referred to the Association of Kennet Passengers' objection to any decision to cut the Night TaxiBuzz service linking Devizes to Pewsey station. It is understood that the Association would also be submitting a petition to the next Council meeting in May.

66. **Empty Private Sector Homes - Update**

At its meeting in March 2010 the Committee considered a report from the Head of Private Sector Housing which provided an overview of the measures being developed to bring vacant private sector housing into use. Discussion at the meeting included concerns that the part time status and salary bracket of the vacant Empty Homes Officer post was inappropriate. The Head of Private Sector Housing confirmed that the recruitment of the post would therefore be put on hold pending further discussion with Human Resources.

Following the concerns raised by the Committee it was agreed that the post would become a full time position and a review of the job specification was taking place to increase the attractiveness of the post.

Cllr Jon Brady, Cabinet member for Housing and Cllr Howard Greenman, Portfolio member for Housing, attended the meeting to answer any questions arising from the item.

Members of the Committee expressed concern that a time-line had not been set to recruit to the post and that the recruitment process did not seem to indicate the appropriate priority members felt the post required.

Clarification was provided that strict recruitment protocols existed which dictated the speed of the process but that an existing member of the Housing team had been appointed on a part-time basis to action part of the role.

The Committee requested that the concerns raised over the recruitment process be noted and that the Senior Scrutiny Officer should continue to monitor the situation and provide future updates.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet and Portfolio Holder for their attendance.

Resolved:

- 1) That the Committee had noted the update provided but with great concern over the speed to which recruitment to the Empty Homes Officer post was taking place.**
- 2) That the concerns of the Committee will also be fed into the Overview and Scrutiny Organisational and Resources Select Committee.**

67. Housing - PFI Update

At its meeting on 3 November the Committee considered a report on the proposed Housing PFI Scheme in Wiltshire. The Committee was informed that contractual negotiations with Silbury Housing Ltd would be completed by March 2010. However, negotiations were extended with an anticipated finalisation of contract set as July 2010 as detailed within the attached reports.

Cllr Howard Greenman, Portfolio Holder - Housing and Chris Trowell, Housing PFI Project Manager, attended the meeting to provide the Committee with an update on progress made towards finalisation of the agreement.

Cllr Greenman commenced discussion by clarifying that the initial ambition of 400 houses had now been reduced with a commitment to deliver 350 homes over 2 phases. Approximately 242 were estimated for delivery in phase 1.

Several unforeseen factors had contributed to the delay in completion of the contract which included the lack of competing bids, title issues in relation to now appropriated land and the possible impact of a new Government.

Once commercial agreement had been reached, papers would be sent to the government's Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) for review. This process was anticipated to take between 6 and 8 weeks to complete.

Clarification was provided that all parties had a willingness to work together and that every effort was being made to conclude the negotiations as swiftly as possible.

Further discussion included that all due diligence issues had been raised and were being dealt with; that the current economic climate had impacted on the overall cost of the project; that the overall cost per unit was estimated to be £156k which was considered acceptable from a Government perspective; and that it should be noted that the PFI scheme was in addition to the S106 scheme. The rental incomes associated with affordable housing would be based on other rental homes within the area.

The PFI project subsidy of £83m included the servicing of land and building in addition to the management and maintenance of the properties for a 30 year term. Wiltshire Council would receive nomination rights for the duration of this term with a no 'right to buy' policy in place to ensure affordable housing remained.

Cllr John Brady, Cabinet Member for Housing, confirmed that he would take on board the feedback received from the Committee.

The Chairman concluded the item and thanked all for their contributions.

Resolved:

- 1) **To note the update provided.**
- 2) **That the Senior Scrutiny Officer would provide an update on the Housing PFI Scheme at the next meeting.**

68. **Homes 4 Wiltshire Service Review**

Prior to it's meeting on 2 November 2009 the Committee received a presentation from Laura Young, Head of Homes 4 Wiltshire on the Homes 4 Wiltshire process. Following the presentation a request was made that a further update should be provided to the Committee on the outcome of the review once completed.

The Homes 4 Wiltshire review had now been completed and was approved by Cabinet on 20 April 2010. Kate Evans, acting Head of Homes 4 Wiltshire, attended the meeting to present details of the review outcomes which included a copy of the revised action plan and improvement targets for 2011. Further information was provided as follows:

- The need to review in detail how properties were marketed. A photograph of the property would be included from October except in exceptional circumstances.
- That work was continuing on the websites (both Wiltshire Council's and the landlords').
- That sufficient priority would be given to a local connection.
- That following a pilot scheme which granted Westlea Housing Association responsibility of the shortlisting process it had been agreed that stock landlords would continue responsibility of the process.
- If an applicant had unreasonably rejected 3 properties offered their priority would reduce to bronze (the applicant had the right to appeal against this

and would be made aware of the consequences of rejecting properties throughout the process).

- That a 'secret shopper' exercise would be taking place to address the concerns raised regarding the level of information received from Homes 4 Wiltshire.
- That timescales relating to the availability of a property, accessibility, etc, would be made available to the applicant.
- Decision methods (other than banding) were still to be considered.
- Partner organisations would have access to relevant information only.
- Application forms would be amended to make applicants aware that information provided would be shared with all partner landlords.
- Continued monitoring of all strands of diversity.

Ensuing discussion included advertising methods, specifically that properties were no longer advertised in local newspapers. Clarification was provided that although landlords did not wish to advertise this way applicants could register to receive paper copies of available properties via first class post.

Additional issues raised included the 'local connection' category and the need for a robustness of the service level agreements with the 32 housing association partners, this included void times which currently equated to approx £2m in lost rent; and the ability of elected Councillors to represent members of the community through the process.

Consideration was also given to the protocols relating to the housing needs of 16-17 year olds under social services care; the definition of homelessness; and whether tenants could be incentivised to down-size where existing the residing property exceeded the need (Westlea Housing Association were reviewing this option).

Resolved:

To note the report and consider the item for further review.

69. **Waste Disposal**

The Committee was reminded that the Waste Task Group, chaired by Cllr Chris Humphries had related to collection services only. With this in mind the Chairman requested an update report from the Service Director for Waste Management on the MBT Plant in Westbury and the progress made relating to a join waste solution with Swindon Council.

Cllr Toby Sturgis, Cabinet member for Waste was in attendance to answer questions arising from the report.

Ensuing discussion included confirmation that the Lakeside Waste to Energy Plant which was contracted for 50,000 tonnes of waste per annum, was fully operational.

The duration of the contract was 25 years with no break points but a mechanism was in place to enter into negotiations to vary the contract if required. As waste was taken predominantly from the south of the county the carbon footprint for transferring waste was considered less than the option of landfill where methane emissions would generate a higher footprint.

Overall responsibility of collection and disposal services rested with the Council although a contractual relationship with the private sector existed in terms of physical collection and disposal.

Acknowledgement was made that as a member of the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme (LATS) any excess of the landfill residual waste allowance could result in a fine of £150 per tonne, although it was understood that with the legislation in place no authority had yet been fined.

In order to safeguard against possible future fines relating to landfill, the Council had commenced discussion with Swindon Borough Council regarding a joint procurement project. Although the project was given approval by Cabinet, Swindon Borough Council informed Wiltshire Council that they would be seeking alternative arrangements and therefore the collaboration had been terminated.

Wiltshire Council would conclude negotiations regarding the MBT contract within six weeks of the meeting. A review of the strategy, which took into account the cancellation of the potential partnership with Swindon Borough Council, would be conducted in due course.

Members of the Committee requested that officers consider the impact additional housing over the next 10 years would have on waste disposal, the revenue stream potential regarding carbon trading as set out in the LATS, where additional landfill sites would be located and the disposal of glass, which was understood to be transported to North Yorkshire.

The Chairman concluded discussions and thanked the Cabinet member and Service Director for their participation.

Resolved:

To note the update and consider the item for further review.

70. **Housing Commission - Request to Scrutiny**

The Audit Commission recently carried out an inspection of the Housing Landlord Services in Salisbury, the results of which were to be published later in the week. Cllr John Brady, Cabinet Member for Housing, would be forming a Housing Commission to respond to the findings and would monitor the Housing Services improvements Plan.

The Cabinet Member for Housing extended an invitation for a member of the Select Committee to sit on the Board who's first meeting was to be held on 12 May. With this in mind Cllr Ricky Rogers was approached to represent the Committee, taking into account his excellent local housing knowledge and representation experience on similar Boards. Cllr Rogers agreed to serve if appointed to do so by the Committee.

Although it was acknowledged that Cllr Rogers (as Councillor for the largest estate in Wiltshire and with an extensive understanding of tenants' needs) would be an appropriate representative, members felt that the Committee would also benefit from further representation from the Committee itself.

Cllr Ian McLennan was duly appointed to further represent the Committee

Resolved:

To appoint Cllr Ian McLennan and Cllr Ricky Rogers as representatives of the Committee on the Housing Commission Board.

71. **Climate Change**

At the meeting held in March 2010, the Committee considered an update on progress made against climate change objectives and resolved to recommend to the Cabinet Member responsible for staffing that job specifications should include responsibility for the authorities corporate climate change targets.

A copy of the Cabinet Member response was attached to the agenda for consideration and note by the Committee.

Ensuing discussion included that the response did not incorporate the Committee's request for management objectives to be set (which included fleet managers, corporate directors and their immediate reports) and how progress would be monitored.

Clarification was provided that Ariane Crampton, Head of Climate Change, would attend the next meeting of the Committee to provide an update on the authority's climate change strategy.

Resolved:

To note the response provided and to request that Cllr Toby Sturgis, Cabinet member responsible for climate change, note the comments of the Committee.

72. **Scrutiny of Corporate Plan**

Following consideration of the Corporate Plan by the O&S Organisation and Resources Select Committee in March 2010 it was recognised that further detail would emerge from the supplementary departmental delivery plans and the new business plans for the Council. The Committee felt that future scrutiny work programmes should be aligned to the priorities identified within these documents with an understanding that the plan would be subject to regular review.

The main document for consideration by the Environment Select Committee was likely to be the Neighbourhood and Planning departmental delivery plan which would be added to the Forward Work Programme for consideration in September 2010.

Resolved:

- 1) **To note the update.**
- 2) **To add Neighbourhood and Planning Delivery Plan to the work programme for consideration in September 2010.**

73. **Forward Work Programme**

Resolved:

To note the update provided.

74. **Date of next Meeting**

6 July 2010.

75. **Urgent Items**

No urgent items were considered.

(Duration of meeting: 9.30 am – 12:10pm)

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