

MINUTES of a meeting of the POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Coalville on WEDNESDAY, 30 SEPTEMBER 2015

Present: Councillor M Specht (Chairman)

Councillors J Cotterill, J G Coxon, T Eynon, J Geary, D Harrison, S McKendrick (Substitute for Councillor N Clarke), V Richichi, A C Saffell and N Smith

In Attendance: Councillors R D Bayliss and J Legrys

Officers: Mr R Bowmer, Ms L Cotton, Mr D Gill, Mr M Harding, Mr G Jones, Mr C Lambert, Mrs C Macrory, Mrs R Wallace and Miss A Wright

8. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor N Clarke.

9. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest.

10. PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

There were no questions received.

11. MINUTES

It was moved by Councillor J Cotterill, seconded by Councillor D Harrison and

RESOLVED THAT:

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 July 2015 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

12. UPDATE OF THE COUNCIL'S CONSTITUTION

The Deputy Monitoring Officer presented the report to Members. He focused initially on the changes to the Planning Code of Conduct and invited Members to comment.

Councillor A C Saffell asked, referring to the calling in of applications, if 'local concerns' included Parish Council's concerns. The Deputy Monitoring Officer explained that to call in an application it would need to be supported by planning grounds and be a matter of local concern; this did include Parish Council concerns. Councillor A C Saffell asked if a Member had a strong planning ground to call in an application was it essential for it to be a matter of local concern also. The Deputy Monitoring Officer explained that the change was to prevent Members calling in applications without a valid planning ground, so he would reconsider the wording to make it clearer. All Members agreed.

Councillor A C Saffell also raised concerns that as the District was now separated into single Member Wards, the power to call in applications had been restricted, especially as the constitution stated that 'a call in shall not be exercised by any member with a disclosable pecuniary interest' and also that it was only Ward Members who could call in an application. The Deputy Monitoring Officer reassured Members that public objection would still lead to an application being brought to Committee and that these procedure rules had always been in the constitution, it was only small changes to wording that had been proposed. After further pursuance of this concern by Councillor A C Saffell, the

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Deputy Monitoring Officer suggested that the wording could be reconsidered to restrict the calling in of applications to ward members and adjoining Ward Members. This would help on the occasions that the Ward Members were unable to call in an application.

Councillor N Smith believed that the proposed changes were good ones and he was happy that it was only Ward Members who could call applications in as in the past they were called in for no valid reason.

Councillor J Geary made the following comments:

- There had been an incident in the past where a Ward Member had refused to call in an application, because of this the Member of Parliament got involved and Councillor J Geary himself called in the application. If that had not been done, the decision made by officers would have led to a great injustice. An occurrence such as this was Councillor J Geary's concern with single Member Wards and the calling in of applications by Ward Members only.
- He was concerned that the planning process was now all about streamlining and rushing through applications, this had led to public loss of confidence. He reported that there had been accusations that the members of Planning Committee were directed how to vote. This had led to the public perception that decisions were made politically, which of course was not true; he believed that needed to be addressed. He suggested that as the public had little confidence in the planning service, a survey be circulated with the Council Tax letters to ask people's opinions so people consider Council Tax value for money. He believed that the responses would be surprising.
- He felt that all Ward Members should have the opportunity to speak at Planning Committee.
- He referred to many decisions within the code of practice for Members which were 'at the discretion of the Chairman', which did not help to ease the public perception that the Committee was not political.
- He believed that the proportionality of the Planning Committee should be fairer with equal numbers of Members from each political party.
- He was concerned that Members only had five working days to call in an application, because if the Ward Member was on leave it could be missed. This could lead to bad decisions being made.

Regarding the membership of the Planning Committee, the Deputy Monitoring Officer explained that it was subject to proportionality rules and it had to reflect the political balance of the authority.

Councillor T Eynon commented that it was important for the Council to be seen as approachable and that the change of a Ward Member only to call in applications did seem restrictive. She stressed that the wording needed to be reconsidered.

Councillor V Richichi expressed strong concerns regarding the proposed changes as he felt that democratic decision making was being taken away from Members. He believed that adjoining Ward Members should also be able to call in applications.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer reported that he would take Members comments forward. He then moved on to present the remaining proposed constitutional changes to Members. He put forward an additional change to the delegations to the Interim Director of Resources in appendix 4 as follows:

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In the interest of consistency, paragraph 5.2.15 to read 'Finance, financial and procurement (without prejudice to the statutory role and function of the Section 151 Officer)' as it did in paragraph 5.2.13 in reference to the Monitoring Officer role.

RESOLVED THAT:

- a) The report be noted.
- b) The Policy Development Group's comments be considered by Council when they meet to discuss the Update of the Council's Constitution.

13. HOUSING STRATEGY - OUTLINE DRAFT

The Housing Choices Team Manager presented the report to Members.

Councillor S McKendrick queried the housing stock figure detailed within the report as she had recently been given a different figure by officers. The Head of Housing agreed to check the figure and confirm with Councillor S McKendrick.

In response to a further question from Councillor S McKendrick, the Head of Housing reassured Members that before any changes were made to the older person's service, the wider networks which the service would rely on, would be consulted.

Councillor N Smith asked if there were enough care home places to deal with the aging population and if the Council has any input. The Head of Housing reported that it was not within the Council's provision to have an input on care homes, however it did have a role through extra care housing which provided a lower level of care but higher support. This bridges the gap between housing and care homes and is something that is currently being developed.

In response to a further question from Councillor N Smith, the Director of Housing stated that if the area was given an allocation of refugees to house, it could be possible to make the empty flats habitable quickly. The Council was currently waiting for confirmation on what was required nationally and the Leader of the Council wanted to do what was necessary to support the crisis. Councillor N Smith suggested that the preliminary work be carried out now so that it would be less work if housing was required. The Director of Housing took the comment on board.

Councillor T Eynon made the following comments:

- She found it helpful that the problems were highlighted within the strategy but was disappointed that there were no solutions.
- The supply and support information was useful but there should be outcomes. Councillor T Eynon hoped that as the strategy developed measures would be included not targets.
- More information such as waiting lists and affordable homes numbers broken down would be helpful to see regularly.
- Councillor T Eynon was pleased to see the green energy section.
- Councillor T Eynon felt that a 'sustainable' section was missing from the strategy.
- As a lot of housing benefit was being spent in the private renting section, Councillor T Eynon would like to see a reduction in the benefit allocated.

The Housing Choices Team Manager clarified that there would be more detailed outcomes and measures included within the strategy as it progressed.

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Councillor S McKendrick supported Councillor T Eynon's comments regarding the importance of introducing measures as she felt it was important to monitor.

Councillor G Geary asked what would happen to the service if the new homes bonus was withdrawn or drastically reduced. The Head of Finance reassured Members that the funding had already been promised by national Government; however the Council did hold money in its reserves. This money would cover the withdrawn amount for approximately one year and in this time alternative plans for the budget would need to be developed with savings found. He recognised the dependency on the new homes bonus but explained that if it was not used how it was currently; savings would need to be found immediately.

Councillor A C Saffell also expressed concerns regarding the use of the new homes bonus as it was originally promised for new homes and after restrictions being relaxed was now used to support services, which would cause issues when withdrawn. He believed that a small increase in council tax would help bring more money into the Authority and he was struggling to justify why this had not already been done.

Councillor D Harrison believed that it was a good strategy and did not agree with Councillor A C Saffell's suggestion of an increase in council tax as the promise to not burden people with more tax was a good one.

RESOLVED THAT:

The comments provided by the Committee be considered by Cabinet when it meets to discuss the Housing Strategy.

14. HOUSING ASSET MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

The Head of Housing presented the report to Members, highlighting the key outcomes and key issues.

The meeting was adjourned at 7.35pm for a brief comfort break and re-convened at 7.40pm.

Councillor S McKendrick and J Geary commented that a number of properties still had solid fuel heating systems with the occupant's receiving concessionary coal allowance and expressed concerns regarding the villages that were not connected to the main national gas network. The Head of Housing responded that there was no plan to immediately replace the systems but they would be replaced as part of a programme or as they broke down with a target of having them all replaced by 2025. He added that there were a reducing number of tenants in receipt of the solid fuel allowance but this would be taken into consideration. The suggestion to include reference in the strategy to the small number of properties with oil based systems was agreed.

Councillor T Eynon commented that she would like to see the strategy include worst case, middle case and best case scenarios for comparison purposes and stressed that it was not all about corporate viability. However, she did request that different financial assumptions be looked at and that the future inflation assumption of 2.5 per cent for income may be too optimistic. She also added that she would like to know more about the breakdown of bids for empty properties in her Ward. Regarding the summary of the investment needs and the potential disposal value of the sheltered schemes detailed within section nine of the report, Councillor T Eynon expressed concerns regarding the loss of housing and the cost of building new flats; she felt this cost should be included within the strategy.

Councillor J Coxon commented that there were many garage sites that were in a dilapidated condition and asked if these sites could be used for development of new affordable housing. The Head of Housing explained that sometimes sites were not viable for redevelopment due to their location or size but when they were, redevelopment was something they absolutely wanted to proceed with. Councillor T Eynon referred to the garage site at the end of Wyggeston Road and hoped that something would be done to improve sites such as those. The Head of Housing explained that they were trying to strike a balance between selling the land without any conditions and putting restrictions on them as it reduces the monetary value.

Councillor S McKendrick asked if the change from lifetime tenancies to five year tenancies had been taken into account when drafting the strategy. The Head of Housing responded that it had been considered in terms of rental income. He added that it would be difficult to predict what the affect of the fixed term tenancies would be until they have ended and this would be 2022 at the earliest.

Councillor S McKendrick thanked the officers for the work undertaken to produce the strategy.

RESOLVED THAT:

The comments provided by the Committee be considered by Cabinet when it meets on 20 October to discuss the Housing Asset Management Strategy.

15. ICT SERVICE UPDATE

The ICT Team Manager presented the report to Members.

In response to a question from Councillor J Geary, the ICT Team Manager reported that the movement of users email accounts to cloud servers would be rolled out for officers in October and Members shortly after once initial testing had been conducted.

Councillor N Smith asked why the desk top computers were operating on Microsoft Windows 7 when Microsoft Windows 10 was now available. The ICT Team Manager explained that it was standard practice to upgrade the operating system every other version to reduce costs. By using Microsoft Windows 7, the Council was in line with 95 per cent of other local authorities.

In response to a question from Councillor V Richichi, the ICT Team Manager reassured that even though savings were being made it would not compromise security as the threat of a breach was very real.

Councillor T Eynon commented that it was a very promising update. She asked how the remote access of emails would work and for reassurance that now the Council ICT systems were being brought up to date, they would be kept that way. The ICT Manager explained that emails would be available through a phone or tablet and would be password secured. Moving forward, he reassured that the plan was to keep everything up to date and as there were no radical changes, this was very possible. The ICT Manager's plan was to keep everything up to date with the private sector and by doing so, will keep the Council current.

Councillor A C Saffell commented that in his experience of working in ICT, issuing laptops and introducing 'hot desking' into the work place was very successful. He asked if that was the plan for the Council. The ICT Team Manager responded that it was the overall aim but it was challenging and involved other factors such as an accommodation strategy.

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RESOLVED THAT:

The progress against the plan outlined in the Council's ICT Strategy be noted.

16. PROCUREMENT STRATEGY

The Financial Services Team Manager presented the report to Members.

Councillor T Eynon commented that it was an excellent document but she did have concerns regarding the reference to the monitoring of small and medium enterprises as the conversation she has had with these organisations indicate that they are not supported. She commented that it would be helpful to see more information, figures and costs with the small and medium enterprises. The Financial Services Team Manager replied that this information could be made available as it was something that was monitored internally.

Councillor A C Saffell commented that the suppliers listed had to be of a certain size and have a particular turnover figure to be used by the Council. This raised concerns as from his personal experience as a Parish Councillor, suppliers used by the Council were much more costly than a more local source. He felt that the smaller, local businesses often lost out. Councillor N Smith concurred. The Head of Finance responded that there were a number of reasons why the Council has particular suppliers on the list, including European regulations which a lot of the smaller organisations did not meet. However, small local suppliers could be used on occasion if there was a strong business case to do so.

In response to a question from Councillor J Coxon, the Financial Services Team Manager explained that there were events planned for the near future to encourage local businesses to bid for contracts as part of the Buy Local Scheme and those that have already registered for the scheme would be invited to attend in due course.

In response to a question from Councillor S McKendrick, the Financial Services Team Manager explained that when larger businesses bid for contracts they were asked how they would contribute to the local area. The Director of Housing added that sometimes local businesses did not want to undertake the larger contracts, even though they are encouraged to do so.

RESOLVED THAT:

The comments provided by the Committee be considered by Cabinet when it meets on 20 October to discuss the Procurement Strategy.

17. ITEMS FOR INCLUSION IN THE FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Consideration was given to the future work programme for the Policy Development Group.

Councillor J Geary asked that when the budget proposals were brought to committee that the portfolio holder be invited to talk to the report.

Councillor J Geary asked for a report regarding the creation of a Leicester and Leicestershire combined authority, and that the Leader of the Council be invited to talk to the report.

Regarding the item on work plan for the next meeting entitled 'Unspent Section 106 Money for Healthcare' Councillor T Eynon asked if, as stated in the previous minutes, the Council's Constitution had been consulted regarding the participation of NHS England and Clinical Commissioning Groups. The Deputy Monitoring Officer confirmed that it had and

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currently the Head of Community Services was looking into inviting the appropriate people to attend the meeting.

Councillor A C Saffell thanked the Housing Portfolio Holder for attending the meeting and commented that he believed Portfolio Holders should attend more often when their reports were being discussed.

RESOLVED THAT:

The following item be put on the future work programme:

The Creation of a Leicester and Leicestershire Combined Authority.

The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm

The Chairman closed the meeting at 8.33 pm