

MINUTES of a meeting of the POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Coalville on WEDNESDAY, 1 OCTOBER 2014

Present: Councillor J G Coxon (Chairman)

Councillors R Adams (Substitute for Councillor N Clarke), J Cotterill, D Everitt, D Howe (Substitute for Councillor J Geary), V Richichi, S Sheahan, N Smith and M Specht

In Attendance: Councillors T Neilson

Officers: Mr R Bowmer, Mr D Gill, Mrs M Meredith, Mr J Richardson and Ms K Talbot

10. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors N Clarke, J Geary and A C Saffell.

11. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillors J G Coxon and S Sheahan declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 7 – Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) 2015/16 to 2018/19, as Members of Leicestershire County Council, due to the reference in the report in respect of recycling credits.

12. PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

There were no questions received.

13. MINUTES

By affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 July 2014 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

14. UPDATE OF THE COUNCIL'S CONSTITUTION

The Deputy Monitoring Officer presented the report to Members, drawing their attention to the main changes proposed as outlined at section 5 of the report. In respect of the Openness of Government Bodies Regulations 2014 he advised that this had now come into effect and a draft protocol had been prepared which set out how the Council would expect members of the public to act when recording meetings. He added that once this was agreed, it was envisaged that a copy would be available at public meetings. He advised that a further consequence of the Regulations was the requirement to publish officer decisions in respect of Council decisions as well as Executive decisions. In respect of Members' interests, he advised that no regulations had been made in respect of non-pecuniary interests; however for the sake of transparency, the Monitoring Officer felt that it would be useful for these interests to be clarified in the Constitution. He highlighted the changes in respect of the Appointments Committee, which had been discussed with Group Leaders. He advised that there had been a suggestion that the Chairman of this Committee should not have a casting vote; he explained that this would not be possible as the Local Government Act could not be dis-applied. He advised that it had also been suggested that a pool of substitutes be appointed, and that it would be appropriate for the pool of substitutes to consist of Cabinet Members and Shadow Portfolio Holders, as

Chairman's initials

Members in these positions had sufficient experience and knowledge to consider the appointment of senior positions.

Councillor S Sheahan referred to the paragraph in the report regarding shared services and asked how this differed to what was done currently.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that the Members for each authority made the appointments in respect of the Leicestershire Revenues and Benefits Partnership; as such there would still be Member involvement, but not in the sense of an Appointments Committee.

Councillor S Sheahan commented that the proposed procedure for appointments of deputy chief officers seemed a little loose, as it was not indicated at what point in the process a Cabinet Member was to object, or who would decide what was a well-founded objection. He felt that it would have been more appropriate for the Appointments Panel to comment rather than Cabinet.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that it had always been the case that Cabinet had the opportunity to object to an appointment, and this was usually within 48 hours of being notified.

Councillor S Sheahan acknowledged that this was an established practice, but felt however that since the appointment of deputy chief officers was being taken out of the purview of the Appointments Committee, the facility should remain for Members of the Appointments Committee to make objections.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that the points raised would be reported back and considered.

Councillor V Richichi referred to the facility to film meetings and asked if the Council would also be recording meetings. He also asked if he would be protected in any way if he made statements without prejudice that others found offensive.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that the cost of recording meetings had been investigated, and it was prohibitively expensive. He added that at this time, it was not considered to be financially viable or a good use of public money. He advised that there was no protection offered in respect of statements made that others may find rude or offensive. He advised that Members should be careful about what they said and the manner in which they made statements at meetings. He added that the Council could not control what members of the public were filming at meetings.

Councillor V Richichi expressed concerns that comments at meetings could be misinterpreted. He added that there was a risk that Members may not make comments due to this, and the official minutes may be challenged.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer commented that it had always been the position that sometimes statements were interpreted differently to how they had been intended. He added that it was the job of officers to investigate complaints and take a rounded view.

Councillor V Richichi asked if filming could lead to more closed meetings taking place.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that closed meetings could only take place due to exempt information under Schedule 12a of the Local Government Act, and meetings would not go into private session simply because Members did not want to be filmed.

Chairman's signature

Councillor S Sheahan commented that officers clearly did not see the need to record meetings, however the fact that everyone else was able to do so made it even more important to have a formal record. He added that there was a risk that someone could abuse the privilege of being able to record meetings, post a snippet online which was out of context, and the Council would have nothing to defend against this.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that the Democratic Services Officer was relied upon to produce an accurate set of minutes. He commented that the cost had to be taken into account, however it was a matter for Members if they wanted to put forward a suggestion to Council in this respect.

Councillor D Everitt referred to the issues that used to arise when the press followed every Council meeting and commented that Members might be worrying too much.

Councillor M Specht asked that if the cost of webcasting was too great, could audio recording of meetings be considered instead.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer stated that this could be looked into and a proposal put before Council.

It was moved by Councillor R Adams, seconded by Councillor M Specht and

RESOLVED THAT:

The report be noted.

15. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

The Head of Community Services presented the report to Members. He advised that there had been a request from Members in 2012 to review the Community Engagement Strategy, however as the strategy had just been introduced at that time, it was felt that it would be appropriate for some time to pass before reviewing the strategy. He suggested that the two key areas for review were the strategy itself, and considering from a Member perspective what had worked well and what hadn't in terms of consultation.

Councillor J G Coxon sought clarification on how long the review was likely to take given the elections in May.

The Head of Community Services proposed that the first meeting be held on 22 October. There would be two further meetings, however the timing of these would be dependent upon the outcome of the first meeting.

Councillor S Sheahan asked if there would be any provision to engage with residents and ask them if what the Council was doing was fit for purpose for them.

The Head of Community Services advised that the Community Engagement Strategy intended to set out how the Council would undertake consultations. He added that each service area had ongoing consultations and individual people with whom they consulted, and as such it may be difficult to obtain a reflective sample from all groups. He suggested that a representative sample could be considered and this could be discussed at the first meeting of the group.

Councillor S Sheahan commented that it made sense to make sure that people were happy with the process if the Council was expecting them to engage.

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Councillor R Adams expressed concerns that the working party might not be concluded by the elections in May, which could affect the make-up of the group.

The Head of Community Services advised that Members could decide to delay the review if they wished to do so. He explained that the rules of political balance did not apply to task and finish groups, however he felt it would be prudent to have a representative from both parties.

Councillor N Smith suggested that the review should not be delayed. In terms of the membership he suggested that there be 3 Conservative Members and 2 Labour Members.

The Chairman commented that he did not see that this should be a political group, however he felt it did require a mix of Members.

Councillor D Howe commented that he believed tenants in North West Leicestershire were more involved than any in the country and there were a lot of tenants who were interested.

The Head of Community Services welcomed this feedback and commented that he would be happy to pick this up as part of the report. He added that if there were no suggestions made where consultation had not worked well, issues would be reported from an officer perspective.

The Chairman sought volunteers to sit on the group.

Councillor R Adams commented that 5 Members was only a recommendation. He suggested there should be 4 Members and that there should be 2 from each party.

Councillor M Specht commented that the suggestion of having 2 Members from each group was ideal and he felt that 3 meetings of the group could be achieved before the elections in May.

The Chairman advised any interested parties to put forward their names to the Head of Community Services within the next 7 days.

RESOLVED THAT:

4 Members be nominated for the Community Engagement Task and Finish Group.

16. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (MTFS) 2015/16 TO 2018/19

The Head of Finance presented the report to Members. He stated that the report provided an opportunity to comment to Cabinet on the strategy following a request at the last meeting. He advised that there would be a further report to Cabinet on next year's budget proposals in November, and these proposals would be considered by Policy Development Group at its next meeting. He highlighted the estimated shortfall set out in the Cabinet report at Appendix 1, and the ongoing savings proposed to address this. He advised that the shortfall was not as high as it might have been, due to the year on year efficiencies which had been made. He added that nevertheless it would be a challenge. He advised that in preparing the MTFS, it was necessary to be mindful of the budget proposals of the Council's partners. He referred to the possibility of the withdrawal of recycling credits as proposed by Leicestershire County Council. He advised that if these proposals were to go ahead, this could lead to a shortfall, and therefore a contingency amount had been set aside in the MTFS. He outlined the assumptions that had been made in preparing the MTFS.

Chairman's signature

Councillor S Sheahan stated that he was disappointed that no Member of Cabinet was present to answer questions, and felt that it was a matter for the Committee to decide whether it wanted a Member of Cabinet present for this purpose. He asked if there was any reason why this had not been arranged. He asked the Head of Finance if he was confident that there would be no need for further cuts.

The Head of Finance advised that the Council operated a Planning for the Future programme, and was therefore constantly undertaking service reviews. He commented that targets could increase or decrease. He added that efficiencies had been made in the current year which would continue in subsequent years. He advised that this was reflected in the budget monitoring report and there would be further modest savings coming forward as part of the report to Cabinet in November.

Councillor V Richichi commented that the Council would be receiving an increase in new homes bonus, yet was still required to make £1.4 million in savings.

The Head of Finance responded that this was possibly a case of central Government giving with one hand and taking away with the other. He explained that the Council had seen very significant reductions in revenue support grants and funding had been reduced by £3 to £4 million over the last few years. He added that the increase in the new homes bonus did not cover the shortfall in funding from central Government, and the Council had been required to make the additional savings.

In response to a question from Councillor V Richichi, the Head of Finance stated that the Council had a good track record of making efficiencies without impacting upon frontline services, however this would be a challenge in the coming years and there could be no guarantees that frontline services would remain unaffected.

Councillor S Sheahan commented that if this amount of money had been identified at the start of the year, the budget could have been planned better and the funding allocated accordingly. He added that better planning and being more honest about resources had to be the way forward. He also commented that the increase in new homes bonus meant an increase in the council tax base and therefore an increased demand on services. He asked the Head of Finance to comment on this. He also asked what impact a 1% increase in council tax would have upon the budget.

The Head of Finance advised that a 1% increase would raise an additional £50,000, which at present was matched by the Government with the council tax freeze grant. He added that increases were capped by central Government and the Council would also be required to pay council tax support.

In response to comments made by Councillor S Sheahan regarding increasing council tax, the Head of Finance explained that the Council retained approximately 15% of income from council tax, whereas it retained 80% of the new homes bonus, and as such, the new homes bonus was much more significant to the Council in terms of the budget than it was to unitary authorities. He acknowledged that an increase in the council tax base would result in an increase in demand for services.

It was moved by Councillor M Specht, seconded by Councillor J G Coxon and

RESOLVED THAT:

The comments made by the Policy Development Group be noted.

17. ITEMS FOR INCLUSION ON THE FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

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Councillor S Sheahan suggested that the items regarding review of housing policies and developing the 2015/16 HRA Budget and HRA Capital Programme be added to the work programme.

Councillor M Specht felt that it would be useful if Councillor T Gillard could provide some information on the superfast broadband programme. He made reference to concerns raised in Coleorton Parish and other rural areas.

The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm

The Chairman closed the meeting at 7.47 pm