

**BRECKLAND COUNCIL**

**At a Meeting of the**

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION**

**Held on Thursday, 9 August 2007 at 2.15 pm in the  
Anglia Room, The Conference Suite, Elizabeth House, Dereham**

**PRESENT**

Mr A.J. Byrne	Mr A.P. Joel
Mr K.S. Gilbert	Mr R.G. Kybird
Mr R.F. Goreham (Vice- Chairman)	Mr K. Martin
Mr J.R. Gretton	Mrs S.M. Matthews
Mrs S.R. Howard-Alpe	Mr J.D. Rogers
Mrs D.K.R. Irving	

**Also Present**

Mr A.C. Stasiak - Executive Member (Strategic Alliance)

**In Attendance**

Susan Allen	- Standards Officer
Mark Broughton	- Scrutiny Officer
Joe Liggett	- Senior Leisure Manager
Stephen McGrath	- Principal Committee Officer
Mark Stokes	- Operations Manager (Cabinet Office) & Acting Deputy Chief Executive
Elaine Wilkes	- Senior Committee Officer

**- Mr R. Goreham, Vice-Chairman in the Chair -**

A statement from the Chairman was read to the Commission to urge members, bearing in mind there were new members of the Council who had not participated in Scrutiny, either in Panel or at full Commission meetings, to give close attention to the agenda papers prior to meetings so as to enable better scrutiny through questioning of officers and guests alike.

**81/07 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 July 2007 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**82/07 APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Messrs. S.G. Bambridge, S.H. Chapman-Allen, J.P. Cowen (Chairman) and B. Rose.

Apologies for late arrival were given by Mr. R.G. Kybird.

**83/07 DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

- Mr J.D. Rogers – personal interests as declared under minute 41/07 of the meeting of Policy Development and Review Panel 1 held on 24 July 2007.

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**84/07 NON-MEMBERS WISHING TO ADDRESS THE MEETING**

Mr A.C. Stasiak, Executive Member (Strategic Alliance) was in attendance.

**85/07 POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW PANELS (AGENDA ITEM 6)**

**(a) Panel 1 - Confirmed minutes of the meeting held on 22 May 2007**

(a) Local Transport Review (Minute 36/07)

A member queried the background to the reference in the report to the Brandon/Lakenheath railway service and it was explained that this was relevant as the railway line essentially formed the county boundary and that the station at Brandon lay partly in the Breckland District. The connection to Thetford was also significant having regard to the Thetford Growth programme.

(b) Royal Mail – Postal Address for Watton and Carbrooke (Minute 37/07)

A member commented that the official postal address for Watton and Carbrooke was Thetford, as this was Royal Mail's feeder office for the area.

(c) Adoption

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of Policy Development and Review Panel 1 held on 22 May 2007 be adopted.

**(b) Panel 1 - Unconfirmed minutes of the meeting held on 24 July 2007**

(a) Breckland Local Development Framework Progress Report and Update on Recent Best Practice and Advice (Minute 43/07)

The Chairman reported that Mr Cowen had raised concerns that the reference (on page 16) that the density for villages could be reduced to 22 homes/hectare or 9 homes/acre sent out the wrong message. Mr Cowen asked whether it would not be more appropriate to have an appraisal of each village that identified the density in the particular location. If an existing village density was four or five homes per acre, then only reducing to nine would change the form and character of the village completely. Similarly, he felt it might be that the larger villages had a spread of densities from the higher in the centre to lower on the periphery and that a 'one size fits all' would not be appropriate here either.

A member supported this view, commenting that such densities were not appropriate in rural locations.

A further view was expressed that given the policies, settlement boundaries and densities being proposed, there would still be an

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influx of applications and he was concerned that the issue of densities would give rise to problems in future.

Another member was concerned about any possibility of a policy gap between the expiration of the existing Local Plan and the adoption of the Local Development Framework, since he was aware that developers were prepared to take advantage of such a situation. It was explained that the Panel had been told that existing policies would continue in place and in addition would be bolstered by national planning guidelines.

The Chairman reported that Mr Cowen also requested that the officers should be asked for their proposals under the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessments issued recently, particularly with reference to page 8, paragraph 16 of the document relating to "Difference between the Assessment and the Urban Capacity Study".

The Chairman of the Panel undertook to raise this issue at the Panel's next meeting.

(b) Norfolk Minerals and Waste Development Framework – Draft Core Strategy and Policies: Issues and Options (Minute 44/07)

The Chairman informed the Commission that Mr Cowen wished to make the point that a strong message needed to be raised with the County Council on the question of nuclear waste (paragraph (b) on page 22 referred). Stanford was a potential site and was a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) located right in the heart of Breckland. Mr Cowen proposed that the residents of Breckland did not want nuclear waste stored here and that the County Council should be made well aware of this.

Members supported this view and Mr Rogers stated that, as a member of the County Committee, he undertook to raise the issue.

(c) Adoption

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of Policy Development and Review Panel 1 held on 24 July 2007 be adopted.

(c) **Panel 2 - Confirmed minutes of the meeting held on 20 June 2007**

(a) Review of the Breckland Council Website (Minute 29/07)

The Commission noted the Panel's views and recommendations in this matter, together with the various officers' comments on each of the items, and accordingly

**RECOMMENDS** to Cabinet that the recommendations contained in the report be agreed (subject to noting the officers' comments as shown in italics) as follows:

- (1) The layout of the home page be reconsidered to ensure that it is not overburdened with information whilst at the

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same time it is user friendly and clear for users. *The Corporate and e-communications Officer has advised that the navigation tree was currently in process of being changed to comply with the Local Government Navigation List making it easier for users to navigate the site. A report regarding the website "First Impressions" quoted as follows: "Nice home page. Easy to see what each section is about and geared directly to the general public. Good."*

- (2) The website should adopt a "four click" approach to ensure that information can be found quickly and easily. *The Website Officer has advised that a two-click approach had been implemented from the Council's home page to the planning search page. In addition, it has been confirmed that web trend software has been installed which enabled the monitoring of public 'hits' to the website. This software enabled web officers to receive information on how frequently their pages were being visited and if they were not being visited very often, they could be given help to improve the pages' functionality.*
- (3) Information on the planning process should be bolstered on the website enabling the public to access pending planning applications and associated maps and forms. *The Website Officer has explained that the planning process had been bolstered on the website by an addition to the link already provided on the left hand navigation list. To make the search more user friendly when using the search function, the user would be taken directly to the main planning search page.*
- (4) A link is established with the Eastern Daily Press Events Page and action be taken to ensure that news items on the website are removed promptly once they are no longer current. *The Corporate and e-communications Officer has advised that a link to the EDP Events page has been established for a trial period of three months, which would be reviewed regarding the number of 'hits' the pages received. It has been confirmed that all news items were live on the site within two hours of being released to the press and that old news items were archived automatically, enabling the user to search for old press releases.*
- (5) Images are limited in size to obviate long download times, especially for dial-up users. *The Website Officer has advised that all images on the website are optimised before they are published onto the site to avoid the use of images that would take too long to download for the user. It has also been confirmed that the monitoring of this would be the responsibility of the Web Officer and the Graphic Designer.*
- (6) A link to "Frequently asked Questions" is installed on the home page and this is updated on a regular basis to ensure freshness. *A link to "Frequently asked Questions" had been concurrent since the site went live and all FAQs were updated to ensure all information was timely with the*

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*questions being taken from the Contact Centre and put onto the website as they were asked by the public.*

- (7) The role of web editors needs to be defined and clarified, in relation to the general work commitments and job descriptions should be updated accordingly to take account of the role of web editors, as this has such an impact on the site content being kept up to date. *It has been explained that the role of web editors has been defined and Service Managers were to be asked to include the targets and commitment to web editing in their future Service Team Plans. All service areas had been asked to confirm the web editor for their team to ensure that there was coverage in each of the service areas. In addition, the role of a web editor was defined as follows:*
- i. To develop specific information resources for the service needs.*
  - ii. To maintain and update pages as appropriate.*
  - iii. Co-ordinate page development and major revisions with the Web, Communications Officer and other web editors to ensure that links from top level pages are accurate (this often includes recommendations on links from the primary page to second).*
  - iv. Serve as liaison to the Web and Communications Officer.*
  - v. Attend meetings of the web editors group.*
- (8) The Council continue to work with external organisations in order to ensure best practice is followed to ensure that the design and operational usefulness of the website is maximised. *The Website Officer has advised that the Web team were benchmarking against South Norfolk District Council and were being evaluated by Socitm and SiteMorse. In addition, a number of online forms (Abandoned vehicles, Fly tips, Compliments and Complaints and Other comments and feedback) had been developed to be used on the Council's website allowing customers to submit requests and report issues 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Once submitted, the forms went direct to the Customer Contact Centre for action. Further extension of online reporting was in process of being developed.*
- (9) The Panel be charged with assessing the website improvement plan at regular intervals through 2007 and beyond as necessary. *The improvement plan would be available on a six monthly basis.*

**RESOLVED** that Members receive the website improvement plan on a six-monthly basis.

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(b) Adoption

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of Policy Development and Review Panel 2 held on 20 June 2007 be adopted.

(d) **Panel 2 - Unconfirmed minutes of the meeting held on 25 July 2007**

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of Policy Development and Review Panel 2 held on 25 July 2007 be adopted.

(e) **Panel 3 - Confirmed minutes of the meeting held on 12 June 2007**

It was noted that the recommendations contained in minutes 27/07 (Breckland Housing Register – Award of Contract) and 28/07 (Big Lottery Children’s Play) had been dealt with at previous meetings.

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of Policy Development and Review Panel 3 held on 12 June 2007 be adopted.

(f) **Panel 3 - Unconfirmed minutes of the meeting held on 10 July 2007**

The minutes were presented by the Vice-Chairman of the Panel, who also encouraged members to attend the next open day of the Anglia Revenues Partnership in September.

In regard to minute 36/07 (Work Programme), the Chairman proposed that the recommended review of Emergency Planning should include, as well as issues on flooding, a review of the information available to the public such as emergency contact telephone numbers, how to obtain sandbags, etc., as he felt it was important that such information was disseminated to the public.

The Chairman of the Panel added that he hoped the aim of the review would be to provide as authoritative a list as possible as to what was constituted in the Emergency Planning function.

**RESOLVED** that

- (1) a review of the Emergency Planning function be incorporated into the work programme for Panel 3;
- (2) the minutes of the meeting of Policy Development and Review Panel 3 held on 10 July 2007 be adopted.

**86/07 ELECTIONS REVIEW TASK AND FINISH GROUP - INTERIM REPORT (AGENDA ITEM 7)**

The Scrutiny Officer presented the interim report of the Working Group, which had been established to examine issues surrounding the local elections on 3<sup>rd</sup> May, with particular regard to the e-counting pilot.

The review was being conducted in two parts: part 1 looked at the

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counting of votes, the initial findings of which were set out in the interim report. Part 2 would look at other relevant issues such as polling stations and training of polling of staff, etc. A final report would be submitted to the Commission in due course.

Members also had regard to the official report on the Breckland electronic counting pilot published by the Electoral Commission on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2007.

Members felt that the Electoral Commission's criticism of Breckland was unfair and that Indra should be held much more accountable for the failings of their electronic voting system.

Members strongly expressed their appreciation and support for the way in which the Returning Officer and his staff had conducted themselves during the very difficult circumstances of the count, which was always a stressful event at the best of times.

The Electoral Commission's admission that not least of the factors contributing to the problems experienced was that there had been insufficient time for testing and planning of the system was felt to be extraordinary. Some of the blame for this, it was felt, lay with the Government, who had also recommended Indra as one of the providers for the pilot.

A member questioned the fact that Indra appeared not to accept any responsibility for the problems experienced with the operation of the system, despite their claim that they had operated successful electronic counts elsewhere both in this country and abroad. Why, therefore, should this count have been so markedly different compared to the others?

The only aspect which a member felt the Council should have noticed at the time of scanning of ballots was in the two cases of discrepancies in the counting of votes in two wards. However, the member felt that this was also part of the role of election agents and therefore they should also have noted and reported the discrepancies at the time, rather than to make allegations after the event.

Another member made reference to the costs of the pilot as compared to those for a manual count, and bearing in mind the questions which had been raised about the Indra's responsibility for the problems encountered, he wondered whether the Electoral Commission intended to make full payment to them for the pilot and suggested they should not.

In concluding that neither of the objectives of the electronic count – which had been to improve accuracy and to improve the speed of counting – had been achieved, the Chairman raised the question of whether the Council should not have anything to do with electronic counting in future, or whether, despite the problems experienced in this instance, it was something the Council might look at again?

So far as the second part of the review of the elections was concerned, members concurred with the view that there would be no duplication with that of the statutory review of polling districts and places to be carried out by the General Purposes Committee.

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In closing its debate, the Commission

**RESOLVED** that the conclusion drawn from the interim report is that a traditional manual count is a core part of the English democratic process and should not be changed.

**87/07 LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN – ANNUAL LETTER (AGENDA ITEM 8)**

**RESOLVED** that the report be received and noted.

**88/07 PROJECT MATCH FUNDING RESERVE (AGENDA ITEM 9)**

The Senior Leisure Manager outlined the present position in the ongoing review of the project match funding reserve and answered a number of questions from members. A report with proposals was planned to be submitted to the Cabinet in October 2007.

While the report was at a draft stage at this point, proposals being considered were for small grants up to £3,000, larger grants up to £20,000, with categories extended to include gifted and talented people, and the possibility of awarding interest-free loans etc.

Area Partnerships funding was assumed not to be continued in future on the basis that the Partnerships were now in a position to be self-supporting but they would be eligible to apply for grants under the revised project match funding reserve.

A suggestion from a member that budget allocation should be ward-based was felt not to be viable, since it would be very difficult to step-change larger projects in this way and bearing in mind that there would be a very large number of smaller applications to be processed. The allocation of funding would, however, be monitored to ensure a reasonable equality of funding between rural and urban areas of the District.

**RESOLVED** that the position be noted.

**89/07 PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT (TEN SYSTEM MONITORING) (AGENDA ITEM 10)**

The proposed presentation was deferred due to the ill-health absence of the officer concerned.

**90/07 WORK PROGRAMME (AGENDA ITEM 11)**

The following items were proposed and agreed for incorporation into the Commission's or appropriate Panel's work programme:

- Update on empty houses policy (Panel 3)
- Review of future provision of Royal Mail services in light of threats to existing level of service (bearing in mind that 2<sup>nd</sup> post deliveries had already been lost).
- Examination of problems following the completion of the



roadworks on the A47/Etling Green, Dereham – Highways Agency to be invited to answer questions.

- Annual budget scrutiny review – to be preceded by a training session for new members.

In answer to questions, the Scrutiny Officer confirmed that

- the review of the Dog Warden Service, following a delay due to the local elections in May, had been rescheduled into the Commission's work programme for 1<sup>st</sup> November;
- the process for progress reporting on the Thetford Growth Point Project was being clarified with the relevant officers to avoid duplication of work through Panel 1 and other committees

Finally, as part of the members' induction process on scrutiny, the Scrutiny Officer invited members to let him know if they were interested in attending the next Norfolk Scrutiny Conference to be held on 16 November 2007 at the UEA, Norwich.

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The meeting closed at 3.55 pm

CHAIRMAN