

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

**Held on Thursday, 24 March 2011 at 2.00 pm in the
Anglia Room, Conference Suite, Elizabeth House, Walpole Loke, Dereham NR19 1EE**

PRESENT

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

Also Present

Mr S.G. Bambridge	Carolyn Bryant – Modern Mindset
Mr J.W. Nunn	

In Attendance

John Chinnery	- Solicitor & Standards Consultant
Helen McAleer	- Senior Committee Officer
Stephen McGrath	- Member Services Manager
Teresa Smith	- Committee Officer
Roger Wilkin	- Shared Services Project Manager

29/11 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 February 2011 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

30/11 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies were received from Mr S Chapman-Allen.

31/11 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

There was none.

32/11 DECLARATION OF INTEREST (AGENDA ITEM 4)

No declarations were made.

33/11 NON-MEMBERS WISHING TO ADDRESS THE MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 5)

Mr W Nunn and Mr G Bambridge were in attendance.

34/11 EXECUTIVE MEMBER PORTFOLIO UPDATE (AGENDA ITEM 6)

William Nunn, Leader of the Council, updated Members on a number of current issues.

Joint Management

People had been appointed to form the new Joint Senior Management Team from 1st April 2011. There were four vacant posts and a report

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would be presented to General Purposes Committee on 30 March 2011 recommending the people for those posts.

A meeting had been held to facilitate Members from both authorities getting to know each other and it had proved very worthwhile and other such meetings would be arranged in the future.

Savings of £300,000 had been estimated for each authority, but the Head of Finance had re-worked the figures and was confident that it was likely that each authority would actually achieve savings of over a half a million pounds from the re-organisation.

Members were reminded that no detailed Business Plan for joint services had been agreed at the start of the process. This approach was working well as matters were being dealt with on a case by case basis.

Next year, in excess of one million pounds of savings would need to be made. A strategy to achieve that would be worked out after the elections.

Planning for the Future

If he was returned to office, the Leader intended to work with the new Corporate Management Team (CMT) immediately following the elections, to review the Business Plan for the next four years. There would be an opportunity to focus on what the Council wanted to provide for its community. The Strategic Framework would be developed to incorporate the Big Society agenda and wider public sector working.

Ward Matters

The Leader was aware of examples where Members had not been kept informed about matters occurring within their Ward. He took this issue very seriously and Officers had been advised of the importance of keeping Members informed of what went on in their Wards. He suggested that a Workshop be set up, with Senior Officers and some Cabinet and Scrutiny Members to ensure that the new CMT set the standards for the future.

New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)

The LEP focussed on economic growth and job creation in Norfolk and Suffolk. The Leader was a member of the Partnership and could therefore ensure that the authority was represented especially in matters of tourism, advanced manufacturing and energy production which were very relevant to Breckland.

LG Eastern Association

The association was going through a process of change to become more sector-led and able to respond to Members' and Local Authorities' needs. Local Authorities would be more pro-active in steering the association in future.

Members were then invited to ask questions.

Several Members commented on the need to be kept informed of issues within their Wards. There was a suggestion that information could be posted on the Intranet.

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The Leader said that a Policy would need to go through both Councils to ensure that Officers kept Members informed. He wanted Officers to be more pro-active in keeping Members up to date.

The Vice-Chairman made the following comments:

- he was delighted that Mark Stokes had been appointed as the Joint Deputy Chief Executive and thought that he would work well with the Chief Executive;
- with regard to the half million pound savings from the liaison with South Holland he suggested that further shared services might be considered with more partners;
- he asked the Leader for his views on the effectiveness of the Commission; and
- he suggested that there might be an opportunity to inject life into full Council meetings, by introducing a dedicated 'question time', after the election.

The Leader responded by saying that they needed to make the partnership with South Holland work first before considering expanding, although he was aware that some Councils and London Boroughs were looking at partnering with three or four other authorities.

He thought that the Commission gave Cabinet a better feel for issues, by being more pro-active and he personally did not have a problem with introducing a question time to Council, which would provide a forum for open debate, and he would look at that proposal after May.

Several Members commented on the meeting with South Holland Members which they had found interesting and useful. One Member suggested that, like South Holland, Breckland should form a separate Company and own their own housing stock.

The Leader said that was an interesting point. Breckland had land and could build houses. It might be possible to use the expertise of the South Holland team going forward.

Discussion turned to the recession and a Member suggested that Partner working with other countries could attract investment.

The Leader said that with EERA, which had been recognised by Europe, there had been a process to bid for European funding. Now that EERA was winding down the LEPs would find it much more difficult to get European money.

The Vice-Chairman wanted the local population to benefit from any new jobs created but said they could not do so without skills. He was concerned that youngsters would be priced out of training because of the lack of grants and said there must be a balance to ensure that the local skills base was improved.

The Chairman was also concerned about the lack of energy available in the area and how that problem could be addressed.

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The Leader said that the Government was aware that development was being held up by the cost of infrastructure. The East of England Energy Group was leading on that issue.

The Chairman concluded by saying that the Localism Bill would bring Ward issues into sharp focus and Members would have additional responsibilities increasing the importance of being kept up to date by Officers.

He thanked the Leader for attending.

35/11 POST DECISION IMPLEMENTATION (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The Member Services Manager introduced Carolyn Bryant from Modern Mindset, the Company which administered the Modern.gov system which had been introduced to the Council four years earlier for agenda management. Part of the Modern.gov system allowed the decision process to be tracked electronically and the Member Services Team had been working to introduce this system.

Ms Bryant explained that when items were put on the Forward Plan they could be tracked through the website. Actions for Officers could be added to the issues and the progress of those actions could be followed on the Intranet.

The system also had the potential to allow Officers to create and submit reports electronically and would automatically send reminders for overdue reports or actions.

Ms Bryant advised that Members would need training to understand how to interact with the internal system.

The Member Services Manager explained that one of the advantages of the system would be to highlight outstanding actions and/or decisions. There were a lot of decisions made by Committees, some as recommendations to other Committees and to Council. The Implementation system gave Members the opportunity to track those decisions.

The Chairman said that the Performance Clinic used a traffic light system to highlight issues that were not 'on-track' or were outstanding. He was concerned that 30% of decisions were not acted upon within 12 months and he wanted to see the outcome and the reasons why items were outstanding.

Ms Bryant advised that on the Forward Plan items could be coloured green when closed or red when still in progress. Outstanding actions could be listed and could be grouped by Committee, Department or Officer. A spreadsheet could also be produced, colour-coded if required.

A Member suggested that it would be useful to have the Action Points listed and that they should then be agreed with the minutes at the following meeting.

Another Member thought it was very interesting and asked if there would be training. The Member Services Manager confirmed that an

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induction programme was already in production for new Members and IT had been identified as a priority. The intention was to have Implementation Tracking rolled out from 1st June and it was already being trialled.

Mr Bambridge asked if Members would be able to sign up for alerts on particular issues as it was difficult to keep track of issues.

Ms Bryant confirmed that it was possible to sign up for updates on specific Committees, Wards, Key Words or Forward Plan issues.

The Member Services Manager explained that actions were already being added to minutes and that the system was accessible by all Officers through the Intranet. Actions could be updated in less than 30 seconds. Automated e-mails were sent to Officers advising them that they had been assigned an action and then reminding them if the action was overdue. The system also provided a clear audit trail.

The Chairman agreed that training was vitally important as was Member buy-in to using computers. New hardware should soon be available to Members which he hoped would improve access.

He thanked Ms Bryant for attending. The report was noted.

36/11 MEMBER/OFFICER PROTOCOL (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The Solicitor & Standards Consultant was in attendance, at the request of the Monitoring Officer, in response to comments made at the Commission meeting on 18 December 2010. He read an extract from the Minutes of that meeting:

The Vice-Chairman wanted the Member/Officer protocol to be reviewed. He was concerned at the lack of response from certain departments to enquiries from Members and suggested that this needed to be addressed before the new Councillors were elected in May. The Chairman agreed and said that the importance of notifying Councillors of things happening in their Ward, should also be included.

The existing Protocol had been included on the agenda and the Solicitor asked Members for their comments.

The Vice-Chairman commented that it was excellent that the Monitoring Officer took notice of the Commission. He then made the following suggestions:

- the Protocol should be reviewed periodically;
- at page 31, item 7.3 he disagreed that questions 'ought' to be provided beforehand and thought that it should say that 'the general line that questioning will take' be added;
- at page 34, item 12, involvement of Ward Councillors had been mentioned by the Leader and the Vice-Chairman emphasised the importance of this and said there should be a specific protocol.
- he also felt there should be a protocol to advise Members which officer to contact for specific issues; should it always be the Head of Department, or might that lead to overload?

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The Chairman added to the final point by suggesting that there should be a contact section with Officers, Departments and Portfolios listed. This was particularly pertinent with the new structure starting on 1 April 2011.

The Solicitor took those comments on-board, and agreed with the importance of including Portfolio information and keeping contact lists up to date. With regard to which Officer to contact he said it was a fine line. The Head of Department needed to know what Members were concerned with and if it was a matter of principle then they should definitely be contacted direct.

A Member suggested that any list should indicate which section the Officer worked in and the sections should be divided up by Portfolio. She said that at County each section had a dedicated Officer to advise Members. She also felt that it was important for new Members to have another Member as a mentor.

The Solicitor thought that it was a good idea to have a dedicated officer in each department to deal with Member enquiries.

The Chairman agreed that a contact list would be useful but he was concerned that paper lists might quickly become out of date. He thought that the e-mail account list should be used as it was the easiest to keep up-to-date. The Global address list would need to be re-drafted in the context of Shared Services. He assumed South Holland had their own and said that the two needed to dovetail.

The Solicitor agreed and said there were a whole range of documents that would need to be aligned.

He noted that the existing Protocol had been produced in 2006 and should have been reviewed annually by the Standards Committee – something he had not known about previously. In future it would also be necessary to look at South Holland's protocol as well.

Finally the Vice-Chairman mentioned the importance of ensuring that if an Officer put an 'Out of Office' message on their e-mail system that it did not direct the sender to another officer who was also 'out of office'.

The Chairman agreed and thanked the Solicitor for his attendance.

37/11 TASK AND FINISH GROUPS (AGENDA ITEM 9)

(a) Joint Audit & Scrutiny Panel

The Chairman updated Members on the Joint Audit & Scrutiny Panel (JASP) meeting on 2 March 2011. As a consequence of the work done six options had been identified and at the end of the meeting three of those options had been supported, they were:

1. a new generation laptop – wi-fi enabled
2. a netbook (which was relatively small) – with additional large screen, keyboard, mouse and CD drive
3. an allowance – provide own equipment to stringent requirements ensuring that it was up to the job

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The three options had different cost and support implications.

Since the meeting the report had been updated for the Business Improvement Sub-Committee on 30 March 2011. The original report had some unanswered questions. It had been suggested that iPads might be the way forward and two other authorities were trialling those. Feedback was being sought from those authorities and would be reported to the BISC if received in time. However, the ICT team did not think that iPads would meet Members' or Government security requirements.

Another amendment to the report was the addition of the need for CD drives and add-ons for the Netbooks. Scanners would be required. Faxes might be phased out but Members found the photocopying facility useful.

The report to the BISC had the six options and supporting information. The Chairman did not think that the majority of Members would opt for the allowance. Discussions were taking place with South Holland to see if they were getting new equipment. This might enable economies of scale providing best value for money.

The biggest problem faced by Members was internet availability and that had not been part of the JASP's tasking.

The Vice-Chairman was pleased that this matter had been looked at and had taken a rational approach. He asked if the Commission's recommendations would be passed to the BISC and it was confirmed that they would. He raised concern about the last paragraph of item 3.9 of the report regarding the direct Member Support Officer who he said was invaluable and very supportive. He urged that the Member Support Officer should be kept.

The Chairman agreed. He said that he would be attending the BISC and would reinforce that message.

RESOLVED to RECOMMEND TO THE BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT SUB-COMMITTEE that Options 1 OR 4 and Option 6 were supported.

(b) Parking Task & Finish Group

The Chairman of the Task & Finish Group presented the final report.

Although there had been very little correspondence before the public meeting it had been very well attended. It had become apparent that members of the public thought that the Council were planning to introduce parking charges and that was why they had attended.

None of the proposed changes were under the direct responsibility of Breckland Council and it would help if it could be agreed with Norfolk County Council who was responsible for all the parking spaces.

The Chairman noted that there were on-going discussions about parking enforcement across Norfolk. A working group had been set up to determine how it would function.

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A Member noted that the Parking Review had started with Attleborough a year ago and it would be nice to see the recommendations put in place.

The Chairman updated Members. The recommendations had gone to Cabinet for both Attleborough and Watton. They had been accepted, subject to costs being worked out and the report going back to Cabinet. Either that action had not taken place, or the costs had been worked out but the report had not gone back to Cabinet. It was incumbent on the Commission to ensure that the report did go back to Cabinet.

A Member pointed out that in the Terms of Reference of the Panel it was asked to consider short and long term parking, but this was not in the report. The Chairman of the Task & Finish Group explained that that was not an issue in Swaffham.

RESOLVED to RECOMMEND TO CABINET that:

- (1) the Council reviews the disabled parking and provides easier access to spaces (perhaps in the Market Street car park);
- (2) Norfolk County Council be requested, as the Highways Authority, to undertake an assessment to consider using the land opposite the old sixth-form centre as a dedicated taxi rank;
- (3) Norfolk County Council be requested to produce new, larger signs to entice people to park at Theatre Street;
- (4) the Council, Norfolk County Council and Norfolk Constabulary liaise over de-criminalisation of on-street parking in Swaffham in a multi-agency approach, seeking a transfer of responsibility and action enabled through joined-up thinking and use of resources;
- (5) the Town Council's proposals to employ a traffic warden to undertake off-street parking enforcement within the five market towns, be supported; and
- (6) the Council retains its policy of providing free parking in all Breckland-owned car parks in Swaffham.

38/11 SHARED SERVICES (AGENDA ITEM 10)

The Shared Services Project Manager was present and advised Members that this was likely to be his last update as the project was reaching its conclusion and the new structure would 'go live' on 1 April 2011.

The aim of the project had been to make efficiencies whilst preserving effective management and allowing improvements. Cashable efficiencies meant that the number of people had to be reduced. 37 posts had been reduced to 18 plus the Chief Executive. All Senior Managers had undergone a selection process. One had been successful in gaining an external job, seven had opted for voluntary redundancy and ten had been unsuccessful in the selection process

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and had been issued with compulsory redundancy notices.

Of the 18 posts on offer, 14 had been successfully filled and there were currently four vacancies.

The ten people on notice of compulsory redundancy were being supported in finding alternative employment. Vacancies in the two authorities were advertised internally first.

The Environmental Services Team Leader post had been successfully filled by a South Holland Manager on notice of compulsory redundancy. Recruitment for the other posts was in progress and might lead to a reduction in the number of redundancies.

The services of a specialist advisor had been bought to provide outplacement support to those on notice and favourable feedback had been received. Both Councils had given as much support as possible to those on notice.

The Business Development Manager post had been advertised externally as well as internally to ensure that a suitable, experienced person was recruited. Other posts would be discussed at General Purposes Committee on 30 March 2011.

An informal joint Council meeting had been held to introduce Members to the Joint Managers and the relevant Portfolio Holders of both Councils would get to know the Joint Managers as part of the induction process. The new Joint Management Team was aware that they were supporting two separate Councils, each with their own distinct priorities.

The latest figures indicated projected savings in excess of £700,000 across the two Councils and savings should be in excess of that, year on year.

The Vice-Chairman was concerned at the number of redundancies which was more than he had hoped. He was pleased that the organisation was giving assistance to find alternative employment. He asked what levels the ten compulsory redundant Manager had held.

The Shared Services Project Manager said that there was a broad spectrum of grades across the two Councils and there were big variations in the Service Manager's grades. In financial terms the pay scales ranged from the upper £60,000s to the mid £30,000s.

He agreed that the number of redundancies was higher than anticipated but explained that when the proposal was reported to Council in December, Members had been keen that Senior Managers should have set competencies. That process had been carried out by an independent organisation and their testing had identified more Managers than expected not having the required competencies.

The Chairman agreed that no more updates would be required and that they would probably receive Shared Services presentations in future. He thanked the Shared Services Project Manager for the work he had done and the way he had conducted it, which had been in an incredibly sensitive and very competent way.

39/11 SCRUTINY CALL-INS (AGENDA ITEM 11)

None.

40/11 COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION (AGENDA ITEM 12)

None.

41/11 WORK PROGRAMME (AGENDA ITEM 13)

It was noted that the Work Programme was almost at an end and would start afresh after the Elections.

The meeting for the Utilities Review (scheduled for 10 March 2011) had been postponed as it had not been arranged to immediately follow Council as expected. It should be a high priority to hold the review after the Election.

The Parking Reviews for Dereham and Thetford would also need to be finished, although Thetford was different because of what was happening there and it might be appropriate to leave it another 18 months.

Mr Kybird (a Thetford Member) explained that parking would form part of the Town Centre action plan. Some short term issues might need to be addressed and an 'outside' set of eyes might be appropriate for those.

Crime and Disorder and the Business Plan would also need to be looked at early on.

A Member suggested that there were lessons to be learnt from the RAF Watton development and another Member mentioned Stone Curlews.

The Chairman agreed and said that they needed an update as the guidance on Stone Curlews was changing.

Drainage and Flooding should also remain on the future work programme.

Finally the Chairman advised Members that the Member Services Manager was leaving to join another authority. He thanked him for all the work that he had done, said he was sorry to see him go and wished him good luck for the future.

The Vice-Chairman endorsed those comments and said that the Mr McGrath was an incredibly conscientious Officer and it was not unusual to receive a reply to an e-mail as late as 7pm. Breckland's loss was Ipswich's gain.

42/11 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 14)

The arrangements for the next meeting on 2 June 2011 were noted.

The meeting closed at 4.00 pm

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CHAIRMAN