

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

**Held on Thursday, 27 September 2007 at 2.15 pm in the
Anglia Room, The Conference Suite, Elizabeth House, Dereham**

PRESENT

Mr J.P. Cowen (Chairman)	Mrs D.K.R. Irving
Mr S.G. Bambridge	Mr A.P. Joel
Mr K.S. Gilbert	Mr C.R. Jordan
Mr R.F. Goreham	Mr R.G. Kybird
Mr J.R. Gretton	Mr K. Martin
Mrs T. Hewett	Mrs S.M. Matthews
Mrs S.R. Howard-Alpe	Mr J.D. Rogers

Also Present

Mrs J. Ball	Mr M.A. Kiddle-Morris
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In Attendance

Ralph Burton	- Economic Projects Officer
John Chinnery	- Solicitor & Monitoring Officer
Mark Finch	- Chief Accountant
Ray Johnson	- Acting Operations Manager (Commercial Services)
Andrea Long	- Environmental Planning Manager
Ian Vargeson	- Democratic Services Manager
Steve Wilde	- Interim Contracts Manager
Elaine Wilkes	- Senior Committee Officer

Welcome

The Chairman welcomed Mrs T. Hewett as the new member of the Commission in place of Mr S. Chapman-Allen.

91/07 MINUTES

Subject to a correction to include the name of Mr C.R. Jordan in the list of apologies for absence given at the last meeting, the minutes of the meeting held on 9 August 2007 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

92/07 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Mr A.J. Byrne and Mr B. Rose and Mr M. Broughton (Scrutiny Officer).

93/07 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The following declarations of interest were noted:

- Mr R.G. Kybird – Personal interest as recorded under minute 50/07 of Policy Development and Review Panel 1 of 30 August 2007

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- Mr J. Rogers – Personal and prejudicial interests as recorded under minute 58/07 of Policy Development and Review Panel 1 of 18 September 2007
- Mr A. Joel – Personal interest as employee of company which has business dealings with Serco (Agenda Item 9)
- Mr S.G. Bambridge – Personal interest by virtue of his working profession in relation to planning matters in connection with Agenda items 10(a) and (b)
- Mr P. Cowen – Personal interest as professional architect in relation to planning matters in connection with Agenda items 10(a) and (b)
- Mr K. Gilbert – Personal interest as employed by Royal Mail in connection with Agenda item 6.

94/07 NON-MEMBERS WISHING TO ADDRESS THE MEETING

The following members were in attendance:

- Mrs J. Ball
- Mr M. Kiddle-Morris

**95/07 POST OFFICE NETWORK CHANGE PROGRAMME
(AGENDA ITEM 6)**

The Commission considered a briefing paper from the Operations Manager for Commercial Services and a presentation was received from Mr. J. Levantis, Regional Committee Member of Postwatch, an independent body set up under the Postal Services Act 2000 and whose principal statutory objective is to “protect, promote and develop the interests of all customers of postal services in the United Kingdom”.

In July 2007, Post Office Ltd announced that it was embarking on a Network Change Programme following the Government’s announcement in May 2007 on its future policy towards the Post Office network.

The Government had recognised the need to modernise and reshape the post office network against the backdrop of falling customer numbers, the decline in traditional services, changing consumer behaviour and rising losses (now standing at £4m a week). The Government’s proposals involved:

- The proposed closure nationwide of up to 2,500 branches (out of 14,300 currently) (both urban and rural)
- The introduction of minimum access criteria in respect of the remaining branches
- Future Government support funding for the network
- The introduction of 500 ‘outreach’ branches

There were approximately 52 post offices in Breckland, of which

approximately 10% could be affected.

Post Office Ltd (POL) was required to maintain a network against the following criteria:

1. 99% of the population to be within 3 miles (i.e. walking distance) and 90% of the population to be within 1 mile of a post office
2. 99% of the population in deprived urban areas to be within 1 mile of a post office
3. 95% of the urban population to be within 1 mile of a post office
4. 95% of the rural population to be within 3 miles of a post office
5. For each post code district, 95% of the population of the postcode to be within 6 miles of a post office

When reviewing the network, POL was also required to take into consideration the physical environment, availability of public transport and alternative access to key services, local demographics and the impact on local economies.

The Government was expecting the changes to be implemented over an 18 month period. The country had been divided into 50 areas, each of which would have a local plan and be subject to a detailed planning process and be subject to a 6 weeks' public consultation period starting in March 2008.

A certain amount of partner activity had already commenced, involving the Norfolk Rural Community Council, all Norfolk Local Authorities and Postwatch as part of a pre-consultation process.

In his presentation to members, Mr Levantis explained that Postwatch's role was to:

- Scrutinise proposals to ensure that POL takes all relevant 'on the ground' facts into consideration
- Ensure that POL adheres to the Government's access criteria
- Encourage meaningful local engagement and feedback
- Work with POL and the local community where it felt plans needed amending

Under the pre-consultation stage, Postwatch would receive POL's plans 10 weeks before public consultation, scrutinise the proposals through fieldwork and research and give feedback on plans.

In the consultation stage, Postwatch would ensure POL was consulting properly, raise awareness, encourage meaningful participation and ensure POL took local needs into account in its decision. Postwatch could also initiate a review process but it did not have the power to veto proposals.

As explained in the briefing paper to members, clearly the loss of any post office would be a loss to that community, which would be felt even harder in rural communities. Although there would be an economic impact, the loss of jobs would not be as great as the loss of a

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community service. In rural areas like Breckland, post office income usually supplemented retail income such as a grocery or newsagent business. It was possible that without the post office, the remaining business was not viable and could close. The consequent impact of the loss of not only a post office but also the local shop could be severe in rural areas.

During discussion, it was noted that nearly 90% of rural post offices failed to make a profit, 1 in every 5 rural branches had fewer than 70 customer visits a week and that the cost to POL of a single transaction was £17. Set against a picture of falling trade and changing customer needs, it was recognised that the post office network needed to change and the aim of the Network Change Programme was to achieve a post office network that was stable and sustainable for the long term.

The main area of concern raised by members was the effect on rural communities which already suffered from existing poor or withdrawal of public transport provision by commercial operators, which would be compounded if the loss of a post office meant that the local retail outlet also closed as a consequence.

There were also implications for local service centres and affordable housing development plans under the Local Development Framework, one of the criteria for which was that a centre should have a shop/post office.

Members feared the combined effect could ultimately be to stifle economic growth in the rural district.

A point was made that some rural retail outlets were not large enough to sustain a post office, even if the post office was supplementary to their main business. It therefore became an economic development issue to support the development of larger, more viable rural business outlets which could, in turn, support a local post office. Diversification was a vital issue for the area and could help post offices survive.

A member also highlighted the fact that the post code criterion was not necessarily a true access indicator. For instance, some rural villages in the Breckland area had a Peterborough post code and yet were nearer to Norwich.

After a long debate, members agreed it was important to research and gather evidence to build a picture of post offices across the district, to identify the issues of viability, accessibility and need, in advance of the public consultation, so that a detailed and robust response can be made.

It was suggested and agreed that members were best placed and had a responsibility to look at the situation in their individual wards and to identify their needs and issues and to feed these back to the Council.

The Commission accordingly

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that a letter be sent to all members of the Council to advise them of the impending closure programme and public consultation timetable and asking them to feed back guidance to the Council's LDF and Economic Development teams

Cabinet
9/10/07 /
Economic
Projects
Officer

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on issues of the viability, needs and associated issues within their wards.

96/07 CAPITAL STRATEGY (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The Chief Accountant presented the draft Capital Strategy for the Commission's information and comment, prior to submission of the Strategy to the Cabinet and full Council for adoption.

No issues were raised and it was

RESOLVED that the draft Capital Strategy be noted.

97/07 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The Chief Accountant presented the draft Medium Term Financial Strategy for 2008/9 – 2014/15 for the Commission's information and comment, prior to its submission to the Cabinet and full Council for adoption.

In answer to a question regarding the budget for the Concessionary Bus Fares Scheme, the Chief Accountant explained that it was understood that there would be an additional grant from the Government towards the costs of the national scheme which was due to commence in April 2008. It would be necessary to keep the matter under review and, if necessary, to make adequate provision in the budget should the grant from the Government be insufficient to cover the costs of the scheme.

A member highlighted the fact that bus operators were ceasing some services as unviable as a direct result of the increased uptake in the use of bus passes and that while the majority of subsidised bus services were able to survive, those commercial services which were not subsidised were seriously affected. There was also a correlation between the reduction in bus services and increased car journeys.

RESOLVED that

- (1) the draft Medium Term Strategy be noted; and
- (2) a review into the impact of changes to the concessionary bus fares scheme on bus services be considered for inclusion in the Commission's future work programme.

98/07 ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES & SECURITY CONTRACT - PERFORMANCE UPDATE (AGENDA ITEM 9)

The Interim Contracts Manager presented the report, which updated members on performance of the Environmental Services contract for the period April to June 2007.

The Interim Contracts Manager answered a number of questions of detail from members, from which the following points were noted:

- Some clarification of the performance indicator relating to year-on year reductions in fly tipping incidents and enforcements would help the performance figures to be better understood.

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- In noting the limiting of certain areas for litter picking, members asked for details of those areas where litter picking had been ceased to be notified to them.
- The officers were not aware of any proposals to take glass at the Costessey recycling centre at the present time. The question of glass recycling collections was still being considered and there were a number of issues still to be overcome, for example the issue of contamination. However, the Interim Contracts Manager undertook to investigate the system for collection of glass and food waste being operated in Norwich.
- In regard to whether the Service Contract provided for bin collections from the kerbside or the curtilage of properties, the Interim Contracts Manager undertook to verify the contract specification on this point. In the meantime, he advised that residents with special needs could request an assisted collection.
- The Interim Contracts Manager agreed to look into and clarify the position in regard to the charging and payment arrangements to parishes for bottle bank collections and provide guidance for members' information on appointing or changing collectors.

RESOLVED that, subject to the above-mentioned matters, the report be noted.

Interim
Contracts
Manager

99/07 POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW PANELS (AGENDA ITEM 10)

(a) Panel 1 - Unconfirmed minutes of the meeting held on 18 September 2007

(i) Local Development Framework: Core Strategy – Analysis of Candidate Local Service Centre Villages (Minute 61/07)

The Environmental Planning Manager clarified the following points in answer to members' questions:

- Swanton Morley: Further clarification was being sought from the Parish Council as to its views on the level of any further growth, i.e. whether its stated figure of 100 homes was on the basis of incremental growth or otherwise.
- It was felt that there was sufficient supporting evidence to ensure that proposals were not being considered in isolation from the wider implications for the District as a whole. Relevant map(s) would be included for members' information at the next stage of the Panel's consideration.

The recommendation to delete Bawdeswell from the candidate list was questioned on the grounds that the north of the District appeared to be not provided for and it was felt that Bawdeswell was strategically placed along the A1067 between King's Lynn

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and Norwich and should qualify as a local service centre to serve the villages in the surrounding area.

Concern was also expressed about the position regarding Carbrooke, given the proposed level of housing growth. It was noted that there was a growing likelihood that a boundary review for Carbrooke and Watton would be initiated at some point.

In response to a question, the Monitoring Officer explained that the LDF process was now approaching its critical stages. Neither the Panels nor the Commission were empowered to make decisions about the wording in the final LDF; full Council would make the final decision. It was not considered that the Commission had the power to override the views of a Panel. Any supplementary or other comments that the Commission wished to make would have to be considered alongside those of the Panel.

The point was also made that the Commission did, of course, have the right to agree or disagree with recommendations made to it and for itself to make recommendations to Cabinet/Council.

RESOLVED that the Commission considers that, from a strategic point of view regarding the northern part of the District, Bawdeswell should be reconsidered for inclusion as a candidate local service centre to serve the number of villages along the A1067 and asks that its views be incorporated as part of the ongoing work towards finalising the Breckland Core Strategy and Development Control Policies document for consultation as part of the LDF later in 2007.

Env.
Planning
Manager

Note: Mr J. Rogers left the meeting during the discussion regarding the village of Carbrooke.

(ii) Adoption

RESOLVED that the unconfirmed minutes of the meeting of Policy Development and Review Panel 1 held on 18 September 2007 be adopted.

(b) **Panel 1 - Unconfirmed minutes of the meeting held on 30 August 2007**

(i) Thetford Growth Point Status (Minute 52/07)

A member asked whether, given the proposed housing growth figure of 6,000, the question of provision for associated issues of hospital and crematoria/burial sites to meet such a level of growth was being taken into account.

It was noted that Thetford Town Council, as the responsible authority for burial land, had begun to look at the question of burial land, including possible alternatives for woodland burials.

The Environmental Planning Manager confirmed that these issues would be taken into account as part of the development

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process.

- (ii) Norfolk County Council A47 to A1067 Link Improvement Consultation (Minute 53/07)

A typographical correction to this item was noted in that the response to the County Council's consultation had been made under Executive Member's delegated powers in order to meet the consultation deadline and the concluding paragraph entitled "recommendation" should, in fact, read "resolved".

- (iii) Adoption

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of Policy Development and Review Panel 1 held on 30 August 2007 be adopted.

(c) **Panel 2 - Unconfirmed minutes of the meeting held on 4 September 2007**

- (i) All Members Matter Programme for Breckland District Council (Minute 42/07)

This item was considered under Minute 100/07 below.

- (ii) Adoption

RESOLVED that the unconfirmed minutes of the meeting of Policy Development and Review Panel 2 held on 4 September 2007 be adopted.

(d) **Panel 3 - Unconfirmed minutes of the meeting held on 11 September 2007**

- (i) Operation of Leisure Facilities at Dereham and Thetford (Minute 40/07)

The Commission noted from this item that the work of the Sports Development Officer and Arts Development Officer had improved the availability of arts and sporting facilities within Breckland and that, in the light of this, the Panel recommended that the service term of the Arts Development Officer should be extended.

The Commission supported the views of the Panel and accordingly

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet to give consideration to extending the service term of the Arts Development Officer.

- (ii) Adoption

RESOLVED that the unconfirmed minutes of the meeting of Policy Development and Review Panel 3 held on 11 September 2007 be adopted.

Cabinet
9/10/07 /
Leisure
Services
Manager

100/07 ALL MEMBERS MATTER PROGRAMME FOR BRECKLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL (AGENDA ITEM 11)

The Democratic Services Manager presented the report in conjunction with the recommendation contained in Minute 42/07 of the meeting of Policy Development and Review Panel 2 held on 4 September 2007.

It was explained that, following the last Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004, the Council was asked to review the training, development and support provided to its elected members. Subsequently, the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) had undertaken a review of the issue of member support and produced a report identifying possible areas for improvement. Officers had analysed the report and produced a draft action plan to deliver the improvements for members' consideration.

The report from the LGIU and the resulting draft Action Plan were considered by Panel 2 at its meeting on 4 September and the Commission noted the detailed response to the draft Action Plan as contained in Minute 42/07 of that meeting.

The Commission supported the recommendation from Panel 2 and accordingly

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet to agree and adopt the Action Plan.

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Cabinet
9/10/07 /
Principal
Committee
Officer

101/07 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT (AGENDA ITEM 12)

RESOLVED that the draft Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report be approved for submission to the Council.

Scrutiny
Officer

102/07 PROJECT CREATE TASK & FINISH PANEL (AGENDA ITEM 13)

RESOLVED that the unconfirmed minutes of the meeting of the Project Create Task and Finish Panel held on 9 August 2007 be received and noted.

103/07 WORK PROGRAMME (AGENDA ITEM 14)

The Chairman advised that he hoped to arrange a meeting with all Panel Chairmen in the very near future to review the various work programmes.

The following matters were agreed for inclusion in the future programme of reviews:

- Concessionary Bus Fares Scheme – Impact of changes on bus services (to include evidence from bus operators)
- Land Drainage Policies – To look at potential flooding issues and drainage policies both generally and in relation to the Local Development Framework (to include evidence from Anglian Water and the Environment Agency)

Scrutiny
Officer

Members were invited to bring suggested items for future review to the next meeting.

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104/07 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 15)

The arrangements for the next meeting on 1 November 2007 were noted.

The meeting closed at 5.00 pm

CHAIRMAN