

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

CABINET – 9 SEPTEMBER 2008

REFERENCES FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 Cabinet is asked to consider references from the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission held on 4 September 2008 in regard to the following items:
- Empty Homes Policy (*Cabinet Agenda Item 12 (pages 123-131) refers*)
 - Watton Horse Fair (*Cabinet Agenda Item 15 (pages 138-141) refers*)
 - Fuel Poverty Policy
 - Breckland Community Car Schemes

2. EMPTY HOMES POLICY

- 2.1 Cabinet agenda item 12 refers.
- 2.2 This item was considered at the meeting of the Policy Development and Review Panel 2 on 3 September 2008. The Panel concluded that while it was supportive of the benefits in encouraging empty dwellings to be brought back into use and noting that the new discretionary powers for the use of Empty Dwellings Management Orders were 'a last resort' option when all other options had been exhausted, it was concerned to ensure that in extreme cases, where an owner could not be traced and it was proposed that their property was required to be demolished and/or redeveloped, such action should be subject to the approval of the full Council. Members also wished to ensure that the Ward Member should be notified of any cases affecting their Ward.
- 2.3 The Panel's views were considered and supported by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission at its meeting on 4 September and accordingly, the Commission

RECOMMENDS TO CABINET that the replacement Empty Dwellings Policy be adopted subject to the following amendments:

- (1) To require that the Ward Member is informed of any instances where an Empty Dwellings Management Order is to be pursued in their Ward; and
- (2) To require that in extreme cases where the owner cannot be traced and it is proposed that a property is required to be demolished and/or redeveloped, such action to be subject to the approval of full Council.

3. WATTON HORSE FAIR – LICENSING OF LAND USED FOR THE STATIONING OF CARAVANS, THETFORD ROAD, WATTON

- 3.1 Cabinet agenda item 15 refers.
- 3.2 This report was considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission at its meeting on 4th September 2008.
- 3.3 A motion to recommend that prosecution proceedings are commenced immediately was lost.
- 3.4 The Commission resolved to accept the recommendations as set out in paragraph 2 of the report to Cabinet.

4. FUEL POVERTY POLICY

- 4.1 The Commission has considered a report from the meeting of Policy Development and Review Panel 3 on 29 July 2003 on the Housing Performance and Improvement Plan Monitoring Report July 2008.
- 4.2 Minute 25/08 of the Panel's meeting highlighted Members' concerns around the issue of fuel poverty in the light of the current level of increases in fuel costs and their view that the Council needed a policy to address the poverty problems that would occur in the forthcoming months.
- 4.3 The Panel had noted that completion of a review of fuel poverty, amongst other work, had been delayed as a consequence of the Department of Communities and Local Government's response to the Council's proposed scheme for a district-wide licensing scheme for Houses in Multiple Occupation to require instead that it be concentrated on the towns only. A report on the review of fuel poverty was due to come before the Panel in due course and would cover matters such as energy efficiency and budgeting, etc.
- 4.3 It was also noted that a Financial Inclusion Policy had already been included on the Risk Register. This policy was aimed at educating residents on how they used their money, such as prioritising debts, etc. Articles of this nature would also be placed in future editions of Breckland Voice.
- 4.4 It had been acknowledged by the Panel that there was an important role for the Council to play in advising all people, not just the elderly, about planning for the winter ahead.
- 4.5 The Commission has noted the Panel's views in this matter and supported its proposals. Accordingly, the Commission

RECOMMENDS TO CABINET that

- (1) a policy be put in place to address the fuel poverty problems that will occur in the forthcoming months; and
- (2) the Council be seen to support local people by actively raising awareness of fuel poverty in the District by placing articles on the matter in future editions of Breckland Voice.

5. BRECKLAND COMMUNITY CAR SCHEMES

- 5.1 The Commission has considered a report on the Breckland Community Car Schemes and proposals for the future delivery of this service.
- 5.2 A copy of the report is appended, which gives full details of the background, issues and options considered by the Commission.
- 5.3 The Commission was fully supportive of the Breckland Community Car Schemes, which were seen as a vital lifeline to people living in the rural areas. Although there were some concerns that the governance arrangements should not be too burdensome on scheme operators and volunteer drivers, Members accepted the need for more formal arrangements for the Council to meet its duty of care and support to all parties.
- 5.4 The question of mileage rates was also discussed and while it was noted the Council could increase the rates above the Inland Revenue Rate, Members felt this should only be done in consultation and with the agreement of the Parish Council and Co-ordinators, because of the implications increased rates could have on drivers' income tax liabilities. However, it was felt that the Inland Revenue should review its rates to a

more realistic level.

- 5.5 The Commission, however, considered that there was a need for substantially more funding than the £10,000 proposed in the report if the Council was to achieve the aims to expand the scheme (noting that there were new applications to join the scheme, such as at Bawdeswell) and to support existing schemes in the future. One suggestion was that a more realistic figure was £100,000. It was felt the Council should also meet the costs of CRB and medical checks.
- 5.6 While being mindful of the need not to introduce unfair competition between the community car scheme service and private hire vehicles and taxis, there was support for some limited diversification of the service to support local key services, such as post offices.
- 5.7 The Commission agreed to incorporate a quarterly review of the Schemes as part of the work of the Task and Finish Group covering the Sustainable Communities Strategy review.
- 5.8 **RECOMMEND TO CABINET** that
- (1) it notes that seldom has any Council initiative been so unanimously supported;
 - (2) robust governance arrangements and legal agreements between Breckland Council and all scheme operators and volunteer drivers be put in place as a requirement to qualify for funding support, along the lines set out in paragraph 3.8.1 of the report;
 - (3) it recommends to the Council that substantial funding be invested to support new and existing Community Car Schemes, to include meeting the costs of required CRB and medical checks.