

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

**Held on Thursday, 3 September 2009 at 2.15 pm in the
Anglia Room, The Conference Suite, Elizabeth House, Walpole Loke, Dereham**

PRESENT

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

In Attendance

Anita Brennan	- Assistant Director - Health & Housing
Mark Broughton	- Member Development and Scrutiny Officer
Sam Hubbard	- Planning Policy Officer
Stephen McGrath	- Member Development Team Leader
Darryl Smith	- Principal Housing Officer (Strategy and Enabling)
Robert Walker	- Director of Community Services
Richard Wills	- Pride Coordinator
Elaine Wilkes	- Senior Member Services Officer

78/09 MINUTES

A correction was made to Minute 72/09 – Community Fora. The last paragraph on page 10 (line 9) incorrectly stated that the Thetford Society started the Moving Forward Board and was corrected to state that the Thetford Task Force was set up in response to a public meeting called by the Thetford Society.

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 July 2009, as amended above, were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

79/09 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Messrs. B. Rose and A.C. Stasiak.

80/09 URGENT BUSINESS

The Chairman announced one item of urgent business to be taken later in the meeting concerning a Government consultation paper received on the subject of “Strengthening Local Democracy” (*see minute no. 86/09 below*).

81/09 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

No declarations were made.

82/09 NON-MEMBERS WISHING TO ADDRESS THE MEETING

None present.

Action By

Action By

83/09 PROGRAMMED EXECUTIVE MEMBER PORTFOLIO UPDATE - PEOPLE FIRST (AGENDA ITEM 6)

The Chairman explained that following the recent changes to the Executive portfolio structures, it had not been possible in the time available to re-arrange the programme for the item on Executive Member Portfolio Update for this meeting. The regular updates would commence again at the next meeting.

84/09 AFFORDABLE HOUSING POLICY (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The minutes of the meeting of the Affordable Housing Task and Finish Group held on 29 July 2009 were considered in conjunction with the draft Affordable Housing Policy.

The Principal Housing Officer (Strategy and Enabling) presented the report and explained that the issues and recommendations made by members and the Task and Finish Group during the process of consultation had been taken into account in the report and the draft Policy. The policy had been drafted to provide the tools to implement the planning policies within the Core Strategy of the Local Development Framework.

Key areas of change addressed in the report included the issues identified by members relating to the green agenda, quality of design, provision for alternative providers of affordable housing other than Housing Associations and to continue the approach not to have subsidy secured through planning gain (i.e. not through additional public subsidy).

Other initiatives incorporated in the policy were as set out in paragraph 10 of the policy (agenda page 33).

The Task and Finish Group had raised some issues that were outside the remit of the Housing Team and which needed a steer from elected members. These were:

- a) How to influence the low cost housing market. While this was something very difficult to manage, Members wished to see further discussion on this issue.
- b) A key factor in meeting housing need for some people was their inability to obtain mortgages and members wished to explore the Council as mortgage provider (powers did exist for this).

The planning policies referred to in the Affordable Housing Policy were not for debate as these had now been submitted to and examined in public by the Inspectors.

The Affordable Housing Policy was designed as a tool to implement those planning policies.

Members were invited to debate any of the other areas before the draft Policy went on to the Cabinet and Council for adoption.

Mr. Joel explained that the Task and Finish Group discussions had included issues of meeting need through the development of flats,

family trusts and other providers, low cost housing and buying a percentage of property. A key to low cost housing was the land value.

The Principal Housing Officer explained that the Council did not have control over land/market prices, which was one of the problems in providing low cost housing and it was an area difficult to monitor.

So far as the issue of the Council as mortgage provider was concerned, this was something outside the scope of the Strategic Housing Team and was more properly an issue for Members to consider having regard to the best use of the Council's resources. However, the strategic framework was there to enable such a route to be taken if the Council so wished.

A member suggested that if the Council were to consider offering mortgages, it should be done in partnership with other mortgage providers as he felt the Council's officers could not be expected to have the skills required in this field.

In answer to a question, it was confirmed that the areas of shared ownership and private trusts were covered in the policy. Shared ownership was currently successfully operated throughout the District. The area of private trusts for affordable housing, in various forms, was something the Housing Team was willing to assist with wherever possible and the policy provided the framework for this.

It was also explained that so far as meeting housing need was concerned, planning policy DC5 allowed the Council to explore meeting specific need in areas, for example through returning empty properties to use and through exception sites, and while the Housing Needs Study identified need in all the parishes, it was necessary to prioritise delivery of those needs. The Affordable Housing Policy set out how planning policy DC5 was supported.

Support for the provision of affordable housing through self-build, park homes and other such schemes was covered in the policy (page 24, paragraph 5), where the policy was applied to a range of issues raised by Members.

Attention was drawn to the question of the selling-off of small pieces of land in the towns and parishes and the difficulties of determining or quantifying the amenity value of such land. The loss of such small areas of green space could have an accumulative detrimental effect on an area. It was suggested that when the Council was considering the sale of such parcels, the Ward Member should be consulted at an earlier stage than at present. While this was a matter for Asset Management, the Principal Housing Officer undertook to refer this point to them.

So far as housing need was concerned, the assessment of need was identified through the Housing Needs Study and the Housing Register; other methodology could also provide projections around the housing make-up. However, it was not felt possible to ever meet the total housing need. Rather it was a question of how best to manage the delivery of housing through the range of solutions and options available.

Action By

Darryl
Smith

On the issue of design, this was a function of the planning process but the Housing Team did offer guidance but, except in the case of specific social housing developments, had little influence on affordable housing being delivered as a percentage of a private development scheme.

Arising from the above point, the importance of the role of Members through the Development Control process to insist on good housing design standards was highlighted.

It was noted that the draft Policy would be the subject of a separate report to Cabinet and the Council for adoption in due course.

RESOLVED that the Commission supports the draft Affordable Housing Policy, for recommendation to Cabinet and the Council in due course.

Action By

Darryl
Smith

85/09 PRIDE IN BRECKLAND (AGENDA ITEM 8)

The Director of Community Services presented the report and introduced Richard Wills, the Council's new Pride Coordinator.

The Pride Coordinator informed Members of the latest progress of events and future programme of the Pride in Breckland project.

In addition to the items set out in the report, the following items were reported for Members' information as good examples of community engagement in seeking to maintain pride in the area:

- Pride in Breckland Awards – it was hoped to repeat these Awards in 2011.
- Thetford: Croxton Road Underpass – the murals had been cleaned of graffiti and a local school had undertaken to monitor and keep the murals cleaned in future.
- Rivers Thet and Ouse, Thetford – the rivers had been dredged and cleared of refuse.
- Dereham: Pond Park – the Norfolk Wildlife Trust had been approached to undertake an assessment of this area prior to establishing a hoped-for community project with the Neatherd High School.

Other projects being planned or in progress included:

- Raising the profile of the Pride project.
- Sponsorship of a 'Welcome Home' supplement for the Light Dragoons.
- Regular programme 'slot' on the Wayland Community Radio.
- Breckland in Bloom
- Pride Grants Scheme – Grants of up to £250 for Pride-related community projects.

Action By

Following the report, attention was drawn to the need for the local town or parish council to be consulted on schemes under the Pride project. Specific reference was drawn to schemes at Dereham, where a member reported that the Town Council had not been involved in the plans for the welcome home event for the Light Dragoons but had managed to make alternative arrangements with the market stall holders to avoid a clash of date and the Town Council would, therefore, be happy to participate in the arrangements for the special event.

In addition, the three schemes in Dereham under the Pride Grants project were all located on land owned and managed by the Town Council. While the Town Council would doubtless be happy with such schemes, it was hoped they were consulted on the proposals before the grants were approved.

It was explained that the funding for the Pride schemes came under the umbrella of the Local Strategic Partnership on which all Town Councils were invited to sit. Decisions on grants were made by a Grants Board and all schemes had to be accompanied by supporting evidence. Action would be taken to ensure all town and parish councils and the local Ward Member(s) were consulted on future bids.

In noting some of the schemes undertaken to date, a member suggested suitable local groups and organisations could be approached for help, for example the Wensum Valley Trust for river clearing. So far as the Breckland in Bloom project was concerned, the member pointed out that the Council would need authority to use the 'in Bloom' branding from the national body.

Another member suggested that a 'Pride in Breckland' pack should be produced for new residents as a way of introducing them to the area.

The Chairman was concerned that some of these schemes allowed the responsible authorities to avoid their maintenance duties, e.g. Environment Agency as regards cleaning of rivers and BT as regards telecommunications street cabinets (in relation to the "Adopt a Box" Pride scheme).

The points were noted.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

86/09 STRENGTHENING LOCAL DEMOCRACY (URGENT BUSINESS - AGENDA ITEM 3)

Since the last meeting of the Commission, a consultation paper had been received from the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government on the subject of local democratic renewal and improving and widening the scope of the scrutiny function.

A response was required by the 2nd October 2009 and it was felt to be important that the Commission did submit a response.

Given the limited time available, it was proposed to appoint a Task and Finish Group to draft a response. It was felt that a single meeting of the Group would be sufficient for the purpose. To assist the meeting, the Member Development and Scrutiny Officer would prepare some draft

answers to the questions for circulation to Members prior to the meeting.

The question of the power of local scrutiny committees to require attendance by other agencies was raised. It was noted that the 2007 Act identified a number of agencies that could be called in to scrutiny and that they had a duty to attend although they did not have to take any recommended action. This would be clarified.

RESOLVED that

- (1) a Task and Finish Group be appointed to draft a response to the consultation paper, such response to be cleared through the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Commission prior being submitted to the Secretary of State;
- (2) the following members be nominated to the Task & Finish Group – Mr. S.G. Bambridge, Mr. K.S. Gilbert, Mr. J. Gretton and Mr. B. Rose.

Action By

Mark
Broughton

87/09 TASK & FINISH GROUP REPORTS (AGENDA ITEM 9)

(a) Off-Street Parking - Report of the meeting held on 27 July 2009

The Chairman of the Group presented the report and explained that there had been a robust discussion of the issues concerned and site visits had taken place on 25th and 27th August.

In the light of the Group's deliberations, the following was being recommended:

- a) the scope of the Task and Finish Group to be widened to include on-street parking, time-limits and a survey of parking needs;
- b) approval of funding of up to £3,500 to cover the cost of the parking survey; and
- c) the review programme be extended until July 2010.

The Chairman advised that Attleborough Town Council had recently written to ask Breckland to look at the issue of charging as a solution to the pressures in the town from all-day/long-term parking by commuters in and out of the town.

In the light of this, the Chairman suggested a way forward was to conduct a pilot, wide-ranging survey in Attleborough, which could then be used as the basis for rolling-out the survey to the other towns in the District, bearing in mind that each would have its own, varying needs and usage. It was suggested the survey could be produced in-house and be carried out by casual employees (e.g. university or other students).

A point was made that market research was a necessary professional function to ensure the correct interpretation of information was achieved.

Action By

Issues of enforcement and need to ensure turnover of parking spaces to support retail centres were discussed, together with the need for the Council to decide what sort of service it wanted to provide in the way of car parking (including maintenance, repair, enforcement), i.e. whether it was to be profit-making or a service to the public. That decision would determine the way forward.

The Member Development and Scrutiny Officer explained that there was sufficient money available in the Commission's budget but that any expenditure would need to be made wisely and proportionately. When looking at using local research organisations, it was necessary to avoid the potential for any bias in the development and interpretation of the questionnaire. This review was necessarily an evidence-based one but need not be limited to the survey. The Citizens' Panel, Council website, and Breckland Voice, as well as consulting through the Town and Parish Councils could also be used to give a balance of information.

It was suggested the proposed limited survey sample of 50 in each town would not be big enough to give a comprehensive finding. A larger survey would increase the costs if an external research body was used. The Chairman suggested that students undertaking degrees and/or Masters at the UEA could be utilised for the research but would need to be contacted beforehand through the University.

A member also felt it would be relevant to the survey to look at under-used private car parks.

RESOLVED that

- (1) the Terms of Reference of the Task and Finish Group be widened to incorporate a review of on-street parking in the five market towns and the name of the Group be changed to "Parking Task and Finish Group";
- (2) the review to include specific attention to the imposition and enforcement of time limits in car parks, as appropriate to local circumstances;
- (3) the review programme be extended to July 2010;
- (4) the Member Development and Scrutiny Officer firm up the arrangements for the survey in consultation with the Chairmen of the OSC and the Task and Finish Group.

Mark
Broughton

88/09 SCRUTINY CALL-INS (STANDING ITEM)

There were none to report.

89/09 COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION (STANDING ITEM)

No references had been made.

90/09 WORK PROGRAMME (AGENDA ITEM 12)

An updated work programme was tabled at the meeting.

Action By

BT Payphones – Cashless Conversion

The Member Development and Scrutiny Officer reported on the latest position regarding the Commission's review of public telephone kiosks. So far as the case at Stow Bedon was concerned, BT had indicated that it would replace this kiosk with a cashless facility earlier in the year but there had been no action to date.

Letters had been sent to the local Members of Parliament on the issue of cashless conversion of public telephone kiosks. A reply from Christopher Fraser M.P. had been received, enclosing a response from BT, details of which were noted. Mr. Fraser was seeking the Council's comments on how it wished to take the matter further.

BT's response and inaction at Stow Bedon was felt to be very unacceptable and it was

RESOLVED that the Chairman should respond direct to BT on the Commission's behalf.

Work Programme

The following items were added:

- Community Car Schemes – To clarify issues around the changes to the governance arrangements of schemes between the District and Town Councils.
- Green Agenda Development Panel – Reports of meetings to be included

Executive Member Updates

Mrs. A. Steward – Executive Member for Planning & Regeneration – had been invited to give the Executive Member update at the next meeting in October.

Mrs. T. Hewett – Executive Member for Communities & Benefits – had been invited to the November meeting but was unable to accept due to work commitments. An alternative Executive Member was being sought for this meeting.

91/09 NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 15 October 2009.

There was some discrepancy over the venues for meetings as these were stated differently in the work programme and the venues for future meetings were therefore subject to confirmation.

The meeting closed at 4.10 pm

CHAIRMAN