

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW PANEL 2

Held on Friday, 13 April 2007 at 9.30am
In the Council Chamber, King's House, King Street, Thetford

PRESENT:

Joel, Mr. A. P (Chairman)	Matthews, Mrs. S. M.
Bambridge, Mr. S.G.	Monument, Mrs. L. H
Carrick, Mr. J. F.	Mortimer, Mr. D.G.
Jordan, Mr. C.R.	Paines, Mrs. T.

IN ATTENDANCE:

Broughton, Mr. M.	- Scrutiny Officer
Collison, Mr. J.	- Web Officer
Jibril, Mr. M.	- ICT Project Manager
Kerry, Miss. M.	- Senior Policy Officer
McGrath, Mr. S.	- Principal Committee Officer

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Ambrose, Mr. K.	- Ambrose Associates Consultancy Limited
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18/07 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 March 2007 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

19/07 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

An apology for absence was received from The Earl Cathcart.

20/07 LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP INCLUSION STRATEGY – PROGRESS REPORT (AGENDA ITEM 6)

Members gave consideration to the report from the Senior Policy Officer on the work being undertaken to develop a Social Inclusion Strategy for the Local Strategic Partnership for Breckland.

The Senior Policy Officer reminded Members that in January 2007, the Council had appointed Ambrose Associates Consultancy Limited to develop a Social Inclusion Strategy for the Local Strategic Partnership. Breckland Council was leading on this project, which should be completed by the end of Summer 2007. It was vital that the proposed Strategy was relevant to, and “owned” by, the many local groups and agencies involved in working for the excluder.

The project's aim was to produce a five year Social Inclusion Strategy to define how the Local Strategic Partnership would tackle the reasons why disadvantaged groups and individuals were excluded and to enable the

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Local Strategic Partnership to work in partnership to reduce the efforts of social exclusion and social disadvantage.

The project's objectives are:-

- To produce an effective Strategy that sets the context for ensuring that all Breckland residents are empowered to participate in society on equal terms;
- To produce clear high level outcomes for the delivery of the strategy;
- To recognise each LSP's partner's role in the production and adoption of the Strategy;
- To consult local representative groups, agencies and individuals as specified by the primary contact.

Members then welcomed Mr Kevin Ambrose from Ambrose Associates Consultancy Limited who had been invited to the meeting to report on progress and answer any questions the panel had with regard to the development of the strategy.

Mr Ambrose informed Members that he was currently building up a picture of social exclusion in Breckland by engaging with the community. This was enabling him to identify the principle stakeholders and key stages in the process. A project plan was currently being devised, incorporating the meeting schedule of the main decision makers within the Local Strategic Partnership. With regard to the development of a Consultation Strategy, work was continuing to decide who needed to be involved and a timetable for the consultation was being finalised. Arrangements would then need to be made for monitoring progress on the delivery of the action plan.

With regard to engaging with community groups, a survey of the main local organisations had now been completed. Meetings had also been held with the people actively working with the excluded. Three workshops were also due to be held in Dereham, Swaffham and Thetford shortly to engage with groups and individuals involved in this work.

Mr Ambrose explained that the first draft of the Strategy and Action Plan would be produced by early May 2007. The key findings would then be circulated to key consultees with a view to the Strategy and comments being considered by the Local Strategic Partnership and Breckland Council committees during May to June 2007. The final version of the Strategy and Action Plan would then be re-circulated for consideration in July 2007.

The issues to be addressed by the Strategy are:-

- Nature of exclusion in Breckland;
- Gaps in current provision;
- Identifying responsibilities for plugging in gaps;
- Role of Local Strategic Partnership;

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- Identification of main actions required (with timescale and responsibilities determined);
- “Handing over the baton” from the Consultant to the Local Strategic Partnership.

During discussion of the presentation and report, Members made the following comments:-

- There is as much deprivation in villages as in other areas – *Mr Ambrose acknowledged this and explained that the Rural Community Council had recently undertaken a piece of work to prove this issue. Although the headline figures identify concentrations of deprivation in urban areas such as Thetford, there are a similar number of cases in rural areas but these are dispersed. He confirmed that this would be shown and actioned in the Strategy.*
- A Member reported that some organisations dealing with excluded people might receive a funding cut from Norfolk County Council due to budget cuts. Concern was expressed at this possibility when social exclusion was an increasing trend in the community. – *Mr Ambrose reported that funding for voluntary groups was a key issue as well as the lack of volunteers. He explained that he was trying to get information on the amount of public money being spent on social exclusion. However, this funding was being spent on dealing with the implications of social exclusion rather than tackling the causes of the problem. It was hoped that the Social Inclusion Strategy could get a debate going on the causes of social exclusion as that would be a major success. Members were informed that the Primary Care Trust was also cutting funding to voluntary groups as part of its budget cut process. This should be undertaken against targets rather than cutting funding indiscriminately. Mr Ambrose reminded Members that all the budget holders were members of the Local Strategic Partnership and a discussion at that body might be useful as it would help them consider the implications of their decisions on any cuts they propose.*
- The lack of transport in both urban and rural areas is a major problem. In addition, poverty, unemployment and poor housing also exacerbate the problem. – *Mr Ambrose explained that the key was to provide services to people which they could access in their locality.*
- Some concern was expressed that the various meetings and workshops which were being held to consider the Social Inclusion Strategy were not engaging with the people who were having problems. In addition, some people had chosen to exclude themselves and do not wish to be involved with general society. – *The Senior Policy Officer explained that the workshops were being widely publicised, including in the local media, but she did acknowledge that socially excluded people were hard to reach. In addition, some of them were suspicious of public bodies so these people were being approached through third party voluntary organisations to encourage them to attend and also identify the reasons why they were excluded. Finally, the agencies who work*

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with socially excluded people were also being asked to provide feedback on what those individuals were saying to them so that this could be incorporated into the Strategy.

- A Member expressed concern that he was not confident that the issues of rural deprivation were being dealt with. He explained that there were children in many villages in Breckland which had no playgroup, second rate schools, lack of local youth clubs, older people who cannot go out shopping, lack of buses, single parents and lack of night life. Although some issues in towns were being dealt with, maybe not adequately enough, the rural areas were being left behind. – *Mr Ambrose explained that all the organisations dealing with the social exclusion had been contacted and their input requested. He reminded Members that the Strategy was the start of the process and that rural deprivation would be a key thing throughout it. He acknowledged that there was a need to provide more buses and transport in rural areas and this could be discussed between the main agencies involved. Discussions had been held with the transportation department at Norfolk County Council about rural transport and, in particular, how these can be made more effective (e.g. community car scheme). With regard to this scheme, the lack of volunteers and funding were key issues. The scheme might encourage more volunteers if the payments were more lucrative to the drivers as they currently only cover the cost of petrol.*
- Members expressed concern that the language barrier, educational attainment and public sector bureaucracy could also be a problem which makes people socially excluded. Although this could be very costly to overcome, services needed to be made available to people speaking different languages otherwise they would become socially excluded by default.
- A Member commented that it was essential that the action plan be monitored to ensure that it was being delivered.
- A Member queried whether funding would be available to deliver the action plan as it was likely to require significant resources. – *The Senior Policy Officer replied that all the projects in the action plan would be submitted through the project management software which would identify the resources required to deliver them. None of the projects would be included within the action plan without the necessary resources being available to deliver them. Whilst Breckland Council might be a lead agency, the project would be owned by the Local Strategic Partnership and that body would be required to deliver them.*

It was then

RESOLVED that the progress on developing the Local Strategic Partnership Social Inclusion Strategy be noted.

21/07 **REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL WEBSITE AND INTRANET (AGENDA ITEM 7)**

Members gave consideration to the report from the ICT Manager on the external assessment of the Council's website by Socitm "Better

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Connected". The ICT Project Member reminded Members that the Council's website had been subject to a major revamp at the end of 2006. At Breckland Council, the operation and development responsibilities were distributed between:-

- ICT Service – for technical construction;
- Communications – for overall development direction;
- Individual Services – for content.

Each month, the authority's website is subjected to independent scrutiny by a company called Sitemorse. This specialist company provides a monthly assessment of public sector websites. Their approach was to make an automated assessment using a special computer programme that submits the website to a series of technical appraisals. This approach develops a score which is used as a means of ranking each local authority.

In addition, since 1999, the Society of Information Technology Management (Socitm) had conducted an annual survey of all local authority websites. Their results are published each March in a report called "Better Connected". This document had recently been published and an initial summary of that document and its assessment of Breckland Council's website was contained in the appendix to the report.

The ICT Project Manager then took Members through the scores and rankings allocated to the Breckland Council website from Sitemorse and Better Connected, as detailed in the report, and explained that the main areas for improvement were the content on the website and by making it more interactive. It was proposed that the web editors group discuss these reports and produce an action plan which would prioritise the areas for improvement.

During consideration of the report, Members made the following comments:-

- The overall appearance of the website is very good.
- Sometimes, the content can be difficult to find. In particular, it is extremely difficult to find information about planning applications and that is one area which requires improvement. In addition, the web editors should bear in mind the information which the public wants to access rather than the information they wish to make available.
- A Member enquired how close the Council was with regard to making the website more interactive – *The ICT project Manager explained that this work would be completed within the next few months. Although he was reluctant to place a date on it, due to changing work commitments, the Council site should be transactional by late summer 2007. He explained that the purpose of making the website more transactional was that the public could be empowered more to utilise the Council services at their own convenience rather than in office hours when staff are available. In any event, the more queries which could be handled through the website would obviously reduce the number of calls*

into the office thereby allowing the back office staff to concentrate on other work rather than answering telephone calls.

- A Member expressed concern that there appeared to have been little progress on updating content since the launch of the website last year. Breckland Council has prided itself over the years on being an innovative authority. It therefore appeared obvious that a significant amount of work needed to be undertaken on the website to improve the content and also the accessibility of the information. It was also suggested that a new section on “frequently asked questions” be added to the homepage and that this list be adjusted according to the information being requested through the website and the customer contact centre.
- A Member enquired why the web editors were not updating the content on the website – *the ICT Project Manager informed Members that the web editor role was not built into the web editors job descriptions and, in some services, other work commitments are taking a priority.*
- A Member commented that South Norfolk Council had the best website in the country, according to the inspection, and enquired whether Breckland Council was discussing areas of best practice with them – *the ICT Project Manager confirmed that a representative from the communications team had met with officers from South Norfolk Council and had brought back a number of areas of best practice which would be shared with the web editors at their meeting shortly.*

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Mike Tuck/
Mutairu
Jibril

RESOLVED

1. That the report be noted.
2. That the proposal for development of an improvement plan be endorsed and this improvement plan be considered at the next meeting of this panel.
3. That the ICT Manager be asked to discuss the possibility of incorporating the role of web editor in the job descriptions of the members of staff concerned with the Operational Management Team and report back to a future meeting of this Panel.

Mutairu
Jibril

Mike Tuck

22/07 WORK PROGRAMME (AGENDA ITEM 8)

Members gave consideration to the proposed work programme and meeting schedule for Policy Development and Review Panel 2, as detailed in the report.

At the request of the Scrutiny Officer, it was agreed to remove the item on Community Partnerships from the future Work Programme.

23/07 VOTE OF THANKS (ADDITIONAL ITEM)

The Chairman concluded the meeting by asking that the Panel's thanks and appreciation be recorded in the minutes to Earl Cathcart, John Carrick and Thelma Paine who were standing down from the Council after numerous years' service. All three Members were then wished the very best for the future.

24/07 DATE OF NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 9)

It was agreed that officers should determine the next meeting date for Policy Development and Review Panel 2 bearing in mind the Work Programme and the need to fit into the Council's committee meeting schedule.

Action by

Mark
Broughton

The meeting closed at 11.10 am.

CHAIRMAN