

CREATING CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE

At a meeting of the **CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE SHADOW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held in Room 15, Priory House, Monks Walk, Chicksands, Shefford on Thursday, 11 December 2008

PRESENT

CLr Mrs P Staples (Chairman)
CLr A R Bastable (Vice-Chairman)

Cllrs P N Aldis
R G Baker BEM
Birt
A Fahn

Cllrs R Goodwin
D Hogan
H J Lockey
G Summerfield

Apologies for Absence: Cllrs R A Baker
J Kane

Members in Attendance: Cllrs M R Jones Portfolio Holder (Corporate Resources)
K C Matthews Portfolio Holder (Sustainable Development)

Officers in Attendance: Mr G Alderson – Director of Sustainable Communities, CBC
Mr B Carter – Overview & Scrutiny Manager, MBDC
Mr R Ellis – Director of Business Transformation, CBC
Ms M Headicar – Consultant, CBC
Ms D Ledster – Committee Adviser, BCC

S/08/7

CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman reported that she had agreed to admit consideration of an urgent item of business at this meeting in accordance with Rule No. 5 of the Access to Information Procedure Rules.

This item related to the Growth Agenda and the vast public concern resulting from the submission of a planning application for 900 more houses in Leighton Buzzard.

S/08/8 **MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

(a) **Personal Interests:-**

None.

(b) **Personal and Prejudicial Interests:-**

None.

S/08/9 **DECLARATION IN RELATION TO THE EXISTENCE OF A WHIP**

No declarations were made.

S/08/10 **REQUEST FOR AGENDA ITEMS**

The Committee noted that no requests for agenda items had been received under the terms of Scrutiny procedure Rule No. 8.

S/08/11 **CALL-IN ITEM**

Members noted that no decision of the Shadow Executive, an individual Member of the Shadow Executive or one made on a key issue by an officer with delegated authority of the Shadow Executive had been referred to the Committee.

S/08/12 **CREATING CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE - PROGRESS REPORT**

The Committee considered a report of the Central Bedfordshire Management Team on overall progress towards the creation of the new Council for Central Bedfordshire.

This second progress report aimed to assist the Committee in identifying the key issues and risks associated with the changes to unitary local government in Bedfordshire.

Richard Ellis, Director of Business Transformation, presenting the report on behalf of the Management Team drew attention to Appendix A which set out an overall summary of progress made since the Committee's meeting in September and the key challenges in achieving a successful transition to the new Council.

The Committee was then invited to comment on progress on the programme to create the new unitary council for Central Bedfordshire.

In relation to the structure for the new Central Bedfordshire Council, Marion Headicar, consultant for CBC, stressed that there were very strict rules and procedures laid down by Government about the creation of the new unitary council. The organisation structure had been concluded with the majority of senior posts appointed and the programme to create the new council had reached the implementation phase. The agreed structure was considered fit for purpose to meet the aspirations and strategic objectives of the new council. Recognising the new council will evolve over the next three or four years a new Directorate of Business Transformation, led by Richard Ellis, had been created. It was acknowledged that the scale of current County Council services means that around 80% of staff will be drawn from the County Council. In areas such as Adult Services and Children's Services the new council will need to rely on a certain body of expertise from the County Council, along with newly appointed staff, in order to continue to deliver high quality services.

A Member commented that there was no mention about economic development and that given the current economic climate consideration should be given to what support can be given to small businesses. It was noted that the existing Councils continue to have responsibility for such matters until 1 April. Concerning the new council's list of approved contractors Members agreed that a policy was needed that encourages engagement with small businesses.

Gary Alderson, Director of Sustainable Communities, advised the Committee that Liz Wade, Assistant Director Economic Development and Growth, BCC had been appointed as Head of Economic Growth, Regeneration and Tourism and will be leading on economic development matters in Central Bedfordshire. One of the priorities in moving forward was ensuring a strong local response to current economic situation.

The Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Development updated the Committee on accommodation requirements for the new Central Bedfordshire Council. Due to practical constraints, some associated with ICT it was now expected that there will be limited moves on day one. In many cases staff will continue to work at their current location. The challenge facing the new council in this early stage will be to make sure staff feel part of Central Bedfordshire. It was noted that a report on accommodation matters was to be taken to the Shadow Executive in January 2009.

Richard Ellis, in response to comments about staffing matters, updated the Committee on the current position. The organisation structure for Central Bedfordshire had been concluded, with the majority of senior posts appointed. Recruitment to the third tier posts will begin before the end of the year.

Staffing information on staff being disaggregated from the County Council, and those being transferred from the Districts, had been consolidated. This information is subject to change because of the County Council appeal process. The disaggregation process had taken longer than envisaged and the detailed mapping of staff to the new council can not start until the appeals process is completed. Under the rules of TUPE all staff have the right to transfer to the new Council on 1 April 2009. It was noted that whilst everyone has the right to transfer this was no guarantee of employment. Where there are more people than positions there will be a competitive selection process. The aim was to communicate to staff being transferred to Central Bedfordshire, where possible, of their position in the organisation before Christmas. However, this was dependent on the completion of the County Council's verification process and the subsequent release of staff information.

In terms of training, Richard Ellis clarified that the Skills for Change Programme is a supporting programme developed to equip staff with tools, knowledge and support during the transitional process. It was noted that the programme was open to staff from all of the authorities in Bedfordshire. Where appropriate, staff will be supported in the development of new skills to enable them to apply for alternative positions.

The Committee's attention was drawn to Deloitte's review of the Implementation Programme and proposed action in order to successfully achieve the requirements for vesting day. The Shadow Executive had agreed to the commissioning of Deloitte because of the magnitude of change being faced. The pace and complexity of change was immense and something that had always been difficult to predict. Agreement had been given to carry out the actions identified by Deloitte starting with an intensive planning exercise; implementation of the proposed actions for managing the programme would follow.

RESOLVED

that the progress made to date in creating the new unitary council for Central Bedfordshire as set out in the submitted report, be noted.

S/08/13

FEES AND CHARGES STRATEGY 2009/10

The Committee considered a report from the Director of Corporate Resources on the approach being recommended to the next Shadow Executive in setting the schedule of Fees and Charges for 2009/10.

The Portfolio holder for Corporate resources introduced the report and advised the Committee that in preparation for the first year of the new Central Bedfordshire Council a schedule of discretionary Fees and Charges needed to be agreed. The principles set out in the submitted report applied only to those Fees and Charges where there is Member discretion. To enable the revenue budget setting process to proceed with maximum resource and minimal delays a simplified approach was being proposed for 2009/10 that will enable officers to create a harmonised schedule within certain agreed parameters.

The Committee, whilst acknowledging the proposal to harmonise District Fees and Charges, was mindful of the potential for vast increases where, for example, one authority had a low fee/charge and the other authority was high. Members were concerned that disadvantaged groups may not be able to afford a high increase. Comments were also made that unless increases were modest there was potential for bad press.

A Member sought reassurance that the Committee will have the opportunity to see the harmonised schedule. The Committee was advised that the Fees and Charges will be included as part of the new Council's proposed Revenue Budget for 2009/10 which will be submitted to the Council for approval. It was noted that there will be more detailed consideration of the charges by the new Council for 2010/11.

RESOLVED

that the Committee's concern about the setting of Fees and Charges for 2009/10, as set out in the preamble above, be considered as part of the deliberations at Council in the setting of a Revenue Budget for 2009/10.

S/08/14

GROWTH AGENDA

Councillor Rhys Goodwin introducing this item reminded the Committee of concern expressed at its last meeting about the substantial infrastructure deficit in South Bedfordshire. He stated that the main cause of increased congestion was the Government's requirement to build at least 1000 houses a year in an area where the infrastructure deficit identified twenty years ago had still not been delivered. House building was continuing to increase and the next 1000 houses would result in even more congestion. He was concerned about the result of increased commuting time on the 40,000 commuters in South Bedfordshire and the effect this had on their families.

Councillor Goodwin went on to state that he had written to Government about the need to address the substantial infrastructure deficit and to stop house building in South Bedfordshire until the situation is resolved.

The Committee was urged to support a recommendation to the Shadow Executive asking for the Secretary of State to be informed of the Council's concern about the infrastructure deficit and seeking a halt to house building in South Bedfordshire until the matter is resolved.

The Committee in discussing the impact of increased building alongside an infrastructure deficit and the resulting effects on families questioned what the implications would be for Central Bedfordshire if the authority decided to go against Government policy.

Gary Alderson advised the Committee of the Government's process for determining housing growth which results in planning targets for each region. Within each region a process is followed for agreeing the best locations for housing growth. On 28 November, Central Bedfordshire became a statutory consultee on the regional Strategy and is currently being consulted on housing growth proposals. A report on this matter was scheduled to go to the Shadow Executive in February. Seeking disengagement from the process could limit the influencing effect the authority will have for finding the most suitable locations for housing growth. In context of the planning system it was noted that appeals for refusal would have a greater degree of success without an agreed Council policy.

The Committee whilst being supportive of the concerns of Councillor Goodwin agreed that as the authority was currently being consulted on the regional Strategy it should not, at this stage, be putting forward such a recommendation to the Shadow Executive. It was suggested that a report on the consultation be brought to the next meeting of the Committee in January to enable Members to give a more considered response to the concerns expressed.

RESOLVED

that a report on the consultation on the Regional strategy be submitted to the Committee's next meeting on 22 January 2009.

(Note: The meeting commenced at 6.30 p.m. and concluded at 8.45 p.m.)