

CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held in Committee Room 1, Council Offices, High Street North, Dunstable on Tuesday, 7 July 2009

PRESENT

Cllr J N Young (Chairman)
Cllr A R Bastable (Vice-Chairman)

Cllrs D J Gale
Mrs R B Gammons
J Kane

Cllrs Ms C Maudlin
Mrs M Mustoe
P Williams

Apologies for Absence: Cllrs P Snelling

Substitutes: Cllrs Ms A M W Graham

Members in Attendance: Cllrs M Gibson (Chairman of Business Transformation O&S Committee)
J G Jamieson (Chairman of Corporate Resources O&S Committee)
Miss A Sparrow (Chairman of Social Care, Health & Housing O&S Committee)
B C A R Wells (Assistant to the Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities)

Officers in Attendance: Mr G Alderson – Director of Sustainable Communities
Mr B Carter – Overview & Scrutiny Manager
Mr L Manning – Democratic Services Officer
Ms S Wileman – Service Improvement Manager

SCOSC/09/1 **Members' Interests**

(a) **Personal Interests:-**

None notified.

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

None notified.

(c) **Prior Local Council Consideration of Applications**

None notified.

SCOSC/09/2 Chairman's Announcements and Communications

The Chairman stated that future meetings could be held at various locations within the Council's boundaries as the Committee's work developed. He then explained that today's meeting, which had originally been scheduled to be held at Chicksands, was being held at Dunstable because of the lack of suitable accommodation at the former. Following consideration Members agreed that, for the foreseeable future, meetings of the Committee should alternate between Dunstable and Chicksands with the next meeting being held at Chicksands.

The Chairman took the opportunity to remind Members that the Overview and Scrutiny Management Panel had agreed that all future Overview and Scrutiny Committees would start at 10.00 am.

In conclusion the Chairman referred to the influential role that the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee would have on the future of Central Bedfordshire.

SCOSC/09/3 Petitions

No petitions were received from members of the public in accordance with the Public Participation Procedure as set out in Annex 2 of Part A4 of the Constitution.

SCOSC/09/4 Questions, Statements or Deputations

No questions, statements or deputations from members of the public were received in accordance with the Public Participation Procedure as set out in Annex 1 of Part A4 of the Constitution.

SCOSC/09/5 Call-In

No matters were referred to the Committee for a decision in relation to the call-in of a decision.

SCOSC/09/6 Requested Items

No items were referred to the Committee for consideration at the request of a Member under Procedure Rule 3.1 of Part D2 of the Constitution.

SCOSC/09/7 Sustainable Communities Policy Development

The Committee received a report by the Director of Sustainable Communities which provided an introduction to the Sustainable Communities Directorate, the Directorate's aims and priorities, the overall strategic context, challenges and opportunities and a suggested Work Programme for the Committee. Using a simple presentation as a backdrop the Director then provided additional information for Members' consideration. He began by reminding the meeting that Sustainable Communities had a leading role in determining how growth targets were met and that Members had a level of control over both planning and delivery.

The Director stated that the aim of the Directorate was to provide thriving, prosperous and inclusive communities and seek to create local jobs. He commented that within Central Bedfordshire's generally affluent communities there were areas of deprivation on housing estates and in rural areas. There was a diverse population and one of the Committee's tasks would be to ensure that everyone felt part of Central Bedfordshire. He added that a major local industry was tourism and referred to Centre Parcs and NIRA.

With regard to living in Central Bedfordshire the Director commented that housing was very expensive and, as a result, there was a trend for young people to move out of the area in order to find suitably priced housing. One of the Committee's tasks would be, therefore, to maximise the provision of affordable housing while seeking to maintain an appropriate social-demographic balance.

The Director reminded Members that, as a unitary authority, the Council was totally responsible for the provision of local services. The Council had, however, only just been formed and he urged Members to be patient as officers dealt with new responsibilities and demands and formulated responses to problems for Members to consider.

The Director placed the Committee's work in context by reminding the meeting that two of the Council's five priorities fell within the Directorate's remit; these being Managing Growth Effectively and Creating Safer Communities, the latter covering not just crime, which was at relatively low levels across the Council area, but the fear of crime and anti social behaviour too.

The Director then stressed that the Directorate's aim was excellence and mediocrity would not be accepted. Once established the Directorate would provide an example of excellence and other authorities would look to it as an example. Referring to the Directorate's priorities as approved by the Executive he stressed that the Directorate would need to establish influence on policy nationally in order to obtain the required level of resources and establish successful partnerships with other authorities to increase the possibility of success.

The Director next referred to the task faced by the Directorate regarding growth. In particular he commented on the three Local Development Frameworks and the other strategies in support including the Housing Strategy, Local Transport Plan and Waste Strategy.

The Director stressed that Members should not lose sight of the connectivity between services; for example housing and jobs and transport, all of which were undertaken by the Directorate and affected the quality of life for most people.

The Director referred to the challenge of understanding and developing policy and expressed the hope that the Committee, Portfolio Holders and officers could work together to achieve this. He added that the Committee had a large workload but he would provide guidance.

In conclusion the Director set out his vision of the Council's future. He stated that, if the governance was right, Central Bedfordshire would be an excellent, Member led authority running and delivering high quality services and providing a high quality, vibrant living environment where residents felt safe and confident.

The Committee was then asked for any comments or queries. A Member queried how the four elected Members on the Police Authority would be kept aware of developments within the Community Safety Partnership (CSP). In response the Director explained that the Police Authority nominated representatives on to the CSP and it was the representatives' responsibility to ensure that the Authority was kept fully aware and engaged with CSP issues. On this basis he did not feel that a problem would arise. He added that the CSP had to include representatives from the various parent bodies but still remain a manageable size. However, the Member expressed dissatisfaction with the situation and commented that it could give rise to problems of communication and policy coordination.

The Chairman of the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee referred to the Local Development Frameworks and the planned population increase in Central Bedfordshire of over 325,000 people by 2031 and queried whether the Council was required to accept this figure, able to secure a reduction or able to reject it all together. In response the Director explained that, since 2004, a planning process had taken place during which authorities had been consulted at each stage and revised rates of housing growth introduced. The Council's representative to the East of England Regional Assembly had sought lower growth levels but this figure would be determined by Government and the high figure could still be imposed. The Chairman of Corporate Resources commented that the organic population growth within Central Bedfordshire was only 10-20,000 people and the outstanding figure was largely made up of people moving into the area. The Director stated that under the current legislation the projected increase was expressed through the Core Strategy document and a Government Inspector would declare it unsound if it failed to accept the revised rates of housing growth. The Council would then be at risk of developers submitting speculative planning applications, the Council refusing them and a Government Inspector allowing them at Appeal because of the absence of a valid Core Strategy. The Director added that the Milton Keynes Growth Area was the largest in the UK and if housing development was constrained then it would have an adverse effect on affordability. However, a Member commented that building large numbers of houses would not automatically deal with the problem of affordability as large numbers would be bought up for buy to let.

Another Member queried the absence of any reference to the environment when dealing with sustainability and how the Directorate could expand in its response to environmental issues, including climate change. In response the Director stated that there was a duty on planning authorities to help reduce the levels of greenhouse gases and have regard of other environmental issues when considering planning applications. Waste authorities also had to have regard to waste minimisation and landfill costs. Furthermore, carbon trading would be introduced for local authorities in 2010. The Director advised that the

corporate lead on this matter was being taken by the Business Transformation Directorate and he stressed that positive action was being taken on environmental issues.

In response to a query regarding the names and roles of the Assistant Directors within Sustainable Communities the Director referred Members to his report which set out the Directorate's six divisions. He then advised the Committee of each Assistant Director's name and their area of responsibility. A Member asked that the information be reproduced as a chart with photographs and contact details. In response to a further query regarding the possible provision of information relating to all senior officers in the Council the Director advised that a similar task was already being undertaken by the Business Transformation Directorate and he would not want to duplicate this.

The Director then drew the meeting's attention to the Bedfordshire Energy and Recycling (BEaR) project which had the aim of procuring a sustainable waste disposal solution for the three unitary authorities in Bedfordshire: Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton Council and which was hosted by the Directorate. The Director briefed the Committee in full on the current status of the BEaR project and also on that of a similar, alternative, project hosted by Buckinghamshire County Council. The meeting noted that the Buckinghamshire County Council project was two years in advance of that for Bedfordshire and included a proposal by Covanta Energy for a facility at Marston Vale which was adjacent to the Bedfordshire authorities' preferred site. The Director emphasised the sensitive nature of this situation and the wider issue of the need for Members not to express any preference for a particular proposal or be seen to be engaged in pre determination in order that an open procurement process could be preserved.

The Committee then turned to consider a suggested Work Programme prepared by the officers. The Director stated that many of the items were driven by central government, some were subject to local discretion whilst others arose from the need to harmonise services provided by the legacy authorities. Members' views and comments were sought as each of the suggested Work Programme items was examined.

The following items were selected for inclusion within the Committee's draft Work Programme:

Development of a Uniformed Presence for Central Bedfordshire (Item Ref 5)

The meeting noted that the two legacy district councils had adopted opposite approaches to the provision of a uniformed team to undertake the enforcement of a range of environmental and community safety legislation.

Harmonisation of Waste Services Policy across Central Bedfordshire (Item Ref 7)

The meeting was aware of the need to examine the available options for the provision of waste services given that the number of households within Central

Bedfordshire was expected to grow by 60,000 and the resulting costs would have major financial implications.

Waste Management Strategy (Item Ref 8)

The meeting noted that this strategy document was required by a new duty on local councils.

Local Transport Plan (LTP3) (Item Ref 9)

The Director of Sustainable Communities informed the meeting that the forthcoming LTP3 would cover all modes of travel and would encourage the most appropriate form of travel for particular journeys. He added that guidance which had been issued by the Department for Transport was radically different in nature from its predecessors. In response to Members' queries he stated that, although LTP3 did not yet exist, LTP2 could not be amended. The Director stressed the importance of creating a Local Transport Plan that covered the whole of the new Central Bedfordshire and incorporated the Core Strategy Preferred Options developed by the Luton and South Bedfordshire Joint Committee. The meeting was advised that there would be a presentation by Trevor Saunders on emerging proposals from LTP3.

Local Development Framework for the former Mid Beds Area: Core Strategy & Development Management DPD (Item Ref 10)

Local Development Framework for the former Mid Beds Area: Gypsy and Traveller DPD (Item Ref 11)

Local Development Framework for the former Mid Beds Area: Site Allocations DPD (Item Ref 12)

The Committee fully recognised the importance of the three LDF items above and the need to give each DPD full consideration. It was noted that the Gypsy and Traveller DPD would deal with the determination of new gypsy and traveller sites whilst the Site Allocations DPD would focus on sites for housing development.

Joint Local Development Framework for Luton and the former South Beds Area (Item Ref 13)

Planning Obligations Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) (Item Ref 14)

Luton-Dunstable Guided Busway (Item Ref 15)

In response to a query the Director stated that it was not possible to undo the Act of Parliament authorising this scheme and, furthermore, Luton Borough Council could proceed with the Busway even if Central Bedfordshire decided to withdraw from the Board. The officer further stated that should Central Bedfordshire withdraw it would lose any influence it had on the scheme,

including the allocation of funding and the provision of the Busway infrastructure within the Dunstable area.

Housing Strategy (Item Ref 16)

Whilst agreeing that this item should be considered the Committee felt this was more of a scrutiny matter than one for investigation.

Enforcement Policy Development Management (Item Ref 19) and Building Control Policy/Enforcement Policy (Item Ref 20)

A Member referred to the lack of enforcement action and the close link between Development Management and Building Control Enforcement Policies. In view of this link Members felt that both items should be considered at the same meeting.

Street Lighting Strategy (Item Ref 22)

The Committee noted the problems arising from the age of the street lighting stock and the need to determine what policy regarding replacement should be adopted. The meeting noted that local ward Member input would be sought on this item.

Development of Congestion Strategy (Item Ref 23)

Members noted that this item included parking and freight and would prioritise these issues.

Highways Maintenance Programme 2010-2011 (Item Ref 25)

The Committee felt that this important item should receive prioritisation.

Dunstable Town Centre Master Plan (Item Ref 26)

Biggleswade Town Centre Master Plan (Item Ref 27)

Town Centre Management Reports (Item Ref 30)

Members saw these three items as closely related.

Local Area Economic Assessment (Item Ref 28)

Central Bedfordshire Economic Development and Regeneration Strategy (Item Ref 29)

The Director informed the Committee that, in addition to the items identified above, Members would also receive reports on performance management and the annual budget planning cycle. The Chairman encouraged Members and officers to bring forward any other items that they felt should be considered.

The Chairman then referred to the large number of items which had already been identified and sought the Committee's authorisation for him and the Vice Chairman to prioritise them.

In conclusion the Chairman informed the meeting that some items could be dealt with by task and finish groups and others by cross-directorate committees.

RESOLVED

- 1** *that a draft Work Programme for the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee be drawn up by the Overview and Scrutiny Manager based on the items identified by Members and set out in the preamble above.*
- 2** *that the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Committee be authorised to prioritise the items included within the draft work programme.*
- 3** *that the Director of Sustainable Communities prepares a chart identifying the senior officers in the Sustainable Communities Directorate and includes role and contact details.*

SCOSC/09/8 Executive Forward Plan

The Committee considered the Executive Forward Plan for the period 1 July 2009 to 30 June 2010.

NOTED

(Note: The meeting commenced at 9.30 a.m. and concluded at 1.30 p.m.)