

## CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held at Room 15, Priory House, Monks Walk, Shefford on Tuesday, 29 September 2009

### PRESENT

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

Cllrs D J Gale  
Mrs R B Gammons  
J Kane

Cllrs Mrs M Mustoe  
P Williams

Apologies for Absence: Cllrs Ms C Maudlin  
P Snelling

Substitutes: Cllrs Mrs C F Chapman MBE  
Ms A M W Graham

Members in Attendance: Cllrs P N Aldis  
Mrs S A Goodchild  
J G Jamieson (Chairman of Corporate Resources  
O&S Committee)  
D Jones  
K C Matthews (Portfolio Holder for Economic Growth  
and Regeneration)  
D McVicar (Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger  
Communities)  
T Nicols (Portfolio Holder for Sustainable  
Communities)  
K Sharer (Vice-Chairman of General Purposes  
Committee)

SCOSC/09/1 **Minutes**

### **RESOLVED**

***that the Minutes of the meeting of the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 29 September 2009 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.***

**SCOSC/09/2 Members' Interests****(a) Personal Interests:-**

<b>Member</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Nature of Interest</b>	<b>Present or Absent during discussion</b>
All Members	11	Membership of one of Central Bedfordshire Council's town centre management committees and/or any of its outside bodies.	Present

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

None notified.

Note: In referring specifically to item 11 the Chairman referred to guidance received from Standards for England. He stressed the importance of Members maintaining an open mind and not pre-determining the issue, especially if a Member also sat on a Town Centre Management Committee.

**(c) Any political whip in relation to any agenda item:-**

None notified.

**SCOSC/09/3 Chairman's Announcements and Communications**

No announcements were made by the Chairman and no matters of communication raised.

**SCOSC/09/4 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/09/5 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/09/6 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 Development Strategy Task Force Recommendations**

No recommendations were received from the Development Strategy Task Force in accordance with the requirements set out in its Purpose and Guidance.

**SCOSC/09/8 Development Strategy Task Force Terms of Reference and Guidance**

Members received a report by the Overview and Scrutiny Officer which sought the Committee's approval of the guidance document for the Development Strategy Task Force. A copy of the document was attached at Appendix A to the officer's report. Members noted that the guidance outlined the Task Force's terms of reference, how its meetings would operate, how reports and updates on progress would be made available and how the public would be involved in meetings. Members further noted that the Task Force had agreed the guidance at its meeting held on 15 September 2009 and that further documents were being developed to provide a clear communications protocol for the Task Force and guidance for members on registering interests.

With regard to consideration of Gypsy and Traveller sites the Chairman reminded the meeting that any recommendations made by the Task Force on this topic would be submitted to the Committee for full debate before the public. He expressed the hope that this, coupled with the presence of Members representing those areas which could be affected by proposed sites, would reassure the public.

The Portfolio Holder for Sustainable development, whilst welcoming the guidance document, expressed concern that there appeared to be a lack of flexibility within the proposed reporting mechanism from the Task Force to the Committee which could lead to slow response on those occasions when he urgently required Members' views on an issue. He added if this situation arose it could lead to the need for an emergency meeting of the Committee to establish Members' view.

In response the Chairman commented that only Gypsy and Traveller and controversial issues would need to be reported back to the Committee. Should a viewpoint be needed urgently the Portfolio Holder was invited to contact the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee and the Chairman of the Task Force to consider how a response might be provided on a particular issue.

In response to a member's query the Overview and Scrutiny Officer reported that the agenda for Task Force meetings would be made available to the public and the recommendations of those meetings would also be made available on the Council's website within ten working days of a meeting taking place.

***RESOLVED that the Development Strategy Task Force guidance document, as agreed by the Task Force at its meeting on 15 September 2009, be approved.***

#### SCOSC/09/9 **Site Allocations Development Plan Document Criteria**

The Committee received a report by the Principal Planning Officer which sought Members' approval of the draft site assessment criteria for selecting the most appropriate sites for inclusion in the Site Allocations Development Plan Document (DPD) for the former Mid Bedfordshire District Council area.

The meeting noted that the DPD needed to identify specific sites for a variety of uses in order to achieve the vision and aims of the Core Strategy. The main element of the DPD would be to allocate sites to help meet the requirement for 17,950 new homes and 17,000 new jobs between 2001 and 2026. Members further noted that the Council needed to demonstrate that there had been a logical and methodical process to the site selection in order to be robust and defensible at a Public Examination by an Independent Inspector. To this end a four stage draft site assessment methodology had been developed and the Committee's approval of this was now sought.

The Principal Planning Officer advised the meeting that a public consultation on the proposed criteria had been carried out and a survey of the responses was circulated for Members' consideration. The Committee noted the variation in the top five priorities identified by residents when compared to those identified by agents, developers and site owners; the top priority for residents being the use of previously developed land over Greenfield sites whereas agents, developers and site owners ranked closeness to a school as their first priority. Lengthy discussion then took place during which some doubt was expressed as to the value of the results given the length of the consultation period and relatively low level of public response. However, it was explained that the Council had not been under any obligation to undertake a consultation on the criteria and this had been carried out purely as a quality assurance measure. Furthermore, the consultees were made up of those who had responded to the initial consultation process in 2008 and they had been able to respond either electronically or by paper copy depending on the preference shown during the initial consultation. In addition the consultation on the proposed criteria had been made available on the Council's website to enable anyone else to respond to it should they wish to.

Members were assured that there would be a major consultation exercise regarding the actual choice of sites.

***RESOLVED that the proposed draft assessment criteria developed for selecting the most appropriate sites for inclusion within the Site Allocation Development Plan Document (DPD), as set out within the report of the Principal Planning Officer, be approved.***

***RECOMMENDED to Council that the assessment criteria be adopted.***

## SCOSC/09/10 Town Centre Management

The Committee considered a report by the Portfolio Holder for Economic Growth and Regeneration which outlined a suggested process for town centre management in Central Bedfordshire under which revenue resources would be directed to areas which had the greatest need. In addition, following instruction from the Constitutional Working Group to examine the constitutional arrangements for Town Centre Management Committees (TCMCs), it was also proposed that such Committees be formally constituted under town council constitutions.

The Portfolio Holder reminded the meeting that the existence of the current TCMCs and their inclusion within Central Bedfordshire Council's Constitution was purely due to the continuation of a policy inherited from South Bedfordshire District Council as a legacy authority; similar Committees had not existed within Mid Bedfordshire. He emphasised that the report did not raise funding as an issue but, instead, suggested how town centre management and regeneration could be dealt with in a uniform manner throughout Central Bedfordshire but with scope for individual variation under which the town centres would set their own agenda and assistance would be made available by Central Bedfordshire if it was requested. The Portfolio Holder stressed that information was still being gathered which would contribute towards the outcome of the process.

A number of public speakers gave their views on the proposals and whilst some aspects received support the overwhelming expression was one of opposition. Some Members of the Committee also made clear their view that the TCMCs operated successfully as they were and expressed concern at any attempt to remove the TCMCs from the Council's Constitution. Concern was also expressed that changes could lead to Central Bedfordshire taking an undue level of involvement in town council matters whilst failing to have regard to the individuality of local towns.

The Assistant Director emphasised that close working relationships would be sought with town councils under the proposed town centre partnership which would address the issue of communication between authorities and offer support to town councils.

The Chairman then took the opportunity to refer to South Bedfordshire's Rural Management Committee, which had been disbanded some years earlier, and some Members commented on the value of that body as a forum for parish councils to meet and debate issues with the District Council and exchange views.

Following further discussion the Chairman proposed new recommendations which he felt would create consistency within the Constitution with regard to town centre management as well as further involve communities as partners and thereby prevent an environment of exclusion. The Chairman also stated that he wished to ensure full Member involvement into all aspects of planning for town centres and that the views of communities were represented at an early stage.

***RECOMMENDED to the Constitutional Working Group that the Town Centre Management Committees in Houghton Regis, Leighton-Linslade and Dunstable remain incorporated within the Central Bedfordshire Council Constitution under Part J2 of that document and that officers of the Sustainable Communities Directorate be asked to incorporate a similar formally constituted structure for the other larger towns in Central Bedfordshire following proper consultation with those towns.***

***RECOMMENDED to the Executive***

- 1 That the process for town centre management in Central Bedfordshire be fully incorporated into the emerging Central Bedfordshire Community Engagement Strategy.***
- 2 That, in the medium term, following a feasibility study and after appropriate consultation and receiving the appropriate reports from the Sustainable Communities Directorate, the smaller towns in Central Bedfordshire be incorporated into a formally constituted structure in the Central Bedfordshire Constitution under Part J2 of that document.***
- 3 That, in the medium term, following a feasibility study and after appropriate consultation and receiving the appropriate reports from the Sustainable Communities Directorate, parishes in Central Bedfordshire be similarly incorporated into a formally constituted structure in the Central Bedfordshire Constitution under Part J2 of that document.***
- 4 That the membership of the proposed Town Centre Partnership Panel be enlarged to include the Chairmen of the Town Centre Management Committees.***

#### SCOSC/09/11 Call-In

The Committee was aware that on 15 September 2009 the Executive had considered a report from the Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities outlining a strategy to avoid overspending on supported (subsidised) local bus services in the current financial year. The Executive had also received comments from the meeting of the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 1 September 2009. Following consideration the Executive had agreed to withdraw support for a number of selected poorer performing bus services with effect from 1 December 2009. The outcome of these reductions in subsidy would be a saving of £60,000 in 2009/10 and a further saving of £120,000 in 2010/11.

This decision of the Executive was subsequently called in by the Chairman of the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration by the Committee at its meeting on 29 September 2009.

The reasons given by the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the call-in were as follows:

'In the absence of a full review of bus services from Transport Officers, the Executive may not have been in a position to make a robust decision which fully considered (a) the impact of the (extensive) proposed cuts on residents, and (b) the use of alternative transport including, but not limited to, buses used in the mornings or evenings which could be used to provide alternative transport options.'

In response to the Chairman's action the Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities emphasised to the Committee that it was necessary for reductions in subsidy to be made as soon as was possible in order to maximise savings within the current financial year and reduce the projected level of overspend. He stressed that it was not possible for a decision on this matter to be deferred until the outcome of a review. In connection with this the Committee noted that whilst a full review of existing service provision had been requested by the Executive this review would take between 12 to 16 months to carry out. It was further noted that the review would be presented to the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee as part of the review process.

Following full debate on this matter the majority of the Committee made clear that they could not, themselves, give their support to the implementation of a reduction in subsidy to individual services without first considering the results of the review and indicated their support for the Committee's original decision.

***RESOLVED that the decision be referred back to the Executive for reconsideration with the following alternative recommendations:***

***That the Executive:***

***1a. Call for a full review of subsidised bus services prior to making a decision to cut services other than those services which are operated primarily or entirely outside of Central Bedfordshire and should be fully supported by other authorities;***

***or***

***1b. Call for a full review of subsidised bus services and, based on the existing information before them, consider a reduction in the overspend by cutting subsidies for a number of carefully selected services where the Executive are confident that this will have a minimum impact on Central Bedfordshire residents.***

***2. Consider the use of existing Central Bedfordshire Council transport services in place of (some) subsidised services and required detailed proposals regarding these alternatives.***

(Note: The meeting commenced at 10.00 a.m. and **adjourned** at 1.30 p.m. It **reconvened** at 10.00 a.m. on Wednesday, 7 October 2009)