

HINCKLEY & BOSWORTH BOROUGH COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMISSION

29 OCTOBER 2009 AT 6.30 PM

PRESENT: Mr MR Lay - Chairman
Mrs R Camamile - Joint Vice-Chairman
Mr P Hall - Joint Vice-Chairman

Mr JG Bannister, Mr PR Batty, Mrs S Francks, Mr DM Gould, Mrs A Hall, MR DW Inman, Mr CG Joyce, Mrs S Sprason, Mr BE Sutton and Mrs BM Witherford.

Mr K Nichols attended the meeting as Chairman of the Flexible Working Group.

Officers in attendance: Mr S Atkinson, Mr N Butler, Mr B Cullen, Mrs T Darke, Mr M Evans, Miss L Horton, Mrs B Imison, Mr S Kohli, Miss R Owen, Mr T Prowse and Mrs S Stacey.

245 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Mr PR Batty, Mrs S Francks, Mr DM Gould and Mrs S Sprason.

246 MINUTES (SC35)

On the motion of Mrs Camamile, seconded by Mr Inman, it was

RESOLVED – the minutes of the meeting held on 10 September 2009 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman subject to the above amendment.

247 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Mrs Sprason declared a personal interest in items 6 and 7 (HRA and Housing Capital Programme presentation and Update on Inspace Partnership) as a Council tenant.

248 PROGRESS ON THE FLEXIBLE WORKING AND RELOCATION PROJECT (SC39)

Members were briefed on the progress of the Flexible Working and Relocation project and it was noted that there had already been a reduction of 25 desks. It was reported that scanning of documents was being investigated to reduce storage requirements and to make information accessible electronically to those working from mixed locations.

Mrs Sprason arrived at 6.37pm.

Concern was expressed about losing the emergency accommodation for homeless families at William Iliffe Street to office space, but it was explained that despite an increase in homelessness, the loss of four family spaces to office use would still leave plenty of emergency accommodation in this and other locations – it was highlighted that at present there were 14 vacant family units.

Mr Gould arrived at 6.40pm.

During discussion and in response to Members' questions, the following points were raised:

- Robust HR policies were in place to support the process, staff and managers. Training on managing staff remotely was planned;
- Questionnaires were being issued to remote staff to ensure they were comfortable with the arrangements and the results of these would be brought back to the Scrutiny Commission;
- A communications strategy was being drawn up for teams within which staff worked flexibly;
- Staff had secure remote access to the Council's IT systems via a key fob (remote access token);
- Phase 3 of the project would involve rolling out flexible working to Environmental Services, Estates, Green Space and the remainder of Revenues & Benefits;
- For home workers, there were health and safety checks on home work spaces and checks that the work space was dedicated and sufficient;
- Productivity would be monitored by managers to ensure work was being undertaken. However an increase in productivity had been recorded in Benefits staff working from home;
- The change in the telephony services to Voice Over IP meant that staff could be contacted at home on their normal office telephone number.

Concern was raised that difficulties with health or performance experienced by home workers may not be identified or addressed as quickly as office based staff. In response it was noted that there would be regular face-to-face team meetings for all staff, and it was also felt that due to district authorities having small teams, even in mixed locations these were close-knit teams and as such problems could be identified just as quickly. Staff could be brought back into the offices to work if problems were identified.

Despite some concerns, Members acknowledged that flexible working was essential to staff recruitment and retention and thanked Belle Imison and her team for the progress made, professional manner in which this had been approached and the positive environment that had been created.

RESOLVED – the report be noted and progress be endorsed.

Mr Nichols left the meeting at 6.59pm.

249 HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT AND HOUSING CAPITAL PROGRAMME PRESENTATION

The Head of Community Services (Housing) gave an overview of the pressures in the housing service and the situation within the Housing Revenue Account. It was noted that the HRA balances were within acceptable levels.

Concern was expressed about the national situation with regard to finance for housing and the lack of government support to secure provision of Council housing in future.

The apparently high cost of kitchens was highlighted and a Member asked if the costs had been reviewed and charges had decreased in line with the national trend. In response it was noted that a tender exercise had recently been undertaken for fitting of kitchens so this cost had been reviewed and was considered acceptable and comparable. Members were reminded that the procurement process had to be followed and HBBC and EU rules had to be followed and suppliers had to meet certain standards which limited the number of companies eligible to tender.

Members asked if it would be possible to look at bringing some housing repairs services in-house. In response it was noted that partnerships with other authorities in various service areas were being explored as this would save money.

A Member expressed concern about the condition of furniture and fittings in sheltered schemes, and in response it was explained that there was a five-year programme to replace furniture and that some parts of schemes had been updated, for example re-carpeting and reupholstering of chairs.

Concerns were raised about disabled adaptations and the number of people on the waiting list and length of wait which had been reported as 15-18 months. It was reported that due to the deficit in the capital programme there was no prospect of increasing the funding available for adaptations and whilst a revenue to capital contribution could be considered, this would create the risk of falling below reserve levels in the revenue account. Members were also reminded that the responsibility for adaptations was shared with the County Council.

It was agreed that a report on options for adaptations be brought back to the Scrutiny Commission and not to the Council Services Select Committee as had been programmed previously.

RESOLVED –

- (i) Members' concern with regard to the waiting times for disabled adaptations be noted;
- (ii) Council be asked to take the Scrutiny Commission's concerns with regard to disabled adaptations into account during the budget setting process;

- (iii) A report be brought back to the Scrutiny Commission to look at options for reducing the waiting time for disabled adaptations to 9 months.

250 UPDATE ON INSPACE PARTNERSHIP (SC36)

Members were provided with an update on the Inspace Partnership as requested at the meeting on 12 February 2009. It was reported that officers had worked with Inspace to ensure adequate monitoring and works had been managed within the budget for 2008/09. Surveys had shown 97% satisfaction. It was reported that costs were continually monitored and challenged and recently a decrease in direct costs had been noted. Officers agreed to provide an answer on a Member's question on the percentage decrease.

Mrs Francks left the meeting at 7.55pm.

At this juncture, prior to questioning officers on the report, Mrs Sprason declared a personal interest in this item and the previous as a Council tenant.

It was suggested that spot checks should be undertaken by officers to ensure quality of work and materials used by Inspace, and in response it was noted that spot checks were already undertaken on a percentage of jobs and on all jobs over £100. In response to a question about skills and training in Inspace, it was reported that there were a variety of skilled and multi-skilled contractors and a lot of emphasis put onto training.

A Member requested that Internal Audit be asked to review the partnership. In response it was reported that this was on the audit plan and would commence the following week.

RESOLVED – the report and progress made be noted and a further report be brought to the Scrutiny Commission on 8 April 2010.

251 UPDATE ON MAJOR CAPITAL PROJECTS (SC37)

Members received a report which advised them of progress made with regard to the Atkins Development, Council Offices Relocation, Argents Mead Enhancement, the Bus Station Development, Hinckley Club for Young People, the Greenfields Enterprise Centre and considerations for the former crematorium site.

Atkins Development

It was noted that the planning application for the Atkins site had been approved and work was underway on the Goddard building and would be completed in May 2010. The estimated costs were within budget but an additional bid had been submitted to EMDA to part fund the shortfall as a result of the reduced Section 111 contribution.

Council Offices

It was explained that whilst the ultimate location for the Council Offices would be in the Bus Station Development, from May 2010 until 2014 these would be located in the Goddard Building.

Concern was expressed that no mention had been made of civic facilities in the new or temporary Council offices. In response it was explained that there would be a temporary Council Chamber in the Goddard Building which would also be hired out to generate some income, and then a permanent Chamber in the Bus Station Development.

Argents Mead Enhancement

It was reported that a number of options for the future of the Argents Mead site were being considered and it was recommended that a target figure of a £5million capital receipt be put into the Medium Term Financial Strategy for this.

Members emphasised that when the Council offices were no longer occupied the site would be a health and safety and antisocial behaviour risk if left empty and in the interest of local residents the site should be enhanced as soon as possible.

A Member expressed concern about the site clearance and demolition costs of the Argents Mead site and how this would feature in the budget and in any agreement made. In response it was reported that either the cost of clearing the site would be deducted from the sale price or the site would be cleared and levelled before sale.

Bus Station

It was reported that rent-free office space for the Council had been negotiated as part of the bus station development although as pay-off for this the Council would not receive income from the car park.

Leisure Centre

Members were reminded that it had been agreed to invest in improving the existing Leisure Centre and this had commenced in September 2009. The newly refurbished centre would open in January 2010.

Greenfields

It was confirmed that funding for the Greenfields project had been secured and the tender process was being entered into. There was some pressure from EMDA to start drawing down funding during this financial year.

Members welcomed progress on this project.

Crematorium site

The Scrutiny Commission was informed that in accordance with the recommendation of the Finance & Audit Services Select Committee, options for developing the crematorium site were being investigated.

The possibility of including the site within the settlement boundary was discussed and officers explained the challenges that there may be to extending into the green wedge at this point. It was noted that this would have to be considered in the site allocations document.

RESOLVED – the substantial progress made be endorsed and Council be RECOMMENDED to support the recommendations.

Mr Gould left the meeting at 8.28pm.

252 UPDATE ON CREDIT UNION

The Director of Finance updated Members on progress made with regard to discussions on setting up a Credit Union for Hinckley & Bosworth. He reported that the first stage would be to set up a borrowing and investment service for staff in partnership with Clockwise and to this end an officer from Finance and HR had been trained to answer questions from staff and a briefing had been arranged for December. With regard to the Credit Union for residents it had been agreed that this would start in Earl Shilton then possibly roll out to other areas of the Borough and this had been discussed with Clockwise and Voluntary Action Leicester. Eight volunteers had come forward to assist with the Credit Union and the Community House in Earl Shilton was being investigated as a possible venue. It was hoped that this would be set up by Christmas. A Communications Strategy and branding was being drawn up with Clockwise and community groups and churches would be approached in launching the Credit Union.

It was agreed that Councillors would also be invited to the briefing in December.

Members thanked officers for the work undertaken on this project and congratulated them on the positive outcome.

253 RENEGOTIATING FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS REQUIRED FOR INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS (SC38)

Members received a report which had been referred by Council for scrutiny by the Commission. It was explained that development on some sites had stalled due to it no longer being feasible for them to provide the financial contributions agreed as part of the Section 106 agreement and Members were asked to consider options for resolving this if they felt it appropriate. The negotiating positions given were deferring contributions, offering a phased approach, or reducing contributions.

Members discussed affordable housing and the importance of this meeting local need before being offered to residents in the rest of the Borough. Officers stated that this was the case but that occasionally they could not

identify people who met this criteria. Members stated that there was no confidence amongst the community that this allocation was undertaken successfully. A Member suggested that such properties should be advertised in the community to reach those who needed affordable housing but were not on the housing register. Officers suggested that they could look to encourage people to apply onto the social housing register.

Concern was also expressed with regard to the five year housing land supply which did not benefit the community as it did not necessarily provide housing where it was needed. Members were reminded that they should bring possible sites forward to avoid having to find sites which may not be as suitable.

Returning to discussions on the report, whilst it was recommended that every application for a variation of a S106 contribution be brought to the Planning Committee, concern was expressed that there was not a representative from each ward on the Committee. It was therefore requested that individual cases be agreed with ward Councillors in addition to the Planning Committee.

Members were not happy to consider reducing contributions on greenfield sites but felt that options 1 and 2 could be supported as they would not be to the detriment of the community, however they acknowledged the need to distinguish between green and brown field sites and the need to bring some buildings on brown field sites back into use, particularly if the planned scheme was high quality and would offer other benefits.

It was agreed that the protocol be reviewed in April 2010.

RECOMMENDED –

- (i) options 1 and 2 be supported but reduced contributions only be considered on brownfield sites;
- (ii) the protocol be reviewed in April 2010.

254 SCOPING OF REVIEW: HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

The Director of Community and Planning Services provided the Scrutiny Commission with an initial paper to commence the Scrutiny Review on Housing Associations. It was agreed that baseline information would be provided to the next meeting of the Scrutiny Commission and at that time consideration would be given to the invitation of witnesses. Witnesses would then be invited to the meeting on 14 January 2010.

It was agreed that in addition to the terms of reference in paragraph 3.3 of the discussion paper an additional point be included “ensuring affordable housing meets local need”.

RESOLVED – baseline information be provided to the next meeting of the Scrutiny Commission in order to commence the review.

255 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME 2009/10 (SC40)

Members received the work programme for 2009/10.

RESOLVED – the work programme be agreed.

256 FORWARD PLAN OF EXECUTIVE AND COUNCIL DECISIONS (SC41)

Members received the Forward Plan of Executive and Council decisions.

RESOLVED – the Forward Plan be noted.

257 MINUTES OF SELECT COMMITTEES AND WORKING GROUPS

The minutes of the following meetings were received:

- (i) Finance & Audit Services Select Committee, 3 August and 14 September 2009 (SC42 and SC43);
- (ii) Council Services Select Committee, 13 August and 1 October 2009 (SC44 and SC45).

(The meeting closed at 9.08 pm)