

1 APRIL 2009

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET

Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet held at Appletree Court, Lyndhurst on Wednesday, 1 April 2009.

p Cllr B Rickman (Chairman)
p Cllr E J Heron (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

p G C Beck
p Mrs D M Brooks
p Mrs J L Cleary

Councillors:

p Mrs M D Holding
p C R Treleaven
p C A Wise

In Attendance:

Councillors:

Ms L C Ford
D Harrison
P E Hickman
Mrs A J Hoare
Mrs M E Lewis
B M F Pemberton

Councillors:

Mrs A M Rostand
Mrs B Smith
Mrs S I Snowden
F P Vickers
P R Woods

Also In Attendance:

Mrs P White and Mrs W Celea, Housing Policy and Report Focus Group Representatives.

Officers Attending:

D Yates, R Jackson, J Mascal, Ms J Bateman, Miss G O'Rourke, and for part of the meeting D Atwill, D Brown, G Ballantyne and K Leach.

105. MINUTES.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 4 March 2009, having been circulated, be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

106. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

Cllr Mrs Smith declared interests in Minute Nos. 112 and 113.

107. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION.

No issues were raised during the public participation period.

108. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENT.

The Chairman reported that the issue of sports hall floors at the Council's health and leisure centres would be discussed at a joint Corporate Overview/Leisure, Culture and Youth Matters Review Panel meeting on 9 April.

He said that "As a council we believe that when things do not turn out as we would wish, we will learn from our experiences and be accountable for our actions. I have studied the report prepared by the executive directors. It is a thorough account of what happened and identifies areas where improvements can be made for the benefit of the council taxpayer".

109. ANNUAL AUDIT REPORT (REPORT A).

The Cabinet considered the Annual Audit and Inspection letter that summarised the work undertaken by the Audit Commission and the District Auditor for the preceding year.

Mr P Jarvis, Ms K Lee and Ms H Molteno from the Audit Commission presented the report and commented in detail on each specific area.

In 2007/08 the Council made good progress in implementing its corporate improvement plan, with the majority of key objectives and milestones being achieved. The Council demonstrated improvement in over half of its key performance indicators with nearly half being in the best 25%, which was above average when compared to other councils.

Whilst the Council's risk management arrangements had improved since the previous year the Audit Commission commented that there remained scope for further improvement, specifically on recognising and responding to partnership risks and providing risk management training to all relevant staff.

In terms of Financial Management and Use of Resources, for the financial year 2007/08 the report concluded that the Council had approved its financial statements in advance of the 30 June statutory deadline and the Audit Commission had issued an unqualified opinion on them and commented that this was a commendable achievement by the Council. The statements were well presented and supported by comprehensive working papers.

An unqualified Value for Money Conclusion was also issued. The Council continued to provide good value for money. The Council's performance continued to improve and was maintained at a level that was above average compared to other councils whilst costs remained below average.

The scoring in the Use of Resources assessment was undertaken against five key themes with 1 being the lowest score and 4 being the highest. NFDC scored a 3 for each of the five themes. The Council's achievement was commendable as the process continued to get tougher each year.

Members noted that a new performance assessment framework, the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) had been developed which would, in future, provide an independent assessment of how well people were being served by their local public services. The CAA would have two main elements. An area assessment that looked at how well public services were delivering better results for local people within agreed priorities, and how they were likely to improve; and an organisational assessment for councils which would combine the external auditor's assessment of value for money with a joint inspectorate assessment of council service performance.

The first area and organisational assessment reports would be published in November 2009.

The Chairman expressed his thanks to the previous leader of the Council, the Chief Executive and officers for their excellent work in maintaining the Council's high standards of achievement.

The Chief Executive thanked the Audit Commission for their rigorous but constructive assessment. He said that joint working with members had enabled the Council to remain an excellent authority. The Council was already engaged with the new CAA process and would continue to work hard to maintain its standards.

In discussing the detail of the Annual Audit Letter members noted that the matters that had been raised for improvement were already being acted upon. In particular, members once again noted the unique problems of shortage of land in the New Forest that reduced the ability to provide sufficient affordable housing. However, the Housing Portfolio Holder was pleased to report that the Council had completed 136 new affordable homes in the district in 2007/08 which was in excess of the target of 100.

In conclusion the Audit Commission commented that in terms of action the Council needed to:-

- keep under review plans to achieve improvements in performance in planning and homelessness services;
- recognise and respond to any significant partnership risks, and ensure all appropriate staff received relevant risk management training

Overall, the Audit Commission were pleased with the direction of travel of the Council and that it was clear that the Council were continually improving.

RESOLVED:

That the Annual Audit Letter for 2007/08 be noted.

110. COUNCIL HOUSE RENT INCREASE – UPDATE (REPORT B).

The Cabinet was advised of the latest position regarding the increase in council house rents for 2009/2010. A draft determination and consultation had been received from the Government proposing that the average rent increase be reduced by half. However, that was a consultation document and a formal determination was not expected until May. That would mean that, following the required 28 day notice to tenants, the actual rent reduction might not be achieved until June or July.

Members discussed the risk to the Council of implementing a reduced rent increase in advance of a formal decision as opposed to the benefits to tenants of reducing the increase as soon as possible. They also took into account the potential costs to the Council that could be incurred in terms of repayments to tenants as a result of the Government's previous higher increase.

Mindful of the difficult situation that many tenants, particularly those on low incomes, found themselves in, the Cabinet agreed that subject to the appropriate notice requirement, the lower average rent increase of 2.9% should be implemented as soon as possible.

Mrs White, the Housing Policy and Report Focus Group Representative thanked the Housing Portfolio Holder and the Chairman of the Housing Review Panel for their time and commitment to tenants which was much appreciated.

RECOMMENDED:

That, following receipt of a draft determination and proposed consultation period from the Government, taking into account the associated risks to the Council of implementing a rent decrease in advance of formal confirmation versus the benefits to council tenants, a reduction in the council rent increase be agreed to give an average rent increase of 2.9% for the remainder of 2009/2010, to be implemented as soon as practical.

111. OLDER PEOPLE'S ACTION PLAN (REPORT C).

The Cabinet considered an Older People's Action Plan that set out how the Council would value and support older people and importantly link to the work and aims of Hampshire County Council to ensure a consistent and coordinated approach to the needs of older people in the District.

Following the publication of the HCC Older People's Wellbeing Strategy, and in line with the approach taken with all other themes linking to the Council's Community Strategy and Local Strategic Partnership, a Community Action Network (CAN) was established for the older people's agenda. The work of the CAN also fed into and informed the work of the District Health and Wellbeing Board.

The prime purpose of the older people's CAN was to create an Older People's Action Plan that primarily aimed to set targets that would meet the needs of older residents in the New Forest but also feed into and complement the wider HCC Older People's Wellbeing Strategy.

The Employment, Health and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder supported the proposed action plan which would assist in bringing services together and provide a means of signposting access to those services for older people.

RESOLVED:

That the Older People's Action Plan, to support and value older people in the district be agreed.

112. KEY ACHIEVEMENTS 2008/09 AND PROPOSED KEY TARGETS 2009/10 (REPORT D).

Cllr Mrs Smith declared a personal and prejudicial interest in this item as she was seeking to lease a property to the Council (Key Target HSG07). She left the meeting during that aspect of the discussion.

The Cabinet considered the Council's assessment of achievements against key targets for 2008/09 and the proposed key annual targets for 2009/2010. They also looked at an overview of all the targets set against the corporate plan.

The Chairman, in introducing the item pointed out that the Policy & Resources Portfolio target (PRS02) related specifically to negotiations over single status and not to the annual negotiations over pay levels. The annual pay award was now negotiated at a national level. However his view was that at New Forest there should be a pay freeze for all employees for 2009/2010. Whilst the Council continued to value its staff highly they would be asked to show restraint in the face of the unprecedented economic turmoil.

The Chairman said that elected members had already shown the way by voting to forgo any pay increase for themselves. Whilst he was pleased with that approach he would wish the Council to go further and explore other ways of reducing costs including the question of the number of councillors on the authority. Clearly that was not solely within the power of the Council however, he would continue to do all that was possible to reduce costs at a time when many people in the community were facing increasing hardship.

Portfolio Holders commented on some of the detail of their individual key achievements for last year and their targets for the forthcoming year.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the assessment of performance against the 2008/09 targets (Appendix 1 of Report D to the Cabinet, pages 3-11) be noted;
- (b) That it be agreed that the overall set of proposed targets for 2009/10 (Appendix 2 of Report D to the Cabinet, pages 12-20) provides a reasonable balance across all the key issues for the coming year, and that no key or strategic issues for the council have been omitted; and
- (c) That the proposed SMART targets for 2009/10, as set out in Appendix 2 of Report D to the Cabinet, pages 12-20 be agreed.

113. COMMUNITY MEALS (REPORT E).

Cllr Mrs Smith declared a personal and prejudicial interest in this item as she was an occasional driver/deliverer for the Community Meals Service. She left the meeting during discussion of this item.

The Cabinet considered a proposal to set the NFDC Community Meals price for 2009/2010 at £3.10. Members noted that HCC had already set the county meal price at that amount.

In supporting the proposal the Employment, Health and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder thanked all those who delivered community meals throughout the district.

RECOMMENDED:

That the New Forest District Council Community Meals (Meals on Wheels and Luncheon Clubs) price for 2009/10 be set at £3.10, an increase of 10 pence (3.3%).

114. DESIGNATION OF POLLING PLACES (REPORT F).

The Cabinet considered a proposal to delegate authority to the Chief Executive to designate areas or buildings outside of a polling district as the polling place for that district.

RESOLVED:

That authority to designate polling places outside the relevant polling district in special circumstances be delegated to the Chief Executive, after consultation with local councillors.

115. WRITE OFFS (REPORT G).

Following the senior management restructure in the Council officer delegations and authorisations were reviewed. As a result the Cabinet considered a new code of practice for Write Offs in order to streamline the process and make it more efficient.

The Council's current income collection performance was good with approximately £150m collected in income each year which equated to about 99.5% of that due.

RECOMMENDED:

That Financial Regulations be updated to reflect that Heads of Service be authorised to write off debts as detailed in Report G to the Cabinet.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That a new code of practice for write offs as detailed in Appendix 1 to Report G to the Cabinet be agreed with effect from 1 April 2009; and
- (b) That an annual performance report on the matter be submitted to the Corporate Overview Panel.

116. NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL/TEST VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL JOINT WORKING ARRANGEMENTS.

RESOLVED:

That Cllrs E Heron and Wise be agreed as the main appointees with Cllr Beck as the deputy to an informal NFDC/TVBC Joint Member Board.

CHAIRMAN

(DEMOCRAT/CB010409/MINUTES.DOC)