

7 OCTOBER 2009

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET

Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet held at Appletree Court, Lyndhurst on Wednesday, 7 October 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
Mrs A J Hoare
Mrs M E Lewis
Sqn Ldr B M F Pemberton
L R Puttock
Mrs A M Rostand

Councillors:

Mrs B Smith
Mrs S I Snowden
J G Ward
Dr M N Whitehead
P R Woods

Also In Attendance:

Mrs W Celea, Housing Policy and Report Focus Group Representative.

Officers Attending:

D Yates, R Jackson, J Mascall, Ms J Bateman and Miss G O'Rourke and for part of the meeting G Ashworth, D Brown, K Connolly, C Elliott and Mrs D MacLean.

31. MINUTES.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 2 September 2009, having been circulated, be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

32. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

No declarations of interest were made by members in connection with any agenda item.

33. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION.

No issues were raised during the public participation period.

34. NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK – CORE STRATEGY FOR THE NEW FOREST DISTRICT OUTSIDE OF THE NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK (REPORT A).

The Cabinet considered recommending the adoption of the Core Strategy for the New Forest District outside of the New Forest National Park, taking on board the conclusions of the Public Examination Inspector, who had found the plan to be “sound” subject to some relatively minor changes.

The Planning and Transportation Portfolio Holder said that the Core Strategy was the culmination of three years work. The Council had considered how well the existing Strategy had been working and the concerns of local people. Following extensive public consultation it was clear that four main issues needed to be addressed. Firstly, the natural environment and the importance of preserving the unique local area; secondly, the imposition by the Government of large house building targets that were destroying the character of towns and villages; thirdly, the lack of affordable housing for local people and lastly the need to create a viable economy within the area to provide employment opportunities for local young people. The Portfolio Holder was particularly pleased that the submitted Core Strategy had received the positive endorsement of the Government-appointed Inspector without significant modification. The planning strategy for the future of the District now addressed the main points of concern and took into account the expressed wishes of local communities as well as planning policies adopted by Parliament.

The Environment Portfolio Holder commended officers for their work which had been done quickly and efficiently. It was the first Core Strategy to be confirmed in Hampshire and the importance of that should not be underestimated.

The Employment, Health and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder expressed concern at the increase in the required level of developers’ contributions feeling that it would discourage building and was a form of taxation. The Portfolio Holder was also of the view that the affordable housing requirement was too high. As such, she did not feel able to support the adoption of the Core Strategy.

A number of other members spoke in support of the Core Strategy. In particular it was agreed that it addressed local concerns and would provide a sound set of rules as a base for the future.

The Planning and Transportation Portfolio Holder confirmed that there would be continued flexibility to negotiate the level of developers’ contributions on small development sites where financial viability was an issue.

RECOMMENDED:

That the Core Strategy document, taking on board the changes set out in the public examination Inspector’s Report, be adopted as a part of the statutory development plan for the area.

35. HOUSE BUILDING PROGRAMME PILOT (REPORT B).

The Cabinet considered a proposal to bid for Local Authority Challenge Funding to build Council Houses and to approve, in principle, the undertaking of prudential borrowing to match fund the grant available. They also considered the approval of a partner to take forward a bid.

The Housing Portfolio Holder said that the House Building Programme Pilot was good news for the Council and she strongly endorsed the proposals. The affordable housing waiting list in the district comprised over 5,000 households and it would always be difficult to meet that demand. Last year, in partnership with Registered Social Landlords, the Council delivered 171 affordable homes which was a significant achievement. However, the current economic climate would make that level hard to sustain. The Council needed to explore every possible option and the building of Council houses, funded jointly by the Homes and Communities Agency and through borrowing, would be one way of achieving that.

Mrs Celea, Housing Policy and Report Focus Group Representative, said that the tenants fully supported the proposals.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That a bid for Local Authority Challenge Funding to build Council Houses be made;
- (b) That the Council's ICT Security team be nominated as the Investment Management System Security Administrator/s;
- (c) That the principle of prudential borrowing to match fund the grant available be agreed; and
- (d) That Mace, Management and Construction, be appointed as the partner to take forward a successful bid.

36. REFORM OF COUNCIL HOUSE FINANCE (REPORT C).

The Cabinet considered a response to a consultation paper on the reform of council housing finance.

The Housing Portfolio Holder said that the Government's proposals for reform had been eagerly awaited. It had been hoped that the paper would spell out clear proposals for ending the unfair housing revenue account system whereby NFDC tenants effectively have to give over £8m of their rents to the Government each year.

However, although the consultation paper did make a number of suggestions, it failed to set out clearly how those suggestions would impact upon the New Forest and its tenants. As a result the Portfolio Holder regretted that the Council had no option but to be vague in its response. She could not recommend supporting possible changes to the housing finance system that did not make clear what the impact upon the Council might be. She expressed disappointment that it was unlikely that progress would be made in these reforms for some time particularly as an election was due next year. Nevertheless, the Housing Portfolio Holder supported the detailed responses to the questions set out in the Report C to the Cabinet.

The Cabinet noted that until the situation with the notional national housing debt was resolved it was difficult to ascertain clearly what the impact might be on the Council.

Mrs Celea, Housing Policy and Report Focus Group Representative said that the tenants supported the response as proposed. They looked forward to the prospect of retaining a greater level of rental income in the future but agreed that more detail was needed.

RESOLVED:

That the proposed response to the consultation paper on the reform of council housing finance as set out in Report C to the Cabinet be agreed.

37. ICT STRATEGY (REPORT D).

The Cabinet considered a Strategy document with supporting policies to develop the use of Information and Communications Technology within the Council, for the next four years to 2013. The ICT strategy contained a number of specific objectives that were closely linked to the major themes of the Corporate Plan.

The Finance and Efficiency Portfolio Holder said that the Council now had a sound base of ICT programmes and systems. He supported the proposed Strategy which would achieve continuous improvement across all services.

The Cabinet noted that the ICT Strategy incorporated a high level action plan and a more detailed, project-based ICT Work Programme, complete with estimated costs and a broad implementation timetable. The ICT Strategy also committed to reducing the Council's carbon footprint and optimising the use of available accommodation.

Members noted that the Corporate Overview Panel had worked through the Strategy in detail and supported its adoption.

RECOMMENDED:

- (a) That the ICT Strategy for 2009 - 2013 and associated ICT Work Programme be approved; and**
- (b) That progress on implementing the ICT Strategy be reported annually to the Finance & Efficiency Portfolio Holder and the Corporate Overview Panel.**

38. CATERING PROVISION AT APPLETREE COURT – ALTERNATIVE ARRANGEMENTS (REPORT E).

The Cabinet considered proposals to change the method of provision of catering arrangements at Appletree Court.

Mr A Cornick, Unison Branch Secretary, addressed the Cabinet. A letter that he had written to the Chairman on behalf of employee side was circulated.

Mr Cornick said that this was an important issue for his members and the speed of the decision had taken employees by surprise. 300 employees had signed a petition to keep Café Revitalise open however, employee side realised that every service was under scrutiny. Employee side said that staff had a number of ideas and suggestions to increase turnover and income and given time felt that this could be achieved. He said that January was not a good time to close a staff facility and asked that the deadline be extended to at least the end of the financial year to give an opportunity to increase usage.

Mr Cornick said that money had been spent on making Café Revitalise a pleasant place for employees to take a break and this would be wasted if the facility were closed. He said that if the One Site proposals meant that Appletree Court became the main place of employment then a restaurant would be advantageous. He felt that the proposal to have a visiting sandwich van would discriminate against those with walking difficulties.

Members noted that over the last few years the usage of the Café Revitalise had steadily decreased, despite efforts to encourage greater patronage. On average, only 15 hot meals per day were purchased by staff. The daily income was now in the region of £80 and that together with the cost of overheads meant that Café Revitalise had become economically unviable.

The current arrangements were not meeting employee needs whilst the new proposals would be able to provide a wider variety and choice and would save an estimated £36,000 per annum. The Cabinet noted that the facility for employees to have an area to eat lunch and relax would remain. It was only proposed to close the actual kitchen.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Efficiency said that the service had been radically changed 3 years ago in an attempt to increase turnover. This had not worked and a modernisation of the service was now needed. The service would continue but in an alternative format tailored to meet the present demand.

RESOLVED:

That, subject to the Council agreeing to the recommendation from the General Purposes and Licensing Committee (11 September 2009) in relation to this matter, the proposed changes to the method of provision of catering at Appletree Court as outlined in paragraph 3 of Report E to the Cabinet be approved.

CHAIRMAN