

20 NOVEMBER 1997

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

**LIAISON MEETING WITH NEW FOREST DISTRICT ASSOCIATION
OF PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILS**

Notes of Liaison meeting with New Forest District Association of Parish and Town Councils held at Appletree Court, Lyndhurst on Thursday, 20 November 1997.

Present:

Councillors:

J E Coles	(Leader of the Council and Chairman of Policy and Resources Committee) (in the Chair)
J A G Hutchins JP	(Chairman of the Council)
N D M McGeorge	(Chairman, Central Services Committee)
Miss G M Rickus CBE	(Chairman, Direct Services Contracts Committee)
F R Harrison	(Vice-Chairman, Housing Committee)
Mrs B Smith	(Chairman, Environmental Services and Licensing Committee)
J J Dawson	(Chairman, Leisure Services Committee)
W J Greer	(Leader, Conservative Group)

Officers Attending:

I B Mackintosh	Managing Director
Ms E Malcolm	Director of Environment Services
N J Gibbs	Director of Community Services
D A Gurney	Director of Finance and Administration
G Tombs	Head of Public Services
Mrs R Rutins	Committee Administrator

New Forest District Association of Parish and Town Councils:

Mr R E Wareham	Chairman, New Forest District Association of Parish and Town Councils and representing Hordle Parish Council
Mr B Rangecroft	Secretary, New Forest District Association of Parish and Town Councils and representing Marchwood Parish Council

Representing Parish and Town Councils:

Name:	Town/Parish Council
J Franklin	Ashurst and Colbury
P N Reynolds	Bramshaw
S Owen)	Bransgore
J W Green)	
B Smith)	Copythorne
J Samways)	
J Clampit	Damerham

D G Timms		East Boldre
M J Brooks)	Ellingham Harbridge and Ibsley
M Duffin)	
K Coles		Fawley
V A Marlow		Hale
W H Dow		Hyde
S S Wade		Hythe and Dibden
M Thorp		Lymington and Pennington
T M Abbott		Lyndhurst
J Simmons		Milford-on-Sea
R J Glover)	Netley Marsh
K Bowley)	
P M Jones)	New Milton
R P Waterman)	
J Newton)	Ringwood
D Newton)	
T L Gibson		Sopley
B Rickman		Sway
D I Biggs		Totton and Eling
N Angel		Woodgreen

Apologies:

were received from

Cllrs Mr R Cox, Chairman, Business Services Contracts Committee
 Cllr Mrs J K Vernon-Jackson MBE JP DL, Chairman, Planning and Transportation Committee
 Cllr Mrs M J Robinson, Chairman, Housing Committee
 Mr Hobby, Milford-on-Sea Parish Council
 Mrs Parsons, New Milton Town Council
 Mr Sturgess, Bramshaw Parish Council
 Mrs Majury, Hale Parish Council
 Mr Parkes, Hythe and Dibden Parish Council
 Mr White, Lymington and Pennington Town Council

1. NOTES (PAPER A).

The notes of the meeting held on 17 April 1997 were agreed as a correct record.

2. FIRE SAFETY.

The meeting received a short talk on fire safety by Mr T Anderson, Station Commander of the Lyndhurst Fire Station. He stressed basic points members of the public needed to know and initial actions they needed to take in the event of a fire in their own homes. He emphasised the wish of the Fire and Rescue Service to go out to the community and talk to groups of people, large and small, on basic fire safety and fire prevention initiatives in order to reduce deaths and injuries resulting from fire. If any Parish was able to offer a venue for a talk, they should contact the Lyndhurst Fire Station. The Chairman encouraged parishes to arrange for talks in their areas.

3. EXPENDITURE PLANS.

The District Council's latest expenditure plans to 2001/02 built on the financial strategy adopted last year. That year the Council had undertaken a significant review of its overall plans, calling on services and management to make large reductions in expenditure to keep within likely forecast cap levels from the Central Government. Since then the new government had continued to use the established public expenditure plans. No provision had been made for employees' pay rises for the fifth successive year. This had significantly impacted on the level of savings needed to be made by local authorities. Effectively, the Council's budget for 1998/99 could rise by only half of one percent. With inflation at 3%, reductions had to be made. Inflation cost the Council in the order of £500,000 a year.

The Council's standard spending assessment should be known in November or December. The Council would then be able to review its overall position. It was hoped that there would be indicators about future trends, the position on capping and inflation factors for pay increases. Shire districts were unlikely to gain overall. Any additional monies available were likely to go to education, law and order and the National Health Service.

The government was stressing that the abolition of the existing system of capping and the return to local control of non-domestic rates was dependent on a package of democratic reforms, improvements to accountability and best value.

The Council's financial strategy was once again to set the 1998/99 budget at the assumed capping level. Any other action would impose further significant cut backs in services over and above future savings which might have to be made from 1999/2000 onwards. The Council might wish to cushion the effect of reduced net expenditure by using the general reserve in later years. This could impact on levels of capital investment from 2002 to 2003 onwards.

Following the strategy set last year, the Council should be able to set a day to day budget within the capping limit and provide an amount of funds for either its capital expenditure or to reduce further savings. However, if the government carried on with present controls into the new Millennium, the Council would need to make further savings rising to £1,451,000 in 2001/02. Car parking income would help to reduce the shortfall. Strategies would be further developed when the government's plans unfolded. The latest forecasts of the Council's spending were:-

	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000	2000/01	2001/02
	£000	£000	£000	£000	£000
	14669	15232	15880	16543	17331
Estimated Cap	15559	15640	15720	15800	15880
Below(-) Above	-890	-408	160	743	1451
Capping					

Only one major capital scheme was now ongoing, Totton Phase II. Most other future schemes, other than any specific coast protection grant aided schemes, were for capital maintenance. Unless private finance was available or schemes had a very high payback, the Council's capital programme for the foreseeable future would be low.

A new initiative for the Council this year was clearly to define key corporate priority areas for expenditure. These were:-

- Generating economic development
- Meeting poverty and deprivation initiatives
- Sustainability (Local Agenda 21)
- Community safety.

The last priority had been set by the Council before the government's recent announcement to make community safety a statutory feature.

It was apparent that with the present financial constraints and the key aims for developing services, working together with parish and town councils, voluntary and other organisations to achieve best value for money was essential.

The District Auditor had complimented the Council in 1996 on its approach to overall strategic financial management as well as in its draft management letter to the Council this year. The District Auditor had said that the Council's general financial strategy was overall good and that the Council had been proactive in considering future expenditure plans to the year 2002. The Council had been complimented on identifying the need to realise efficiency savings which would be central to the continued sound financial standing of the Council.

It was difficult for the Council, as with any other organisation, to make plans without having background information in place. However, the Council had a flexible framework which the District Auditor had confirmed was sufficiently robust to meet the likely challenges local authorities would undoubtedly face.

4. CAR PARKING CHARGES (PAPER B).

The decision of the Council on 3 November to introduce car parking charges in town and certain village car parks was considered. The proposed amendments to the Car Parking Order resulting from the decision were being advertised, with the deadline for objections and representations being 6 December.

In reply to a question, it was explained that in general no changes had been made to short stay parking periods in conjunction with the introduction of charging in order to avoid disruption to parking patterns. Therefore, the charge in some areas would be 50p for two hours whereas in others it would be 50p for three hours or 50p for four hours.

It was explained that the proposals agreed upon had as a fundamental principle the charging of the many visitors to the area, whilst allowing significant exemptions to residents. Introducing a short, one hour charge had not been considered appropriate as most residents would be exempt from the parking charges by way of the free permit to each household.

The Lyndhurst Parish Council was pleased to note that the District Council had taken account of its request for charging to cease in the Lyndhurst car park at 5.30 pm.

5. PRUNING OF SHRUBS ADJACENT TO HIGHWAYS AND ON AMENITY LAND.

New Milton Town Council had received numerous complaints this year regarding overgrown shrubs on highway and other publicly owned land. It was noted that shrubs affecting sight lines were pruned annually to a height of 600mm. Those that did not affect sight lines were trimmed once every three years. If they became a safety hazard they were trimmed as necessary. Shrubs on amenity land were pruned annually.

If Parish Councils wished shrubs trimmed to a higher standard in a particular area, the Town or Parish Council was invited to contribute towards the additional cost. New Milton Town Council considered this unreasonable as they were receiving large numbers of complaints from the public and were passing them on to the District Council, without being recompensed by the District Council for the service. The officers of New Milton Town Council and the District Council would discuss the issue in more detail.

It was pointed out that grass cutting and shrub pruning was very difficult to predict. Assumptions on growth rates had to be made well in advance in order to schedule cuts across the District. Growth rates in the spring/summer of 1997 had been abnormal and this might have led to the high level of complaints this year.

6. STATEMENT OF PARTNERSHIP (PAPER B).

The report detailing responses to recent consultations by the District Council was considered. The Association would consider it at its next meeting.

Although one or two instances of lack of consultation by the District Council had arisen over the past few years, Parishes generally concurred that the spirit of the partnership agreement was being adhered to by the District Council. The District Council was, however, sometimes disappointed at the response received to consultations on important policy documents. Parishes were urged not to miss the opportunity to influence District Council policy and strategy when such consultations took place.

7. POSSIBLE DEVOLUTION OF FUNCTIONS TO TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS.

It was reported that at the meeting with Town and Parish Clerks held earlier in the week, it had been agreed that at present there was little scope for further devolution of functions to Parishes, bearing in mind existing contractual arrangements and the underlying principle of achieving best value for money. The matter would, however, be carefully examined in the coming months in conjunction with the Best Value initiatives. These were likely to replace the existing Compulsory Competitive Tendering regime and would require the District Council to demonstrate that each of its services was being rendered at best value to the community. Further opportunities for Parishes to offer some services would have to be examined in detail at that stage. In the interim, Parishes were welcome to raise with the officers any opportunities for further delegation if it could be demonstrated that this would be cost-effective and in the best interests of the community.

8. TOWN CENTRE MANAGEMENT (REPORT D).

Parishes were informed of the initiative being taken for two officers of the Environment Services Directorate to meet Parish Councils to discuss day to day, practical operational issues affecting their Parishes. These officers could form a useful channel between Town and Parish Councils and the appropriate Head of Service and relay concerns to the District Council quickly and effectively. Parishes welcomed the initiative.

The proposed appointment by the District Council of a Town Centre Manager, subject to final approval and budget provision, was discussed. The duties attached to this post would initially focus on Hythe and Ringwood but it was hoped that the role would be extended into other areas in future years. In this regard, the District Council hoped to build on and learn lessons from experiences in other towns and districts such as Chard in Somerset.

9. "BEST VALUE" PRINCIPLES (REPORT E).

Possible implications of the proposed best value initiatives for town and parish councils were discussed. There was no definitive information yet available regarding the impact on local councils but as there had been no mention of de minimus provisions for best value, it appeared that local councils would be affected. Although it was the government's proposal to replace the present CCT regime with best value, there was no firm indication of the date on which this would take effect but it was thought likely in April 2000.

Initial proposals showed that best value would not be a soft option to CCT. It would apply to all services and not only to the defined activities under CCT. Current advice was that a review of all services would be required on a rolling four to five year programme. The government had stressed that it was looking for greater consultation with 'stakeholders' to take on board their views on service specification and delivery. Stakeholders included the public, trade organisations, community groups and other interested parties.

The District Council had set up a best value project group to examine the issue in detail. This group would keep a careful watch on the outcome of the best value initiative in a number of pilot authorities. Parish Councils would be kept informed of any implications for them.

10. COMMUNITY SAFETY ISSUES.**(a) Law and Order Issues (Report F)**

It was reported that the Government proposed making community safety a statutory duty of local authorities. The District Council would work closely with Towns and Parishes on the issue. A seminar was being arranged for all members of the Council in the near future.

The action being taken by the District Council and the Crime Prevention Working Party to assist in the reduction of crime were considered. It was noted that the Crime Prevention Working Party had produced a three-year strategy and action proposal after analysing results of the Crime Audit conducted in 1996. The Community Safety Officer post had been made full-time and this would enable the further development of local community based crime prevention initiatives.

The Government's proposals for Community Safety Orders were discussed. These Orders could be actioned against persistent and troublesome groups or individuals.

Other Government proposals were aimed at involving the community more in policing initiatives. For example, policing plans would have to be agreed with local people in future.

It appeared that no additional resources would be provided for community safety from central government. This was of concern. It was recognised that reasons for crime were widespread and issues such as the increase in exclusions from schools had an impact. Any effective crime prevention measures had to be part of a corporate approach. It seemed that Hampshire County Council would be making resources available for various initiatives to tackle youth crime.

The importance of high quality youth work in reducing crime was stressed. Steps taken by Parishes and Towns to fund or part-fund youth workers were seen as extremely valuable.

Tribute was paid to the work done by the District's Community Safety Officer. She would be very happy to discuss any points Parishes wished to raise with the Detached Youth Worker (in respect of Lymington/Pennington) and any other relevant organisations.

(b) Parish Role in Crime Advisory Clinics (Report G)

An item regarding the Parish role in Crime Advisory Clinics would be included in the next agenda for the Association's meeting. It was felt that attendance at these would perhaps be better if they were held in the evenings rather than during the day.

(c) Community Youth Support (Report H)

The question of Town and Parish Councils contributing towards the support of youth work in their areas would be included in the agenda for the next meeting of the Association.

11. SECTION 106 AGREEMENTS (REPORT I).

Lymington and Pennington Town Council was concerned that they had no input into Section 106 Agreements. It was explained that what could and could not be sought by means of Section 106 Agreements was now strictly controlled by legislation and Government guidance. In practice the benefits which planning obligations sought to secure were normally set out in planning policies for the area. The most common example was the provision of a large off-site open space as an alternative to developers providing smaller areas within their developments. The legislation provided that any open space or financial contributions for open space had to be given/paid to the District Council. The District Council, through its Leisure Services Committee, had decided that any land to be passed to Parish Councils would be leasehold and not freehold. The Lymington and Pennington Town Council did not agree with this policy. The proposed seminar on open space would discuss these issues in detail.

12. BREACHES OF PLANNING LAW (REPORT J).

The legal position with regard to taking action for breaches of planning law and the difference in procedures between planning contraventions and action for breaches of Tree Preservation Order legislation were understood. The view was, however, expressed that the lack of immediate remedial measures for breaches of planning law encouraged people to "play the system" at great cost to the public purse. It was considered imperative for the new Government to tackle the problem and make more immediate remedies available. In practice this was unlikely because of the Government's other priorities.

13. INTEREST ON DEVELOPERS' CONTRIBUTIONS FUND.

It was reported that there was no change proposed in the payment of interest rates on those Developers' Contributions earmarked for payment to Town and Parish Councils. A change was, however, intended in respect of those contributions held by the District Council for off-site schemes, to which the District Council invariably contributed from the General Fund. The matter would be discussed during the proposed Open Space Seminar early in the New Year.

Local Councils expressed concern at the change in policy which would result in reduced amounts being directly available for open space in their areas. It was, however, pointed out the District Council had from its own resources contributed over £700,000 since 1991 on open space schemes part funded from developers' contributions. The plans for the future included a further £300,000 from the District Council's own resources.

14. GRANT AID TO CITIZENS' ADVICE BUREAUX.

The Association would include in its next agenda an item on contributions to Citizen's Advice Bureaux. There was a large discrepancy across the District in Parishes' support for Citizens' Advice Bureaux, with some Councils contributing generously and others not at all.

N.F.D.A.L.C.

20 NOVEMBER 1997

15. DATE OF NEXT MEETING.

Thursday, 23 April 1998.

(LA201197.doc)