

22 JULY 2002

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the New Forest District Council held at Appletree Court, Lyndhurst on Monday, 22 July 2002.

- p Cllr J M Hoy - Chairman
- p Cllr J A G Hutchins - Vice-Chairman

Councillors:

- p Mrs S M Abernethy
- p K F Ault
- p K E Austin
- p G C Beck
- p E R Bowring
- p F J Bright
- p Mrs D M Brooks
- p D S Burdle
- p W R Catt
- p Mrs J L Cleary
- p J E Coles
- e D E Cracknell
- p B D Dash
- p J J Dawson
- p W H Dow
- p Miss P A Drake
- p L T Dunsdon
- p B C Earwicker
- p M H G Fidler
- p Mrs L C Ford
- p R L Frampton
- p Ms C F Gradidge
- p P C Greenfield
- p R C H Hale
- e L E Harris
- p F R Harrison
- p S A Hayes
- p J D Heron

Councillors:

- p P E Hickman
- p Mrs M D Holding
- e Mrs A M Howe
- p Mrs M Humber BA
- p M J Kendal
- p G N D Locock
- e Mrs B M Maynard
- p Mrs M McLean
- p B M F Pemberton
- e A W Rice TD
- p B Rickman
- p Mrs M J Robinson
- p B Rule
- p T M Russell
- p D N Scott
- p M J Shand
- p S A Shepherd
- p Mrs B Smith
- p N L T Smith
- p Mrs L P Snashall
- p G Spikins
- p M H Thierry
- p D B Tipp
- p M S Wade
- p S S Wade
- p C A Wise
- p P R Woods
- p Mrs P A Wyeth

Officers Attending:

D Yates, Ms E Malcolm, C Malyon, D Atwill, Ms J Bateman, N Cross, and Mrs R Rutins.

12. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

Councillors Ault, Humber, Robinson, Rule, Mrs B Smith and S S Wade declared personal interests in Minute 17(a).

Councillor Mrs B Smith declared a personal interest in Minute No. 18 (Question No. 6).

Councillor Snashall declared a personal interest in Minute No. 20.

13. MINUTES.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meetings held on 13 May and 17 June 2002, having been circulated, be signed by the Chairman as correct records.

14. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS.

(a) Members Seminar – 24 July

In November 2000 a Citizens' Panel Survey showed that 92% of New Forest District Council residents were satisfied with the overall service provided by the Council. That proved to be the highest in the Country.

The Chairman reported that a members seminar had been arranged for Wednesday, 24 July at 6.30 p.m. to discuss further what lay behind that score and what the public expected of the Council. Members were encouraged to attend.

(b) Best Value Performance Plan

The Chairman reminded members that their copy of this year's Best Value Performance Plan was available for collection. He thought this year's document was the best yet and recommended all members to use the document as a key reference to help them in the year ahead.

15. CABINET.

The Chairman of the Cabinet presented the reports of the meetings held on 1 and 13 May, 5 June and 8 July 2002.

On the motion that the reports be received and the recommendations adopted:-

(a) Partnership Proposal – Test Valley Borough Council and New Forest District Council (5 June 2002)

The Chairman of the Cabinet reported that Cllrs Holding, Kendal and Wise had been appointed by the Cabinet as the three executive members to sit on the joint committee. The Council was asked to agree that Cllrs Dash, N Smith and Thierry, who were the political groups' nominees, be appointed as the three non-executive members to sit on the proposed scrutiny committee.

(b) Road Traffic Management (8 July 2002)

A member expressed concern that so much reference was being made to car parking charges in connection with this item. He pointed out that the public were being consulted on a proposal for a Road Traffic Management Policy which was entirely different. The two issues had different aims, benefits and drawbacks.

Other members said that they did not believe that this was anything other than raising money through the introduction of car parking charges. The public were using the term "car parking charges" in relation to this proposal and the article in Forest News had highlighted the purchase of a car parking clock rather than traffic management.

It was suggested that members should, in conjunction with their Parish Councils, work through traffic management issues in their areas and report back to officers on the particular problems that required restriction or de-regulation. This was an opportunity to consider traffic management properly starting with a blank sheet.

Another member expressed surprise at the suggestion in the report that this proposal was not financially motivated particularly in the light of the financial strategy that pointed out that a balanced budget needed to be achieved. The Administration had made the abolition of car parking charges the major issue in their manifesto and she considered that they had been elected under false pretences. The proposal did not detail the target of the scheme or what it was hoped it would achieve. Whilst it did hint at better controls there was no suggestion as to how these would be achieved or why it was the most appropriate course of action.

Members asked questions in relation to the effect the proposals would have on vehicle turnover in car parks and how this would impact on spending in local shops, what the net effect of enforcing on-street parking would be and what added value there would be in this. Members commented that they would raise these issues when the Review Panel considered the proposals.

Other members said that the proposals were the first stage in a consultation process and that nothing had been decided yet. The whole point was not to shape the proposals before the public had had a chance to comment. Members were not being asked to vote on the proposals and their comments should be reserved until after the consultation process had taken place and the detail of the scheme to be put forward was known. The proposals could provide a way of managing the real issues of traffic congestion that many villages in the New Forest faced. There had been complaints about the previous system because of the unfairness of the scheme. The proposals now under consideration were entirely different and the facts were being distorted.

Under the previous car parking charges scheme all residents had one free permit per household and were then charged for additional permits. Under the new proposals residents would be charged for a transferable permit. A member expressed concern that, as the permit would not detail car registration numbers, the scheme could be abused by "hiring" transferable permits to visitors. Another member said that previously the Administration had said that car parking charges would devastate local businesses. He asked what was different about these proposals.

The Chairman of the Cabinet responded that he had provided some very broad suggestions for traffic management to the Cabinet. The Cabinet were genuinely asking Town and Parish Councils, residents, visitors and businesses for their views of the basic proposals. This would include the proposal for a £5 charge for a parking clock. Changes were not being implemented without consultation. The strategy that was being put forward might be changed in the light of the consultation. Detail of the scheme would be drawn up following consideration of comments received. The Chairman said that he was concerned that there seemed to be a deliberate attempt to spread incorrect information.

In terms of the financial management of the Council, the Council Tax had risen by 17½% in 3 years of Conservative control as opposed to 48% in the last 4 years of Liberal Democrat control. In this context, administrative costs of the scheme would be negligible.

The Chairman said he was looking forward to the results of the consultation process in November to see what the public really wanted.

(c) New Forest Caterers – Proposal for Bar and Café Closures (8 July 2002)

A member said that whilst he understood that there was an economic need to modify the facilities at some of the recreation centres, the café areas provided an important social facility for people. This was particularly relevant at Lymington Recreation Centre. Pennington was very poor in terms of social facilities and mothers who took children swimming no longer had a facility where they could sit and wait. He enquired about the form the consultation on closure would take bearing in mind the local investment in the original facility.

Another member said that consultation with Town and Parish Councils was very important and whilst he appreciated that “dry side” fitness provision was needed at Lymington this should not be at the expense of other facilities.

The Leisure Portfolio Holder said that the café had already been closed for a year. Local focus groups had not indicated that there was a huge demand for the café. There had been a careful examination of the social element of the facilities.

The Chairman of the Cabinet responded that Phase II of the refurbishment of Lymington Recreation Centre would provide much bigger and improved social facilities and would meet all the needs of the area.

(d) Proposed Port Development at Dibden Bay – Public Inquiry (8 July 2002)

A member said that the proposed Port Development at Dibden Bay was the most important issue facing the Council at present. He had attended the inquiry last week and had heard comments relating to the visual intrusion of the cranes on the landscape and the increased traffic that there would be on the Marchwood bypass. A number of members spoke in support of the additional funding proposed to cover the costs of the Inquiry .

(e) Financial Strategy 2003/2006 (8 July 2002)

The Council agreed that the report of the Environment Panel (11 July 2002) should be considered at the same time as Paragraph 17 of the Cabinet report as they related to the same issue.

A member of the Environment Panel, speaking on the Panel's recommendation, expressed concern that the timetable proposed by the Cabinet for the expenditure plan process appeared to be dictating the Panel's work programme.

An amendment was moved and seconded that the timetable for the expenditure plan process be revised to enable proposals to be considered by Review Panels in September.

The Finance and Support Portfolio Holder spoke against the motion. He said that he had attended Review Panel meetings last year and they had not given any clear direction to the Cabinet. Officers had identified bids and savings for Review Panels to consider but there had been little desire in the Panels for discussion. He suggested that it might be more useful for a small panel of members, officers and portfolio holders to be formed to make proposals for expenditure reductions and changes and to prioritise needs.

A number of members spoke in favour of the motion saying that the role of the Review Panels was misunderstood. The terms of reference of Review Panels clearly stated that they should consider proposals for revenue and capital expenditure and make recommendations to the Cabinet. The timetable proposed would not give Panels time to consider all the options.

Other members said that it was open to Review Panels at any time to consider their own proposals and, whilst proposals from the Cabinet would not be ready until November, there was nothing to stop Panels considering options in the meantime. Any member of a Panel could ask for an item to be put on an agenda for discussion.

The Cabinet were looking for a greater level of co-operation at an earlier stage of the budget proposals than had previously been the case. It was not helpful for budget proposals to be brought forward if funding for them was not available.

In seconding the motion a member said that the timetable proposed by the Cabinet did not reflect what members wanted. There should be a greater input from the Panels. Panel members wanted to make scrutiny work and the contribution that Panels made to the expenditure plan process should be formalised. There should be additional consultation with the Panels in September.

The Chairman of the Cabinet responded that the process proposed was in line with the requirements of the Constitution. He reiterated that Panels could, at any time, put forward proposals to influence or inform and did not have to adhere to a timetable. He pointed out that it was for the Council to agree the financial strategy and not the Cabinet.

Upon a vote the amendment was lost.

(f) Compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998

A member commented that she felt the proposed £10 fee was high and it would deter some people from making an enquiry.

The Chairman of the Cabinet commented that whilst the £10 fee was not statutory it was a government guideline. The fee was not intended to deter legitimate requests for information.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be received and the recommendations adopted; and
- (b) That Cllrs Dash, N Smith and Thierry be appointed as the three non-executive members from New Forest District Council to sit on the proposed scrutiny committee with Test Valley Borough Council.

16. GENERAL PURPOSING AND LICENSING COMMITTEE.

The Chairman presented the report of the General Purposes and Licensing Committee held on 14 June 2002.

On the motion that the report be received and the recommendation adopted it was:-

RESOLVED:

That the report be received and the recommendation adopted.

17. HOUSING, HEALTH AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION REVIEW PANEL.

The Chairman of the Committee presented the report of the meeting of the Housing, Health and Social Exclusion Review Panel held on 19 June 2002.

Councillors Ault, Humber, Pemberton, Robinson, Mrs B Smith and S S Wade declared personal interests as members of the Citizens' Advice Bureaux. None of the councillors considered their interests to be prejudicial. They remained at the meeting, took part in the discussion and voted.

On the motion that the report be received:-

(a) Citizens' Advice Bureaux and the New Forest District Council

A member expressed the view that the CAB provided an excellent service despite working in poor conditions and having restricted funds. It was unfortunate that the time that the Council was taking to agree a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with them was causing a great deal of unnecessary uncertainty. The CAB was an essential irreplaceable service that the Council should support fully. The member urged the Portfolio Holder and the Cabinet to expedite the matter as soon as possible.

The Chairman of the Housing, Health and Social Exclusion Review Panel, in response to a question, said that he had written to the Leader and had asked him to appoint a "Champion" from the Cabinet to attend the Review Panel in September. Discussions were ongoing and the commitment of the Cabinet was not in question. The Panel had considered that the CAB was underfunded and that their long term position needed to be considered. The CAB had indicated that they felt they were not working as closely with the Council as they would like. They wanted to agree a new SLA and they were prepared to consider the use of performance indicators.

The Chairman of the Cabinet said that he had written to the Chairman of the Joint Leadership Group of the New Forest CAB. Currently the Council provided 90% of the funding for the CAB. The Council valued the work that the CAB did and was aware of the increase in their client base. However, the Chairman expressed some concern over the additional costs that the CAB had identified and said that these needed to be substantiated. A meeting was to take place to progress the matter.

RESOLVED:

That the report be received.

18. ENVIRONMENT REVIEW PANEL.

The Chairman presented the report of the meeting of the Environment Review Panel held on 11 July 2002. (The discussion on the recommendation contained in the Panel report had taken place at the same time as the Cabinet report was discussed.) On the motion that the report be received it was:

RESOLVED:

That the report be received.

19. PORTFOLIO HOLDER QUESTION TIME.

Question No. 1 from: Cllr Nick Smith to Cllr Simon Hayes, Portfolio Holder, Policy & Strategy

"With recent press statements from members of Southampton City Council regarding their ambitions for a "greater Southampton", dragging Marchwood into the control of the shambolic and financially inept Southampton City Council, can you confirm that his Administration will never allow this to happen and will fight any attempt by Southampton City Council to encroach on the boundaries of New Forest District Council?"

Answer

The Policy and Strategy Portfolio Holder confirmed that, insofar as it would be possible, any proposal for the District Council to be subsumed would be resisted. Whilst the possibility of future local government re-organisation had to be borne in mind, the indications were that Southampton City Council would remain the same.

In a supplementary question the Portfolio Holder was asked if he would write to Southampton City Council to remind them that the Waterside area was part of New Forest District Council and they should not make statements about areas that were not under their control.

The Portfolio Holder replied that this Council was developing a more open relationship with Southampton City Council and he would discuss this issue with them at their next meeting.

Question No. 2 from: Cllr Pat Wyeth to Cllr Melville Kendal, Portfolio Holder, Environment

"Could the Environment Portfolio Holder please report on the outcome of the recent bid by the Board of Project Integra to the Government for special funds offered to Local Authorities for waste management/recycling?"

Answer

The Environment Portfolio Holder replied that the Government had made £42 million available from the National Waste Minimisation and Recycling Fund for all local authorities in England and Wales to improve the national recycling rate. Over 190 applications for funding had been received by DEFRA, of which 112 had been approved.

Project Integra, which had already achieved a recycling rate of 25%, had submitted a bid of £39.2m to secure the level of financial commitment required to achieve the target to recycle 40% of household waste by 2006. This bid included priorities for £5m additional processing infrastructure; £250,000 for research and communications and £2m towards Hampshire's 'low performing' authorities. The remainder of the bid covered additional infrastructure and revenue needs for the higher performing partner authorities in Hampshire. New Forest District Council's element was for extended kerbside collections, green waste collections, extended glass collections and further glass and textile bring sites. The total bid from New Forest was: Capital £18,000 Revenue £630,000.

Project Integra's bid had been rejected in total. The Portfolio Holder said that a second round of bidding was available from October 2002 and a larger sum (£76.3 million) was available.

The Management Board of Project Integra had already expressed its disappointment at not receiving any financial recognition, despite the Government often promoting Project Integra as a flagship partnership programme and an example of best practice through the award of Beacon Status. The Management Board intended to make direct representations to the Government ahead of the next bidding round.

For New Forest the outcome of this failure was likely to be a delay in meeting its statutory recycling targets (along with the majority of Integra partners). If the second round bid failed, there was a possibility of the Council having to find innovative ways of securing additional funds through a further review of how it delivers its service.

Question No. 3 from: Cllr Derek Tipp to Cllr Simon Hayes, Portfolio Holder, Policy & Strategy

"Does Cllr Hayes share my view that the current un-elected South East England Regional Assembly is an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy which needs to be abolished, instead of following the government's proposal to make it into an elected body? If an elected body were to be established, what effect does he believe it would have on this Council and on the lives of our residents?"

Answer

The Policy and Strategy Portfolio Holder said that he shared Cllr Tipp's view and that the Cabinet at their meeting in September would discuss the matter. He could see no benefit to the lives of the residents of the New Forest by the establishment of a Regional Assembly. He did not feel there had been any real debate centrally on the Local Government White Paper. There was no clear idea of what powers could be devolved to a Regional Assembly or who would decide on a referendum.

Question No. 4 from: Cllr Malcolm Wade to Cllr Jeremy Heron, Portfolio Holder, Crime and Disorder

“Following on from the recent crime spree in the centre of Hythe, when during the other weekend a number of commercial properties were broken into and bearing in mind that community suffers the highest amount of crime in the New Forest I know you are aware I have written to the Chief Executive regarding the provision of CCTV in Hythe. We are all aware that CCTV is quoted quite often on various pages of the Community Safety Strategy 2002 –2005 and provision identified as a priority on page 27. So I ask you what hard evidence is there that provision of CCTV is actively being sought for Hythe and New Milton by this Administration or is it resting on its laurels in Lymington, Ringwood and Totton ?”

Answer

The Crime and Disorder Portfolio Holder responded that when the CCTV control room was established, provision had been made so that if further funding became available there was the option to expand the system. However, at present it was not possible to fund any expansion locally and there was no further central government funding available.

In response to a supplementary question the Portfolio Holder said that the initial bid for CCTV funding had included provision for Hythe but this part of the bid had been unsuccessful. Half of the funding received was intended for use in Town Centres. The crime statistics quoted covered a much larger area than just Hythe Town Centre which did not have the highest crime figures.

Question No. 5 from: Cllr Robin Harrison to Cllr Tom Russell, Portfolio Holder, Economy and Planning

“On April 22, the Council endorsed the decision of the Cabinet to delay the Revised Deposit Stage of Alterations to the Local Plan so that consideration could be given to affordable housing, to support for employment and to care for the elderly. Can the Portfolio Holder for Economy and Planning tell us what progress has been made over the last three months ?”

Answer

The Economy and Planning Portfolio Holder responded that he was not just intending to review the three items detailed but that the whole plan was being discussed. Once he had reviewed the entire document then he would ask officers to progress the matter through the Planning Development Control Committee, the Review Panel, the Cabinet and Council. The task was a very large one and the Portfolio Holder expressed his thanks to all Councillors who had put forward suggestions and proposals.

In a supplementary question the Portfolio Holder was asked to bear in mind that the two stage deposit process was fundamental for consultation and if new matters were introduced at this second stage this might leave the Council open to challenge at a public enquiry.

The Portfolio Holder responded that whilst he was very aware of the process it was also important to note that this would be the Local Plan that the Council would be using when the National Park was established and consequently it needed to be right for the district.

Question No. 6 from: Cllr Bob Hale to Cllr Simon Hayes, Portfolio Holder, Policy and Strategy

Cllr Mrs B Smith declared an interest in that her spouse was employed by New Forest District Council. She considered her interest to be prejudicial and left the meeting for the debate. There was no vote.

“The Leader will be aware that the council recently sent out by post, a number of individually addressed, glossy postcards, as part of the advertising campaign for the launch of the New Forest Local Strategic Partnership.

Could the Leader of the Council please equate for us the number of New Forest old age pensioners, who do not qualify for benefits, who could have had a rat infestation problem treated for free, for the cost of the overall advertising campaign?”

Answer

The Policy and Strategy Portfolio Holder replied that the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) was an important strategic development for the Council to work with partners to improve the quality of life for the residents of the New Forest. As the Council was taking the lead role in the development of the Partnership, it was important that staff were fully aware of the issues. The postcard had cost £200 to produce. The Portfolio Holder was not able to comment on the number of pensioners that could have benefited had this money been spent on rodent treatment. He said that he did not have knowledge of the financial circumstances of the council’s elderly residents nor did he feel the Council should have this personal information. However, he confirmed that no-one who would have qualified for a free rodent treatment service from the Council had suffered as a result of the expenditure on the cards.

In a supplementary question the Portfolio Holder was asked what postage had been incurred. At a time when there were many pressures on the Council’s budget did he not feel that it was insensitive to spend this money? The employees did not need a postcard but greater support and direction to keep them informed.

The Portfolio Holder responded that the cost of postage had been approximately £250. The officers would be integral to the work to deliver results from the LSP and the community would benefit because officers were now more aware of the issues. The LSP was a government initiative that, in New Forest, had been developed in an unprecedented way. New Forest was now leading the way in Hampshire.

20. NOTICE OF MOTION. "amended at Council 14/10/02 - see Minute Book"

Cllr Snashall declared an interest in that her partner was employed at the Southampton Job Centre. She considered the matter to be prejudicial and as such left the meeting for the debate and the vote.

Councillor Robinson moved the following motion standing in her name:-

"That the Chairman of the Council write to the Prime Minister stating the concern of New Forest District Council that we understand that there is a planned closure of Job Centres in the New Forest and their replacement by a Job Centre Plus Bureau in Totton. This Council believes this will lead to hardship and further social exclusion. For many unemployed people, access will be more difficult due to irregular and infrequent bus services and the high cost of fares. The Council requests the Prime Minister to consider the potential disadvantages of the proposed changes in rural areas such as the New Forest."

In accordance with Standing Order No. 41.2 the Chairman of the Council agreed that the motion be dealt with at the meeting.

Councillor Robinson in moving the motion said that she had received a letter from the Citizens Advice Bureau informing her of the planned closure, as part of the Government's welfare reform programme, of Job Centres in the New Forest. She commented that the current provision of Job Centres offered a fully integrated work and benefits service. Whilst she accepted that the proposals in the welfare reform programme were sensible they presented problems in rural areas, particularly when there was a less than ideal rural transport service. As an example, currently a resident of Hythe could walk into the village centre to access the Job Centre. Under the new proposal they would have the additional burden of a bus fare of around £4 for every return trip to the Job Centre for their regular interviews. There would therefore be increased hardship on the most vulnerable as a result of this proposed change. The Government had said that they would 'rural proof' their new policies but this had clearly not happened in this case.

In seconding the motion Cllr Dash said that the Government's proposal might work in London but not in the New Forest. Getting back to work should be made as easy as possible for unemployed people. The lives of those in rural communities should be enhanced not made more difficult.

The Health and Social Exclusion Portfolio Holder said that initially the proposed Job Centre Plus Bureau had not been planned for Totton but for Brockenhurst. If that had not been possible then Lyndhurst was suggested. The Government had wanted it to be opened by October and thought the middle of the Forest was the most appropriate place. There would have been obvious local planning problems in the Heritage Area, but, more importantly, for unemployed people to get to a centre in such a place as Brockenhurst would involve high costs and difficult journeys.

It was the intention of the new Job Centre Plus Bureau to conduct much of their business via the phone and the internet. However, many of those in greatest need would probably have the least access to the internet.

The Portfolio Holder was of the view that there could be other ways of accessing and delivering Government services. The Citizens' Advice Bureau had centres placed strategically throughout the Forest and greater use could be made of this resource, particularly in the light of E-Government services up and running in the near future.

The Portfolio Holder agreed that if Job Centres were to close with nothing locally in their place this would lead to hardship and social exclusion. However, the problem could be solved by looking at other ways of service delivery and she did not agree that a negative request should be sent to the Prime Minister.

The Chairman of the Housing, Health and Social Exclusion Review Panel supported the Notice of Motion. He said that the deprivation index showed some areas of the New Forest were just as deprived as areas of Southampton. The residents of New Forest faced discrimination as they did not have access to the infrastructure which was available in Southampton. Currently there was not a Job Centre or Benefits Agency in New Milton and residents from that area already had to travel to either Lymington or Totton.

RESOLVED:

That the Motion set out above be agreed.

**21. ALLOCATION OF LOCAL AUTHORITY SOCIAL HOUSING GRANT –
REPORT OF URGENT DECISION BY THE HOUSING PORTFOLIO
HOLDER.**

RESOLVED:

That the urgent decision taken by the Housing Portfolio Holder in relation to the allocation of local authority social housing grant for Hazel Farm, Totton be noted.

CHAIRMAN