

19 APRIL 2010

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the New Forest District Council held at Appletree Court, Lyndhurst on Monday, 19 April 2010.

- p Cllr L R Puttock - Chairman
- e Cllr Mrs P A Wyeth – Vice-Chairman

Councillors:

- p G C Beck
- p D A Britton
- p Mrs D M Brooks
- p Mrs F Carpenter
- p Mrs J L Cleary
- p G F Dart
- e S P Davies
- p W H Dow
- e L T Dunsdon
- p Ms L C Ford
- p H F Forse
- e P C Greenfield
- p C J Harrison
- p D Harrison
- p E J Heron
- p J D Heron
- p P E Hickman
- p Mrs A J Hoare
- p Mrs M D Holding
- p J A G Hutchins
- e Mrs P Jackman
- e M J Kendal
- p C Lagdon
- p Mrs M E Lewis
- e Mrs K J Lord
- p Mrs P J Lovelace
- p B D Lucas
- p Mrs A E McEvoy
- p Mrs M McLean

Councillors:

- p G J Parkes
- p Sqn Ldr B M F Pemberton
- p J Penwarden
- e M P Reid
- p A W Rice
- p B Rickman
- p W S Rippon-Swaine
- p Mrs M J Robinson
- p Mrs A M Rostand
- D J Russell
- p R F Scrivens
- e Lt Col M J Shand
- p A E J Shotter
- p Mrs B Smith
- p Mrs S I Snowden
- p A J Swain
- p M H Thierry
- p A R Tinsley
- p D B Tipp
- p C R Treleaven
- p F P Vickers
- p M S Wade
- p S S Wade
- p R A Wappet
- p J G Ward
- p A Weeks
- e Dr M N Whitehead
- p C A Wise
- p P R Woods

Officers Attending:

D Yates, R Jackson, J Mascall, Miss G O'Rourke and Ms M Stephens.

53. MINUTES (PAPER A).

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 February 2010 having been circulated, be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

54. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

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

55. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS.**Spring Clean Week**

On Tuesday 9 March the Chairman took part in one of the litter pick days as part of the forest's fourth 'Forest Force' annual spring clean.

The Forestry Commission, New Forest District Council and the New Forest National Park Authority had worked together to organise a series of litter picks from 6-14 March. These had been managed by voluntary rangers and attended by local businesses, interest and community groups.

Civic Service

The Chairman thanked all those who helped make his Civic Service a memorable occasion. The service had been held on Sunday, 21 March at St Matthews Parish Church in Netley Marsh. There had been a great turnout from civic heads from around Hampshire, the Deputy Lieutenant, Mrs Susan Glasspool, close friends and local people. The Chairman gave special thanks to Donna Miller for all of her hard work in organising the day.

Hampshire Annual Sports Awards – Wednesday 24 March

The Chairman announced that one of the New Forest's young sporting talents had won an award at the Hampshire County Council Annual Sports Award event held on Wednesday 24 March. Tom Britz from Priestlands School had won an award in the Junior Sportsman category.

Lyndhurst Community Centre

On Friday 26 March the Chairman had assisted with the launch of Lyndhurst Community Centre as a 'Smarter Working Centre'. The Centre had been refurbished and was better equipped to respond to the huge range of community and business needs in the area.

The Chairman wished the centre luck and hoped that its new focus would benefit the local community.

'Big Spin'

On 18 April the Chairman attended the 'Big Spin' event at Applemore Health and Leisure Centre.

This had been one of the 100 bike spin events held across the New Forest. Entry fees from the sessions would go to the Stroke Association, one of the Chairman's charities for the year.

56. LEADER'S ANNOUNCEMENTS.

There were none.

57. REPORTS OF CABINET.

Cllr Rickman, the Leader of the Council and the Chairman of the Cabinet, presented the report of the meetings held on 3 March and 7 April 2010.

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

New Forest Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) Representatives

A member expressed his concern that despite the fact that the CAB was funded by approximately 90% of Council grant, the Council had only been invited to appoint an observer representative to the organisation.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Efficiency said that discussions had been held with the CAB prior to the amalgamation and it had been agreed that the role of trustee was not appropriate for the Council. However an observer representative would be in a better position to carefully monitor the use of the Council's grant money.

Other members expressed the view that the role of observer would not diminish the Council's commitment to the CAB. Members all agreed that the CAB delivered a much needed service to local residents and was an important organisation to support.

Cllr Vickers, the Council's nominated observer on the CAB, assured members that he would provide regular reports to the Council on the activities of the CAB.

RESOLVED:

That the reports be received and the recommendations be adopted.

58. QUESTIONS UNDER STANDING ORDER 22.

There were none.

59. PORTFOLIO HOLDERS' QUESTION TIME.

Question from: Cllr Mrs Robinson to Cllr Mrs Cleary, Housing Portfolio Holder

"I believe that NFDC is currently one of the biggest payers in the country into the HRA subsidy system. However, the CLG has recently published proposals to reform that system. Would the Portfolio Holder give us her views on the long term effects of the recently published proposals on NFDC's own housing account?"

Answer:

The Portfolio Holder responded that the tenants of the New Forest through the Housing Revenue Account were one of the largest single contributors in Housing Subsidy within the current system.

In terms of the total subsidy payable to government, the £9million paid over by New Forest was dwarfed by major cities and urban settlements. However in terms of payment per property, the New Forest was the ninth largest contributor per dwelling in the country, out of 177 authorities currently in the HRA system.

The document circulated by CLG was a prospectus aimed to bring council house funding up to date – replacing a system which was introduced before the Second World War and had operated in its current form since 1989.

The plan set out within the prospectus was highly technical. It was not simply an administrative change in the funding system. The government opinion was that the changes within the prospectus would change people's lives. They also held the view that the reforms would create the funding capacity to build 10,000 new homes each year within five years. The prospectus reached further than the New Forest alone.

The consultation period for the prospectus began on 24 March and would conclude on 6 July. The consultation set out the proposals for dismantling the current HRA subsidy system and replacing it with a devolved system of funding and responsibility.

This new system proposed that New Forest District Council kept the money raised through rents in full to reinvest in the area. This would enable the District Council to plan for the long term, to improve the quality of its housing and to build much needed new Council homes.

The prospectus had been the culmination of consultation and research which was first announced in December 2007 and was in response to a long standing campaign by local government to reform the current system.

If there was agreement to the proposals within the prospectus, the Government proposed to work towards voluntary implementation from as early as 2011/12. The agreement would be standardised and not bespoke to each individual authority.

Alternatively, the prospectus proposed to implement self-financing through new primary legislation from potentially as early as 2012/13.

The prospectus therefore suggested a matter of when, not if, the reform would happen, regardless of the view held by the New Forest District Council.

If the prospectus was to be believed, the long-term effects to residents of the New Forest were to be welcomed.

The Council would retain all of the rental income and all of the money raised from the sale of council houses via the Right to Buy system to reinvest locally as it chose. The Council could continue the new build, a pilot recently approved for Howards Mead, Pennington.

The Council could maintain and potentially improve on the Decent Homes Standard that the stock currently met, and could improve the services provided to tenants. The Council would no longer subsidise other authorities. Most importantly, the prospectus suggested a national settlement to benefit local communities.

These benefits would not come free. The Council would stop contributing at least £9million per year into an unfair system. But the Council would have to take on real debt to buy out of the existing subsidy system.

The financial model within the prospectus estimated this to be a debt of approximately £140million. In the short term, the model suggested that the £9million contribution would simply go towards paying off the debt expenses. But over time, as the debt was reduced, the model showed the New Forest benefitting financially from the reforms included within the prospectus.

The previous consultation that had led to the prospectus had been much welcomed throughout the country. The current HRA system saw money transferred away from the New Forest and many other authorities to benefit a minority.

The prospectus included a welcome shift change in suggesting that New Forest tenants would benefit from their rents being wholly retained locally, subject of course to paying off the debt that the New Forest was obliged to accept.

Officers were currently in the process of reviewing the prospectus in more detail and would be preparing a report for members outlining the implications for the New Forest and more specifically, a response to the consultation questions included within the prospectus.

The future of the HRA would be fundamentally different. The prospectus completely dismantled the existing subsidy system and introduced self-financing.

The ideology of retaining all monies locally was much welcomed, as was removing the annual round of waiting on subsidy determinations to review the impact on New Forest tenants.

The reform devolved from Whitehall responsibility and accountability for the funding, management and standards of council housing to elected local councils. The New Forest enjoyed an excellent record and reputation for the management of its finances.

The Portfolio Holder had confidence in the long term viability of the General Fund and if the proposals within the prospectus were to be believed and fully realised, there would be no reason why the Council should not have the same long term confidence in the post-reform HRA.

In a supplementary question, Cllr Mrs Robinson asked the Portfolio Holder whether she considered it a good idea to investigate reforming public sector borrowing requirements to free councils to borrow money against their assets in order to build a new generation of council homes and allow the council to keep all the revenue from the new homes.

The Portfolio Holder replied that this was already being examined by officers and the members would be informed of the outcome.

60. NOMINATIONS FOR APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN AND VICE-CHAIRMAN OF THE COUNCIL.

RESOLVED:

That Cllr Mrs Wyeth be nominated as Chairman and Cllr Penwarden as Vice-Chairman of the Council for the following Municipal Year.

61. STANDARDS COMMITTEE – ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2009/10 (REPORT B).

Mr A Lander, Chairman of the Standards Committee, presented the annual report of the Standards Committee.

RESOLVED:

That the report be received and noted.

62. REPORT OF THE REVIEW PANELS FOR 2009/10 (REPORT C).

Cllr Ward, Chairman of the Corporate Overview Panel, presented the annual report of the Review Panels.

Cllr Ward encouraged members to input into the current scrutiny review. All members had the opportunity of completing the questionnaire from South East Employers however only 37 had responded. Members also had the opportunity to attend a workshop on 16 April but disappointingly only 11 had done so.

Another workshop session would be held on 10 May where members would have an opportunity to express their views for consideration as part of the review. It was vital that members got involved in the review as the outcome was likely to determine the Council's scrutiny arrangements for the next 4-6 years.

One member expressed the view that the review process was unbalanced as a limited number of members, namely Cabinet members and Panel Chairmen, had been given the opportunity for personal interviews with the consultant undertaking the review. He felt that as backbench members had received limited opportunity for input an unbalanced outcome would result. He felt that all members should have been offered individual interviews with the review consultant.

Cllr Ward responded that the external consultant, South East Employers, had determined the list of interviewees and, at the suggestions of Cllr Ward, had extended the list. South East Employers were experts in this type of review and as such the Council should follow their advice regarding how the review was conducted. Nonetheless, members had, and would have, plenty of opportunity to get involved either by completing the questionnaire, attending workshops, or by making personal written submissions to Mark Palmer at South East Employers.

Other members expressed the view that it was the responsibility of individual members to input into the review and that they should engage in the review in a positive way. Members should attend the final workshop or make individual written submissions to ensure their views were taken into account. Members had received ample opportunity to make their contributions.

RESOLVED:

That the report be received and noted.

63. MEMBERSHIP OF COMMITTEES AND PANELS.

No changes were proposed by the political groups.

CHAIRMAN

(DEMOCRAT/CL190410/MINUTES.DOC)