

**16 MARCH 2017**

**NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL**

Minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel held in Committee Room 1, Appletree Court, Lyndhurst on Thursday, 16 March 2017

\* Cllr M R Harris (Chairman)  
Cllr Mrs A M Rostand (Vice-Chairman)

**Councillors:**

A R Alvey  
\* W G Andrews  
\* M J Kendal  
Mrs A E McEvoy

**Councillors:**

A D O'Sullivan  
\* M A Steele  
\* D B Tipp  
\* C A Wise

\*Present

**In attendance:**

**Councillors:**

L E Harris  
J D Heron

**Officers Attending:**

M Callaghan, Mrs R Drummond, C Elliott, A Rogers and Mrs M Sandhu

**Apologies:**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Mrs Rostand, Alvey, Mrs McEvoy and O'Sullivan.

**47 MINUTES**

**RESOLVED:**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 19 January be confirmed as a correct record.

**48 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Cllrs L E Harris, M R Harris, M J Kendal and M A Steele – Minute No. 50.

**49 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

No issues were raised during the public participation period.

**50 RESIDENTIAL AND COMMUNITY CARE IN THE NEW FOREST**

Cllr Steele disclosed that he was in the business of running a care home. He did not consider that there were any issues under common law to prevent him from speaking and voting on the matter.

Cllr Kendal disclosed a non pecuniary interest as a director and treasurer of Oakhaven Hospice. He did not consider that there were any issues under common law to prevent him from speaking and voting on the matter.

Cllr L E Harris disclosed a non pecuniary interest as a trustee of Age Concern. He did not consider that there were any issues under common law to prevent him from speaking and voting on the matter. He did not have a vote.

Cllr M R Harris disclosed a non pecuniary interest as a director of the New Forest Villages Housing Association. He did not consider that there were any issues under common law to prevent him from speaking and voting on the matter.

The Panel received a report highlighting the significance of the care sector within the New Forest economy and drawing attention to some of the issues and barriers currently restricting it, focussing on areas where the District Council could provide practical assistance and support.

The care sector was one of the most significant within New Forest's local economy, both in terms of employment and revenue, and this would increase as the local age profile rose.

Challenges in the sector included recruitment (owing to low wages, high property prices, and restricted access to transport), and an under-skilled workforce requiring training, which had direct resource implications on the businesses. Some parts of the care sector were at times disconnected from support and information which could help them overcome many of the barriers addressed in the report, such as links with colleges and the business sector.

It was suggested that the Council facilitate an enabling session with partners, to encourage collaboration between providers, colleges and related sectors to discuss training and other issues. Members of the Older Persons' Forum could be invited to attend.

**RESOLVED:**

- (a) That the report be noted;
- (b) That the Council use its existing relationships with local education establishments, networks and care sector businesses to act as 'honest broker' in developing relationships to ensure that businesses are accessing the full range of support available to them; and
- (c) That further work be undertaken to explore the potential for collaboration in sharing best practice amongst care sector businesses and developing the skills of employees through available training accessible to them.

**51 CUSTOMER SERVICES REVIEW - INTERIM REPORT**

The Panel considered an interim report on the Customer Services Review, which was being overseen by a Task and Finish Group.

The project brief had identified four main areas for the review to consider, including customer strategy, digital service delivery, information offices and the customer services centre.

Actions to date included a customer survey to understand customer behaviour, and analysis of channel use and available technology. Future actions included enhanced web functionality, and improved multiple delivery channels. It was acknowledged that face to face service would continue to be available for as long as it was needed.

The Group supported online processes being simplified to encourage self - service. Non - ICT back office systems would also be reviewed. It was intended to upgrade computer equipment for public use at information offices.

Visits to other authorities would be undertaken to gain an insight into best practice and arrangements, and the latest technology available. The need to move customers to online self service was accepted and would have many benefits including financial savings. Changes would be widely communicated to customers, and it was suggested that some members of the public be encouraged to be Digital Champions.

It was acknowledged that success of the project was in part dependent on availability of a good standard of Broadband within the New Forest. Whilst 95% of homes in Hampshire now had superfast broadband, there remained some 'dead spots' in the Forest. Although this was not within the scope of the project or within the power of NFDC, the Panel would continue to try to influence BT Openreach and HCC in improving the service in the District. The Panel would arrange a further meeting with BT and HCC in May to again press them to use their best endeavours to expedite matters.

Members thanked officers and the Task and Finish Group for the report and the good progress to date.

**RESOLVED:**

That the report be noted and that a further report be made to the September Panel meeting.

**52 KEY ACTIONS AND SERVICE REVIEW PROGRAMME UPDATE**

The Panel received an update on work being undertaken, as part of the regular monitoring of the corporate delivery plan. The report detailed progress with various service reviews.

The savings identified to date were £446,000, which would contribute to the funding shortfall in the medium term financial plan.

Members were updated on the proposal to provide the Council's Building Control Service jointly with other authorities, and were informed this would not now proceed as, after careful consideration of the financial implications, it appeared that joint provision would increase the District Council's costs.

The Chairman referred to the Waste and Recycling specifically the removal of 80 bring sites, and requested feedback on the related cost savings.

Action: Beccy Drummond

The Chairman referred to the review of the Health and Leisure Centres and was keen that the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel was represented on the Task and Finish Group undertaking the review.

Action : Melanie Stephens

### 53 HOUSING WHITE PAPER

The Panel considered a summary of the Housing White Paper. The broad thrust of the paper was that Councils should be more involved in the wider housing market than traditionally had been the case.

Members were reminded that the Chairman had written to local MPs to make representations about the negative effects of the Right To Buy (RTB) policy, but noted that it was evident from the Paper that there were no immediate plans to change it. There were a number of questions on where RTB applied, and the Panel was advised that this was a very complex area of law. On the whole, RTB applied to Council procured or controlled housing, not just Council houses. RTB also applied to housing associations, and houses built under the Rural Exception Policy might not be exempt from RTB. Members suggested that the whole RTB principle needed to be revisited as it was open to abuse, and they encouraged the Chairman to raise the matter again in the context of the White Paper.

A member expressed the view that developers would not build at a loss unless there was long term return. He did not agree that regulation was the solution to the housing shortage, and that it slowed market development. There needed to be a wholesale change in major planning approvals

The Chairman felt that that the Council's approach to the provision of homes in the District was traditional rather than innovative. It was commented that the Council focussed on Council housing and fulfilled its statutory duty very well in this regard. There were a number of ways in which the Council could stimulate provision which fitted well with the proposals in the White Paper.

Some members favoured joint ventures with local developers so as to spread the risks.

It was commented that a large part of the District was within the National Park, and parishes would like to encourage building but were limited by land availability. Some previous affordable housing applications in the Forest had been viewed by some as too large and incompatible with some village communities.

Reference was made to Scandinavian and German built wooden modular houses, which were of a modern design and technology and might be an attractive and cost-efficient option. However, this might be a niche market and the houses might have a more limited lifespan. Officers undertook to circulate a note about the lifespan of modular houses.

#### **RESOLVED:**

That the Panel support the proposed responses as set out in the report.

**54 WORK PROGRAMME**

The Panel considered its work programme and various issues were raised.

The Chairman suggested that officers report to a future meeting on ways to assist local firms to export their goods and services, and that contact be made with the Department of International Trade in this connection. It was felt this item might usefully be combined with the Marine and Engineering review. The latter was being discussed at the New Forest Business Partnership at the end of March.

Action: Matt Callaghan

It was noted that the Building Works Review would be brought to the Panel in May.

In answer to a question, the Chairman gave an update on the progress of the Electoral Review Task and Finish Group. The Group had met on 13 March and considered potential models for a reduction in the numbers on the District Council. The Group would meet again in the autumn, so that Local Plan projected population growth figures could be factored into the population of prospective wards for any potential schemes.

The Chairman proposed that a task and finish group be set up to consider future grant allocations for the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB). It was explained that the Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel had set up the Grants Task & Finish Group to review the award process and grant allocations for 2017/18. In agreeing the grants, the Cabinet and Council had agreed that, in view of the size of the CAB grant, (£255k for 2017/18), a separate Task and Finish Group should be established to review the future relationship and funding support for the CAB from 2018/19.

As CAB grants fell within the remit of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel, the Chairman invited volunteers from COSP to sit on the Group. He felt the Group should look at issues such as benefits of the grant to the Council, possible other funding sources and potential efficiencies from alternative accommodation. Other members of the Council (preferably including at least one member of the Community Panel) would be invited to join the Group. Cllr Harris volunteered to be a member of the Group.

Action: Andy Rogers

As discussed in an earlier item, BT Openreach and HCC would be invited to a future meeting to discuss progress with Broadband.

**55 PORTFOLIO HOLDERS' UPDATES**

Cllr Heron gave an update on various developments and their likely effects on Council budgets. The Government New Homes Bonus grant had been dramatically reduced, which had a significant impact on the Council's budgets. With other positive variations, the Council was on target for the end of the 2016/17 financial year. Some Capital Projects had to be rephased.

CHAIRMAN