

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD IN THE FOUNDATION HOUSE, ICKNIELD WAY, LETCHWORTH
GARDEN CITY ON TUESDAY, 18 JULY, 2017 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors Councillor Cathryn Henry (Chairman), Councillor Steve Hemingway (Vice-Chairman), Ian Albert, Clare Billing, John Booth, Bill Davidson, Elizabeth Dennis, Jean Green, Steve Jarvis, Gerald Morris, Michael Muir and Frank Radcliffe*

N.B. Councillor Davidson left at 9.21 p.m.

In Attendance: *Councillor Michael Weeks (Chairman, Task and Finish Group on the Council's Management of Larger Projects) Norma Atlay (Strategic Director of Finance, Policy and Governance), Jo Dufficy (Customer Services Manager), Steve Geach (Parks and Countryside Development Manager), Brendan Sullivan (Scrutiny Officer) and Hilary Dineen (Committee and Member Services Officer)*

Also Present: *Councillors Julian Cunningham and Martin Stears-Handscomb. Two members of the public.*

17 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Janine Paterson.

18 MINUTES - 6 JUNE 2017

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 6 June 2017 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chairman.

19 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

No other business was submitted for consideration by the Committee.

20 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

- (1) The Chairman reminded those present that, in line with Council policy, the meeting would be audio recorded;
- (2) The Chairman informed Members that there was no sound amplification and asked Members to speak loudly and clearly and announce their names before speaking;
- (3) The Chairman drew attention to the item on the agenda front pages regarding Declarations of Interest and reminded Members that, in line with the Code of Conduct, any Declarations of Interest needed to be declared immediately prior to the item in question;
- (4) The Chairman advised that the requested discussion regarding New Settlements would be deferred to the next meeting of the Committee as the lead officer was on annual leave and felt that he could not leave this with another officer as it was still in the conceptual stage;

- (5) The Chairman advised that the Customer services Manager had, at short notice, provided a document regarding Channel Shifting that would be discussed later on the meeting.

21 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There were no presentations from members of the public.

22 URGENT AND GENERAL EXCEPTION ITEMS

No urgent or general exception items were received.

23 CALLED-IN ITEMS

Since the last meeting, no decisions had been called-in by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

24 TASK AND FINISH GROUP ON THE COUNCIL'S MANAGEMENT OF LARGER PROJECTS

The Committee considered the revised Task and Finish Group report on the Council's Management of Larger Projects and the Senior Management Team Comments regarding the recommendations contained in that report, which had been tabled.

Introduction by the Chairman of the Task and Finish Group

Councillor Michael Weeks, Chairman of the Task and Finish Group on the Council's Management of Larger Projects reminded Members that this Committee had, at the meeting held on 6 June 2017, asked the Task and Finish Group to reconsider some of the recommendation previously presented and that he would limit his comments to those deliberations.

Councillor Weeks stated that he stood by the statement made at the last meeting of this Committee, that he felt that the recommendations made by the Group should not be amended.

The Task and Finish Group as a whole had agreed to change the recommendations in line with the suggestions made by this Committee, despite this he, as Chairman, did not agree with the amendments to recommendations 4 and 9 and would be unable to support them going forward.

He presented each of the Recommendations as detailed below.

Comments of the Senior Management Team

The Strategic Director of Finance, Policy and Governance clarified the process relating to Task and Finish Groups and stated that the comments of the Senior Management Team (SMT) should be considered by this Committee alongside Task and Finish Group Recommendations so that the Scrutiny function was comprehensive and the recommendations to Cabinet were the result of full and detailed consideration of all aspects.

The Strategic Director of Finance, Policy and Governance clarified that the comments were tabled at the meeting because the Senior Management Team did not see the amended report until last week.

Members discussed what value and weight should be given to the comments from the Senior Management Team.

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The Chairman advised that, in the past this Committee had taken a decision not to consider the comments of the Senior Management Team however they were submitted to Cabinet along with this Committee's referral. She had decided that the Committee should trial consideration of these comments to see if they affected or added value to the recommendations submitted to Cabinet.

There was some discussion regarding the SMT comments in that they appeared to be defensive responses that the Council was already doing the things suggested as well as they could, but did not acknowledge that that the aim of the Task and Finish Group had not been to level criticism, but to identify a process by which things could be improved and the Council could do better.

The Strategic Director of Finance, Policy and Governance presented the Senior Management comments on each of the Recommendations as detailed below.

Recommendation 1

This recommendation had not been amended and remained as:

"The Council needs to be more decisive about what it wants from larger projects and once it decides, it needs to get on with them."

SMT supported the position that the Council needed clear and expedient decision making furthermore, they advocated the concept of a 'design freeze' or a freeze on project scope in relation to other projects.

Members agreed that this Recommendation be put forward to Cabinet.

Recommendation 2

The Task and Finish Group had agreed with the suggested minor drafting changes to this Recommendation, which now read:

"The Council should not introduce unnecessary complexity into its invitations to tender because it is unclear about its preferred outcome. It should decide what it wants and then invite bidders to tender for it."

SMT supported the concept that the tender specifications should be made as clear as possible and not unduly complicated. The Council must however ensure that its contractual position was safeguarded and that the full requirements of the project were captured in the specification.

Members agreed that this Recommendation be put forward to Cabinet.

Recommendation 3

This recommendation had not been amended and remained as:

"The Council's financial information should be comprehensive and presented in the form of accounts so the extent of profits and losses can be easily understood."

SMT advised that reports regarding project proposals provided appropriate information, in for example business cases, to enable decision makers to take a properly informed decision.

When undertaking a project, the business case drew out the links to the Council's Corporate Objectives as well as considering the social benefit of the project alongside its monetary cost which required both numerical and narrative explanation.

Local Authority accounts were required to separate Capital and Revenue expenditure and were prepared on an income and expenditure basis rather than profit and loss.

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Where impacts were more difficult to assess, these would be incorporated into the Risk Logs which were continually updated throughout the life of the project. The Risk Logs include financial risks and additionally these are often incorporated in the Corporate Business Planning process.

Members commented that the Recommendation was about receiving comprehensive financial information and that this could be by way of a business plan that included financial information and a narrative regarding social and other benefits. It was important that the financial and social benefit information regarding a project was clear, accessible and able to be monitored by Members regularly.

It was suggested that projects should be reviewed after completion to monitor the benefits realised and again after the project had been completed and operational for some time to monitor that those benefits were still being realised.

Members agreed that the wording of this Recommendation be amended as follows and put forward to Cabinet.

“The Council’s financial information should be comprehensive and presented in the form of a business plan so the extent of profits and losses can be easily understood.”

Recommendation 4

The existing Recommendation read:

“When exception reports are produced by project boards, they should be circulated to all members of Council through the Members’ Information Service or by e mail.”

The proposed Recommendation would read:

“When exception reports are produced by project boards, they should be circulated to all members of Council through the Members’ Information Service or by e mail; and, unless they are confidential, made available to the public via the Council’s website.”

Councillor Weeks advised that he did not agree with the proposed amendment to this Recommendation.

He was of the opinion that most exception reports would be confidential, but if those that were not confidential were publicised, this would only serve to engender criticism and comments that would take officer time to address resulting in to slow down the project.

This would then go against the most important of observations made by the Task and Finish Group that, once decided upon, the Council must get on with projects.

SMT advised that the Council operated an Executive model of governance and NHDC’s accepted project management methodology sat within that framework.

Where projects required any decision making that was outside the scope of the project as defined by Council or Cabinet then an exception report was provided to the appropriate committee seeking the necessary authorisation.

Information on project delivery was provided to Members at key points in the progression of projects through MIS.

The Scrutiny Officer advised that not all non-confidential exception reports were considered by the sponsoring Committee and that there was a misconception that because Councillors know about something that meant that the general public also knew about it.

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The Strategic Director of Finance, Policy and Governance reassured Member that NHDC did its utmost to ensure that as little as possible was classified as confidential and that everything that could be made public was.

Members debated this Recommendation. Some Members agreed with Councillor Weeks regarding exception reports and stated that the purpose of these was to inform the Project Board and Project Executive so that they could take steps to address the problem, If exception reports were published as a matter of course, this would engender criticism and complaints on something that it was likely had already been addressed. They felt that, if non-confidential exception reports were considered by Cabinet then the documents were already in the public arena.

Other Members commented that the mere fact that an exception report was produced implied that there was a problem and this should be made clear. There was no reason to not subsequently provide an information note detailing how that problem was then overcome. There was a perception that the Council was secretive and making exception reports more accessible could help address these issues.

They acknowledged the risks associated with this Recommendation as detailed by Councillor Weeks.

Upon the vote it was agreed that the following recommendation be presented to Cabinet:

“When exception reports are produced by project boards, they should be circulated to all members of Council through the Members’ Information Service or by e mail; and, unless they are confidential, made available to the public via the Council’s website.”

Recommendation 5

This Recommendation had not been amended and remained as:

“Projects are constrained by the resources that the Council has available. Planning a substantial project on the basis that part of it will be done in a member of staff’s spare time allows no contingency. The Council should ensure that large projects are properly resourced. If adequate resources are not available, the project should not begin until they are.”

SMT agreed that projects needed to be adequately resourced and the Council did this through its project management arrangements and Corporate Business Planning Process.

There were a limited number of projects that could be resourced at any one time and work plans were finely balanced so that additional ad-hoc internal requests for “small projects” or external requirements from Government departments could impact on delivery timescales.

In some instances there could be ‘pinch points’ in terms of delivering a project or other work competing deadlines which meant that a member of staff may work additional hours. Where this occurs this was with the agreement of the member of staff and time off in lieu or overtime may be payable. Where additional/external resources were required these were sourced.

Members agreed that this Recommendation be put forward to Cabinet.

Recommendation 6

This Recommendation had not been amended and remained as:

“The Council needs to have clear, documented objectives before it embarks on projects.”

SMT agreed that the Council prepared a detailed planning brief with extensive public consultation. Project initiation documents captured the objectives of a project.

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In relation to the Churchgate Project, it was agreed by Full Council in February 2010 to enter into a contract with Simons for them to bring forward proposals to regenerate the area. The scheme was complex and involved ownership outside the control of the Council and the relocation of the market. Despite extensive efforts Simons were unable to bring forward a viable scheme which met the objectives within the contract period and in January 2013 Full Council declined to extend their contract.

Members commented that the ownership of Churchgate would have been known prior to starting the project and queried the SMT comments in this respect.

The Strategic Director of Finance, Policy and Governance advised that details regarding ownership were known before starting the project and that at the time Hammersmatch had indicated that they would be happy to do a deal with NHDC and/or Simons, however this changed as the project progressed.

Members agreed that this Recommendation be put forward to Cabinet.

Recommendation 7

This Recommendation had not been changed and remained as:

“Large scale projects should have a champion to drive them forwards.”

SMT agreed with this recommendation and advised that there was already a ‘champion’ in the Lead Member and the Project Executive.

Members discussed that not all previous projects with a Lead Member had been successful and that a Champion should drive the project forward not just adds it on as another responsibility.

Members agreed that this Recommendation be put forward to Cabinet.

Recommendation 8

This Recommendation had not been changed and remained as:

“The Council should be more flexible about membership of project boards.”

SMT advised that the Council operated Project Board membership in a flexible way to ensure that there was a balance on ‘inputs’ to the Board whilst keeping Boards to a manageable size.

On the Churchgate Project Board there were four elected Members one of whom was not an Executive Member.

The composition of Project Boards varied between projects and it should be recognised that in an Executive model Council there would be appropriate representation from the Executive on Project Boards.

Members agreed that this Recommendation be put forward to Cabinet.

Recommendation 9

The existing Recommendation read:

“The Council should improve its consultation and engagement with the public.”

The proposed Recommendation would read:

“The Council should ensure there is meaningful consultation with the public prior to it finalising its plans; and make sure it continues to engage with the public throughout the life of the project.”

Councillor Weeks advised that he did not agree with the proposed amendment to this Recommendation.

He was of the opinion that all projects should have a freeze point at which the decision was made and no further changes could be made and that continued engagement with the public could only serve to slow down the project.

This would again go against the most important of observations made by the Task and Finish Group that, once decided upon, the Council must get on with projects.

SMT advised that the Council always strived to undertake meaningful consultation and uses a variety of mechanisms to do so.

It was true that not all consultation was equally successful however the public acceptance of the outcome should not, in itself, be used to measure the success of the consultation.

In respect of Churchgate, the Council sought to use a tried and tested method of public engagement, which Simons had used successfully in other town centre schemes, to gather public opinion leading to development of a scheme for submission to the Local Planning Authority.

Members noted that at the previous meeting of this Committee there had been long discussion regarding how a project could be effectively moved forward whilst ensuring that the public felt that they were part of the process, but not a burden to the process.

The general feeling was that public participation was valuable and helped the Council to be transparent and open, but it had to be acknowledged that consultation would not continue indefinitely although engagement certainly should.

The suggestion that not continuing to engage with the public throughout the life of a project would reduce the level of criticism was clearly incorrect. The Council needed to engage more with people and accept that criticism would likely be part of that engagement.

In terms of the wording of the Recommendation it was generally felt that the original recommendation was woolly and didn't inspire effective engagement.

The proposed wording would improve engagement by making it meaningful and continuing engagement did not mean continually asking what people wanted, but rather keeping them informed of what was and would be happening.

Upon the vote it was agreed that the following recommendation be presented to Cabinet:

"The Council should ensure there is meaningful consultation with the public prior to it finalising its plans; and make sure it continues to engage with the public throughout the life of the project."

Recommendation 10

This Recommendation had been amended to read:

"The Council should be mindful of the disadvantages of the Competitive Dialogue process and think very carefully before using it again in future projects."

SMT advised that whilst the Competitive Dialogue process could have its limitations, there were circumstances where it was the most appropriate method of procurement and the Council should keep all options open.

In respect of the District Council Offices, at the time that this piece of work commenced Full Council considered it to be the most suitable procurement route given all of the circumstances.

Members agreed that this Recommendation be put forward to Cabinet.

Other Issues

In response to comments from Councillor Weeks that he felt that the report of the Task and Finish Group should not be amended by this Committee, the Chairman acknowledged the depth of work undertaken by the Task and Finish Group and clarified that recommendations were ultimately made to Cabinet from this Committee.

In order to recognise the areas of disagreement, namely Recommendations 4 and 9 and to ensure that Cabinet had the benefit of seeing the original and the amended recommendations, Cabinet would receive the Task and Finish Group Report, the comments of the Senior Management Team regarding those recommendations and the Minutes of the meeting held on 6 June 2017 and this meeting.

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:

- (1) That, with the exception of Recommendations 3, 4 and 9, the Recommendations contained in the Task and Finish Group Report on the Council's Management of Larger Projects be supported;
- (2) That Recommendation 3 contained in the Task and Finish Group Report on the Council's Management of Larger Projects be amended to read:

"The Council's financial information should be comprehensive and presented in the form of a business plan so the extent of profits and losses can be easily understood."

- (3) That Recommendation 4 contained in the Task and Finish Group Report on the Council's Management of Larger Projects be amended to read:

"When exception reports are produced by project boards, they should be circulated to all members of Council through the Members' Information Service or by e mail and, unless they are confidential, made available to the public via the Council's website."

- (4) That Recommendation 9 contained in the Task and Finish Group Report on the Council's Management of Larger Projects be amended to read:

"The Council should ensure there is meaningful consultation with the public prior to it finalising its plans; and make sure it continues to engage with the public throughout the life of the project."

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider and comment on the Task and Finish Group report on the Council's Management of Larger Projects prior to consideration by Cabinet.

25 INFORMATION NOTE - CHANNEL SHIFTING

The Committee received an information note entitled Channel Shifting.

The Customer Services Manager introduced Channel Shifting as about trying to encourage customers to self serve by improving NHDC's digital offerings whilst recognising that there were customers who did not wish to or were unable to use this method of communication.

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Channel shifting had been around for some time and NHDC had already implemented a new website which had, as part of it, a self service portal that, although not yet fully functional, would give the customers the capability to log in online into an account in future.

The e-forms package enabled certain transactions and reporting functions to take place online.

There had been a very successful project in the Revenues Team, which had involved putting some of their processes fully on-line and completing them in that way. This had enabled the team to respond to enquiries that go directly to the back office almost immediately and process transactions very quickly.

Although channel shifting was referred to as a project, it had no end date as technology was constantly evolving and some of the technology being investigated was listed in Section 3 of the Information Note.

Research was also being undertaken regarding what other Council's were offering as well as considering what could be achieved with the resources and technology already in house.

Some examples of the technology being investigated in more detail were a service which would enable the customer to move seamlessly from the traditional telephone channel to the website, a system enabling customers to self scan documents and a digital newsletter that could be sent to a wide reaching number of customers to keep them updated.

It was important to note that the existing channels were being continued and this was about finding the most appropriate methods to help those customers that want to do things on-line.

Currently there were two officers whose job roles had changed so that they were now entirely involved with digital engagement and networking with other councils.

A project plan was being formulated to ensure that relevant discussions were being held with IT and Service Managers at the earliest opportunity in order to ensure a joined up corporate approach to channel shifting.

Members expressed some concern that there was no end date to the project, as NHDC needed to move forward with their digital communications as soon as possible and were concerned that the IT Department may not have sufficient staff and resources to undertake current works and queried whether this was feasible with the current staffing levels.

Members cautioned that any system should be easy to use and not require long and complicated passwords to use and that even digital communications should have a personal touch, such as the name of the person dealing with your request. It was also important that online information encouraged further digital communication by ensuring that the information given was comprehensive.

Members commented that digital systems required economies of scale to be cost effective and that purchasing lots of systems would result in the IT department constantly being required to connect different systems together.

Members asked for clarification about what success would look like and what measures and markers were used to gauge that success, what the response time was to respond to tweets and queried whether consideration was being given to how NHDC could work with other Councils regarding channel shifting.

The Customer Services Manager clarified that although the channel shifting project had no end date, as it was something that would be ongoing, due to changing technology and demands, however specific tasks within the project would have end dates.

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The project was not fully dependent on IT to be successful and before a commitment was made to any external offering IT was being consulted to see if that capability was available in house.

Data was received regarding e-form and website usage as well as how people were accessing the website. It was recognised that, as more channels became available, this didn't mean that everyone would move from one to another. Page click data was also used to ensure that the most viewed pages of the website were updated and traditional channels of communication were also reviewed.

There was currently no formal response time for tweets as they were continually monitored, but they were generally responded to on the same day..

Councils were currently sharing information on the technologies being used, what was working well and what was less effective.

The Strategic Director of Finance, Policy and Governance advised that events or services that were outside of the norm, such as Bank Holiday bin collection dates, were tweeted and put on social media.

The aim was to give people a nudge to use digital methods and that consideration was being given to maximising the capabilities of existing systems rather than spending a lot of money on new systems.

Members asked that the background papers be circulated to all Members of this Committee.

RESOLVED: That the Customer Services Officer be requested to circulate the document entitled Channel Shift – Plan for Progress to all Members of this Committee by email;

REASON FOR DECISION: To keep the Overview and Scrutiny Committee apprised of the progress made regarding Channel Shifting.

26 INFORMATION NOTE- FULL YEAR REPORT ON COMMENTS, COMPLIMENTS AND COMPLAINTS (3CS)

The Committee received an information note entitled Full year report on Comments, Compliments and Complaints (3Cs).

The Customer Services Manager drew attention to the following:

- Over that last 3 years the total number of 3Cs had reduced, although there had been an increase in the last 12 months;
- The increase in complaints this year was due to a couple of planning applications;
- The increase in compliments this year was for the Leisure Centres where a new system had been installed, which made it easier for customers to leave feedback'
- There had been one finding of maladministration by the Ombudsman, but they noted that NHDC had already been remedied.

Members asked that the percentage of interactions resulting in compliments be included in future reports and commented that John O'Connors did not appear to have any compliments despite doing an excellent job and asked how compliments were captured for this contractor.

Members asked whether all complaints received were analysed to see if there was a specific problem that could be solved and whether any benchmarking against other Councils was undertaken.

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The Customer Services Manager advised that complaints were analysed and reports regarding this were available to Service Managers who are required to update them with actions taken and lessons learnt. This system had resulted in improvements in service such as Waste.

Benchmarking against other Councils was not regularly undertaken as this was not always a like for like comparison, however some enquiries had been made of Three Rivers District Council and East Herts District Council and the number of complaints, the level of stage 1 resolution and the number of referrals to LGO were all very similar.

27 CORPORATE PLAN 2018 TO 2023

The Strategic Director of Finance, Policy and Governance presented the report entitled Corporate Plan 2018 to 2023 and reminded Members that the Corporate Plan informed the Corporate Business Planning Process.

This Corporate Plan was slightly different to previous Plans in that it recognised the day to day business of the Council, as it was increasingly likely that financial constraints would result in the emphasis for Council spend to be on day to day service delivery and it was important to be aware of the uncertainties that would affect the Council's financial position.

The Corporate Plan aimed to put the day to day roles into context at the start of the document and then move through each of the objectives.

A Member queried the discrepancy on Page 68 between the number of households that waste was collected from and the number of homes that Council Tax was collected from.

The Strategic Director for Finance, Policy and Governance advised that the Waste collection figure should be increased to match the Council Tax figure.

Members commented that there was little of substance about commercialisation and that simple outsourcing of services was not a form of commercialisation.

They expressed concern that, although generally crime rates were down, there was no recognition of the rise in Domestic Abuse and the actions being taken to address this problem. They felt that this aspect needed to be made clearer.

There was some discussion about protecting the environment and that initiative such as planting trees would help the environment and make the area more attractive.

In respect of grants to local community groups a Member commented that the revised Grants Policy was unhelpful and resulted in Councillors having to award grants for more than one year because of restrictions on groups applying in successive years.

Members noted that the biggest employers in the District were retail and hospitality and that people living in the District often worked in other towns. They considered that progressive steps were needed to encourage smaller business into the towns.

There was concern that there was no mention of the differences between parished and non-parished areas and the effect that this had on local finances and services.

Members generally did not like the document. They felt that the objectives read as if they were something that ought to be said, rather than a belief and the document as a whole felt disjointed, as though the different elements were not related, but squeezed together to make a document.

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They acknowledged that policy and finance were interdependent, but felt that the Plan was purely finance rather than policy led and that there should be some comment about what success would look like which would include some measurable targets.

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET: That Cabinet consider the comments of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee made in the discussion above regarding the Corporate Plan 2018 to 2013, in particular the following:

- (i) That the document as a whole felt disjointed;
- (ii) That more hard data should be included;
- (iii) That some specific and measurable targets should be included;
- (iv) That some detail be included regarding the differences between parished and non-parished areas;
- (v) That, whilst acknowledging financial constraints, the document should be more policy led.

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to comment on the report entitle Corporate Plan 2018 to 2013 prior to consideration by Cabinet.

28 INFORMATION NOTE - GREEN SPACE STRATEGY

The Committee received an information note entitled Green Space Strategy.

The Parks and Countryside Development Manager informed Members that the Information Note included details of the actions taken since February 2017 and the progress made regarding play areas and pavilions.

The team had been very proactive in seeking those interested in taking on responsibility for the play areas which included placing signage at the relevant play areas and putting information on the NHDC website.

In respect of progress made he made the following comments:

Bakers Close, Baldock

Since the information note was produced another group had expressed interest in taking on the pavilion.

St Johns Changing Rooms and Cadwell Lane, Hitchin

The football clubs using the sites were keen to take on the buildings and work was being undertaken with Community Development and the clubs to produce business cases to check that this was a viable option.

This building was in a poor condition and had been deemed by the Council as beyond economic repair therefore a lot of work would be required to bring the building up to standard.

Walsworth Changing Rooms, Hitchin

No interest had been expressed in the existing building however it was the Council's intention, subject to securing Section 106 funding, to build a new pavilion on the site and make it the hub for football in Hitchin.

Play Areas

The Council had updated its sponsorship ethos and were seeking sponsorship for larger play areas, skate parks, flowerbeds and splash parks.

This could bring in additional income to the Council which could in turn offset some of the planned closures of the smaller play areas.

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Betjeman Road and Farrier Court, Royston

Royston Town Council had met to discuss the two play areas in Royston and decided not to take them on. Royston Members were seeking alternative methods of funding them.

Ivel Road, Baldock

There had been no expressions of interest for this very small play area.

Dacre Road, Hitchin

There had been no expressions of interest.

Rosehill, Hitchin

This site had a lot of community support, including the submission of a petition, however there had as yet been no offers of funding.

Symonds Road, Hitchin

This was a very small site that had not received any expressions of interest.

Jackmans Recreational Ground, Letchworth

A community group had expressed interest and were very keen to take on the management of this play area. The group had sought sponsorship from businesses to fund the ongoing maintenance of the site.

Linnet Close, Letchworth

There had been some community support for this play area, but no offers of funding.

Oaktree Close, Letchworth

No expressions of interest had been received for this very small site.

Chilterns, Cleveland Way, Fairfield Crescent and Merrick Close, Great Ashby

Detailed talks had taken place with Great Ashby Community Council and they were currently undertaking a survey of local residents to ascertain what they want regarding play areas in the future. The result of this survey was due at the end of July which may then produce potential solutions for these play areas.

The Parks and Countryside Development Manager advised that he would present an update to this Committee in March 2018 prior to a report being presented to Cabinet.

In respect of those pavilions deemed as beyond economic repair, Members queried whether the agreements made with organisations regarding these would reflect this.

The Parks and Countryside Development Manager advised that the buildings deemed as beyond economic repair would be leased at a peppercorn rate.

Members noted that, even if a play area was closed, there would still be an expense for the Council for grounds maintenance of the area. They also commented that the costs for removal of pavilions could be given to organisations taking on these buildings.

The Parks and Countryside Development Manager confirmed that the Council had decided that, even if play equipment were removed the green space would be retained and maintained to a high standard.

If a third party took on responsibility for a play area, the Council would maintain the revenue expenditure that would have been spent if the equipment was removed by continuing to cut the grass, maintain trees etc. It would purely be the maintenance and upkeep of the play equipment that would transfer to the third party.

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In respect of pavilions, the Parks and Countryside Development Manager advised that the difficulty in giving third parties the money set aside for demolition was that, if that organisation did not continue, the pavilion would have to be demolished anyway.

Members commended the work undertaken and the innovative methods being used.

RESOLVED: That the Parks and Countryside Development Manager be requested to bring a further update regarding progress made in respect of play areas to the meeting of this Committee due to be held on 20 March 2018.

REASON FOR DECISION: To keep the Overview and Scrutiny Committee apprised of the progress made in respect of play areas, prior to consideration by Cabinet.

29 INFORMATION NOTE - CITIZENS ADVICE NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE - MAJOR FUNDERS

Prior to the item being discussed Councillor Henry declared a declarable interest in that she was a Citizens Advice North Hertfordshire Board Member. She advised that she would leave the room for the duration of the item.

The Vice-Chairman took the Chair.

The Committee received an information note entitled Citizens Advice North Hertfordshire – Major Funders.

A Member noted that Council funding for this organisation was for a limited time period and expressed concern at what would happen at the end of that period.

The Strategic Director of Finance, Policy and Governance clarified that Council had guaranteed funding for the three year period at which time it would be reviewed. Council had not made a decision as to whether it would or would not provide funding after this period.

The Scrutiny Officer reminded Members that the Council also supported organisations with benefits in kind as well as direct funding.

Councillor Henry returned to the room and took the Chair.

30 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

No questions had been submitted.

31 RESOLUTIONS OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Scrutiny Officer presented the report entitled Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

He advised that the report was in two parts with the first part being resolutions made by the Committee and most of these were either concluded or in hand.

The second part related to recommendations of Task and Finish Groups for which some were still awaiting a response from Cabinet.

The Task and Finish Group report on Commercialisation of Council Services had been presented to Cabinet approximately two years ago and as a result a Project Board had been set up to report back on how the recommendations should be implemented however there had, as yet, been no response from Cabinet as to the progress made.

Tuesday, 18th July, 2017

A Member noted that there was rarely a positive response from Cabinet regarding Task and Finish Group reports and that all too often the recommendations were not commented on, even to reject them.

The Task and Finish Groups involved a lot of people putting in a lot of work, which then generated constructive ideas and, in the case of commercialisation, Cabinet appeared to be saying they would do the work again by setting up a project board.

The Council's progress on commercialisation had been minimal at a time when additional funding would help maintain services and it felt like the time spent on the Task and Finish Group had been wasted.

He questioned the value of continuing Task and Finish Groups.

There was some discussion about the work of the Council being piece meal and not cohesive and that this appeared to be due to policy being budget led rather than a strategic policy led view.

It was noted that staff numbers had significantly reduced and that this had an impact on the work and capabilities of the Council and had resulted in projects remaining incomplete and lack resources being used as a reason not to do things.

Members felt that without effective feedback, the Committee were unable to judge whether the recommendations were helpful or not.

It suggested that a letter be sent to the Leader of the Council asking for a response regarding the Task and Finish Group on Commercialisation recommendations and suggesting that the new role of Deputy Chief Executive be given responsibility for commercial operations, also to advise that the lack of feedback to recommendations meant that Task and Finish Groups and this Committee could not judge their effectiveness.

Upon further debate Members felt that a discussion would be more beneficial than a letter.

The Strategic Director suggested an externally facilitated workshop for Members of this Committee and Cabinet to ascertain effective methods of Overview and Scrutiny that result in added value and impact on decisions.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the report entitled Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be noted:
- (2) That the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be requested to meet with the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive to discuss holding an externally facilitated workshop for all members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet to ascertain effective methods of Overview and Scrutiny that result in added value and impact on decisions.

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to improve its Overview and Scrutiny in order to have added value and impact on decisions.

32 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Officer presented the report entitled Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme and drew attention to the following:

Work Programme

A draft work programme was included at page 123 of the report.

Members agreed that the Committee should receive an update on the Common Housing Policy in September and that the effectiveness of the Community Halls Strategy be added as a discussion topic for a future meeting.

Review of the North Hertfordshire Museum and Community Facility at Hitchin Town Hall

Members felt that consideration should be given to how this review might be undertaken.

Task and Finish Groups

Members considered that, in light of the discussion regarding the effectiveness of Task and Finish Groups (Minute 31 refers) all planned Task and Finish Groups should be deferred until the previously discussed workshop had taken place.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme be noted;
- (2) That all planned Task and Finish Groups be deferred until after the planned workshop on effective methods of Overview and Scrutiny (Minute 31 refers) has been held;
- (3) That the Head of Housing and Public Protection be requested to provide an update on the Common Housing Policy at the meeting if this Committee due to be held on 19 September 2017;
- (4) That the following be added to the list of discussion topics for future meetings:
 - (i) The effectiveness of the Community Halls Strategy.

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to plan and carry out its workload efficiently and effectively.

The meeting closed at 10.28 pm

Chairman