

Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Committee17 November 2008
5.00pm – 9.00pm

Present: Councillors Bick, Blackhurst, Dryden, Ellis-Miller, Herbert, Shah, Taylor (Chair) and Ward

Also Present:

The Leader: Councillor Ian Nimmo-Smith

Executive Councillor for Customer Services and Resources: Rod Cantrill

For the Information of the Council

The Chair informed Members of the Committee and the Public that Agenda Item 14 (Quayside Property Matters) had been deferred and would be discussed at a special meeting to take place in December.

08/SR/61 Minutes

The minutes of the Meetings on 22nd May and 1st September and the Special Meeting on 16th June 2008 were agreed as correct records and signed by the Chair.

08/SR/62 Apologies

Apologies were noted from Councillor Howell.

08/SR/63 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Shah (08/SR/65): As Board Member of the Cambridge Ethnic Community Forum.

08/SR/64 Public Questions

None

08/SR/65 Race Equality Scheme 2008-11

The Head of Strategy and Partnerships introduced the item and explained that the Council adopted its first Race Equality Scheme (RES) in May 2002 and that legislation required that progress against the scheme be reviewed annually. The emphasis within the RES was on ensuring equality issues were mainstreamed within the organisation.

Councillor Bick voiced his support for the scheme but highlighted that equality and diversity needed to be seen as everyone's responsibility and not just tackled on a departmental or organisational basis. The Head of Strategy and Partnerships agreed with this view and stated that equality issues were now built into individual staff performance appraisals and formed part of the Council's competency frameworks.

In response to a question from Councillor Bick it was confirmed that the Council now looked at BME representation by individual job grade instead of overall figures. This ensured that the organisation could better target areas of low BME representation and a full breakdown of the grading figures was available to members on request.

In response to a question from Councillor Shah regarding capacity building and community support the Head of Strategy and Partnerships confirmed that extra funding was being sought through the Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) to further support existing BME Groups to become stronger and more sustainable.

Councillor Herbert asked how the views of local BME Groups were gathered and was informed that the key route is through the Council's Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs). EqIA's looked specifically at how services were being delivered and gathered feedback from users and stakeholders. Work was also continuing with the Ethnic Community Forum and the Community Development Team to see how the Council could engage better.

In response to a question from Councillor Taylor it was confirmed that Council surveys do not always receive a proportionate response from BME groups but work was ongoing to specifically targeting under represented groups. An example of this was the work done with LBGT groups at the Pink Picnic event that took place in the summer.

The Committee supported the recommendations set out in the officer's report by votes 6 to 0

The Leader approved the recommendations

08/SR/66 New Legislation – Implications for the Council

Councillor Nimmo-Smith introduced the item and highlighted the recommendations in relation to the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the Empowerment White Paper as set out in appendix 1 of the officers report.

He explained that whilst it was seen as a complex package, it was one that met the requirements and challenges facing the City Council.

Councillor Herbert felt that Opposition Groups did not have an adequate opportunity to comment on these proposals and were not involved in the process. He referred to the recommendation that the current election system be retained and stated that this was an expensive option.

Whilst Councillor Nimmo-Smith agreed that moving to elections every four years would produce a saving it was felt that the current system gave an opportunity for more stability, continuity and the development of Councillor skills. It was also felt important that residents had a regular opportunity to express their views and guide the direction of the City, and that students could actively and regularly engage with the democratic process.

Councillor Herbert stated that current Executive arrangements were not fit for purpose and that the public would benefit more from a revised Cabinet and scrutiny system. He also felt that the lack of financial scrutiny did not deliver best value.

In response Councillor Nimmo-Smith stated that the current system was open and transparent and that other systems were deemed to be too insular

Councillor Herbert reinforced the need to use simpler language in order to engage the public, and whilst Councillor Nimmo-Smith agreed, it was highlighted that terminology was cascaded down from Central Government.

It was suggested by Councillor Taylor that a glossary of terms could be appended to these types of report in order to assist the public. The Director of Customer and Democratic Service stated that the recent 'Code of Corporate Governance Report' taken to the Civic Affairs Committee included a comprehensive glossary of terminology which could be useful and that recent e-newsletters explaining the Local Area Agreement process, were being written in 'Plain English' to aid the public's understanding.

In response to a question from Councillor Herbert regarding engaging the public in the 'Councillor Call for Action' powers Councillor Nimmo-Smith stated that the primary route for publicity was through Ward Councillors. The public were already able to have an input into the committee process through public questions at meetings, petitions and the request of agenda items through their Ward Councilors so it was felt that this Council were already actively encouraging involvement and engagement.

Councillor Herbert highlighted the need for public petitions to be treated with respect and acted upon appropriately by Executive Councillors.

In response to a further question from Councillor Herbert regarding the discharge of further responsibilities to *individual* Councillors, Councillor Nimmo-Smith felt that this could be open to corruption and risk and had therefore decided not to act upon this. However, more delegated authority to Area Committees was welcomed and this would be looked at in more detail.

It was felt that the increased powers for Local Authorities to make bye-laws without the need for scrutiny by government was a positive step forward but, whilst it was a tool to assist, it would not solve the problem of street drinking.

In relation to the Sustainable Communities Act, further proposals and ideas were welcomed from Members and the outcomes, together with proposals from Community Groups, would be reported back to the Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 16th March 2009.

The Committee supported the recommendations set out in the officer's report by 6 votes to 0

The Leader approved the recommendations

08/SR/67 Treasury Management Report

The Chair raised a question on behalf of a member of the public who was unable to attend regarding the suitability of investing in Icelandic Banks after warnings earlier in the year. The Leader confirmed that he would provide a full response in writing.

The Director of Finance introduced the item giving an update on the current position and distributed an additional document highlighting the 'Schedule of Investments as at 01.10.08' to Members.

Members were reassured that, whilst there was still uncertainty over what investments may be recoverable, the Council was not in a position where impending payroll or precept payments were a concern.

A creditors meeting for the Landsbanki investors had taken place on 13th/14th November (feedback expected on 20th November), with a creditors meeting for the Heritable Bank Ltd investors planned for 9th December 2008.

The Director of Finance took Members through the full recommendations as highlighted in the officer's report and confirmed that work was ongoing with the Local Government Association and the Audit Commission. A full budget setting report would be sent out in December.

In response to a question from Councillor Shah regarding Irish financial institutions the Director of Finance confirmed that whilst a deposit-guarantee scheme was in place, all investments with non-UK banks were suspended.

This view was supported by Councillor Cantrill who felt that as the situation was still very fluid caution should be taken with all non-UK institutions.

In response to a number of questions from Councillor Herbert the Director of Finance stated that Local Authorities follow set guidance and frameworks regarding investments and all use similar credit rating information. The City Council chose Icelandic Banks as they offered optimal returns but within a safe and seemingly secure framework. It was not the policy of the Council to simply chase the highest interest rates. It was confirmed that there was no concern regarding the £18m already invested in Irish banks but as a precautionary measure further investments were limited to UK banking institutions only.

The Director of Finance went on to state that credit agencies were still used by Local Authorities to guide placements of their investments but other background information on the proposed institutions was always taken into account prior to a judgment being made. The Council had placed over 40 successful transactions with Icelandic banks over a three year period and whilst Landsbanki and Heritable Bank Ltd were linked, they were individual counter parties from the approved list. Members were also informed that at the time of the latest transactions these institutions were both rated as F1 (the highest credit rating) so were deemed very safe options by the Council.

Councillor Bick felt that the suggested recommendations were a sensible approach to limiting future risk but questioned whether it would be advantageous to review the length of time that investments are left.

The Director of Finance stated that current cash flow positions would drive this and at the moment most investments were for less than 12 months.

Councillor Dryden asked who would be responsible for the costs of Ernst & Young and it was confirmed that this would be charged direct to Heritable Bank Ltd, and not the responsibility of the Council.

In response to questions from Councillor Herbert and Councillor Shah the Director of Finance confirmed that investing funds with other Local Authorities was possible as they were included on the counter party list and also had the benefit of full Government backing. The 'clubbing together' of Local Authorities could also be advantageous as big street banks generally ask for higher investments than single authorities would normally give. Whilst this would have its difficulties, as investment periods, preferred rates and differing cash flow priorities differ widely between authorities, it would be looked at.

The Committee supported the recommendations set out in the officer's report by 6 votes to 0

The Leader approved the recommendations

08/SR/68 Additional Item: Council Appointment to City Centre Partnership Board

The Chair ruled that under 100B(4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972 the two additional items would be considered despite not being made publicly available five clear days prior to the meeting.

The City Centre Manager introduced the item. Further to a report which went to Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 16th June 2008 the City Council was invited to appoint a Director to the City Centre Partnership Board and it was recommended that this position be taken up by the Executive Councillor for Customer Services and Resources.

Councillor Herbert highlighted the lack of community representation on the Board and the potential problem with the majority of Directors being from national and international commercial companies. It was felt that this was not a strong base from which to work and would result in an unrepresentative view for the City.

The City Centre Manager stated that the structure of the proposed Board was still being worked on but should be agreed by mid November and that it was important to get a broad representation whilst still making it a manageable size. It was likely to consist of between 12 and 13 members, with the Chair being a resident of the City and a local retailer. There would only be 1 seat for a national retailer and 1 representative from each of the main shopping centers in Cambridge.

It was confirmed that any Resident Association (RA) could become a member of the Board and this would entitle them to one vote, attendance at quarterly members meetings and to be included on Action Groups. It was also envisaged that the City Council Member would act as a representative and voice of the whole community.

Councillor Cantrill agreed that the composition of the board could be seen to be weighted towards the larger retailers but the diverse nature of the Board and the broader membership would go a long way to counter this. It was felt important to draw on the professional services experience in the community but to also bring together a representative balance. The objective of the Board was to embrace all stakeholders.

Councillor Herbert suggested that a representative could be appointed that gave the views of *all* local RA's and had a passion for the City. Councillor Cantrill stated that whilst this could be considered, in his experience individual RA's had differing priorities and a collective view could be difficult to obtain.

In response to a question from Councillor Bick regarding the involvement of Ward Councillors it was stated that ways were being explored for these Members to actively participate.

The Chair summed up and felt that the balance of discussion had given a fairly clear steer to the Executive Councillor to ensure that the residents and Councillors had a greater degree of representation.

The Committee supported the recommendations set out in the officer's report by 6 votes to 0

The Executive Councillor for Customer Services and Resources approved the recommendations

08/SR/69 Additional Item: Section 29 – Draft Regulations

The Head of Policy and projects introduced the item and explained that the report was late as the date of the consultation by the Secretary of State on the draft order to establish the Section 29 Committee could not be known in advance. It was recommended that the draft regulations be referred to Full Council on 4th December.

Councillor Herbert raised concern regarding the number of Committees with common membership and seemingly common remits.

Councillor Nimmo-Smith took this on board but highlighted that the establishment of the Section 29 Committee is crucial to the continued Government funding of £70,000 pa to the three Local Authorities and Cambridgeshire Horizons for the staff to help deliver quality growth.

The Committee supported the recommendations set out in the officer's report by 6 votes to 0

The Leader approved the recommendations

08/SR/70 Mapping Poverty Report

The Strategy Officer introduced the item and informed Members that in general the findings were similar to the previous years research findings. The main findings were highlighted as indicated in the officer's report and the information in appendix 1 was briefly discussed.

The officers suggestion that the research be redone in 2009 (instead of the proposed 2010) in order to review the implications of the economic downturn, was agreed by Members with a formal amendment proposed by Councilor Taylor and seconded by Councilor Herbert.

It was highlighted by Councillor Herbert that 1/5 of the City's population was over 65 and resources could be redirected to tackle poverty in this area. It was also suggested that a comparative study in 2009 would be useful as it may identify residents new to the benefit system and not linked to the regular support and information networks.

Councillor Cantrill brought up the issue of changes by central government to the Local Housing Allowance Scheme. 'Average rents' were now based on rents from across the county not just the city and many tenants had found their benefits cut as a result. Whilst assistance was available through the Emergency Funding Scheme it was limited and only on a month-by-month basis so a longer-term solution was being looked into.

Councillor Nimmo-Smith confirmed that discussions were ongoing between Local Authorities on ways to tackle the increase in vulnerable people due to the economic downturn. Workshops had taken place through Cambridgeshire Together and feedback would be issued soon.

Councillor Nimmo-Smith circulated an additional document (his suggested actions to mitigate the economic downturn) and referred to the pressure on resources for local advice agencies such as the Citizens Advice Bureaus and local Law Centres. The document was summarised and Members were invited to forward additional comments or views prior to the workshops.

As sharing data with partners was an objective, Councillor Taylor asked to what extent other agencies had used the data to shape their priorities and activities

The Strategy Officer agreed to compile a list of specific examples where comparative data had helped and distribute to Members.

The Committee supported the following amended recommendations as set out in the officer's report by 8 votes to 0 (unanimous):

i) To approve the actions for the future use of the research shown in 8.1

ii) To repeat the research in 2009

The Leader approved the recommendations

08/SR/71 Countywide Review of Partnerships

The Director of Customer and Democratic Services introduced the item highlighting the representation of the Cambridgeshire Together Board and the Partnership Structures (as indicated in sections 4.2 and 4.4 of the report).

The Principles of Partnership Working as set out in appendix A of the officer's report were briefly discussed and the recommendations highlighted.

Councillor Herbert highlighted the need for more streamlining and consolidation of all the competing structures and the continued need for improvements.

The Chief Executive agreed that the structures were confusing for the public but that the diagrams in Appendix 2 of the officer's report were the result of 9 months work. Work would continue with the Local Strategic Partnership to get a more 'local voice'.

The Committee supported the recommendations set out in the officer's report by 6 votes to 0

Councillors Ellis-Miller and Nimmo-Smith left the meeting at 8.30pm

08/SR/72 Appointment to outside bodies

The Chair informed the Committee that a substitute Member for the Local Area Agreement Joint Accountability Committee needed to be appointed and Councillor Herbert had been nominated.

The Committee supported the nomination by 5 votes to 0

08/SR/73 Project Appraisal – Guildhall Project

The head of Property Services introduced the item and gave a brief update on the project.

The Committee supported the recommendations set out in the officer's report by 6 votes to 0

The Executive Councillor for Customer Services and Resources approved the recommendations

08/SR/74 Service Plan performance Review

- Customer Services

The Head of Customer Services introduced the item and went through in detail the Key Achievements, Key Objectives 2008/09, Longer Term Objectives 2009/10 – 2011/12 and Performance Information and Targets as highlighted in the officers report.

Councillor Cantrill explained that the Customer Service Centre was a very complex and complicated project and that he would like to thank all of the officers involved for the amazing job they had done.

In response to a question from Councillor Ward regarding the performance targets as indicated in appendix 1 of the officers report, it was confirmed that these would be agreed as more services were integrated into the Customer Service Centre. Strong working relationships were being built with other services and the East of England Regional Assembly to help develop targets.

In response to a question and idea from Councillor Shah it was confirmed that officers within the service would be reviewing the possibility of installing systems to automatically alert when an appointment checks in at front desk and that courtesy phones were currently available to enable a direct point of contact with named officers.

The Committee supported the recommendations set out in the officer's report by 5 votes to 0

The Executive Councillor for Customer Services and resources approved the recommendations

- Property and Building services

The Head of Property and Building Services introduced the item and went through in detail the Key Achievements, Key Objectives 2008/09, Longer Term Objectives 2009/10 – 2011/12 and Performance Information and Targets as highlighted in the officers report.

In response to questions from Councillor Herbert it was confirmed that managing the property portfolio in the current economic climate was being looked at strategically across the whole Council and in partnership with Housing Associations. Commercial properties with easy lease terms would be promoted actively to attract new businesses or those looking to downsize.

Councillor Cantrill confirmed that as part of the budget process all commercial properties would be look through in detail.

In response to a question from Councillor Dryden regarding fire safety procedures the Director of Customer and Democratic Services confirmed that a recent evacuation drill had been held, the alarms were tested every week and the out of hours procedures were in the process of being reviewed.

The Committee supported the recommendations set out in the Officers' report by 5 votes to 0

The Executive Councillor for Customer Services and resources approved the recommendations

The Meeting closed at 9pm

CHAIR