

SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
3RD APRIL 2006

MINUTES
(18.00 – 7.50 PM)

PRESENT Councillor Mrs Driver (in the Chair), Councillors Allen,
Mrs Hale, Mrs Ledoux, Nicholson, Mrs Regan
Mrs Kitchin and Mrs Steers

APOLOGIES Councillor Mrs Holliday
Deputy (Health, Wellbeing and Economy)

RELEVANT DEPUTIES IN ATTENDANCE:
Deputy (Green Environment and Licensing)
Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community)

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 20th February 2006 be approved as a correct record.

3. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions or petitions had been received.

4. MATTERS REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE

- (a) **By Council** – None
- (b) **By Cabinet** - None
- (c) **By other Committee** – None

5. BRIEFING FROM CABINET DEPUTIES (Agenda item 6)

The Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) reported on the following issues within his portfolio which had been considered by Cabinet on 29th March 2006:-

- Housing Act 2004 – Operational and Strategic Implications. The report contained information on how the council will respond to responsibilities brought about by the

Housing Act 2004 which is due to be implemented in April 2006 and in the light of the results of the 2005 private sector house condition survey. The act introduces a licensing system for certain houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) resulting in at least 400 houses requiring to be licensed. Local Authorities are empowered to charge a fee which has been agreed county-wide at £350 for a three year license.

- Cheltenham's Foundation Regeneration Strategy. The Cabinet had endorsed this document produced by the Regeneration Partnership (Cheltenham) on behalf of Cheltenham Strategic Partnership to support the work of all partners engaged in community regeneration. The strategy which has been widely consulted upon identifies Cheltenham's priority neighbourhoods and challenges, sets a strategic framework for the delivery of regeneration activity in Cheltenham and lays the foundation for a more effective and efficient organisational structure for regeneration.
- St Paul's Estate Regeneration – Progress Update. This report provided an update on the process being followed to establish the most satisfactory course of action for dealing with the area of predominantly council-owned housing at St Paul's Estate. The Council's key strategic objectives are:-
 - to bring properties up to the decent homes standard
 - to produce a more balanced and sustainable community, partly by introducing a measure of owner occupation.A detailed survey was currently being conducted and was due to be completed by the end of the month. This would provide information on what people want and the condition of the property. The council will continue to engage with residents to develop options for the area and will then need to look at costs and options for delivery before reporting back recommendations for implementation to the Cabinet.
- Managing Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Assets. This report updated the Cabinet on the work undertaken to date to develop an Asset Management Strategy for HRA assets to enable decisions to be taken on whether assets should be held, invested in, developed or disposed of over the next 30 years. The Deputy referred to the recent headline in the Echo regarding the future of the council's stock of prefabricated houses and indicated that there was no substance to the statement. He explained that the council was obliged to go through this exercise to ensure remedying the structural defects of the prefabs for another 30 years does not exceed the cost of building and maintaining a new property in its place over the same period. He pointed out that some prefabs that had been built to last five or ten years had lasted fifty or sixty years and were still structurally sound – each case would be assessed individually.

Councillor Allen asked for other factors to be considered as part of the redevelopment of St Paul's including the provision of a reasonable standard of environment in the form of gardens, amenity space, parking space etc which were important to quality of life.

In response to comments made by Councillor Mrs Regan, the Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) undertook to ensure that tenants of prefabricated houses were kept informed about any council policies to redevelop their homes if this became an issue (as suggested by the Echo) and allow them to participate in decision-making about their homes.

The Deputy (Green Environment and Licensing) updated on licensing statistics which were also available on the website:-

- 711 licences handled so far since November 2006 with 40 pending a decision

In response to concerns raised by the Chairman about the recent decision of the Licensing Committee to renew a private hire drivers licence in respect of a driver who had a number of

previous speeding convictions, the Deputy (Green Environment and Licensing) explained that the decision had been taken democratically and with regard to the magistrate court's decision to allow the applicant to retain his DVLA licence because he was the only wage earner in the household. However, she pointed out that the conditions attached to the granting of the licence included the applicant taking a driver assessment test with the Road Safety Unit within 28 days and the licence being reviewed again by the Committee in six months time.

Members of the Committee expressed their best wishes to the Assistant Director (Public Protection) who was currently incapacitated and asked the Chairman to sign a letter/get well card on their behalf.

The Acting Managing Director reminded the Committee that the new senior management structure became effective on 1st April and these changes will have an impact on the scope of the remit of the three O & S Committees. Neighbourhood Regeneration and the interim Entertainments and Tourism Division were now in the Social and Community Group which would hopefully avoid some of the previous confusion about the responsibility for issues such as housing and the arts both of which appeared to fall within more than one O & S Committee's remit.

6. SCRUTINY IMPROVEMENT PROJECT (Agenda item 7)

Councillors Allen and Mrs Hale, as members of the scrutiny improvement working group, introduced their report. The group had looked in detail at all aspects of scrutiny which had resulted in the outline proposals set out in the report. They said that the working group had been well led and had received good officer support which had included carrying out research amongst other local authorities. The working group were keen to get comments from all members before doing any further work, particularly as some of the proposals would require additional resources before they could be implemented. Councillor Allen commented that he particularly welcomed the changes to be brought about by the new senior management structure as problems arising from cross-boundary issues had been highlighted during the review.

Mrs Kitchin and Mrs Steers were pleased to see proposals for better co-optee induction.

Councillor Nicholson felt that scrutiny was currently not a good use of time and cited an example where a request from scrutiny had been ignored by a Cabinet Deputy. When asked by Councillor Mrs Hale, he had no suggestions for improving the scrutiny process.

Councillor Mrs Regan commented that the questionnaire was excellent and thought that press releases and increased publicity were a good idea.

The Chairman referred to the recent meeting of the Committee held at Leisure@ which she felt had been excellent and suggested that each scrutiny committees should aim for 2 or more external meetings a year as community engagement was key.

Mrs Kitchin thought the council should learn from its experiences of Area Committees that public attendance must be gained through good and imaginative publicity which must be supported by a budget.

The Democratic Services Manager highlighted the need for additional resources in order to implement some of the recommendations whilst others could be implemented immediately

as they had no resource implications. The Chairman thought that scrutiny should prove itself before asking for more resources.

The Democratic Services Manager thanked members for all their responses. She emphasised that the aims behind many of the group's proposals were to increase members' engagement with the process and address the relationship issues. For this reason the group had considered it important that they sought some buy-in for their proposals at this stage before taking their final report to Council. She advised that the working group would be meeting again to consider the feedback from all the overview and scrutiny committees and planning their next steps.

RESOLVED that the Committee notes the report.

7. PROMOTING DISABILITY EQUALITY (Agenda item 8)

The Corporate Policy Manager introduced this Information/Discussion paper which had been circulated with the agenda. He explained that the review group had now met four times and the paper summarised the progress to date which he went through in some detail. He indicated that the impact assessment of the council's housing management service had taken place that day and the process was to be rolled out to tackle the other eight areas over the course of the year. The meeting involved the Community Partnership Manager and the Housing Services Manager who had met with the Chairman of Cheltenham Disability Forum and Councillor Mrs Driver the Chairman of the review group and all parties had gained significantly from the meeting.

The Chairman was very impressed with the progress made by the working group and the depth of the review and thanked the Corporate Policy Manager for his commitment.

Councillor Mrs Regan commented that since the establishment of the Disability Forum she had noticed that the profile of disability issues had been raised significantly across the town and this was a welcome achievement.

Councillor Allen commented that building regulations were making good progress on promoting disability issues but felt that there was a slight imbalance with regard to access to sport and leisure facilities.

The Chairman pointed out that disability included those people suffering from visual and hearing impairment and mental illness as well as those who relied on wheelchairs. She referred to the disability awareness event to be held on Wednesday 17th May at the Civil Service Club and encouraged all members and officers to come along.

Councillor Mrs Hale suggested that the council should focus on the extent to which its own signage and communications to the public take into account the needs of disabled people.

RESOLVED that the Committee notes the report.

8. LOCAL DEMOCRACY REVIEW (Agenda item 9)

The Policy and Consultation Officer introduced this Information/Discussion paper which had been circulated with the agenda. He reminded the Committee that it had agreed the terms of reference for the review at the meeting held on 9th June 2005. At a subsequent scoping session

it had been agreed by the review steering group to focus primarily on the involvement and engagement of young people in the local democratic and political process. The Policy and Consultation Officer explained that the review is project-based and, given resource constraints concentrates on identifying realistic actions that can be carried out to increase young people's understanding of and participation in local democracy. He provided an update on the nine projects which had been identified as offering low cost – high impact benefit.

Whilst supportive of the review, Councillor Mrs Hale was disappointed that it was limited to young people when the council should do more to raise awareness generally. She indicated that she had taken part in the 'political speed dating' exercise undertaken as part of Local Democracy Week but had not received any feedback on the event which she would find interesting.

Councillor Mrs Regan thought that encouraging young people was a good start as they were potential voters of the future. She was of the opinion that many people of her generation continued to vote out of duty or habit and so did not need quite so much encouragement. There was already quite a bit of party political literature posted across the town to generally raise awareness of the forthcoming election and there was scope for the review to be extended into other areas in future.

In response to a question from Councillor Mrs Regan, the Policy and Consultation Officer explained that the DVD/CD-ROM to be developed for schools would likely contain information in two parts:-

- Local Democratic Process
- How your vote can make a difference – including interviews with Councillors, young people and material to stimulate discussion.

The Policy and Consultation Officer indicated that the review steering group would be involved in this development.

The Chairman endorsed the work of the review group and suggested that Councillors could do a lot more to raise awareness of local democracy and encourage people to vote by going out into the community to engage with the public. The Council also needed to market itself more. She referred to the recent event she had organised for local school children to come along to the Council Chamber for a mock debate and indicated that the parents and the teachers were equally as interested because they did not know what went on.

RESOLVED that the Committee notes the report.

9. POSSIBLE FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS

The Acting Managing Director referred to the Council Business Plan 2004-2007 which had been approved by the Council on 29th March 2006 and contained over 100 actions for 2006/07. He indicated that an extract of 'Our plans for 2006/07' relating to the Social and Community Group would be presented to the Committee at the next meeting so that it could decide on which areas of work it would like to focus and include in their workplan for 2006/07.

Following a request from the Chairman it was agreed that notes on the new divisional structure and the responsibilities relating to the Social and Community Group would be circulated to members of the Committee.

The Chairman agreed to produce a scrutiny topic registration form in respect of two possible new topics:

- How much the council spends on upgrading private sector housing / relocation grants and how the process works
- Holding some of the major Housing Associations in Cheltenham to account. Finding out about their policies and procedures to look after tenants.

During discussion that followed, Members were unaware that there were between 20 and 30 Registered Social Landlords across Cheltenham and asked for a briefing note to be circulated.

Mrs Kitchin referred to an outstanding item on the workplan relating to the review of temporary exhibitions policy and asked whether the review could be made meatier and broader now that proposals arising out of the cultural review had recently been given the go ahead by the Cabinet. The Acting Managing Director indicated that the Deputy (Health, Wellbeing and Economy) would likely welcome input from the Committee in progressing this work and suggested Mrs Kitchin provided further details by completing the scrutiny topic registration form.

10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING – Thursday 8th June 2006

**Councillor Mrs B Driver
Chairman**