

SOUTH BUCKS DISTRICT COUNCIL

Meeting - 23 January 2007

Present: Mr Adams (Chairman), Mr Dhillon (Vice-Chairman), Miss Arnold, Mr Binns, Mr Bowater, Mr Busby, Mr Cooper, Mr Dawkins, Mrs Evans, Mr Harding, Mr Hardy, Mr Hartwell, Miss Hazell, Mr Hollis, Mrs Holloway, Mr Jones, Mr Lidgate, Mrs Lowen-Cooper, Mr Mountford, Mr Nicholls, Mr Reed, Mr Rigby, Mrs Royston, Dr Scott, Mrs Simmonds, Mr Smith, Mr Thomson, Mr Tilbey, Mr Walters and Mr Worrall.

Apologies: Mr Capel, Mrs Fea, Mr Houdret, Mr Oxley, Mr Sandy, Mrs Tofari and Mrs Woolveridge.

68. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman began his announcements by referring to the sad loss of a Council colleague and a former Council colleague and invited the Council pay tribute to them. Mrs Barbara Greenfield, who had died on 15 December 2006, was first elected in June 1973 to the shadow authority which preceded the new Beaconsfield District Council. Mrs Greenfield represented Denham North and had completed twenty-two years continuous service as a Councillor when she stepped down in 1995. She had served on a number of Council Committees over the years, having a particular interest in planning and was also a tireless worker for the Community in Denham. Her accomplishments were formally recognised when she was awarded the British Empire Medal.

Councillor Rodney Royston, who had died on 27 December 2006, was first elected as a District Councillor for Farnham Royal in May 1995, serving just short of three full terms. During this time he had acted as Vice-Chairman of the Policy Committee, Vice-Chairman of the Council and then Chairman of the Standards Committee 2003/2005. Mr Royston was also a Buckinghamshire County Councillor from 1997 and served for a number years as a Cabinet Member with responsibility for Strategic Planning. His expertise and wise counsel would be greatly missed.

The Council stood in silence as a mark of respect to the memory of these two servants of the community.

The Chairman also reported on recent functions and events attended on behalf of the Council and mentioned in particular the Beaconsfield Festival of Lights, the Staff Christmas Party, the Bucks County Council Ceremonial Meeting which included the presentation of awards to unsung heroes and a Memorial Service for the late Councillor Professor Hogarth.

68. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 12 December 2006 were confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

With reference to minute 58 [Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority] the Council received a copy of a letter from the Fire Authority containing further information on development options in Beaconsfield following the presentation to the last Council Meeting.

With reference to minute 65 [Electoral Modernisation Programme - May 2007 Electoral Pilots] the Chief Executive reported that the Department of Constitutional Affairs had indicated that the Council's application for an Electoral Pilot had been approved but this was due to be confirmed in a Ministerial Announcement to be made shortly.

67. QUESTIONS

Mr Rigby had given notice in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 9 of the following question he wished to put to the Leader:-

“Will the District Council be responding to the DTI consultation document entitled ‘The Post Office Network’? Does the Leader agree that the provision of post offices in our villages is a vital service which should be maintained? In respect of paragraph 6.2 of the Consultative Document should we welcome greater Local Government involvement but be wary of being asked to provide funding? Will the Leader also seek to influence the LGA response to the consultation”?

The Leader referred the question to Mr Bowater, Planning Policy Portfolio Holder, who replied as follows:

“I am grateful to you Cllr Rigby for highlighting this consultation on the future of the Post Office Network, especially in view of the efforts of the Council to keep the Stoke Poges Post Office operating in its current temporary accommodation, with a permanent home in the new Bells Hill re-development.

It is proposed that the Council responds to the DTI consultation - I will be considering a report at the next meeting of the Planning Policy Advisory Group suggesting a robust reply to the consultation. I believe we should respond on the lines that Post Offices are indeed vital to the fabric of many of our towns and villages, that a proper, transparent and independent assessment should be made of which must be retained, and that the role of Post Offices in serving the poorer, more vulnerable and elderly members of our communities is most important and should be preserved. Further, the Government should free Post Offices from the shackles of Royal Mail restraint on what they can do, thus allowing them to both serve our communities and operate as proper businesses OR the Government should insist on continuing the Royal Mail subsidy.

I have a concern that if local government becomes involved, there will be an expectation that it will take over subsidising rural and less heavily used Post Offices, in addition to picking up the blame for any closures that go ahead. I would not advocate this other than in a watchdog role where powers currently exist to cover this (with the exception of performing a scrutiny role)“.

The Council’s response will be copied to the Local Government Association who are responding to the consultation in full.

68. **WYCOMBE LEISURE LIMITED**

The Council received a presentation from Mr Rick Durrant, Managing Director of Wycombe Leisure Limited (WLL), which had been appointed to take over as the Council’s Leisure Management Contractor in relation to the Beacon and Evreham Sports Centres from 1 April 2007. He was accompanied by John Amatt, Operations Director and John Coughtrey, Community Development Manager for the company.

Mr Durrant indicated that WLL was delighted to be taking over as the Council’s Leisure Management Contractor and promised to make a positive impact on residents lives through working towards the following aims:

- A wider choice for residents on leisure
- Improved facilities at Sports Centres
- Improved service for residents attending the centres
- Promoting SBDC though its services and joint projects

It was proposed to introduce a South Bucks Leisure Card which would be available to residents of Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe and give access to all the sports facilities which the company operated. There were immediate plans to invest in excess of £300k at the Beacon and Evreham Sports Centre, principally on improving the health and fitness facilities. WLL would be employing a Community Development Officer to work from the Beacon and Evreham Sports Centres to work to meet particular community objectives amongst specific groups targeted and this would include some of the harder to reach groups

and would involve a particular emphasis on health promotion activities allied to use of the Sports Centres.

Members asked a number of questions of the Wycombe Leisure Team and received answers regarding the price and operation of the leisure card, health promotion activity, the collection of customer data to inform decisions regarding target groups and methods to work with local communities and Parish and Town Councils.

Councillor Tilbey summed up the presentation by thanking the Officers from WLL and looking forward to a new productive partnership.

69. **LOCAL GOVERNMENT WHITE PAPER - STRUCTURES DEBATE**

The Chief Executive introduced this item, referring to his report on the issue, the annexe issued subsequently and the booklet prepared jointly by all Councils in the County "Effective, Strong and Integrated Local Government in Buckinghamshire - the case for enhanced two-tier working" which had been circulated to all Members.

The report detailed the significant change of direction for Local Government that was signalled in the White Paper. A number of changes of emphasis were to be applied (a first Bill had already been published to enact these with two more to follow). The changes centred around more responsive services tailored to local need, increased engagement, the promotion of community cohesion, encouragement for local communities and parishes to take on more and yet greater partnership working.

The financial context in which the changes were to be introduced fell towards the end of the end of the current three year grant settlement, during which the Council had been forced to deliver savings to balance its budget while struggling to maintain services. The following three year public sector funding regime beginning in 2008/09 promised to be no less tough with further emphasis on efficiency savings.

The White Paper made it clear that because efficiency gains are required, in two-tier areas it will be necessary for Councils to work together to seek those gains and to present a more streamlined "face" to the public to reduce confusion.

The four basic options for the local authorities in Buckinghamshire to consider had effectively been reduced following the decision of Buckinghamshire County Council on 18 January 2007 not to support a Unitary bid for the whole of Buckinghamshire. However, the County had requested the support of District Councils for a joint "Pathfinder" bid based on the enhanced two-tier model as outlined in the booklet produced jointly by all five authorities.

The report annexe explained that a Pathfinder was a new concept introduced by the White Paper which while giving some flexibility to the basis of any bid, required that bid to meet Government requirements as set out in the bid criteria. The criteria were:-

- (1) Aims to unify service delivery so that service users had no need to understand which provider is responsible for which service, particularly in relation to front of house contact.
- (2) Aims to give even stronger leadership for place shaping, that is influencing the longer term character and quality of the area.
- (3) Aims for effective accountability arrangements so that residents know who is responsible for what decision.
- (4) Aims to share back office functions and integrate service delivery mechanisms.

The point of the Pathfinder bid was to enhance the existing two-tier structures and to achieve this over a six year time frame. Assuming all Councils sign up to the Pathfinder bid, an "in principle" decision would be made by the Minister by 27 March 2007 with work to

commence as soon as possible on the project with a Joint Improvement Board being brought into effect by 1 August 2007. The report set out the benefits of the Pathfinder bid and drew attention to some disadvantages.

The Council debated the issues seeking clarification on a number of points. It was recognised that since closer joint working was essential to make some of the savings required, doing this within the framework of a Pathfinder bid did give certain advantages over simply enhanced two tier working. It was not possible to predict the position in six years time at the conclusion of the project, but there was no reason to suppose it made a single Unitary Authority for Buckinghamshire any more likely to come about. It was broadly accepted by Members that signing up to a Pathfinder bid would provide a model that was:

- Closer to the community
- Understandable to the community
- Workable at lower cost

It was understood that the Governance arrangements would involve a partnership of County and District Leaders where SBDC would have an equal say.

On the recommendation of the Leader it was:

RESOLVED to support the submission of a Pathfinder Bid with Bucks County Council and the four District Councils based on the jointly prepared case for enhanced two-tier working.

(Note: the position of Miss Hazell, Mr Hardy and Mr Lidgate as Members of Buckinghamshire Council was noted in relation to the debate on Local Government White Paper/Unitary Status).

70. CABINET MEETING

The Leader, Mr Hardy presented a report of the meeting of the Cabinet held on 9 January 2007. Each minute of the Cabinet was introduced by the relevant Portfolio Holder respectively.

With reference to minute 77 [Budget 2007/08] the Leader informed the Council that decisions/recommendations regarding growth bids would be considered at the next meeting of the Cabinet and Members were invited to submit their views either directly or through the consultation with Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED that the report be received and adopted.

72. PLANNING COMMITTEE

The report of the meeting of the Planning Committee held on 20 December 2006 was presented.

The Chairman of the Committee was pleased to draw attention to minute 78 [Planning Appeals] from which it was noted that eight planning appeal decisions and two enforcement notice appeal decisions had all been dismissed.

RESOLVED that the report be received and adopted.

73. MEMBERSHIP OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Following the resignation of Councillor Rodney Mountford from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the vacancy arising was to be filled on the nomination of the Conservative Group.

RESOLVED that the vacancy on Overview and Scrutiny Committee be filled by nomination of the Conservative Group.

(Note: subsequent to the meeting of the Council, the Conservative Group nominated Councillor Alan Walters to the vacancy).

74. MEMBERS ALLOWANCES 2007/08

The Council considered a report of the Director of Resources setting out the main points of the report of the Independent Panel reviewing Members Allowances and the financial implications of their recommendations. A full report of the Members Allowances Panel was included together with a schedule of Members Allowances in comparison with other similar authorities and the summary of the Members Survey and Focus Groups feedback.

The main recommendations of the Panel were:-

- The basic allowance be increased in line with the Officers pay increase as determined by the Council.
- A Special Responsibility Allowance for the Chairman of the Audit Sub-Committee be established and set at the basic allowance x 0.25.
- An allowance of £25 per month be introduced for Councillors who use their own IT to carry out Council business, and do not therefore receive any ICT support from the Council.
- The Council considers the issues raised by Councillors with the Panel and decides what steps, if any, it wishes to take.

The main element of the cost of the Members Allowances Scheme is the basic and special responsibility allowances. The recommendations contained options for a two per cent increase (total cost £144,460) and a 2.5% increase (total cost £145,100), each of which could be accommodated within the base budget for 2007/08. Introducing an ICT allowance, if taken up by all Members, would cost £12,000 per annum at the level suggested in the Panel's Report. This matter was under consideration by a Sub-Group of Members reporting to the Resources PAG and if approved would require a growth bid item for the 2007/08 budget.

Members considered the report, the options contained and made comment about the general level of allowances in comparison to other authorities. After discussion it was:

RESOLVED that:-

- (1) The report of the Independent Allowances Panel be noted and the Panel be thanked formally for the work done.
- (2) The basic allowance be increased by 2.5% to £2,440 per annum, with consequential increases to the Special Responsibility Allowances in accordance with the multipliers set, and the draft revenue budget be amended accordingly.
- (3) The change to the weightings to the Special Responsibility Allowances proposed by a Panel in respect of the Audit Sub-Committee Chairman be approved.
- (4) The principle of a new ICT Allowance for Members be approved.
- (5) Taking account of the above, a Members Allowances Scheme for 2007/08 be approved.

75. TERMINATION OF MEETING

The Meeting terminated at 7.55 p.m.