

## SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

### Minutes of the meeting of the Services Select Committee held on 21 June 2011 commencing at 7.00 pm

Present: Cllr. R J Davison (Chairman)  
Cllr. C Brown (Vice-Chairman)

Cllr. L Abraham, Cllr. Mrs B Ayres, Cllr. L Ball, Cllr M Butler,  
Cllr. C Dibsdall, Cllr. J Edwards-Winser, Cllr. Mrs A Firth,  
Cllr. Mrs A George, Cllr. R Hogarth, Cllr. M Horwood,  
Cllr. Mrs F Parkin, Cllr. A Pett, Cllr. R Piper, Cllr. S Raikes,  
Cllr. J Scholey, Cllr. P Towell and Cllr. R Walshe

There were no apologies for absence

Cllr. L Ayres and Cllr. Mrs A Hunter were also present

#### **1. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting of the Services Select Committee held on 13 April 2011 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

#### **2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.**

Cllr Mrs Parkin declared a personal interest in matters relating to housing and benefits as she had relatives in both social housing and on benefits.

#### **3. COMMITTEE'S TERMS OF REFERENCE - FOR INFORMATION**

The Chairman noted that the Committee's terms of reference covered a wide range of topics.

Resolved: That the Services Select Committee's Terms of Reference be noted.

#### **4. FORMAL RESPONSE OR CONSULTATION REQUESTS FROM THE CABINET FOLLOWING MATTERS REFERRED BY THE COMMITTEE:**

None

#### **5. FORMAL RESPONSE OR CONSULTATION REQUESTS FROM THE PERFORMANCE AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE:**

None

#### **6. ACTIONS FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The completed actions were noted.

The Chairman informed Members that the Committee had been invited to tour the Ideal Materials Recycling Facility in Swanley. They were asked to return their availability to the Democratic Services Team as soon as possible so that a visit could be arranged.

## **7. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY TRAINING**

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services explained that training was being provided to give Members an introduction to how scrutiny worked at the District Council. Formal Scrutiny Training had taken place on 1 June 2011 but not all Members had been able to attend. Members then watched a DVD which outlined the general process and key aims of Scrutiny.

The Head of Housing and Communications informed Members that in 2008 the Services Select Committee had undertaken an in-depth scrutiny exercise which had focused on Empty Homes. Democratic Services had created a Guide to In-depth Scrutiny which was distributed to Members. As set out in the Guide, a sub-group had been formed to consider the issues. Housing Officers had provided the sub-group with case studies to consider and relevant information which included funding and information about landlords. The sub-group had decided to set up a Panel of experts, which had included the Manager of the Kent County Council's "No Use Empty Scheme", the Director of West Kent Housing Association and the Chair of the Landlords' Association as well as other relevant Officers and interested parties. The sub-group had devised questions to ask the Panel and had carried out a question and answer session at a meeting of the Committee.

The Head of Housing and Communications informed Members that, at the time, there had been 600 empty properties in the District with ten properties per year being brought back into use. She noted that the question and answer session had generated a good discussion of the issues and led to an Action Plan being produced at the meeting. An Empty Homes Officer had been created within the Housing team and an amount of funding had been secured. A new target had been set to bring 20 properties per year back into use and the Head of Housing and Communications felt that Members had successfully supported Officers in achieving this target in 2009 and 2010.

When considering items for scrutiny, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services advised that, due to the difficult financial situation of the Council, Members should be mindful of costs associated with a particular topic. Scrutiny exercises should also be "task and finish" time limited.

With regard to the Localism Bill, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services advised that it made no substantial changes to the operation of Overview and Scrutiny. The Bill would also give council's the option to return to the Committee System and Members might be asked by the County Council to sit on Police and Health Boards. However, the details of these boards were yet to be known.

Members were then split into three groups to complete a scrutiny exercise. They were given a case study relating to Carmarthenshire Coastal Erosion

and were asked to consider how they would scrutinise this issue. Following the exercise they reported their ideas back to the Committee. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services explained that should Members wish to view further case studies, a library of over 2,000 cases was available on the Centre for Public Scrutiny website.

8. **FUTURE BUSINESS, THE WORK PLAN 2011/12 AND THE FORWARD PLAN**

The Chairman drew Members' attention to a briefing note (attached to these minutes as an Appendix) that he and the Vice-Chairman had produced. It outlined proposals for the Committee's main business for the 2011/12 municipal year. The Chairman noted that Housing, in particular under-occupation of social housing, the points allocation system and the introduction of Universal Credit benefits payment as three possible topics for the Committee to discuss in-depth. It was noted discussion of that the points allocation system would be delayed as it had not yet been finalised by Government.

The Chairman suggested the Committee begin in-depth scrutiny with under-occupation of social housing as the topic. He also suggested that, due to the significant impact of the introduction by Government of the Universal Credit benefit payment, this topic be considered at the beginning of next year as and when more details became available. A sample in-depth scrutiny timetable was attached to the briefing note (attached as an Appendix). It was suggested that a sub-group be set up and that they consider whether the timetable could be adhered to as well as the main objectives of the group. The membership of the sub-group is as outlined in Minute No. 10.

The Committee then discussed the Work Plan and agreed the following amendments:

- The Housing item relating to "Single Conversation" was moved to the November 2011 meeting of the Committee due to significant changes made by Government.
- Government had made changes to the way the Sevenoaks District Housing Register Allocation Policy was required to be written and as such, it would need further public consultation. This item was moved to the April 2012 meeting.
- It was agreed that the Head of Housing and Communications would do a short presentation in September 2011 regarding Housing services instead of a report.
- The Head of Housing informed Members that the Hever Road Gypsy and Traveller site had recently benefited from significant external funding and works on site were due to be completed shortly. Members would be provided with an update report at the January 2012 meeting along with an invitation to visit the site.
- The Democratic Services Officer would liaise with the Head of Environmental and Operational Services and the Licensing Partnership Manager to ascertain when Licensing matters could be reported to the Committee.

- An update report on Revenues and Benefits, including an introduction to Universal Credit benefits payment was pencilled in for the November 2011 meeting of the Committee.
- It was suggested that Waste and Recycling be reported to the Committee bi annually with the next update in January or April 2012.
- A Customer Services Report was requested for January 2012. A Member also noted that they had not had sight of the report by Westco.  
*Action 1: The Corporate Resources Director undertook to provide Members with the results of the Communications Review that had been completed by Westminster Council.*

For the benefit of new Members, the Chairman explained the Budget Process.

The Committee agreed that the Chairman and Vice-Chairman be given responsibility for updating the Work Plan and redistributing the updated version before the next meeting of the Committee.

## **9. REVENUES AND BENEFITS PARTNERSHIP UPDATE**

The Head of Finance and Human Resources explained that the report set out the progress made in implementing a partnership between Dartford Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council for the delivery of Revenues and Benefits Services, including Audit and Fraud. The decision to begin the Partnership had been made in July 2010 with all staff being appointed by December 2010. All staff were based at the District Council with the exception of the Audit and Fraud team, who were based at Dartford Borough Council but worked across both authorities. A number of staff vacancies had been held during the year which had helped to achieve some efficiencies. An initial saving of £500,000 between the two authorities had been identified for which the Council was on target to deliver. Despite the disruptions over the initial Partnership period, a recent Customer Satisfaction Survey had resulted in very positive feedback. As outlined in the report, Revenues performance results were very successful and Benefits were performing well, but showed a slight dip in the number of days taken to process new benefit claims. It was noted that this was partly due a significant increase in the Team's workload since January. The Head of Finance and Human Resources also noted that the new Universal Credit benefits payment would have a potentially significant impact on Revenues, Benefits and Housing services.

Following questions, the Head of Finance and Human Resources clarified that the current time taken to process new benefit claims and change events was monitored in calendar days. With regard to customer satisfaction, it was difficult to compare results with other Kent authorities as the authorities asked different questions on their surveys. The Head of Finance and Human Resources felt that, due to the nature of the service, customers tended to give more negative feedback as to their overall satisfaction with the tax collection service.

It was clarified that the £250,000 saving had been achieved in part from staff vacancies being held, some staff reducing hours, IT system efficiencies being made and an amount of in-house expertise being provided by the Partnership authority.

In response to a query, the Head of Finance and Human Resources explained that the level of grant received from Government for Benefits administration had decreased in recent years. However, it was allocated based on case load. The Head of Finance and Human Resources confirmed that the Council was interested in extending the Partnership to other authorities, but required an appropriate authority with which to partner.

Resolved: That the progress made in implementing the joint working arrangements for Revenues and Benefits Services between Dartford Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council be noted.

## 10. RECONSTITUTION OF INFORMAL GROUPS

Following discussion under Minute No. 8 regarding establishing a sub-group to consider the In-depth Scrutiny topic of under-occupation of social housing within the District the Committee;

Resolved: To establish the Members' Under-Occupation of Social Housing Working Group for the 2011/12 municipal year with the membership of Cllrs. Mrs Ayres, Mrs George, Horwood, Mrs Parkin and Piper.

### a) Members' IT Working Group

The Chairman suggested that the Group continue for the 2011/12 municipal year. However, he felt the emphasis of the Group should be focused more on "task and finish" activities and suggested that the first item they consider be the IT Strategy.

Following a query, it was also suggested that the Group consider internet infrastructure services in the District and investigate funding options. The Committee were keen for members of the Group to be taken from the membership of the Services Select Committee.

Resolved: That the Members' IT Working Group be re-established for the current municipal year with membership of Cllrs. Abraham, Dibsdall, Edwards-Winser, Pett (Chairman) and Scholey.

### b) Members' Working Group for Recycling

The Chairman explained that he had consulted with the Portfolio Holder for the Cleaner and Greener Environment, who was also the Chairman of the Group, and the Head of Environmental and Operational Services and they had agreed to provide the Committee with a Waste and Recycling update bi-annually. On this basis it was;

Resolved: That the Members' Working Group for Recycling not be continued.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 9.01 pm

Chairman

## Item 7: Future Business: The Work Plan

For those of us who have sat on scrutiny committees before there is a danger that such committees do not contribute perhaps as much as they can do by conducting in-depth reviews of areas of the Council's business, as opposed to simply receiving reports from Officers and engaging in relatively passive debate.

The Chairman and Vice Chairman want the Services Select Committee ('SSC') to be an effective scrutiny committee. To that end we propose that during the course of this Council year that the SSC undertake *in-depth scrutiny* ('IDS') reviews of **two** key areas of the Council's business, pursuant to the terms of reference of the SSC.

This will involve an initial meeting before the SSC to discuss the scope of any IDS, the use of dedicated sub committees (5 members, including a chairperson) who would meet on a number of occasions, collection of evidence from Officers, members of the public and other Districts and producing a report together with Officers, and a final meeting before the SSC where the subcommittee's report and findings would be reviewed and actions suggested (For detailed explanation of the stages involved please see your 'In Depth Scrutiny' Handbook, and schedule produced by Officers for the June 2011 Meeting). As will have been noted from the above it is intended there will be a clear starting point and conclusion for any IDS.

The Chairman and Vice Chairman have no doubt that members have carefully considered the SSC's terms of reference document. For those whose recollection of the document is a little sketchy the SSC's principal areas of business include: -

- Information Technology
- Development and Retention of Staff

## Minute Annex

- Public Relations – including communications and customer services
- Development of Housing Strategy
- Waste and Recycling
- Licensing Policies
- Payments of benefits to those who have been the subject of Maladministration
- Scrutinise cabinet decisions – including a review of the budget
- To carry out specific research and development projects and to submit recommendations to cabinet

It will be noted that IDS projects are specifically contemplated within the SSC's terms of reference. Having carefully considered the above and consulted Officers we consider that IDS's should take place within SSC in relation to: -

- Housing. In particular, the under-occupation of social housing across the district and the points allocation system. Questions for such an IDS may include how the under occupation of social housing and the points allocation system could be improved.
- The introduction of the 'one benefit' payment system. Questions for such an IDS may include how to ensure the new payment system is as effective as possible.

In suggesting areas for review we have taken into account the fact that IDS's or similar were conducted in relation to Empty Homes, Waste Recycling and the Call Centre in 2010.

Benefits of an IDS would be that a report would be produced that would be of some real benefit to the Council and the Public (as has occurred before – the empty homes in depth scrutiny review to name but one) and that members on this committee would really be able to contribute to the Council's and SSC's business.



## Minute Annex

In addition, and in order to ensure we comply with our terms of reference, SSC would also deal with the following: -

- Regular updates would be received from Officers in relation to those areas not covered by an in depth scrutiny review. It is proposed that such updates would be relatively brief (no more than a two or three page report), would flag any areas of concerns for members and would detail any action required.
- Information Technology. The IT budget is considerable and policies need to be developed to ensure that the IT dept. meets the needs of the Council while reducing costs as much as possible. A sub committee will be required to meet with Officers to develop such policies. It should be noted that this will not amount to an IDS of the IT dept.
- Some time would need to be set aside for discussions in relation to the budget.

**Richard Davison** – Chairman – SSC

**Cameron Brown** – Vice Chairman – SSC

19<sup>th</sup> June 2011



In-Depth Scrutiny of Under-Occupation

	Services Select 1st Committee 20 <sup>th</sup> September 2011	Working Groups		Services Select 2nd Committee 8 <sup>th</sup> November 2011	Services Select 3rd Committee 31 <sup>st</sup> January 2012	Services Select 4th Committee 3 <sup>rd</sup> April 2012
		Sept	Oct			
Stage 1	✓					
Stage 2	✓					
Stage 3		✓	✓			
Stage 4				✓		
Stage 5 (a)				✓		
Stage 5 (b) - outcomes					✓	
Stage 6						✓

In-Depth Scrutiny of Universal Credit\*

	Services Select 1st Committee 31 <sup>st</sup> January 2012	Working Groups		Services Select 2nd Committee 3 <sup>rd</sup> April 2012	Services Select 3rd Committee June 2012	Services Select 4th Committee September 2012
		Jan	Feb			
Stage 1	✓					
Stage 2	✓					
Stage 3		✓	✓			
Stage 4				✓		
Stage 5 (a)				✓		
Stage 5 (b) - outcomes					✓	
Stage 6						✓

\* Dates to be confirmed.