

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF CONSTITUTION AND MEMBERS SERVICES SCRUTINY
STANDING PANEL
HELD ON TUESDAY, 20 NOVEMBER 2007
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1
AT 7.30 - 9.27 PM**

Members Present: R Church (Chairman), R Morgan (Vice-Chairman), M Colling, J Markham, T Richardson and Mrs J H Whitehouse

Other members present: Mrs D Collins, Mrs A Cooper, Mrs A Grigg and P McMillan

Apologies for Absence: D Stallan

Officers Present I Willett (Assistant to the Chief Executive), B Land (Assistant Head of Planning and Economic Development), C Overend (Policy & Research Officer), S G Hill (Senior Democratic Services Officer) and Z Folley (Democratic Services Assistant)

29. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

Noted that Councillor M Colling was attending the meeting as a substitute for Councillor D Stallan.

30. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

No declarations of interests were made pursuant to the Member Code of Conduct.

31. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING - 11 OCTOBER 2007

Noted that the word "sub – group" in note 19 (OS Review Seminar) should be amended to read "sub – group of an OS Panel". It was noted that this referred to the Panels ability to set up a small sub on a particular issue.

32. WORK PROGRAMME

Item 5 - Local Government Act - Electoral Cycles

At the last meeting, the Panel considered the implications of moving to whole Council elections. The Panel asked officers to gather information on Councils where this practice was in place.

It was suggested that the Panel should investigate: Castle Point BC, Broadland DC and Eastbourne BC. These Councils had recently altered the frequency of their elections (from election by thirds to whole Council elections and vice versa) and therefore should provide some insight into what such changes could involve in practice.

The Policy and Research Officer agreed to prepare a report on these cases for submission to the next meeting.

Noted that the Panel had also agreed that a representative of the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) facilitate an awareness session on the matter. The Panel were reminded of the cost implications of this should the Council decided to pursue this option.

33. REVIEW OF MEETING CYCLE OF AREA PLANS SUB COMMITTEES

The Panel considered whether the cycle of Area Plans Sub – Committees should be revised so that there was one meeting of each Area Planning Sub – Committee every three weeks.

It was noted that the current cycle of Area Plans Sub Committee meetings was a monthly one with one “fallow week “where there was no meeting. Under this cycle, the waiting periods for cases to reach Committee ranged from two to up to six weeks. This adversely effected the Councils ability to achieve the target of eight weeks in the determination of planning applications.

It was noted that a three weekly cycle would reduce these waiting periods and therefore help assist the achievement of the targets.

It was reported that applications were separated into three categories: major, minor and other applications. These were subject to statutory performance indicators. The proposals should help the Council achieve its aim of top quartile performance for these targets which it was currently just falling short of achieving. Such improvement could mean better scores in future assessments.

It was clarified that the proposal would not effect the timescale for consultation with Town and Parish Council on cases which was 21 days by statute.

The Portfolio Holder also prepared monitoring reports on turnaround times for cases. This revealed that there had been significant improvements in performance. However further improvement was necessary to ensure the key targets were achieved. She stressed that any further measures that could help achieve this would be welcomed.

The Panel balanced the merits of the proposals against the costs (extra meetings, officer time and resources) and agreed that they should be introduced with a start date of May 2008 (for the start of the new Council year). They also asked that the proposals should go out to all Members and Local Councils for consultation to seek their views on the changes before any decisions were made formally by the Council.

Recommended:

- (1) That a report be submitted to the December 2007 Council recommending a three weekly cycle for Area Planning - Sub Committees with a start date of May 2008;**
- (2) That prior to this, the proposals be put out to all Members and Local Councils through letters and an item on the 28 November 2007 Local Councils Liaison Agenda to seek views;**
- (3) That statistics on turnaround times for cases be placed in the Bulletin to give to the consultation.**

34. LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN HEALTH ACT 2000 - (A) EXECUTIVE ARRANGEMENTS FOR ENGLAND (B) LOCAL AREA AGREEMENTS AND COMMUNITY STRATEGIES

(a) Local Area Agreements and Community Strategies

The Panel consider a report on the Local Area Agreements (LAA) and Community Strategies. It was reported that the new Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 placed a duty on Local Authorities to prepare and submit a Draft Local Area Agreement. The LAA would require the Council to set out local priorities and identify targets for meeting these aims.

The Leader undertook to keep Members informed of the process. It was envisaged that the LAA2 would come into effect by April 2008. Further reports would be submitted to the Panel in due course.

The Panel noted the report.

(b) Executive Arrangements for England

It would noted that the Act required local Authorities to operate one of the following models:

- (a) Leader and Cabinet Executive
- (b) Mayor and Cabinet Executive,

The proposals had initially offered a third option of an Elected Executive with a 'slate' system for electing the Executive but this had been withdrawn. The Council would be required to adopt one of these models.

The Panel consider the merits of a directly elected Mayor with the ability to select their own Cabinet and exercise Executive functions. This would involve candidates running as a Mayor rather than a Member of the Council. The Panel felt that this option was not suitable for the District and decided to discount this option.

The Panel heard about the key features of a Leader and Cabinet Executive – 'strong Leader option'. The Panel asked officers to research this option and submit a further report to the next meeting.

The Panel also noted that there was provision for local people to request a referendum on any changes.

Agreed:

- (1) That the option of a Mayor and Cabinet Executive not be pursued;**
- (2) That officers prepare a report on a Leader and Cabinet Executive for submission to the next meeting of the Panel.**

35. ACCESS TO COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION ARRANGEMENTS

The Panel considered a request submitted by Councillor Mrs Cooper for scrutiny of communication and access to information arrangements. The Panel considered each concern as follows and agreed the following actions:

(a) Communications and Access to information arrangements within EFDC, and between the County, Essex County Council and its partners and residents.

Councillor Cooper stressed the need for Ward Members to be kept aware of issues affecting their wards.

Agreed that a review of the use of ward councillors forms be undertaken and reported back to the Panel.

It was noted that the County Councils was responsible for Health Scrutiny so issues concerning this areas could be directed to them. Concerns had been raised about health screening and the County's approach to dealing with these concerns. This did not mean that matters of local concern should not be discussed. The Panel stressed the need for the issues to be chased up. It was also stressed that minutes of meetings should record any requests for letters to be sent to external organisations and recommend that the Lead Officer follow it up.

There was some confusion over 'who dealt with what' - (services provided by ECC/EFDC).

Agreed: That consideration be given to including a session within the Members Training Programme about how issues are considered by the Councils Committee and where to go for information about services.

Agreed that a hierarchy chart of the Council staff and structure be provided for members on completion of the Senior Management review.

(b) Meetings – Details and availability of information

Agreed that officers be reminded of the desirability of reports from meetings not attended by Members appearing in the Council Bulletin as and when appropriate.

It was also suggested that more use should be made of the item on the Council agenda for reports from Members on External Organisations. The Leader saw merit in providing regular reports on the discussions at the meetings with MPs and Councillors to update Members.

Local Strategic Partnership - .It was noted that the recent OS review of the Partnership recommended action to encourage greater Member involvement in its action groups. Members were already able to join any action group or attend meetings of interest. The minutes for the Board and Steering Group were circulated in the Council Bulletin.

Members were already able to sign up for agendas for the Councils Committee meetings

(d) Members Room – Arrangements for storing information

Agreed: That a 'new documents shelf be created in the Members Room together with work to remove old and obsolete materials to enable faster location of documents

(e) Committee Reports

Agreed: That consideration be given to including a summary box on committee reports

(f) Member Training

Agreed that further planning training sessions cover the main aspects of the various local and national plans and related current issues.

Agreed: that consideration be given to strengthening the advise to potential Councillors about the need for attending new Councillor induction sessions.

36. REPORTS TO BE MADE TO THE NEXT MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 13 DECEMBER OSC.

Report on Frequency of Area Planning Sub – Committees
Chairman to report on tonight's discussions.

37. FUTURE MEETINGS

Noted that the next meeting of the Panel would be held on 11 Dec 2007 and then on 15 January 2008 (Provisional) 12 February 2008 and 28 April 2008

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