

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

CABINET SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee held in the Darent Room, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Wednesday, 25 April 2007.

PRESENT: Dr M R Eddy (Chairman), Mr D Smyth (Vice-Chairman), Mr A R Bassam, Mr R B Burgess (Substitute for Mr C T Wells), Mr C J Capon, Mr B R Cope, Mrs T Dean, Mr J B O Fullarton, Mr C Hart, Mr C Hibberd (Substitute for Mr A H T Bowles), Mr E E C Hotson, Mr P W A Lake, Mr C J Law, Mrs M Newell, Mr R J E Parker, Mr J E Scholes and Mrs P A V Stockell

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr J Wale, Assistant to the Chief Executive, and Mr S C Ballard, Head of Democratic Services.

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

66. Minutes - 21 March 2007
(Item. A2)

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 21 March 2007 are correctly recorded and that they be signed by the Chairman.

67. Informal Member Group on "Kent: What Price Growth?" - 26 March 2007
(Item. A3)

RESOLVED that the notes of the meeting of the Informal Member Group on "Kent – What Price Growth?" held on 26 March 2007 be noted.

68. Informal Member Group on Budgetary Issues - 12 April 2007
(Item. A4)

RESOLVED that the notes of the meeting of the Informal Member Group on Budgetary Issues held on 12 April 2007 be noted.

69. Cabinet Scrutiny Committee - Standing Report to April 2007
(Item. A5)

RESOLVED that the report on the actions taken as a result of the Committee's decisions at previous meetings, and the updated report on progress with Select Committee Topic Reviews, be noted.

70. Directorate Business Plans 2007/08
(Item. A6)

(1) Members suggested that the following unit's Business Plans would be worthy of detailed consideration by the Committee during 2007/08:-

Dr Eddy

1 Children's Social Services (CFE)

- 2 Environment and Waste (particularly waste management) (E&R)
- 3 Kent Highway Services (E&R)
- 4 Libraries and Archives (Comms)

Mrs Dean

- 5 Community Safety (Comms)
- 6 Strategy and Planning (particularly the impact of losing responsibility for the Structure Plan) (E&R)

Mr Law

- 7 Adult Mental Health (to examine interface between KCC and NHS) (ASS)
- 8 Health, Children and Young People (to examine interface between KCC and NHS) (CFE)

(2) RESOLVED that the Chairman and Spokesmen consider the list set out in sub-paragraph (1) above and recommend to the next meeting of the Committee 3/4 unit Business Plans for detailed consideration by the Committee during 2007/08.

71. Proposed Revision of Rates Payable and Charges Levied for Children's Services in 2007/08 (Decision 07/00972)

The Chairman explained the concerns he had about this Decision:-

- (a) it was a Key Decision and should therefore have appeared in the Forward Plan;
- (b) the decision report was marked "confidential";
- (c) the report for the Decision was published on 24 April although the effective date for the new charges was 9 April.

72. Equality Strategy 2007-10
(Item. C1)

(1) Mr P B Carter, Leader of the Council; Mr O Mills, Managing Director, Adult Social Services; Ms A Beer, Head of Personnel and Development; and Ms J Richardson, Inclusive Services Policy Manager, attended the meeting to answer Members' questions on this matter, which covered the following issues:-

Consultation Arrangements - General

(2) In answer to questions from Mrs Newell, Mr Mills explained that the County Council was required to have a Gender Equality Strategy in place by 30 April 2007. Race and Disability Equality Strategies had been approved previously and the County Council had decided to bring all three Equality Strategies together into one document. The current consultation exercise, which would be completed within the next week, related only to the Gender Equality Strategy. Consultation on the Race and Disability Equality Strategies had taken place before those strategies were adopted. However, there would be further consultation with service users over the next six months on all three elements of the Equality Strategy to inform a review at the end of 2007.

Consultation Arrangements - Members

(3) In answer to questions from Mrs Newell and Dr Eddy, Ms Richardson said that consultation with Members had been undertaken through the cross-party Strategic Equalities Group, and there would be further consultation with Members through the Policy Overview Committees for the end-2007 review. In the meantime, Members were welcome to pass their views direct to her or to Mr Mills. Mr Mills offered to circulate details of the membership and terms of reference of the Strategic Equalities Group.

Consultation Arrangements – Residents’ Panel

(4) In answer to a question from Mr Parker, Ms Richardson explained that the Residents’ Panel had not been used for consultation on the Gender Equality Strategy because it was felt that a broader reach was required. Ms Richardson pointed out that the Race Equality Action Plan included reviewing the ethnic composition of the Residents’ Panel.

Action Plans

(5) In answer to a question from Mr Scholes, Ms Richardson explained that the Action Plans were still being refined at the time that the report was published for Cabinet. The Action Plans were now complete and included names, dates and indicators of achievement for every item.

(6) In answer to a question from Dr Eddy, Ms Richardson said that the Action Plans would include a target on making KCC documents accessible to people for whom English was not their first language and for the visually-impaired.

(7) RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Mr Carter, Mr Mills, Ms Richardson and Ms Beer be thanked for attending the meeting and answering Members’ questions;
- (b) the Leader’s agreement that any changes proposed to be made to the Strategy as a result of consultation responses would be shared with the opposition Group Leaders before publication on 30 April be welcomed;
- (c) the Managing Director, Adult Social Services be requested to share the final versions of the Action Plans (including target dates and indicators of achievement) with the Chairman and Spokesmen of the Committee as soon as completed;
- (d) the offer by the Managing Director, Adult Social Services, to circulate details of the membership and terms of reference of the Strategic Equalities Group be welcomed;
- (e) the Managing Director, Adult Social Services be requested to ensure that the Action Plans included provision for a review of the composition of the Kent Residents Panel as part of the overall review of the Equality Strategy at the end of the year.

73. Kent TV
(Item. C2)

(1) Mr P B Carter, Leader of the Council; Mr P Gilroy, Chief Executive; and Ms T Oliver, Head of Strategic Development, attended the meeting to answer Members' questions on this item, which covered the following issues:-

Constitution of Board of Governors

(2) In answer to a question from Mr Smyth, Mr Carter said that no decision had yet been taken on the constitution of the Board of Governors.

(3) Mr Gilroy explained that the latest thinking was that the Board of Governors should include representatives of other public services in Kent (District Councils, Police, Fire and Health); of all political parties; of the Kent business community; plus a member from the communications industry (with no connection with the chosen provider).

Independence of Kent TV

(4) In answer to a question from Mr Smyth, Mr Gilroy said that the Board of Governors would be independent in terms of editorial control and the contracted provider, not KCC or the Board of Governors, would control the news output. In addition, Kent TV would comply with OFCOM regulations governing news broadcasts, even though, as a broadband broadcaster, it was not required to do so.

Use of Consultants

(5) In answer to a question from Mrs Dean, Ms Oliver confirmed that Armitage Bucks Communications (ABC) had signed a disclaimer to say that they had no connection with any of the companies that had tendered for the Kent TV contract.

(6) In answer to a question from Mr Parker, Ms Oliver said that ABC had been paid £8k for their work on Kent TV, and this sum was included in the overall budget for Kent TV.

Involvement of Members

(7) In answer to questions from Mrs Dean and Mr Scholes, Mr Gilroy explained that the normal procurement rules applied which meant that the Business Plan and tender documents for Kent TV had to be treated as commercially confidential. He regretted that this meant that the amount of information which could be shared with Members generally – and indeed amongst officers – had had to be restricted. Nevertheless, the plans for Kent TV had been discussed in detail at meetings of Cabinet Members on a number of occasions.

(8) Mr Gilroy added that once the provider had been appointed, all Members would be kept fully informed of developments with Kent TV.

Financing

(9) In answer to questions from Mr Lake and Mr Parker, Mr Gilroy explained that other public services in Kent and commercial organisations had indicated that they were interested in investing in Kent TV. He confirmed that there were plans to

obtain income through advertising. The preferred provider had estimated that advertising income would be £100k in the first year of operation, £200k in the second year, and increase year on year after that. Mr Gilroy added that, by using Kent TV, KCC was likely to be able to make savings on its existing paper-based publicity.

Reductions in Paper-based Publicity

(10) In answer to questions from Mrs Dean, Mr Law, Mrs Stockell and Mr Smyth, Mr Carter said that it was hoped that Kent TV would allow KCC and other public services in Kent to make a gradual migration from paper-based publicity to on-line publicity. The success of this would be dependent on good marketing and promotion of Kent TV and a requirement for this had been included in the tender documents. Mr Carter confirmed that Kent TV would be interactive and so could be used for consultation with the public.

Accessibility of Kent TV

(11) In answer to a question from Mr Fullarton, Ms Oliver said that Kent TV was available to anybody with a broadband connection. Over 500,000 people in Kent had direct access to broadband, and access to broadband was available free at all Kent libraries. In addition, all Kent's schools had a broadband connection.

(12) In answer to a question from Mrs Newell, Mr Gilroy and Ms Oliver said that broadcasting via broadband meant that Kent TV could be viewed on all sorts of equipment, including a normal TV set, as well as computer monitors, mobile phones, iPods, MP4 players, etc. Ms Oliver added that, in common with other broadband channels, Kent TV would not broadcast the sort of programmes that people would watch for long periods. Instead, it would provide programming that people could dip into for short periods.

Employment Creation

(13) In answer to a question from Mr Parker, Ms Oliver said that the tender documents made it clear that Kent TV was to be Kent-based. The preferred provider had said that it would employ approximately 12 people locally. Kent TV was also expected to generate work in other local media companies.

(14) RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Mr Carter, Mr Gilroy and Ms Oliver be thanked for attending the meeting and answering Members' questions;
- (b) disappointment be expressed that Cabinet felt itself unable to share information about the proposals for Kent TV more widely;
- (c) the Chief Executive be requested to arrange a presentation on Kent TV for all Members of the Council by the appointed provider as quickly as possible;
- (d) the offer by the Leader of the Council to circulate regular updates on progress with implementation and uptake of Kent TV be welcomed.

74. East Kent Empty Property Initiative - Direct Purchase Scheme (Decision 07/00934)
(Item. D1)

(1) Mr R W Gough, Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Supporting Independence; Mr M Austerberry, Director of Property; and Ms S Pledger, Project Manager, East Kent Empty Property Initiative, attended the meeting to answer Members' questions on this matter, which covered the following issues:-

No Use Empty Campaign

(2) In answer to a question from Mr Hart, Mr Gough explained that No Use Empty was the overall campaign and this had been running for some time. The No Use Empty campaign had a number of elements and the Direct Purchase Scheme was one of these.

(3) The No Use Empty campaign had proved very successful in bringing empty properties back into use in all four East Kent Districts and particularly in Thanet. It was clear that, without the campaign, many of these properties would not otherwise have been brought back into use.

Consultation with Members

(4) In answer to a question from Dr Eddy, Mr Gough confirmed that consultation with Members had been about the principles of the Direct Purchase Scheme. Because purchase of individual houses under the scheme often involved rather difficult negotiations with property owners, local Members could not be consulted in advance on any proposal for purchase. However, he would be happy to inform the relevant local Member once any particular property had been acquired under the Scheme.

Alternative Options

(5) In answer to questions from Mr Law and Mr Fullarton, Ms Pledger explained that there were other options available to local authorities for bringing empty houses back into use.

(6) Under s215 of the Planning Act, local planning authorities could require owners to repair dilapidated buildings. If the owner failed to do so, the Council could carry out the works and recoup its costs by putting a legal charge on the property.

(7) Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs) allowed local housing authorities to take over houses left empty for a long period and lease them to tenants.

(8) The Direct Purchase Scheme had advantages over the s215 arrangements because it was less bureaucratic and was more likely to attract the co-operation of property-owners.

(9) EDMOs were another element of the No Use Empty initiative and were used in cases where the Direct Purchase Scheme was not appropriate.

Regeneration Effect

(10) In answer to a question from Dr Eddy, Ms Pledger explained that for every case where it was proposed to use the Direct Purchase Scheme, a business case was prepared. This set out the objectives to be achieved and these normally included a regeneration effect as well as a financial return.

(11) RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Mr Gough, Mr Austerberry and Ms Pledger be thanked for attending the meeting and answering Members' questions;
- (b) the agreement by the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Supporting Independence to supply Members of the Committee with a copy of the Risk Assessment for the Direct Purchase Scheme be welcomed;
- (c) the agreement by the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Supporting Independence that, in future, local Members would be advised of properties in their area which had been purchased under the Direct Purchase Scheme be welcomed.