

EXECUTIVE

Minutes of a meeting of the Executive held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Consett on Monday, 9th May 2005 at 4.30 pm.

PRESENT

Councillor A. Watson, Chair

Councillors C.D. Christer, J. Huntley, O. Johnson,
D.G. Llewellyn, M.J. Malone and A. Taylor

IN ATTENDANCE

Councillors J. Pickersgill and W.J. Tyrie.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor W. Armstrong.

1. REVIEW OF SCRUTINY BOARD DEBATE

A list of items discussed at Scrutiny Board was presented, the Chair advised that the comments would be referred to as each agenda item was discussed.

2. MINUTES – 25 APRIL 2005

The minutes of the meeting held on 25th April 2005 were agreed as a correct record.

3. FINANCE DIRECTORATE – CUSTOMER CARE DOCUMENTS

Councillor J. Huntley presented the report which requested Members to agree to the introduction of the following documents to assist in the improvement of service delivery to our customers:

- A Customers' Charter – this sets out what the customer can expect from the Directorate, its services and aims.
- A Customer Compliment, Suggestions and Complaints booklet - this sets out how we would like the customer to engage with us to help improve our service.
- A Correspondence Policy – setting out how we will correspond with customers and service standards around response times.

Option: Whether to adopt, amend or reject the three documents referred to in the report.

Councillor Taylor raised concerns regarding the wording of some of the letters sent out to customers as she had received reports that some of the wording in the existing letters can be perceived as intimidating especially to elderly residents.

In response, the Director of Finance advised that Officers were working with a Focus Group of customers and one of the issues was to look at improving correspondence, it was also intended to involve Scrutiny in this process.

RESOLVED: that the following documents be adopted and displayed at all customer contact offices, on the Council's website and in other organs of publicity:

- A Customers' Charter
- A Customer Compliment, Suggestion and Complaints Booklet
- A Correspondence Policy.

Reason: To work towards improving the service provided by the Directorate, as written policies will help to promote consistency and fairness in the treatment of all stakeholders of the Finance Directorate.

4. UPDATE ON DANGEROUS HEADSTONES WITHIN CLOSED CHURCHYARDS

Councillor Watson presented the report which advised Members of the outcome of a recent meeting with the Church Authorities on the lack of progress in dealing with the issue of work in Closed Churchyards.

The report advised on the budgetary implications of this issue and requested that Members discuss a programme to prioritise the inspections and recovery works necessary.

Councillor Watson went on to explain that at the meeting the significant costs associated in carrying out this type of work had been discussed, and currently the Council simply did not have the financial resources available. He emphasised that the issue of reinstatement be considered by the Council at some point in the future, however this was entirely dependant on finances becoming available in the fullness of time. He suggested that Officers write to the Diocese to reiterate the Council's position regarding reinstatement. The Executive Director emphasised that the primary aim of the report was Health and Safety issues and making the areas safe – the report had not asked Members to agree reinstatement issues.

Options:

- (i) The approved un-resourced Capital bid is reallocated to testing and remedial works to dangerous headstones and works to recovering the grassed areas to a standard suitable for grass cutting.
- (ii) Continue with the inspection programme only, which was identified in the un-resourced approved Capital bid.

RESOLVED: that:-

- (i) The approved un-resourced Capital bid is re-allocated to allow for the testing and remedial works to dangerous headstones and works to recovering the grassed areas to a standard suitable for grass cutting. This to be in accordance with the prioritisation established by the Health Scrutiny Panel.
- (ii) An additional bid of £170,000 is recommended to allow the completion of the testing of the remaining Cemeteries and Closed Churchyards to allow a phased programme of works to be carried out, to return the areas to the appropriate standard when funding permits.
- (iii) Officers write to the Diocese emphasising the issue that the Council could only be in a position to consider a programme of reinstatement if financial resources became available in the future

Reasons:

- (i) To allow the Council to resume its maintenance responsibilities within its own Cemeteries and the Closed Churchyards.
- (ii) To remove a dangerous liability which currently exists putting at risk not only Council staff but also the general public.

5. STEELHAVEN

Councillor Christer presented the report which provided Members with a brief summary of progress on the repair and refurbishment of the Steelhaven building and development of a 24-hour staffed, supported direct access unit for young homeless people.

Options: Whether to agree, amend or reject the recommendations in the report that the Council meet the identified shortfall in capital needed to complete essential repair and refurbishment works from the Council's General Fund.

Councillor Taylor whilst commending the report asked a number of questions on the quality of the research on which the original budget estimates were based and if further work and money would be required to fund the refurbishment of the building. She also queried why the report had no

explanation of the shortfall of NRF funding and what impact the homeless issue was making on the Council's waiting list.

In response, the Strategic and Supported Housing Manager advised as follows:-

- (1) The initial survey of the building had been carried out in 2002 (not by the Council) and it was usual that during this type of refurbishment on properties that had been standing empty for a number of years that additional problems were uncovered as work progressed.
- (2) The NRF funding final decision had been made at the LSP Board. The NRF funding would be monitored by way of regular outcome reports.
- (3) The scheme had no direct impact on the Council's Housing List, the long-term vision for the project was to equip young people with the skills to help them sustain a Council tenancy.

Councillor Huntley commented that this was a laudable project however she also raised concerns regarding the request in retrospect for additional funding and the overall complicated nature of the funding. She also asked what reasons the LSP Board have given for not allowing the full grant for the project.

In response, the Strategic and Supported Housing Manager advised that Officers had met with the Housing and Environment Sub-Group and presented a strong case that the full funding was required. Officers had been clearly informed by the LSP Board that the pot of money available was fixed and could not be increased. The Executive Director indicated that as a member of the LSP Executive Board he would refer to notes to find the process used for the distribution of grants and these notes would be circulated to Members.

Councillor Malone raised concerns regarding the original surveys that had been taken of the property, he also raised the issue of a sprinkler system being installed in the project.

In response, the Director of Housing and Capital Works advised that different types of surveys can be commissioned, the first survey had been a Dilapidations Survey (not commissioned by the Council) which was not a full structural survey of the building.

Following discussion on this issue of sprinkler systems, the Director of Housing and Capital Works advised that a system could be fitted in retrospect and that quotes for this work would be circulated to Members.

RESOLVED: that agreement be granted for the shortfall in capital of £31,000 needed to complete essential repair and refurbishment works of the Steel Haven building to be funded from the Council's General Fund.

Reasons:

- (1) The scheme had been widely recognised across County Durham as an example of good practice and it is the only scheme of its type to be developed in the whole of the County. The service is one of only nine schemes in the Supporting People Strategy 2005-2010 that has been named as a priority for future funding.
- (2) The scheme aims to equip homeless young people with essential daily living skills necessary to successfully manage a home. Current figures show that around one in three first time Council tenants who are between sixteen and twenty-five have failed in their tenancy within a year or less.

CONCLUSION OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 5.25 pm

Chair.