

THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING
OF THE SERVICE DELIVERY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON MONDAY 5 DECEMBER 2005

Present: Councillor D Raine (Chair)
Councillors S Bishop, D Chaytor,
A J Holmes, Mrs E Huntington, Mrs A Naylor,
D J Taylor-Gooby and C Walker

T Taylor

Also Present: Councillor D Myers – Executive Member for
E-Government and Scrutiny Liaison
Councillor R Crute – Executive Member for
Regeneration

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor H High.

2 THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING held on 14 November 2005 and of the **SPECIAL MEETING** held on 17 November 2005, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were confirmed.

3 MATTERS ARISING

(i) **Environmental Health and Licensing Unit – Performance Report (Minute No 5(ii) refers)**

A Member asked if any more information had been received regarding contingency plans for the bird flu.

The Scrutiny Support Manager explained that arrangements had been made by Durham County Council's Emergency Planning Unit for a joint authority full day seminar and relevant officers had been invited to attend. This would be held on 20 December 2005 at County Hall, Durham.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

(ii) **Planning and Building Control – Quarterly Performance Report (Minute No 5(i) refers)**

A Member asked if an update had been received from the Head of Planning and Building Control Services regarding the road closure adjacent to Ridgemount House.

T Taylor explained that an article had been in the local press explaining that the barriers were going to be removed for the Christmas period beginning on 1 December. This had not happened and more fencing had been erected and this was unacceptable.

The Chair explained that enquiries would be made to ascertain the current position.

RESOLVED that enquiries be made to ascertain the current position with regard to the road closure adjacent to Ridgemount House in Peterlee.

- 4 **THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE** held on 22 November 2005, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were submitted.

COUNCILLOR D RAINE DECLARED A PERSONAL AND PREJUDICIAL INTEREST IN ITEM NO 11 - LISTED BUILDING CONSENT FOR THE PROPOSED DEMOLITION OF EASINGTON COLLIERY SCHOOL

Item No 9 – Consultant Studies to Support Economic Regeneration

The Chair explained that the report had been discussed at Scrutiny Management Board and it had been agreed that the Executive Member for Regeneration be invited to the meeting to provide more detailed information on the report.

The Executive Member for Regeneration explained that the report recommended to appoint consultants to undertake work on two specific exercises related to the promotion of the economic regeneration of the district in respect of:-

- (a) a proposal from the University of Newcastle to establish a Geothermal Research Education and Training Institute – ‘The GREAT Institute’ within the district;
- (b) the preparation of a regeneration statement for the District in order to clearly establish a forward vision for the future regeneration of Easington that could be used to influence regional stakeholders and other key partners. The statement would also support the preparation of the District’s Local Development Framework documents and complement the planned review of the District’s Community Strategy.

‘The GREAT Institute’ project based around geothermal energy applications had arisen as a concept from a proposal prepared by the Vice Chancellor of the University of Newcastle and had been the subject of discussions of the Chief Executive and the Director of Regeneration and Development.

Appendix A to the report provided a detailed briefing note on the project, but in summary there were three distinct but related elements:-

- development of a building to act as a ‘centre of excellence’ in geothermal energy research and to serve as a demonstration project for the associated technologies. The centre would also serve as a focus for training and workforce development and could also encompass some form of visitor attraction. Hawthorn Business Park had been identified as a possible location for the Institute;
- the establishment of a new joint venture company to capitalise on the marked opportunities for geothermal heat pump technology and to allow partners within the company to compete for large scale contracts. The company could occupy part of the proposed Institute building as an anchor tenant;
- a potential Economic and Social Research Council and One NorthEast funded, long term research project on the dynamics of worklessness in Easington and on the opportunities for sustainable employment associated with geothermal energy.

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The Executive Member for Regeneration explained that the Easington Regeneration Statement would support the development of the next series of regeneration priorities in the context of changing regional and national policy and resource availability context. In order to advance the promotion of 'The GREAT Institute' concept and to create an effective advocacy document for the district's future regeneration, it was recognised that some degree of external support, advice and expertise was needed to help effectively promote and shape the two documents.

The development of a building to act as a 'centre of excellence' as part of 'The GREAT Institute' was the most critical aspect of the whole project as it afforded the opportunity to embed research expertise in the district and also ensure that local communities derived real benefits from the applied geothermal technology. However this was the least developed component within the scheme.

It was proposed that the Council in partnership with the University of Newcastle should commission a prospectus for 'The GREAT Institute' which integrated the various strands of the project and sought to present it positively within One NorthEast, Government Office for the North East and other potential capital revenue funders.

The objectives of the commission would be to:-

- draw together the existing desk research on the global/UK market for geothermal energy by building on material held by the University and other partners and to explore research on geothermal heat pump technology as its application to a range of end users;
- consult with key stakeholders to identify their views on the strategic fit of the strands of the GREAT project with wider regional policy agendas including the renewables/environmental technologies cluster development programmes, knowledge transfer and worklessness and to build up support for the initiative;
- build a consensus on the role, research focus, core components and operating model for 'The GREAT Institute' to develop a clear project plan and governance arrangements for the project;
- identify outline floor space requirements and capital costs for the Institute building and prepare a funding prospectus along with a critical path/project plan that embraced a series of options for the delivery of the project;
- a key outcome from the study would be a concise advocacy document which clearly defined the projects proposals and their inter-relationship, their potential contribution to the regions economic competitiveness and set out the broad funding requirements.

Members were advised that a number of other positive regeneration programmes were in prospect. A Regeneration Statement setting out the Council's vision and forward regeneration programme embracing this range of initiatives as well as others would provide to all stakeholders as well as local communities, a clear understanding of the Council's ambitions for the area and would provide the Council with a policy framework to more effectively respond to the changing national and regional policies as evidence by the Local Area Agreement for County Durham, the

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Northern Way Growth Strategy and emerging regional, economic, spatial and housing strategies with their emphasis on the policy concept of City Regions.

It was therefore proposed that a Regeneration Statement for the District should be commissioned with an emphasis on investment already committed within the District, the opportunities available and how this would assist in the delivery of local sub-regional and regional policy objectives.

In summary the statement would:-

- provide a long term vision for the physical regeneration of Easington;
- identify the priority projects that would make the greatest contribution to the strategy;
- develop a phased public/private investment programme for the next 5-10 years with a robust justification for each project and quantification of the outputs that would be delivered;
- set out the key policy/delivery challenges to be overcome and undertaking regeneration in Easington and demonstrate the alignment of proposals for economic growth with the renewal of the housing market and educational, cultural and leisure offers.

The Executive Member for Regeneration explained that in respect to 'The GREAT initiative', the University of Newcastle were involved in a separate initiative in Tyne and Wear under the Northern Way Growth Strategy to develop Newcastle as a Science City. This involved in part the establishment of a campus on the former Scottish and Newcastle Brewery site. In order to develop the Science City concept, the University with One NorthEast and other partners had commissioned the firm Shared Intelligence from York to prepare a prospectus for the Science City Initiative. It had been proposed by the University of Newcastle that Shared Intelligence could be approached to undertake 'The GREAT Institute' work in light of their experience in developing the Science City scheme.

A Member asked if the new strategy fitted in with the City Regions strategy. The Executive Member for Regeneration explained that there were separate regional and sub-regional strategies which also fitted in with the City Region agenda.

The Director of Regeneration and Development explained that each of the City Regions areas had sub Development Plans and Regional Economic Strategies and he would make sure that the needs of Easington were known. With regard to the City Region agenda, the District Council was on the edge of the area and would be in a position to help them achieve their objectives.

A Member commented that this was an exciting document and was a whole network of positive implications. She asked if this would make a big impact in terms of employment. The Executive Member for Regeneration explained that geothermal research was not big in Europe as yet and if this could be developed there could be endless advantages for the District.

A Member requested that the Scrutiny Committee be fully involved in any future reports. The Executive Member for Regeneration explained that he would keep Members involved throughout the process.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member for Regeneration for his report.

RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the information given, be noted;
- (ii) the information contained within the Minutes, be noted.

5 PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

There were no members of the public present.

6 WORK PROGRAMME ISSUES

(i) **Energy Conservation Report**

Consideration was given to the report of the Energy Conservation Officer which provided information on the annual Home Energy Conservation Act (HECA), feedback from Government Office North East and progress with the Over 60s Fuel Poverty Scheme and Climate Change Action Plan, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

The District of Easington Warm Homes Campaign was designed to maximise the uptake of all fuel poverty grants within the district to reduce heating costs and provide warmer, healthier homes and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Details were given of schemes which assisted vulnerable households within the district:-

(a) **Easington over 60s Free Insulation Scheme**

The scheme was aimed at reducing private sector fuel poverty with the vulnerable over 60s age group. Funding was supplied by the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and the Government's Energy Efficiency Commitment. To date, 1,021 homes had been insulated and £384,000 of funding had been secured;

The Energy Conservation Officer explained that promotion of the scheme would be in the December Infopoint. Scottish Power was to present the prize to the 1000th customer. The scheme would be promoted through all warm home outlets and by door to door promotions.

The Energy Conservation Officer explained that everyone who had accessed the scheme completed a customer questionnaire and 96% had indicated between good and excellent.

(b) **Annual Home Energy Conservation Act Report**

All local authorities were required to reduce domestic energy consumption by 30% in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and global warming. Easington's target was 18% and the actual reduction in domestic energy consumption for 1996 – 2005 was 25.1%. Appendix A detailed the feedback letter from Government Office North East on the annual HECA progress.

(c) **Climate Change Action Plan**

A project was launched in partnership with the Centre for Sustainable Energy on 16 November 2005. A work plan was currently being prepared to co-ordinate the next stages of the Action Plan.

(d) **Climate Change Schools Education Pilot**

A Climate Change Education Project with 12 schools was currently being undertaken. The aim of the project was to provide the children with classroom based sessions to help them understand climate change and what they could do about it. Posters from the schools involved had been on display in the Members' Room for judging by local Members. 150 posters had been received and the LA21 Working Party would choose 6 winners. The next edition of Infopoint would include a story on the event.

Members commented that they had received excellent feedback from members of the public and asked that congratulations be passed onto the company carrying out the insulation works.

A Member asked when the scheme would end. The Energy Conservation Officer explained that NRF funding would expire in March 2006 and the scheme was now looking to be mainstreamed.

A Member asked how domestic energy consumption was measured. The Energy Conservation Officer explained that the District Council had a database that recorded all domestic properties that were built before 1996. The District Council were one of the few authorities that had access to the database and could find out where the hotspots were. This was one of the reasons why the District Council was so successful with funding.

The Energy Conservation Officer explained that the District Council's website was very comprehensive regarding energy conservation. The website had over 15,000 hits in November, 10,000 in October and 8,500 in September.

The Chair thanked the Energy Conservation Officer for his report.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

8 SICKNESS MONITORING

Consideration was given to the report to the Head of Personnel which appraised Members of the current situation with regard to sickness monitoring across the authority, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

The Head of Personnel explained that following the disappointing performance during 2003/4, an action plan had been devised and agreed by Members to address a worsening trend in sickness absence and a number of initiatives had been implemented to aim to reduce the sickness levels.

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Members were advised that the corporate rate of sickness absence had reduced to 11.3 days per employee in the 12 months to the end of March 2005. Whilst this was partly attributable to the transfer of craft workers to East Durham Homes, Members were assured that the campaign was having a positive effect on the Council's performance.

The improvements from 13.1 days per employee to 11.3 days could be solely attributable to the Council's workforce. This represented a 14% reduction in the sickness rate and were the best annual figures that the Council had achieved so far.

The Head of Personnel explained that the corporate sickness rate now stood at 9.6 days per employee per annum and the corporate target for 2005/6 was 10 days per employee. An updated league table was attached at Appendix A which illustrated the number of days lost to sickness per employee and was listed by work area in order from best to worst.

East Durham Homes sickness statistics had also shown a significant improvement. The overall sickness rate had reduced from 17.4 days per employee to 15.8 days which represented a 9% reduction.

Appendix B and C detailed the Council's performance in 2003/4 and 2004/5 against the Durham and Northumberland districts.

T Taylor explained that it was pleasing to see the sickness rate reducing and asked if working from home was something the Council was considering. The Head of Personnel explained that the Council had adopted a Home and Remote Working Policy which included short and long term arrangements. This meant many of the Council functions could be done more efficiently and effectively. A pilot was currently ongoing in Benefits with handheld computers which linked into the system at the council offices and residents' problems could be dealt with in the home. It was explained that if an employee had particular difficulties ie illness or disability a remote workstation could be set up in their home.

A Member explained that the report was very encouraging with the use of innovative ideas but explained that it could be very easy to become complacent. She asked how this momentum was going to be maintained. The Head of Personnel explained that audits were to be carried out on return to work interviews to make sure that they were all being carried out. Further training would be offered to managers to make sure that return to work interviews were consistent. He added that over the last 6 – 7 years the District Council had used an independent counsellor to provide advice and felt that this was a factor in helping reduce the sickness. The counsellor had also been asked to provide practical stress sessions and had dealt with over 50 employees. The feedback from the course had been very positive and there was a waiting list for further courses.

A Member explained that there was new legislation in place for the terminally ill and asked if the District Council had taken this into consideration. The Head of Personnel explained that this was an extension to the Disability Discrimination Act and legislation was in place so that employees who had a disability could not be discriminated against. The District Council complied with the law and had procedures in place.

A Member asked if the Council were looking at alternative ways of reporting sickness as sometimes employees felt under pressure to return to work when speaking to their manager and queried if the Council were looking at reporting

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sickness independently. The Head of Personnel explained that when the campaign to reduce sickness was launched in July 2004, more stringent reporting mechanisms were put in place. Previously, sickness was reported to administrators and it was felt this should be changed so employees had to report to their line manager. Managers had been trained to ask the correct questions and no complaints had been received. He added that he was aware that other local authorities had commissioned companies to provide a 24/7 medical advisor for employees to report to. He was aware that Durham City was piloting a scheme and would be looking at it very carefully to see what the results were.

The Chair referred to the Benefits Section and explained that Members of the Committee had visited them in their workplace and had suggested a number of improvements and was pleasing to see that their sickness had now reduced.

The Chair thanked the Head of Personnel for his report.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.