

THE DISTRICT COUNCIL OF CHESTER-LE-STREET

Report of the meeting of Council Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Newcastle Road, Chester-le-Street, Co Durham, DH3 3UT on Thursday, 26 July 2007 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT:

Councillor Allen Turner, Councillor Stephen Barr, Councillor James William Barrett, Councillor Lancelot Edward William Brown, Councillor Richard Court, Councillor Linda Ebbatson, Councillor Paul Ellis, Councillor Martin James Gollan, Councillor Simon Antony Henig, Councillor Alan Keith Holden, Councillor Christopher John Jukes, Councillor William Laverick, Councillor Maureen Diana May, Councillor Maureen Potts, Councillor Jacqueline Maria Proud, Councillor Derek Leslie Robson, Councillor Michael Sekowski, Councillor John Shiell, Councillor David Thompson, Councillor Simon Christopher Lindsay Westrip and Councillor Audrey Willis

Officers: R Templeman (Chief Executive), L Chambers (Director of Resources), P Stephens (Acting Director of Community Services), A Ainsley (Acting Head of Housing Services), J Henderson (Revenues and Benefits Manager), C Potter (Head of Legal and Democratic Services), M Walker (Head of Regeneration), H Geertsema (Communications and PR Officer) and L Hall (Housing Strategy and Business Manager)

Also in attendance were four members of the public.

36. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors A Humes, G Armstrong, GK Davidson, S Greatwich, R Harrison, TH Harland, PH May, P Nathan, K Potts, T Smith and F Wilkinson.

The Chairman advised that Councillor R Harrison had undergone an operation and was recovering well.

37. TO CONFIRM THE MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the proceedings at the meeting of the District Council held on 28 June 2007, copies of which had previously been circulated, were submitted.

The Council RESOLVED:

“That the minutes be confirmed as a correct record.”

The Chairman proceeded to sign the minutes.

38. PUBLIC SPEAKING

No requests had been received from members of the public to speak at the meeting in accordance with the Council's agreed policy.

39. TO RECEIVE DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST FROM MEMBERS

The Chairman advised that he, Councillor DL Robson and Councillor AK Holden declared personal interests as members of the Cestria Housing Board in item no. 10 on the agenda relating to a report on Joint Allocations and Lettings Policy, and would be remaining in the meeting.

40. REPORT FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

The Leader of the Council reported:

Key Decisions

Write-off of Debt

"1 That the write-off of the debts detailed in sections 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4 of the report be agreed.

2 That it be noted that the NDR bad debts will be charged to the non-domestic rating pool and £14,028.35 will be written off against the general fund provision for bad debts."

Land Matters

"1 Surplus Land

That the disposal stages that have been reached were noted, and progression to the next stages of the following disposals were agreed:

- The re-marketing of the site at East Street (Site 2), Grange Villa and Gray Avenue, Chester-le-Street;
- Consideration of the Mafeking Terrace site as part of the consideration of the Sacriston Area Development Framework;
- The expenditure of £1000, from within existing budgets, on urban design work to enable further more detailed consultation with the residents of Grange Villa."

2 Acquisition of land at Merlin Drive, Chester-le-Street

- That the land shown edged in black at Appendix 1, be acquired by 'Deed of Gift' subject to the Council paying the landowners reasonable legal costs.

- That a further report be presented to Members at a later date regarding the allocation of Section 106 monies and installation of play equipment.”

A Busy Month

The Leader advised that in addition to usual business it had been a busy month:

- LGA Conference
- Climate Change Conference at the Riverside
- LAA Board Meeting
- Environment Board Meeting
- Corporate Briefings
- Publication of Sub National Review of Economic Development Regeneration
- Announcement on Local Government Re-organisation

Local Government Re-organisation

The Leader advised that as a result of central government deliberations a single unitary authority for all of County Durham would come into being in May 2009. No further details were available but a copy of the ministerial statement had been circulated for information. The Leader advised that we must assume that the re-organisation will be on the lines of the proposals submitted by the County Council – copies of which were available on their web site.

The Leader stated that many Councillors had spent the past 4 years, at considerable cost to their personal lives and interests, in taking the Council from poor to good – an achievement by anybody’s standards. At the same time old bonds of trust and confidence with local people had been re-established, as well as new bonds being built. The Leader said that to say that she was disappointed at the Government’s decision was to put it mildly, and added that some may recall that when she took over as Leader of the Council in 2003 she quoted Arundhati Roy from the ‘God of Small Things’ “ And the air was full of Thoughts and Things to Say. But at times like these, only the Small Things are ever said. The Big Things lurk unsaid inside”. She advised that remained true so “Good luck Albert, you’re going to need it”.

The Leader said that on a practical level she would direct Members to the message sent to all staff by the Chief Executive, a copy of which had been circulated , and added that the main points apply equally to Councillors –

- We are fortunate insofar as we are experienced in working in an environment of change
- We have two years in which to ensure that the Council is in the best possible shape to deliver good services to our communities

- We now need to reflect on the detail of the decision before considering the next steps
- Our priority however will be to concentrate on providing uninterrupted delivery of quality services that are right for the people we serve.
- In addition we are fortunate in having a Chief Executive with experience of re-organisation.

As there would be no Council Meeting in August the Leader suggested Members take the next few weeks to rest, recuperate and reflect. By September more details of the proposed changes would be available and they could be tackled with fresh vigour and in the tradition we have established over the last 4 years – that is calmly, constructively and always with the best interests of the people and place of Chester-le-Street District Council at heart.

The Leader said that can be done best by keeping a sense of perspective – unclouded by anger, however justified, and unfashioned by disappointment, however deeply felt.

The Leader added, on a more light-hearted note, Ed Balls, recently appointed Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families had been asked to write an alternative ending to the latest Harry Potter (an event of far greater interest to the general public than local government re-organisation) for the Guardian.

The Leader paraphrased:

“As Albert tried to cram yet another trophy for outstanding wizardry into his trunk, a promising future of non-academic accolades and no doubt, a slow-track career at the Ministry of Magic within his grasp, Chester-le-Street District Council looked on wistfully. Typical we thought. You can have 2 PhDs on your Council, you can save a Council from impending doom but if Ministers and Civil Servants don’t listen to you, all that’s left is a job behind the bar at the Leaky Cauldron or stacking shelves at Flourish and Blotts”.

41. REPORTS FROM PORTFOLIO HOLDERS

a. Resources and Value for Money

Councillor SA Henig advised that the draft report following the review of the Benefits Service indicated that the service was good with promising prospects to improve further.

b. Regeneration and Strategic Planning

There was no report from Councillor CJ Jukes.

c. Community Engagement and Partnership

Councillor S Barr reported on the following:

Member Development

The draft Member Development Strategy was ready for consultation with Members and would be discussed at the Members Steering Group meeting on Thursday 2nd August 2007 at 4.00pm in Conference Room 3. There was an established group, but all interested Members were invited to attend.

Copies of the Members training plan had been circulated. The training plan had been revised to include course objectives. Members were requested to book spaces for relevant training. For all mandatory courses, places would be reserved and Members would be sent written details and course joining instructions.

Work was ongoing to produce a "Directory of Services" for Members. This would provide a handy guide to who to contact for different issues.

The Council had registered an interest in being part of a North East Learning Pool where Members will have access to on line learning materials and will potentially provide an additional flexible alternative for development.

Information Technology

Councillor Barr advised having attended the Durham County eGovernment Partnership meeting that oversees a Countywide approach to IT including a Customer Relationships Management system. The system manages contacts between customers in all of the Districts on a wide variety of functions and although continuing to evolve was managing 45,000 transactions per week across the County. At Chester-le-Street, the system dealt with complaints, compliments, MP enquiries, and change of address notifications.

With regard to IT accessibility, members of the community were to be invited to attend a workshop to explore how ICT could improve services to the community and in particular to those with a disability or other special needs.

Councillor Barr made specific reference to other IT developments:

- An Extranet for the Local Strategic Partnership.
- The Document Management System in Planning.
- Planning for the implementation of ICT provision for Cestria Community Housing.
- Working towards the Chartermark for ICT Service Delivery.

Customer Services

The Reception and Cashier units had been formed into the corporate Customer Services Team to provide all cashier / reception and switchboard services within the Civic Centre, and was the next step in the overall development and transformation of front-line services within the Council as a whole.

LSP

Councillor Barr advised having attended the LSP Steering Group meeting when the Council's CPA Inspection Report was submitted and the Group recorded its congratulations to the Council.

Reports were considered by the Group on:

- Public sector procurement and the voluntary sector
- Local Transport Bill
- Local Area Agreement

Democratic Services

Councillor Barr advised that following the visit of the School Council from Chester-le-Street CE Junior School that he reported last month, the Democratic Services Team together with the Chairman of the Council, visited the school to give a presentation on Democracy. The event was interactive and involved the children voting and taking part in a role-play. The event had been a tremendous success and a card was subsequently received, signed by all of the School Council, with a message of 'Thank you for a brilliant assembly'

Councillor Barr described this as a great example of promoting local democracy. He advised that work was progressing on arrangements for Local Democracy Week (15th – 20th October) that would include:

- A rap band to do two shows.
- The launch of the European Charter for Equality for Women and Men in Local Life by Stephen Hughes MEP
- Civic Centre 'open days' throughout the week with presentations by all Service Teams
- Activities at the Civic Heart

A full programme and further details would be circulated in advance and Councillor Barr suggested that this would be a good way for Members to get involved and promote local democracy.

d. Neighbourhood Services

Councillor SCL Westrip reported on the following:

Smokefree Implementation

The Health Act 2006 came into force on 1 July 2007 making the majority of enclosed work places and public places Smokefree, and formal high intensity

monitoring of the legislation started at 7.00pm on Sunday 1 July. In order to monitor the legislation, part-time temporary internal vacancies were advertised enabling Council staff to work on the project. Over 30 staff applied and most Departments were represented. Each Monitoring Team consisted of two people at least one of which had experience in enforcement. The approach enabled the high intensity phase of the monitoring programme to be delivered at less than 50% of the cost had external contractors been used. This example of the 'One Team' approach will be featured in the next issues of Team Talk and District News.

Monitoring focussed on pubs, clubs, bookmakers and cafes and over 400 monitoring visits have been carried out without a single instance of smoking in a Smokefree area being witnessed.

Environmental Services

Councillor Westrip advised of the Teams positive response to recent flooding delivered by the One Team approach, and of the value of in-house services with local knowledge and a commitment to communities.

The Green Flag Award for Riverside had been retained for the third year in succession.

Difficulties had been experienced in maintaining standards in the ground care service due to the above average rain fall, but the Team was working hard to recover standards across the District.

Leisure Services

Councillor Westrip advised that a full programme of events had been organised for the summer school holiday period and details of the events were circulated at the meeting.

Positive Futures Summer Programme

Councillor Westrip advised that Positive Futures was a national initiative aimed at young people aged 8-19 years who were at risk of social exclusion and involvement in criminal activity/anti-social behaviour, by encouraging them through the medium of sport to participate in positive activities.

The summer programme would be based in the five Positive Futures target areas, namely:

- ***Pelton Fell***
- ***Chester West***
- ***Pelton***
- ***Lumley***
- ***Sacrison***

Planning Services

Councillor Westrip said he was pleased to announce that BVPI 109 showed that the Planning Section was continuing to improve and advised of the following indicators:

- ***BVPI 109a – Major Planning Applications decided in 13 weeks
88% - fourth in region***
- ***BVPI 109b – Minor Planning Applications decided in 8 weeks
92% - first in region***
- ***BVPI 109c – Other Planning Applications decided in 8 weeks
95% - first in region***

e. Health and Wellbeing

Councillor M Potts reported having attended several meetings during the previous month. She made specific reference to the Durham and District Supporting People Partnership meeting when one of the items discussed was services for offenders. The group was looking to remodel the service as it mainly focussed on single people.

Also discussed at the meeting was a Floating Service for the deaf, deafened and deaf/blind aimed at promoting the ability to live independently in the community.

Councillor Potts advised having also attended a meeting at Newcastle Civic Centre at which the new Home Secretary, Jacquie Smith, was present. At the meeting, the Home Secretary paid tribute to the people of Byker saying that everyone working together and had reduced crime in that area by 35% since 1997.

Councillor Potts added that she had attended the launch of the Pocket Guide to Durham that contained details of places to visit, stay, eat, shop and enjoy, as well as including quotes by travel writer, Bill Bryson.

42. QUESTIONS TO LEADER AND EXECUTIVE MEMBERS

There were no questions for the Leader or Executive Members.

43. ANTI POVERTY STRATEGY

Consideration was given to a report from the Director of Resources and Revenues and Benefits Manager seeking approval to the Corporate Anti-Poverty Strategy, copies of which had previously been circulated.

Councillor SA Henig introduced the report and moved, seconded by Councillor CJ Jukes, that the recommendation in the report be approved.

The Council RESOLVED:

“That the Corporate Anti-Poverty Strategy appended to the report be approved.”

44. HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

Consideration was given to a report from the Head of Regeneration seeking approval to the Homelessness Strategy, copies of which had previously been circulated.

Councillor CJ Jukes introduced the report and acknowledged the involvement of the former portfolio holder, former Councillor IS Smith, in the production of the strategy.

The Housing Strategy and Business Manager spoke on the detail of the report and strategy.

Councillor S Barr advised being impressed with the performance of the Homelessness Team and requested that the graph on page 19 of the strategy document be amended in order to identify the homeless presentations within each of the Chester-le-Street Wards.

Councillor SCL Westrip advised that reference to domestic violence in the strategy should be changed to domestic abuse.

Councillor CJ Jukes proposed, seconded by Councillor S Barr, that the recommendation in the report be approved.

The Council RESOLVED:

“That the revised Homelessness Strategy as appended to the report be approved.”

45. JOINT ALLOCATIONS AND LETTINGS POLICY

Consideration was given to a report from the Acting Director of Community Services seeking approval to the Joint Allocations and Lettings Policy between Cestria Community Housing Association and the Council, copies of which had previously been circulated.

The Acting Director of Community Services introduced and spoke to the report.

Councillor L Ebbatson proposed, seconded by Councillor CJ Jukes, that the recommendations in the report be approved.

The Council RESOLVED:

“1. That the Joint Allocations and Lettings Policy appended to the report be approved.

2. That the Policy be presented to the Shadow Board of Cestria Community Housing Association.”

46. CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

Consideration was given to a report from the Customer Relationship Manager recommending the adoption of the Corporate Communications Strategy 2007-2010, copies of which had previously been circulated.

The Chief Executive introduced that report and advised that Members’ use of IT services would be added to the strategy.

Councillor L Ebbatson advised she welcomed the strategy and challenged the Chief Officers to look at the Action Plan and ensure that performance management is both rigorous and comprehensive.

Councillor L Ebbatson proposed, seconded by Councillor CJ Jukes, that the recommendation in the report be approved.

The Council **RESOLVED**:

“That the Corporate Communications Strategy 2007-2010 as appended to the report be adopted.”

47. COMMON SEAL

The Council RESOLVED:

“That the action of the Officer in affixing the Common Seal of the Council to the following documents be confirmed: -

Transfer in duplicate relating to 30 Viola Crescent, Sacriston
Transfer in duplicate relating to 48 Conyers Road, Chester-le-Street
Transfer in duplicate relating to 15 Northlands, Chester-le-Street
Form DS1 in respect of 38 Northlands, Chester-le-Street
Transfer in duplicate relating to 29 Marigold Crescent, Bournmoor
Transfer in duplicate relating to 30 Ruskin Avenue, Pelton Fell.”

The meeting terminated at 6.55 pm