

THE DISTRICT COUNCIL OF CHESTER-LE-STREET

Report of the meeting of Council held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Newcastle Road, Chester-le-Street, Co Durham, DH3 3UT on Thursday, 26 June 2008 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT:

Councillor D Thompson (Chairman)

Councillors

A Humes	D M Holding
A Turner	C J Jukes
G Armstrong	W Laverick
L Armstrong	M D May
S Barr	P H May
J W Barrett	J M Proud
L E W Brown	M Sekowski
R Court	J Shiell
L Ebbatson	S C L Westrip
P Ellis	F Wilkinson
M Gollan	A Willis
S Greatwich	

Officers: R Templeman (Chief Executive), T Galloway (Director of Development Services), J Elder (Acting Head of Resources), I Herberson (Head of Corporate Finance), L Howley (Chief Environmental Health Officer), B Lightburn (Community Leisure Manager), C Potter (Head of Legal and Democratic Services), N Tzamarias (Assistant Director of Development Services) and C Turnbull (Democratic Services Officer)

There were 30 members of the public present.

17. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors GK Davidson, SA Henig, AK Holden, PB Nathan, DL Robson and TJ Smith.

18. TO CONFIRM THE MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL MEETING HELD 29 MAY 2008

The minutes of the proceedings at the Annual Meeting of the District Council held on 29 May 2008 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.

19. 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.

20. TO RECEIVE DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST FROM MEMBERS

There were no declarations of interest from Members.

21. REPORT FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

The Leader, Councillor L Ebbatson, reported that as a result of meetings with other District Leaders in Durham and the Leader of the new unitary, the County Durham Association of Local Authorities would continue to meet. This provided a ready made forum to collectively discuss issues of joint concern to the new unitary and predecessor councils such as ourselves

Following on from such meetings during the month, Councillor Ebbatson advised having been informed that:

(a) The Head of Social Inclusion would be overseeing a consultation on 'area arrangements' for the new unitary in July and August. Further details were awaited.

(b) Although the Structural Change Order defers any parish elections until 2013 (a 6 year term) the Department of Communities and Local Government had issued a letter of consultation to the new unitary seeking views on whether there should be parish council elections in 2009 – coinciding possibly with the European elections in June of that year.

(c) Clearly this linked to the bid proposals which uses town and parish councils as the vehicle for community engagement and devolved powers and responsibilities. It was unclear these proposals could be progressed.

(d) This was also linked to the review of electoral boundaries for the new unitary which was to be undertaken by the Boundary Committee.

"It is the view of the Electoral Commission that a 5 year term of office is unacceptable for councillors in a new authority and an electoral review implemented at an early opportunity will ensure that the new authority is able, early in its life, to have an appropriate council size and good levels of electoral equality across its area"

Councillor Ebbatson advised being informed at a meeting with the Boundary Committee earlier in the day, that:

- The review would commence in July with a consultation on the size of the new council and determine the appropriate number of members

- The building blocks would be existing parish and town council boundaries
- No community governance reviews should be commenced during the process (July 2008 – May 2009) to avoid complications
- A decision regarding the timing of the next elections would be made at the end of the review.

(e) Councillor Ebbatson advised that the issue of Honorary Aldermen was also considered during the month. Honorary Aldermen could be elected by a 2/3 majority of a principal council. The candidates could not be sitting councillors. A predecessor authority's councillor may be considered for this position.

Further clarity was sought on:

- (1) the legal position regarding District Councils and
- (2) the criteria which should be applied for nominations. A report on this would be received at the August meeting of the CDA.

On another topic, Councillor Ebbatson advised that the Council had been informed of 2 days of action proposed by Unison. The dates were 16/17 July. She suggested that the Council Meeting arranged for 17 July be postponed to 24 July.

The Leader stated that Members would recall that the date of the Council Meeting in July was brought forward to facilitate a public discussion on any Post Office closures in the area that would be known on 1 July. The presentation by the Post Office had also been deferred to 24 July.

Councillor Ebbatson advised that the key decisions made by the Executive in May and June had been circulated.

In conclusion, Councillor Ebbatson said that it gave her great pleasure to welcome the visitors that evening, which included the nominees for the Community Awards, adding that their contribution to well being in the District was immense, although they may not always know it, and it was much appreciated. She added that the Community Awards were the Council's way of recognising that contribution and the achievements that go with it. She hoped everyone would enjoy the evening.

22. REPORTS FROM PORTFOLIO HOLDERS

a. Neighbourhood Services.

Councillor SCL Westrip reported on the following items:

Flood Defence Grant Monies

Following the floods in the summer of 2007 the Government made provision of over £108M in grant aid to Councils affected by localised flooding and this Council received a grant of £60K. The monies received had to be spent on

flood defence works to those properties specifically affected by the floods. Over 200 questionnaires were sent out to residents in the flood-hit areas to ascertain the level and extent of the flooding and as a result, 20 properties were offered grants of up to £3K to fit door and air brick guards to their properties.

Planning Committee Member Training

Councillor Westrip advised that the first of two training sessions for members of the Planning Committee was held the previous evening with a further session scheduled for 11 July 2008. He reminded Members that it was a requirement of serving on the Planning Committee that they have at least basic training.

Licensing Committee Member Training

Councillor Westrip advised that a training session for members of the Licensing Committee was scheduled for 2 July 2008 with the training aimed at new Members on the Committee or as a refresher for serving Members. A further session would be held on 9 July 2008 and he reminded Members that it was a requirement of serving on the Committee that they have basic training.

Olympic Flag Raising Event

Councillor Westrip advised that the Council had registered for a free Olympic flag to take part in the 'hand over' ceremony from Beijing to London as host of the 2012 Olympics. Leisure Services were organising a 'mini Olympic' event on this occasion and also an event on the occasion of the Paralympics handover. He added that Councillor TJ Smith would provide updates at future meetings.

Gateshead MBC

Councillor Westrip reported that the Environmental Services Team and Area Managers from Gateshead MBC would be visiting the district to see how this Council adopted and successfully implemented a Parks to Larks Policy

Green Hero Award

Councillor Westrip advised that the Council had received a Green Hero Award, presented by the Green Organisation, for consistent best practice examples with regard to communication of environmental issues to the community and local school children.

b. Regeneration and Strategic Planning

Councillor CJ Jukes reported on the following matters:

- Town Centre profile of activities being compiled

- Promotion and improvement of the Market was continuing
- Business Improvement District initiative was on track
- Sacriston Community Centre – keys for new Centre handed over
- Pelton Fell Regeneration – progress on the refurbishment of the Community Resource Centre was to plan

c. Resources and Value for Money

Councillor L Armstrong had no report but extended thanks to the Head of Corporate Finance and his dedicated team for ensuring that the Statement of Accounts for 2007/2008 was available.

d. Community Engagement and Partnerships

Councillor M Sekowski reported that over the past month he had been getting to grips with the brief for the Community Engagement and Partnerships Portfolio. The focus of the brief, alongside the other portfolios, would be to help deliver the Council's single corporate priority "People And Place."

Four Action Learning Sets had been established to deliver sustainable outcomes for this priority and Councillor Sekowski advised he would be involved in two of the Sets:

Partnership For Futures

The essence of the scheme was to harness the collective efforts of the District's businesses and educational establishments to ensure that the Council can match local people with local jobs. This would enhance the future prospects of both employers and the workforce and help to provide the area with a sound, sustainable, competitive economic base.

Councillor Sekowski advised having attended a meeting of the Steering Group on 24 June that approved the job specification for the post of Executive Director who would lead the scheme forward. An interview panel was established to make the appointment and a target start date of 1st September 2008 agreed.

Strengthening Partnerships.

Councillor Sekowski advised that the aim of the Action Learning Set was to help fill any gaps in the key partnerships to ensure that sustainable change was carried over to the new Unitary Authority.

One of the key partners was the Local Children's Board, whose terms of reference was to develop and deliver local services for children, young people and their families. The Board formed one of the theme groups of the Local Strategic Partnership and comprised a range of partners including the Primary Care Trust, providers of children's, young people and family services, Police, Schools, Connexions County Durham and Youth Engagement Service.

As the Council's representative, he attended his first meeting of the Board on 13 June to gain a feel of the subject matters involved.

Youth Council / Forum.

Councillor Sekowski advised having been involved in an initial exploratory meeting to assess the viability of setting up a Youth Council/Forum. The purpose of such venture would be to:

- Give children and young people a voice in local affairs.
- To provide a vehicle for relevant agencies and partners to consult children and young people.
- To engage with the younger generation and involve them in the design, delivery and improvement of local services
- To involve them in the democratic processes of the area.

Ongoing discussions were being held as to the structure and process of establishing a Youth Council which had the support of the Local Children's Board.

23. QUESTIONS TO LEADER AND EXECUTIVE MEMBERS

Councillor PH May referred to the report of the portfolio holder for neighbourhood services and enquired what was being done to prevent a repetition of the flooding damage caused to properties in the District.

Councillor Westrip advised he would ensure that the Director of Development Services provided Councillor May with a report on the matter.

The Chief Executive advised having held discussions on the matter with officials from the Environment Agency and Water Authority.

24. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2007/2008

Consideration was given to a report from the Scrutiny Officer that presented the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2007/2008 copies of which had previously been circulated.

Councillor G Armstrong, Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board, introduced the item and thanked the two members of the public who regularly attended meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels. He also thanked the Scrutiny Officer and members of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels for their involvement and work during the year and advised that all Scrutiny Members would be invited to participate in Task and Finish Groups.

The Leader thanked Councillor G Armstrong, Chairmen of Overview and Scrutiny Panels and all Scrutiny Members for their hard work and reports to the Executive.

The Council RESOLVED:

“That the contents of the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2007/2008 be noted.”

25. PRIVATE SECTOR EMPTY PROPERTY TRANSITIONAL POLICY

Consideration was given to a report from the Director of Development Services seeking approval to the Private Sector Empty Property Transitional Policy, appended to the report.

Councillor SCL Westrip introduced the report.

The Chief Environmental Health Officer answered questions from Members relating to probate properties, compulsory purchase and well maintained empty properties.

Councillor SCL Westrip proposed, seconded by Councillor L Armstrong, that the recommendation in the report be approved.

The Council RESOLVED:

“That the Private Sector Empty Property Transitional Policy, as appended to the report, be approved and progress of the Policy and implementation of the Action Plan be monitored by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel.”

Councillors LEW Brown, R Court and JM Proud abstained from voting on the matter.

26. MEMBER APPROVAL OF THE STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS FOR 2007/2008

Consideration was given to a report from the Head of Corporate Finance seeking approval to the 2007/2008 Statement of Accounts as appended to the report.

The Head of Corporate Finance spoke to the report and advised that the Cash Flow Statement and associated notes which were marked copy to follow were made available to Members. In addition a revised Income and Expenditure Account was circulated as an amendment had been made to make the statement comply with the relevant accounting codes of practice.

He reported on the key messages as follows: -

General Fund Revenue Expenditure – after difficulties highlighted at the half year financial monitoring position, it was pleasing to report that the outturn for 2007/2008 was an underspend of £27,422. This had been made possible as a result of actions taken during the year to offset projected overspends in order to safeguard balances.

Housing Revenue Account (HRA) – The accounts presented to Members had been prepared taking into account the impact of the Housing Stock Transfer that took place on 4 February 2008. Attention was drawn to £1.579 million HRA balance as at 31 March 2008. It was noted, however, that this balance had been earmarked to ensure the residual cost to the General Fund following the stock transfer was cost neutral for the following five financial years.

Capital Programme – The Head of Corporate Finance assured Members that there were enough resources available in the Balance Sheet to cover existing capital commitments. However, any new capital expenditure in 2008/2009 was dependent on capital receipts from the sale of land.

Revenue Recovery – It was noted that the performance in relation to the collection rates for Council Tax and Non Domestic Rates in 2007/2008 had improved year on year. The level of arrears in relation to Rents was nil due to the Housing Stock Transfer.

Borrowing – The Head of Corporate Finance stated that the authority did not exceed its authorised limit or operational boundary during 2007/2008. As part of the arrangements to transfer the Council's housing stock, £19.85 million of debt was repaid by the government which enabled the authority to have no long-term borrowing as at 31 March 2008.

Balance Sheet – The Head of Corporate Finance drew Members attention to the Balance Sheet on page 25 of the Statement of Accounts and explained the significant year on year impact of the decision to transfer the Housing Stock to Cestria Community Housing Association Limited.

Councillor G Armstrong advised that the Audit Committee had studied the Statement of Accounts and asked a number of questions of the Officer. He asked whether there would be any cost implications to the Council as a result of staff retirements/redundancies leading up to vesting day for the new unitary authority.

The Chief Executive advised there would be a report on staff retirement/redundancy submitted to the July meeting of the Council. He added that it would be the responsibility of the Council to take decisions on these matters prior to vesting day but he was hoping for few, if any, redundancies.

Councillor LEW Brown commented that the Riverside Cricket Ground was owned by the Council, albeit held by Durham County Cricket Club on a 99 years lease, and as such should be included in the Statement as a Council asset.

Councillor L Ebbatson gave an assurance that the Council's budget took account of possible retirement/redundancy situations. She advised that any decision required on staffing would be referred to the Council. She thanked the Head of Corporate Finance and his staff for preparing the Statement of Accounts within the reduced timetable.

Councillor CJ Jukes proposed, seconded by Councillor G Armstrong, that the recommendations in the report be approved.

The Council RESOLVED:

- “1. That the Annual Statement of Accounts for 2007/2008 be approved subject to audit.
2. That the Capital Financing for 2007/2008 be determined as detailed in the report.
3. That delegated authority be granted to the Head of Corporate Finance (Section 151 Officer), in consultation with the Lead Member for Resources and Value for Money, to make any amendments to the Statement which are not material.
4. That the Annual Governance Statement for 2007/2008 be approved subject to audit.
5. That the transfer of the 2007/2008 underspend on General Fund services (£27,422) from the General Fund Reserve to Insurance Reserve as detailed in the report, be approved.”

27. CORRESPONDENCE

Councillor SCL Westrip reported receipt of a letter from Mr BJ Straughan, on behalf of the Community Awards Panel, advising that the Panel members were keen to ensure that the Civic and Community Awards were progressed in 2009 and continued by the Unitary authority.

The Council RESOLVED:

“That a letter be sent to the Unitary authority in support of the continuation of the Civic and Community Awards following vesting day in 2009.”

28. CONFERENCES

There were no invitations to attend conferences.

29. 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:

Lease in duplicate relating to a single storey factory unit
Lease in duplicate relating to Bullion Hall, South Approach
Temporary Road Closure Order in respect of Sacriston Carnival, 21 June 2008.”

Following the conclusion of business, the Chairman of the Council presented Community Awards and the Civic Award to the following:

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| Young Achiever Winners | – | Anna Collin
Sophie Forster
Scott Lowerson |
| Young Achievers Team/Group
Award Winners | - | The Chester-le-Street Riverside
Youth Brass Academy |
| Civic Award Winner | – | Audrey Lines |

The meeting terminated at 5.20 pm