

THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING
OF THE RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON TUESDAY 3 JUNE 2008

Present: Councillor A Burnip (Chair)
Councillors Mrs M Baird, A Collinson,
J Haggan, A J Holmes, D Maddison,
Mrs J Maitland, M Nicholls and Mrs V M Williams

Apologies: Councillors R Liddle

- 1 **THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING** held on 22 April 2008, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were confirmed.

Matters Arising

The Scrutiny Support Manager advised that a report on the Value for Money of Horticultural Services would be considered by this Committee at its meeting held on 24 June 2008.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

- 2 **THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE** held on 20 May 2008, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were submitted.

RESOLVED that the information contained within the Minutes, be noted.

- 3 **PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

There were no members of the public present.

- 4 **FEEDBACK FROM SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD**

The Chair advised that there were no issues considered at the Scrutiny Management Board meeting held on 27 May 2008 which fell within the remit of this Committee.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

- 5 **SERVICE UNIT PERFORMANCE REPORTING – DEMOCRATIC SERVICES**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Democratic Services which gave an update on the performance of the Democratic Services Unit, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

The report provided an update on the previous six months of the Unit which comprised of the following service areas:

- Democratic and Member Services
- Elections and Electoral Registration

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Members were advised that in March this year, following the final report of the Best Value Review of Support Services the Executive approved proposals for the restructuring of a number of corporate support services.

The report proposed a separation of the Democratic Services and Legal Services/Risk Management/Insurance functions to establish a clear focus for each. The Democratic Services function transferred to the Assistant Chief Executive's team to allow closer alignment between democracy and the agendas around community engagement and corporate development.

The Legal, Risk and Insurance functions were transferred to the Directorate of Finance and Corporate Services.

The District of Easington Scrutiny Annual Report 2007/08 had been considered by the Scrutiny Management Board.

The Scrutiny Committees' work programmes, in what was a transitional year to the new Unitary Council, concentrated on service unit performance reporting to ensure that Council performance was maintained at the highest level together with monitoring of priorities identified within the Council's Transitional Plan. Key issues identified for each Scrutiny Committee were outlined in the report.

The Council was involved with County-wide Scrutiny initiatives and had two elected Member representatives on the County Council's Joint Health Scrutiny Committee. Members of the Council had also been involved in the Young People not in Education, Employment or Training and Public Transport Countywide Scrutiny reviews.

The County Durham Overview and Scrutiny Officer Network had comprehensively evaluated Overview and Scrutiny in County Durham. Using the Centre for Public Scrutiny's Evaluation Toolkit a number of Members had been either interviewed or surveyed as part of the process. The results of this work were being compiled into a comprehensive report which would be considered by the Scrutiny Committees when completed.

As part of the adoption in February 2008 of the Council's Transitional Plan for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), organisational development work was refocused to support the needs of staff and Members through the period of transition.

As part of this process Member training and development activity was concentrated on activities to support elected Members through the transition. Notwithstanding this, learning opportunities would still be circulated to Members from the usual sources including the North East Regional Employers' Organisation.

Within the ongoing LGR workstreams, officers had been involved in developing Induction and Training activities for the newly elected County Councillors.

The Unit had been heavily involved in the Neighbourhood Forum Pilots in Seaham, Murton and South Hetton. Working with East Durham Trust, the initial pilot meetings were held in March 2008. Collectively, over 100 residents took part in the pilot meetings with residents invited to leave contact details so that they could receive information regarding the ongoing pilots.

Arising from the meetings an "Agenda for Action" for each Forum was produced and would be presented to the Forums in May and June 2008 for approval. The new Forums would be evaluated during August and September and a decision on whether the pilot arrangements would be extended to other parts of the District would be taken then.

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Councillor A Collinson asked if the events had been well attended. B Garside advised that the initial pilot events in all three areas had been well attended. The first Forum meeting held in Seaham had been well attended but the Murton Forum had not attracted any members of the public to attend.

Councillor Mrs J Maitland expressed concern at the lack of public attendance in Murton. B Garside explained that East Durham Trust, who had facilitated the pilot events, had provided a data base of contacts for community groups and interested parties and invites had been issued widely.

B Garside had previously reported that the annual canvass for the Electoral Register had been completed and resulted in an overall total household response rate of 95%, of which 22% had responded by telephone.

In February this year, prior to the County Council Elections a "Register Cleansing" exercise was undertaken. This involved writing to all households in the District asking if occupants were registered or whether any circumstances had changed. The exercise resulted in 492 additions, 772 deletions and 92 changes to the Register which proved the exercise had been worthwhile in preparation for the May elections.

In 2007 the Council undertook a review of all polling districts and polling places and the final proposals were approved by Full Council on 23 November 2007.

At that time there were a number of polling places with changing circumstances. Therefore in readiness for the County Council Elections a further review was undertaken and the District Council agreed at their meeting on 6 March 2008 to adopt further proposed changes to a small number of polling places.

Councillor M Nicholls pointed out that often voters were not happy using a particular polling station. B Garside advised that the figures for any particular area could be looked at if it was felt turnout was low as a result of the location of the polling station.

Through February, March and April staff were heavily involved in the management of the elections.

Through a joint procurement exercise with the other 6 District Councils, Sunderland City Print were contracted to produce poll cards, postal voting packs and ballot papers. This arrangement proved to be successful with postal voting arrangements running smoothly.

18,300 postal voter packs were despatched and 11,878 were returned giving a postal voter turnout of 65%. The overall turnout for the District was 30.5% and across the county the turnout was 35 – 36%.

Councillor Mrs J Maitland felt the low turnout could be a result of the Referendum held in relation to the Unitary Council and the fact that the majority vote was ignored.

Councillor J Haggan queried the number of postal votes that were spoilt by the lack of a signature. B Garside advised that very few postal votes had been rejected due to the lack of either a valid signature or date of birth.

The recent Electoral Administration Act had made significant changes to the way the electoral process was administered. Staffing arrangements were reviewed 18 months ago to deal with the new provisions, and made permanent this year following the structural review. These new arrangements had allowed the Electoral Services Section to successfully meet the demands placed upon them.

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As part of the work being undertaken for LGR B Garside and S Gwilym had been involved in sub-groups of the Legal and Democracy Workstream.

B Garside was a member of the Decision Making Sub-Group which had looked at issues related to the transitional constitution requirements in the run up to the Elections and the Durham County Council Annual Meeting. Work was now ongoing on constitutional and structural arrangements in preparation for vesting day in April 2009.

S Gwilym was involved in the Behaviour Skills and Values Sub Group which had looked at Councillor development and support including an initial Member Induction Programme. He was also involved in the Member Locality Working Group which had looked at support facilities such as office accommodation, meetings facilities, IT facilities and access to Council information.

Councillor A Collinson queried the current situation in relation to a possible Boundary Review. B Garside advised that a representative from the Boundary Commission had met with the District Councils and it was likely that a review of the county would be carried out. Both the County and District Councils were opposed to this on the basis that a review was recently undertaken and LGR was imminent. If the review went ahead a key factor would be the implementation date which would be either 2010 or 2013. It was pointed out that 2010 was the date of the next parliamentary elections and the last three County Elections had been combined with Parliamentary.

B Garside reported that effective sickness monitoring continued to be carried out in the Unit.

The overall sickness rate for the Unit for the period 1 May 2007 to 30 April 2008 was 3.49 days. The Council's corporate target was 8 days.

Councillor Mrs J Maitland queried staff moral within the unit. B Garside advised that moral was high and as yet no staff had indicated they were leaving. Councillor Maitland stressed the importance of maintaining staff moral and the need to retain staff up until vesting day.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

6 **ADDITIONAL URGENT ITEMS OF BUSINESS**

In accordance with the Local Government Act, 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985, Section 100B(4)(b) the Chair, following consultation with the Proper Officer, agreed that the following items of business, not shown on the Agenda, be considered as a matter of urgency.

7 **DISTRICT OF EASINGTON SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2007/08 (AOB)**

Consideration was given to the report of the Scrutiny Support Manager which sought approval of the District of Easington Scrutiny Annual Report 2007/08, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

The report highlighted the work undertaken by the Community Services, Resources and Regeneration Services Scrutiny Committees during 2007/08 and set out the proposed areas of work that would form part of the work programme for 2008/09 which were drawn from the Council's Corporate Plan and Transitional Plan which detailed Council priority areas of work over the coming year.

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RESOLVED that the District of Easington Scrutiny Annual Report 2007/08 be approved and submitted to Full Council for endorsement.

8 HACKWORTH ROAD DEPOT (AOB)

Councillor A Collinson suggested that the Resources Scrutiny Committee visit Hackworth Road Depot.

RESOLVED that arrangements be made for the Resources Scrutiny Committee to visit Hackworth Road Depot.

9 HOTEL FEASIBILITY STUDY (AOB)

Councillor A Collinson requested an update in relation to the hotel feasibility study.

S Gwilym advised that the results of the study were reported to this Committee in April 2007.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.