

**DUNSTABLE TOWN COUNCIL**

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE**

**HELD AT THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, GROVE HOUSE, HIGH STREET NORTH, DUNSTABLE**

**ON MONDAY 19TH JUNE 2006**

Present: Councillor Mrs C M Gresham (Town Mayor), Councillors A Bray, A J Fairbairn, Mrs J K Fairbairn, Mrs S A Newton, P Russell and M Tilley with Councillor Mrs S Littlechild and Mr R Walden (Town Clerk) and Mrs R G Smith (Administration and Finance Manager)

Apologies for Absence: Councillors Mrs B Boatwright, P J Boatwright, M J P Mullany and M Jones

**179 CHAIRMAN**

In the absence of the Chairman and Vice-Chairman Councillor Mrs Newton was appointed Chairman for this meeting.

**180 MINUTES**

**RESOLVED:** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 27th March 2006 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**181 SPECIFIC DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no specific declarations of interest.

**182 ACCOUNTS**

**a) Accounts Sub-Committee**

The Committee received the Minutes of the Accounts Sub-Committee held on 20th April and 25th May (see Appendix 'A'). Members were delighted to note the satisfactory completion of the Audit of the 2004/05 Accounts and that the Audit Commission had issued an unqualified opinion and audit certificate on the accounts on 16th May 2006.

**b) Statement of Accounts 2005/2006**

The Committee received and considered the draft Statement of Accounts 2005/2006.

**RESOLVED:** i) that the Chairman be authorised to sign the Statement of Accounts as approved by the Council

ii) that the Statement of Internal Control as included in the Statement of Accounts be approved.

**183 CALENDER OF MEETINGS**

**RESOLVED:** i) that the draft calendar of meetings set out at Appendix 'B' be approved

ii) that the proposal of the Graham Cumming Group for the production of a Council Diary for 2007, with ten pages of editorial free of charge in return for advertising rights, be accepted.

**184 CIVIC EVENTS AND MAYORAL ACTIVITIES**

The Committee received a report of the Civic Administration Officer on recent events and activities at which the Town Mayor had represented the Council together with a schedule of forthcoming Mayoral events and Civic occasions.

**185 DUNSTABLE LIAISON FORUM**

**RESOLVED:** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Liaison Forum held on 7th June 2006 (see Appendix 'C') be received.

**186 SOUTH BEDFORDSHIRE LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP**

The Committee received the Minutes of the meeting of the Local Strategic Partnership held on 9th March 2006.

**187 CORPORATE GOVERNANCE**

The Town Clerk and Deputy Town Clerk submitted a joint report recalling that the Committee at its meeting in June 2005 had agreed the following corporate priorities in addition to securing improved performance as measured through the Council's approved satisfaction ratings:

- Health and Safety
- Risk Management
- Freedom of Information
- Staff induction and support mechanisms
- Disability Discrimination Act
- Environmental Protection Policy
- IT Security

They reported on progress in relation to each of these priorities and also reported that the Council had received from the Society of Local Council Clerks and the Audit Commission a corporate governance checklist. The Council complied with the great majority of the recommended practice but reports on any outstanding issues would be presented during the course of the coming year.

**a) Review of the Council's Performance**

As part of its agreed performance management system, the Council annually conducted satisfaction surveys of the services it provided. The surveys were conducted amongst users of services, partner organisations and a postal survey of a random sample of 500 households. The results for each individual service were then averaged out to give an overall satisfaction rating for town council services. In 2006 the Council had achieved an overall satisfaction rating of 95% compared to ratings of 96% in 2005 and 94% in 2004.

**Services achieving full satisfaction**

Full satisfaction had been achieved for the following services:

Cemetery  
Community Development  
Mayfield Centre  
Priory House

The **Mayfield Centre** had consistently achieved **100% satisfaction** since the introduction of these ratings in 2003. Last year's decline in **Community Development**, which resulted from a decrease in the public's satisfaction with the Summer Playscheme, had been successfully redressed. The **Cemetery** having consistently improved over the last 3 years had outperformed its target for 2006. **Priory House** by achieving full satisfaction amongst partners and visitors, including local educational establishments, had outperformed its first year target by 6%.

### **Services with improved satisfaction ratings**

The most improved service in 2006 had been **Recreation Grounds** where satisfaction **increased from 90% to 96%**. The satisfaction rating for **Youth and Community** had **increased from 96% to 97%**. This had been as a result of increased ratings from both young people and Dunstable residents.

Whilst the satisfaction ratings for **Allotments** and **Library and Promotions** had remained **constant at 93% and 98% respectively**, both had showed improvements within some of their sub ratings with increased proportions of 'good and excellent' responses.

### **Services with reduced satisfaction ratings**

In 2006 satisfaction with 4 of the Council's services has declined. All of these services had achieved increased satisfaction ratings in 2005 which suggested specific problems relating to the past year rather than an ongoing downward trend. The individual services were as follows:

#### **Civic Expenses**

The overall satisfaction rating for this service had **declined from 100% to 94%**. This had been entirely due to a fall in satisfaction with the 2005 AGM which had in addition to the usual arrangements hosted a town twinning visit. This would not be the case in 2006.

#### **Council Offices**

The overall satisfaction rating for this service had **declined from 98% to 93%** the latter also being its rating for 2004. This had been due to increased levels of dissatisfaction with site/building accessibility, information received and complaint handling. It was however noted that there was increased satisfaction in relation to the 'helpfulness of the staff'. Each of the points raised would be addressed as specific actions in the Council's 2006 Best Value Performance Plan.

#### **Downside Community Centre**

The satisfaction rating for this service had **declined from 100% to 98%**. Each of the recorded points of dissatisfaction related to the physical aspect of the building including appearance and maintenance. This would be addressed as part of the current best value review of this service.

## **Town Centre Management**

The overall satisfaction rating for this service had **declined from 85% to 74%**. Whilst satisfaction amongst Dunstable residents had increased by 7% that of local businesses and other stakeholders had fallen by 30%. It was noted that the sample of local businesses in 2006 had been much larger than in previous years. Whilst Members accepted that this did not excuse the decline it possibly helped to explain why this disappointing level of dissatisfaction had not been identified earlier. It was however felt that the key agencies involved with Town Centre Management service needed to engage more fully with local businesses to identify ways of improving the performance of this service in the future. Actions were already in hand to address this point.

**RESOLVED:** that a summary of general comments arising from the household survey be forwarded for the information of all Councillors.

### **b) Best Value Performance Plan**

The issues identified in the review of the Council's performance had been developed and incorporated within a draft Best Value Performance Plan for 2006 which was duly considered.

**RESOLVED:** that the Plan be approved.

### **c) Staff Development**

The annual staff appraisals/development interviews had now been completed and recommendations relating to the Council's Performance would be considered later in the meeting.

### **d) Health and Safety**

Members noted that the Council's management team were in the process of conducting a full review of health and safety policies and procedures. Progress to date had included:

- Meetings of all staff to discuss health and safety issues
- Appointment of health and safety representatives for each of the Council's service areas
- Training for all health and safety representatives
- Working teams appointed to draw up Working Practice Notes for Lone Working, Equipment and Vehicles and First Aid
- Introduction of a new procedure for reporting accidents

### **e) Risk Management**

All Managers were in the process of completing risk management assessments for all Council functions and activities in accordance with the LCRS (Local Council Risk System) designed for town and parish councils which provided comprehensive templates for every area of the Council's work. The templates had been extended beyond the recommended "risk" "control" to include "action plans" and "progress reports" to support monitoring of the risk management process.

### **f) Freedom of Information**

The Committee noted that the Council's Freedom of Information policy had been refined and endorsed a revised Policy which had been published on the Council's Website.

**g) Staff Induction and Support**

The Deputy Town Clerk had reported that detailed work was currently being undertaken on updating and revising the Council's procedures to achieve a more corporate approach to staff development and support. This had to date included reviews of the Councils recruitment/appointment and induction procedures. Specific changes to previous arrangements would include the introduction of:

- Exit interviews for staff leaving the Council's employment
- A recruitment pack for all advertised posts providing comprehensive information about both the Council and the post
- A greater emphasis on ensuring that new staff display the qualities that will add value to the Council's work in accordance with the Council's agreed 'Individual Performance Criteria'.

Further information regarding developments relating to induction training and support would be presented to the Committee in due course.

**h) Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)**

(DDA) A DDA checklist had been drawn up detailing relevant issues for all council sites and services following inspections by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and the Executive Manager of the Disability Resource Centre. There were no immediate actions which needed to be taken but issues arising from the checklist were being developed into a timetable and costed action plan which would be incorporated within the Council's five year financial plan.

**i) IT Security**

The Council's Information Security Policy required the introduction of a further policy for staff use of email, telephone and fax.

**RESOLVED:** that the policies set out at Appendix 'D' be adopted.

**188 ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION POLICY**

The Committee received a report of the Deputy Town Clerk which noted that the need to develop an environmental protection policy had been identified during the last corporate governance audit and had subsequently been confirmed by this Committee as a corporate priority.

Environmental Protection was a key objective of 'Sustainable Development' which was defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This 'safeguarding' of future interests could only be achieved through the careful management of today's resources. These resources/assets were referred to in environmental policy as environmental, social and economic capital. These forms of capital could be further described as follows:

**Environmental Capital** was "attributes of the environment...capable of providing services which people can use." These forms of capital included material resources, flows of energy

and other attributes that contributed something of value. Local examples of environmental capital included parks and open spaces.

**Social Capital** was “the formal and informal structures and mechanisms within society that produced a stream of benefits for individuals and communities.” Local examples of social capital included the democratic process itself as well as projects, services and community events and activities.

**Economic Capital** was “the infrastructure...and equipment...which is used to produce material goods.” Local examples of economic capital included roads, buildings, computers etc.

### **Current Position**

This Council was, as a Best Value Authority, required to comply with guidance on ‘Best Value and Performance Improvement’ issued by the Government. Guidance published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister stated that “sustainable development is fundamental to best value, and should be reflected in the local councils’ programme of reviews, the review process itself and improvement planning.”

This Council had since 1997 included ‘sustainable development’ as one of its key objectives and published it as such in its Annual Best Value Performance Plan. In its current Performance Plan the Council included ‘to seek the sustainable development of functions and services through managed incremental growth’ as the first principle of its 5 year financial plan. However, whilst reference was made to the term in various documents and plans there was no centrally collated evidence on how the principle was being applied.

A review of the Council’s activities over the past 10 year period had identified the following contributions to sustainable development:

- Supporting the use of traffic management measures to ensure public transport operates more efficiently and improving bus stop facilities and providing new bus shelters.
- Managing parks and open spaces in an environmentally responsible manner including the composting of green waste, reducing the use of chemicals in weed control and using organic products where cost effective.
- Making the town centre safer and more accessible for pedestrians and cyclists by the introduction of CCTV and the provision of public seats and cycle racks.
- Introducing substantial tree planting and landscaping into the town centre to ameliorate the impact of heavy traffic.
- Publishing literature on public walks including 6 guided walks into open countryside within easy reach of the town centre.
- Contributing towards new shared pedestrian and cycle routes in the central area and beyond.
- Purchasing Blows Downs with the aid of Heritage Lottery funding and maintaining this as a publicly accessible resource.
- Creating a naturalised wildlife garden within the ornamental Grove House Gardens.

- Introducing recycling schemes at The Place and Mayfield Centre.

Whilst these actions represented important contributions towards sustainable development they did suggest that its consideration had been limited to the management of only the most obvious forms of environmental capital. The Council was however either responsible for or its actions impacted on a much wider range of environmental, social and economic capital. Examples of which included the following:

## **Environmental Capital**

### **Dunstable Cemetery**

Whilst the primary purpose of Dunstable Cemetery was to provide facilities for burial it also represented an environmental asset of wider importance. Its 20 acre site includes green space, trees and shrubbery etc that provided conditions which sustained the lives of a range of animals, plants and micro-organisms. It was essential therefore that decisions relating to the maintenance and use of this area took into account its contribution to biodiversity.

### **Allotments**

Land was an "attribute of the environment". This Council had designated 18 acres of land within the town for use as allotments, providing local people with a resource that they could use to produce their own vegetables, fruit, herbs etc. The way in which individuals use this resource could impact on sustainable development. The Council could, however, play a very important role in ensuring the most sustainable use of this resource by placing conditions on its management. For example, not permitting the use of 'manure' as a fertilizer which can cause detriment to the environment, as it may produce ammonia gas.

## **Social Capital**

### **Grants to Voluntary Organisations**

The Council sought to support, through the provision of financial assistance, voluntary and community groups. Whilst the Council made this valuable contribution towards sustainable development by enhancing the Town's social capital it had never formally considered the impact of this action on other forms of capital. The Council could for example, in seeking to act more responsibly, set conditions on the use of its grants. If the grant for example were to be used for the purchase of a computer, the Council could stipulate that the equipment must be recycled in accordance with sustainability criteria.

### **Playschemes**

The Council organised an annual programme of activities for children. The Cheltenham Observatory in its Directory of Sustainable Rural Initiatives had produced a set of nine headline criteria for sustainability. Criterion no.9. 'Diverse and participatory cultures, traditions and activities are maintained and encouraged' could be proactively applied to the Town's playscheme to further enhance its 'capital' value by for example using it in part as a vehicle for promoting a programme of diverse cultural activity.

## **Economic Capital**

### **Council Buildings**

The Council had offices located at both Grove House and Priory House which were leased to commercial businesses and other agencies including the County Council and Citizens Advice Bureau. This accommodation would be classed as economic capital. The Council currently leased this property for maximum financial return with no conditions other than those relating to maintenance and running costs. Whilst the Council was making good use of this economic capital it could also contribute to the safeguarding of other forms of capital by for example stipulating that organisations leasing its property must comply with certain conditions relating to sustainable development.

## **Plant and Vehicles**

In addition to its own economic capital the Council employed contractors who utilised economic capital to provide services to the Council and other customers. An example of this would be grass-cutting contractors whose main resource after the social capital of staff was the economic capital of plant and vehicles. As above the key factor in determining contracts was financial. However “for some time it has been common for ...local authorities to require some measure of environmental performance as part of their procurement policies”.

## **The Future**

Members accepted that these examples represented a cross section of forms of capital which were either the responsibility of or can be influenced by the actions of the Council was agreed that whilst the Council had aspired to support sustainability more could be achieved. The Council would approach the issues in a more structured manner including addressing the following points:

What impacts do the organisation’s current activities have on the environment?

How can these impacts be monitored, controlled and reduced?

How can we measure the effectiveness of our actions?

It was proposed that the introduction of an environmental management system would provide the framework for responding to these questions.

## **Environmental Management System (EMS)**

The Deputy Town Clerk suggested a model for an environmental management system which would require the input of significant capital in the form of time, expertise and financial resources. A summary of key considerations in relation to each stage of an environmental management system were as follows:

### **Initial Review**

To ensure that the optimum benefit was gained from the process of environmental management the Council was need to begin with a period of training to enable its members, managers and staff to understand the principles of sustainable development and the potential impact of its own activities on the environment.

### **Policy Formulation**

The Council would then need to consider, agree and publish details of both its environmental policy and system of implementation. It was proposed that this and future stages of the system were facilitated and overseen by a working party of a similar membership to that of the Best Value Working Party.

### **Gather Information**

This stage would involve measuring the impact of this Council's activities including resources used, emissions and wastes produced etc. This might also include measuring the impact of the activities of the Council's suppliers, contractors and partners. This 'environmental auditing' could be carried out by the Council's own management team or external advisors.

### **Targets**

Following this audit the Council's working party would analyse the information obtained and consider priorities and timescales for improvement. It was proposed that this action plan would be published in the Council's Best Value Performance Plan with associated resource allocations detailed in the Council's 5 year financial plan.

### **Establish EMS**

It was suggested that implementation of the Environmental Management System would take place over the 5 year period of the Council's subsequent Financial Plan.

### **Monitor**

The review of progress in relation to the agreed targets would be incorporated within the Council's wider Best Value monitoring and review programme as detailed in its Performance Management Framework .

### **10 Year Action Plan**

It was believed that the introduction, implementation and review of an Environmental Management System would take in the region of 10 years as follows:

<u>Timescale</u>	<u>Proposed year/s</u>	<u>Actions</u>
Year 1	2006/2007	Design and deliver training programme for all members and staff. Set up E.M.S. Working Party.
Year 2	2007/2008	Complete initial review. Agree and publish policy and systems.
Year 3	2008/2009	Conduct environmental audit.
Year 4	2009/2010	Formulate 5 year action plan with associated budget proposals.
Years 5-9	2010-2015	Implement E.M.S. with agreed programme of monitoring and review.
Year 10	2016	Carry out full evaluation of E.M.S.

**RESOLVED:** i) that the concept of a 10 year Sustainability Strategy and Action Plan as set out in the report be adopted.

ii) that the Action Plan be incorporated into the Council's long-term corporate plans

iii) that an EMS Working Party be established with membership to be determined at the next Council meeting.

**189 REPRESENTATIVES ON OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS**

**RESOLVED:** i) that vacancies for Council representatives on the following organisations be filled as indicated:

Icknield Lower School	Councillor Littlechild
Willow Nursery School	County Councillor Howard
Dunstable Carnival Association	Councillor A Fairbairn

ii) that the vacancy for a representative on the Dunstable Older People's Welfare Association be referred to the full Council meeting.

**190 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

**RESOLVED:** that, in view of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted, the press and public be excluded from the remainder of the meeting.

**191 ANNUAL STAFF REVIEW**

**RESOLVED:** that the various proposals set out in the report of the Deputy Town Clerk for the awarding of additional increments, re-grading of posts and extending the hours of 2 part-time posts be adopted with effect from 1st June and 1st July 2006 respectively.

**192 APPEALS AND APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE**

**RESOLVED:** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Appeals and Appointments Committee held on 8th June 2006 be received (Appendix 'E').