

To: All Members of the County Council
All Chief Officers

From: COUNTY SECRETARY'S
DEPARTMENT
Ask for: Adrian Service
Ext: 25563

**RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
THURSDAY 19 JUNE 2003
MINUTES**

ATTENDANCE

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE

D Clayton, G M Cook, I H Laidlaw-Dickson (Chairman), P V Goggins
D B Lloyd, S Quilty, H M Saunders, R J Smith, W A Storey (Vice-Chairman).

EXECUTIVE MEMBERS

D Beatty (Resources), M H T Janes (Partnerships), A M R Searing (Efficiencies and IT).

Also in Attendance

N E Agar and R A Mays.

MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 20 March 2003 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

PUBLIC PETITIONS

None

QUESTION

Nigel Agar asked the Executive Member for Resources, **David Beatty**, the following question:

"Is the Executive Member for Resources confident that the environmental issues relating to Dunsley Bungalow have been adequately taken into account?"

Would the Executive Member for Resources be prepared to examine further the ecological assessment for Dunsley Bungalow provided by EPCAD given the following :

The Ecological assessment provided by EPCAD, although by no means totally inadequate or inaccurate, nevertheless reveals a number of flaws amounting to severe bias.

Paragraph 1.4.2 refers to the identification of areas of greater ecological potential which require further survey. It is not easy to see where that has in fact been done.

Paragraph 2.1.6 lists sufficient species present which would appear to justify designation of the site as a County Wildlife Site (CWS) which is at a variance with the final conclusion that it is not one. Or is no longer one.

Paragraph 2.1.6 The sentence beginning 'Curiously these (Scabious plants) were distributed very evenly ...' Adds nothing to the assessment except to imply that the Scabious was planted deliberately.

Paragraph 2.2.4 A hint of herbicide treatment. Has this been verified?

Paragraph 3.3.3 The suggestion in 2.1.6 is repeated.

Paragraph 3.1.1 It has been suggested that both Ox Eye Daisy and Birds Foot Trefoil are in fact both present.

Paragraph 3.1.4 The numbers of indicator species are not relevant. Their mere presence is enough, PPG9 refers to the presence of species being 'substantive' i.e positively identified and present rather than present in 'substantial' numbers. 3 plants of agrimony and 4 of scabious, plus 3 other indicators, are quite sufficient to count as indicating an area of wildlife interest.

Paragraph 3.1.5 The same point applies here, The Maps in Appendix 3 indicate that the species are widespread not that they are necessarily common. The maps, which cover the entire British Isles may appear to show that the species are widespread but as the unit of measurement is a 10 km square i.e 100 sq kilometres this may mean no more than they are present at a rate of one 100 sq kilometres. This hardly counts as abundance. The maps do not indicate that the species are either common or are unthreatened

Paragraph 3.1.6 It would have been more to the point to include a map of old established neutral grassland in Hertfordshire to enable the Committee to assess the relative importance of this example.

Paragraph 3.1.7 There is selective quotation from PPG 7 paras 14 to 16 refer to the importance of habitat areas as links, corridors or stepping stones.' This is ignored in the final conclusion. Paragraph 18 is not the sole advice that PPG 7 has to offer. Nor is it necessarily the over riding advice. It must be taken in conjunction with paras 14 –16.

In short the EA fails to establish that the site is not a CWS on the count of plant species present.

It takes no account whatsoever of animal species including invertebrates. It takes no account of the importance of old unimproved grassland in a Hertfordshire context. Finally it would appear to be a variance with specialist local knowledge accumulated by Hertfordshire's own specialist branch – the HBRC. The fact that the site was, and possibly still is occupied by an HBRC officer, perhaps does not make an independent assessment necessary as a second opinion but does not absolve the Council from the obligation to make decisions fully informed by both local knowledge and scientific method?"

Answer:

“Nigel Agar wishes to challenge the report of Epcad, a company of international repute in the field of ecology and in order to support on environmental grounds, Dunsley Bungalow and Orchard as a County Wildlife Site.

I have had Councillor Agar's assertions and criticisms about the assessment looked into by Epcad- it is their report and assessment which he has challenged. Having read

the report, I am completely satisfied on all the points made by him and hence remain certain that the decision to dispose of this asset was and still is, correct.”

Councillor Agar asked the following supplementary question

“Will the Executive Member answer the detailed ecological points contained in his above question ?”

Answer :

“ These points are covered in Epcad’s assessment and I am happy to hand a copy of Epcad’s assessment to Councillor Agar.”

PART I ('OPEN') BUSINESS

1 SCRUTINY UPDATE AND WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2003 / 04

[Officer contact: Adrian Service, Committee Administrator
Tel: 01992 555564]

1.1 It was noted that in 7 of the table on page 2 the last two words ‘disadvantaged people’ in the ITEM box should be deleted and the wording of the second sentence of the EFFECTS OF SCRUTINY box should read ‘ The Committee are due on 19 June 2003 to consider a report containing details of an effective member challenge process and the proposed efficiencies programme.’

1.2 Conclusions

1.3 It was agreed that Planning Obligations Topic Group be requested to consider procedures, timeliness, precision of wording and enforcement of Section 106 Agreements. The membership size to be determined by County Secretary in consultation with the Group Spokesmen.

1.4 That following the Planning Obligations Topic Group considering the new Guidance issued by H M Government, this issue be referred back to the Committee at the earliest opportunity.

1.5 That a further report on the Efficiencies Programme be submitted to the 22 January 2004 meeting.

Jan Kinsman
Adrian Service

Jan Kinsman

Ian Bailey
Adrian Service

2 BEST VALUE REVIEW MONITORING UPDATE

[Officer contact: Clare Kaye Tel: 01992 555300]

2.1 It was noted that in Table 1, the projected cost over 5 years for the BVR item Services to Schools – April 2002 was the entire budget rather than the projected cost, from which the savings would come from and the additional cost of £735,000 was an aggregate total of cashable and uncashable savings.

2.2 Conclusions:

2.2.1 The Committee noted the report and requested further reports provide more clarity on the extent to which projected savings are being achieved and reasons for shortfall.

Clare Kaye

2.2.2 The Committee requested that the E Government Minister be urged to consider the possibility of pushing for changes to legislation to enable local authorities to undertake statutory advertising by using the internet rather than having to advertise in local newspapers given the high cost of advertising.

James
Odling -Smee

2.2.3 That progress from the Simply Done Best Value Review should be reported to a future meeting and shown in future Best Value Monitoring Reports.

Ian Bailey /
Clare Kaye

3 **COUNTY COUNCIL REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGET MONITOR**

[Officer contact: Andrew Nightingale
Tel: 01992 555331]

3.1 The Finance Director advised that in addition to the overspend on the CSF budget in the order of £2.6 m identified in the monitor the overspend was increasing by another £1 m to £1.5 m. This was despite attempts by Children Schools and Families Department to manage the original pressures down. There was concern that the worsening position had been identified relatively late in the day. He stated that the overspend was on Out of County School placements, local transport, maternity cover and child care litigation. He advised that the matter would be reported to the Cabinet at its next meeting and what action was proposed to improve budget management and monitoring.

Comment was made that the matter had been reported to the CSF Scrutiny Committee meeting held on the previous day. However very little attention appeared to have been paid to the report.

The Executive Member for Resources and this Scrutiny Committee's members shared the view, that finance officers within service departments, such as Children Schools & Families Department, had dual roles to play in advising their department management and the corporate finance team of budget issues in order to avoid such unforeseen problems.

3. Conclusions:

3.1 The Committee noted the report detailing the projected revenue and capital outturn position at as at 28 February 2003.

3.2 Whilst recognising the unavoidable pressures on some parts of the Children Schools & Families budget, the Committee expressed deep concern about the overspend, in particular the long and unacceptable delay in this coming to light.

3.3 The Committee requested that the Chief Executive advise the Director of Children Schools & Families of the points raised by the Committee and the Executive Member for Resources at the meeting. It was noted that steps are already being taken to review expenditure reporting processes.

3.4 That the Children Schools & Families Scrutiny Committee be recommended to consider this issue in depth at its next meeting and that a report be submitted to the Resources Scrutiny Committee at its next meeting.

Charlie
Watson

Julia Harries /
Clare Kaye

4 ISSUES ARISING FROM THE CPA – IMPLEMENTING CHANGE AND BECOMING A LEARNING ORGANISATION

[Officer contact: Alan Warner / Judith Sharples
Tel: 01992 556650 / 01992 588318]

4.1 A draft programme for a Members 'Becoming a Learning Organisation' Workshop session were circulated at the meeting.

4.2 The Committee observed that in addition to the mechanisms in the paper the Council needs to systematically learn from valid complaints made by the public. The Committee supported the assertion that Hertfordshire County Council should learn by sharing working experiences within the organisation, both good and bad, in order to improve overall performance.

4.3 **Conclusions :**

The Committee agreed that a Member Workshop session to consider and focus on how the County Council could get better in performing its duties should be held immediately following the next meeting of the Committee.

Carole
Grimwood

5 EFFICIENCIES PROGRAMME

[Officer contact: Ian Bailey, Strategy and Consultancy
Tel: 01992 588382]

5.1 **Conclusion:**

The Committee noted a report on the Efficiencies Programme and requested a report outlining possible savings for 2004 / 05 to a future meeting to facilitate consideration alongside the budget proposals.

Ian Bailey

6 MONEY ADVICE UNIT – ANALYSIS OF POSSIBLE BENEFITS AND COSTS OF INCREASED WORK

[Officer contact: Gary Vaux, Head of Money Advice Unit
Tel: 01992 556370]

6.1 Conclusions:

6.2 The Committee welcomed this report.

6.3 The Committee recommend to the Executive Member for Partnerships to consider the suggestions for extending the work of the Money Advice Unit as detailed in the submitted report.

6.4 Additionally the Committee made the following recommendations: -

- That the Chief Executive explore further opportunities to work with District / Borough Councils to encourage benefit take up from housing benefit claimants.
- That the Executive Member for Partnerships use any available opportunities to lobby for simplification in the tax and benefits systems.

Gary Vaux

Gary Vaux

7 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

[Officer contact: Alison Adams Consultation Manager
Tel: 01992 555642]

The Committee considered a range of issues contained within the submitted report from which the following views were expressed: -

- a) The knowledge of County Councillors as representatives of their divisions, provided a good source of local views and concerns of their divisions.
- b) The MORI survey results show that there is some interest in viewing live web broadcasts of county council meetings. One in four (24%) say they are very or fairly likely to use this facility if it was available to them, although seven in ten (69%) say they are not very or not at all likely to use it.
- c) Email alerts be explored as a means of encouraging residents to participate in consultation exercises. This is part of the website development programme.
- d) The venue of meetings of scrutiny committees to an area where there is a topic of interest under discussion so that local people can find it easier to attend, may prove to be of some limited benefit.

- e) Publicity for survey results - members should have access to results of Citizens Panel surveys and other consultation exercises with all results being published on
HYPERLINK <http://www.hertsdirect.org> www.hertsdirect.org
- f) To develop as a learning organisation, feedback from our own service users and citizens should be considered to learn as much as possible.

7.1 Conclusions:

- 7.2 The Committee supported the need to improve public involvement in Council activities such as elections and meetings but there was no consensus view of how this could be achieved.
- 7.3 There was an in depth discussion about measures to increase the numbers of people voting.
- 7.4 Concerns were expressed about the security of electronic voting and there were strong arguments for and against postal voting.
- 7.5 Measures to increase voting which were supported included the extension of polling hours for local elections to mirror those for national elections and more pro active use of local media.
- 7.6 Direct public participation at meetings was discussed. There were differing views on public participation at Cabinet meetings. Developing the select committee / hearing process which had been successful at Environment, Adult Care Services and Health Scrutiny Committees was supported.
- 7.7 Further suggestions included that there should be a public debate on petitions presented to the Council or Scrutiny Committees and that web casting at Council meetings should be tested.

8. TRAFFIC LIGHT MONITOR

[Officer contact: Geoff Brown Change Consultant
Tel: 01992 555370]

Conclusion :

The Committee requested officers to review the 'rules' which define the traffic light colour on 'Promises' in order to remove quirks from the system.

Geoff Brown

9. ITEM REFERRED TO THE COUNTY COUNCIL

The Item on Public Involvement in the Democratic Process was referred to be reported to the County Council at its next meeting

Ron Coxall
Adrian Service

10. PROPOSED CHANGED DATES OF FUTURE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The Committee Chairman advised of the proposal to spread out the dates of Scrutiny Committee meetings in each committee cycle which if proceeded with would involve dates of meetings of the Community Services and the Resources Committees changing.

This proposal would involve the following changes to programmed Resources Scrutiny Committee meetings :

<u>Current date</u>	<u>Proposed revised date</u>
16 October 2003	no change
22 January 2004	no change
25 March 2004	22 April 2004
8 July 2004	1 July 2004

The Committee Chairman expressed his concerns where the proposed changes would lead to the Committee reporting to a later Council meeting than at present i.e the March / April 2004 meeting.

It was viewed that the 16 October 2003 meeting date should be retained in order to have a Workshop session in the afternoon. There was a need to look further at the possibilities for the March 2004 meeting.

The proposed revised date for July 2004 would be acceptable.

Ron Coxall

Ron Coxall

Ron Coxall

Andrew Laycock
County Secretary