

MEETING OF THE ENGAGEMENT POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP

FRIDAY, 18 NOVEMBER 2011 10.30 AM



GROUP MEMBERS PRESENT

Councillor Bob Adams (Chairman)
Councillor Ray Auger
Councillor Ibis Channell
Councillor Reginald Howard
Councillor Nick Robins
Councillor Rosemary H Woolley (Vice-Chairman)

OFFICERS

Head of Finance – Richard Wyles
Head of Legal & Democratic Services – Lucy Youles
Democratic Officer – Lucy Bonshor

Mr Chris Holtom – Chairman of Standards Committee

33. COMMENTS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

None in attendance.

34. MEMBERSHIP

Councillor Howard was substituting for Councillor Jock Kerr for this meeting only.

35. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Bisnauthsing.

36. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None declared.

37. ACTION NOTES FROM THE MEETING HELD ON 15TH SEPTEMBER 2011

The notes from the meeting held on 15th September were agreed as a correct record of the decisions taken.

38. UPDATES FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

Councillor Robins confirmed that he, together with Councillor Adams, had been on a tour of the Customer Service Centre (CSC) and had found it very interesting and wished to thank the Customer Services Manager, Hayley Kent Simpson, for arranging the tour. He highlighted various systems which were used by the CSC, some of which were not being utilised to their fullest capacity by officers such as the visitor badge system. The Head of Finance, Mr Wyles informed those present that an e-mail had been sent round the offices reminding employees of the visitor badge process. This item then led to the number of staff/councillors that were on the premises at any one time and whether the swipe cards used to enter the building could be used to check what employees, visitors, councillors were on the premises at any time. Mr Wyles replied that unfortunately the cards were not technologically sophisticated enough to gather the information. The Head of Legal & Democratic Services, Mrs Youles replied that sweeps of the offices were carried out by staff if the premises had to be vacated.

39. BOURNE COMMUNITY ACCESS POINT

The Head of Finance, Mr Wyles gave a presentation to the Group on the Bourne Community Access project. He briefly outlined the background to the project, what the project intended and what the key benefits to the community would be.

The issue had been talked about for a long period of time between the district and the county to incorporate the tiers of local government together in one building including the Bourne Town Council. The town hall did not have the appropriate space and it was decided that as the Corn Exchange was underutilized this would be a good location in the centre of town. At the meeting of the Cabinet on 5th November approval had been granted to go ahead with the project.

Mr Wyles then outlined the proposals for the building showing members a concept plan of the proposed layout with the ground floor being a community hub incorporating district and library services. There would be an improved customer experience with reliance on self-service and dedicated officer support and specialist advice. Officers would be based at Bourne which would create a council presence in the south of the district. It was a different approach to the traditional model. The capital expenditure and revenue funding was currently being established with the county council.

Benefits of the project would be to give customers the ability to access a wide range of council services from a single point of access, to make better use of the buildings and resources without compromising service quality. Provide an improved customer environment and opening times, the office would be open six days a week and would create a central location in the town, especially for the library service which was currently located in a less convenient area of the town. The area was fluid in design and other partners such as the police and the CAB had expressed an interest in using the office on certain days. The function room would be the only room for hire in the building and it was felt that 60% of the bookings that had been received for the upstairs room which would no longer be available could be accommodated in the function room.

An area upstairs had been allocated to the Bourne Town Council, although this space was more likely to be used in the evening rather than during the day. Mr Wyles then spoke about work stations and how staff would operate in the office.

The projects next steps were to agree a funding model with the key partners, communicate changes to stakeholders and ensure a smooth transfer. The council was committed to keep the building open during the work which would hopefully be completed by December 2012.

Mr Wyles then responded to questions asked about parking outside the building, opening times, use of the function room, security and ownership of the town hall.

The Chairman thanked Mr Wyles for his presentation and asked that the group was kept informed of the projects progress.

40. STANDARDS AND THE LOCALISM BILL

The Chairman welcomed Mr Chris Holtom to the meeting who was the current Standards Committee Chairman. Mr Holtom presented his report which followed from a meeting of a working group of the Standards Committee which had considered the implications of the Localism Bill on the Standards regime. The report presented recommendations from the Working Group to the Engagement PDG. Since the report had been written the Bill had received Royal Assent on 15th November 2011 and could become law in April 2012.

Mr Holtom summarised the main points of the report which included the following points.

- Retention of a Standards Committee
- A code of conduct
- The Councils requirement to put in place a system to deal with allegations of breaches of that code.
- The code of conduct must contain provisions relating to, Members failure

- to register and/or disclose interests could be a criminal offence.
- The authority must appoint an independent person through a transparent process and ask that person's view before reaching a conclusion about any allegation relating to the code of conduct. Co-opted members already in place would not be eligible to stand.

Mr Holtom indicated that it was essential that any code adopted by the District Council should be adopted at Parish level. If Parishes choose to adopt their own code, then the District would be unable to offer support. It was therefore important that the Parishes were made aware of the implications should they adopt their own code. The current process used was effective but it was not efficient or proportionate. There would not be any mandatory sanctions available to the Council under the new scheme but by having a formal process which had a balanced judgement at the end would be enough.

The Chairman thanked Mr Holtom for his report and indicated the unreasonable provision of the new Act which stopped Mr Holtom from continuing his role as Standards Chairman. He asked that the MP for the area be contacted to see if this course of action was that intended by the Act considering the experience that would be lost.

► **Action Note**

That a letter be sent to the MP Nick Boles to see if this course of action (that the current independent co-opted members had to be replaced) was that intended by the Act considering the experience that would be lost.

Mr Holtom said it was important that the District Council communicates with the Parishes about the code and the role that the Standard Committee plays. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services confirmed the work of the Standards Committee would continue to produce a draft code for adoption and put forward arrangements for the consideration of complaints relating to a code of conduct.

► **Action Note**

That the Standard Committee continues to work on compiling a draft Code of Conduct and considering arrangements for the consideration of complaints

41. LOCALISM ACT UPDATE

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services gave an overview to Members of the Localism Bill which had received Royal Assent on 15th November 2011 by way of powerpoint presentation. The Act contained 241 clauses in 8 parts. Different parts of the Act would come into force at different times with the majority of measures expected to be in force by April 2012. The Regulations to be made by the Secretary of State and which would provide the detail to the

Act had yet to be drafted. The Act was wide ranging with the key measures being:

- Freedoms and Flexibility
- Community Rights
- Neighbourhood Planning
- Housing
- Empowering Local Areas

General topics covered by the Act which would be matters for the Engagement PDG to consider included:

- General Power of Competence
- Standards
- Offences
- Predetermination

The act had repealed the duty relating to the promotion of democracy and provisions relating to petitions and schemes to encourage domestic waste reduction by payment and charges.

The Act also included pay accountability, Governance of Local Authorities, increase local control of public finance, new rights and powers for communities, planning and neighbourhoods and housing. . Once more detail was known a meeting between all the PDG Chairman and Vice-Chairman would be arranged to see what the implications of the Bill meant for each PDG.

Comments were made by Councillors on various topics including Standards, referendums, community assets and the repeals. It was felt that due to the enormity of the Act training and the involvement of town and parish councils would be an issue. The Head of Legal and Democratic services confirmed the District Council had a duty to assist the parish and town councils and that it would be the local authority's responsibility to ensure Parishes were communicated with. She would report back again to the Group once more information was known

42. REVIEW OF DATA PROTECTION POLICY

The Head of Legal & Democratic Services referred to the Data Protection Policy which had been circulated to Members. The policy had been reviewed and no substantial change had been made to the document. The policy was circulated to raise awareness. The issue of Data Protection was included in core Member training on staying within the law. It was important for Members to understand the implications of the policy. A review of the content of the policy was given. Any breach of the Data Protection Act had serious implications for the Council. Awareness of the policy by both members and officers was essential.

43. ANY OTHER BUSINESS, WHICH THE CHAIRMAN, BY REASONS OF SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES, DECIDES IS URGENT

The Chairman asked that the presentation recently given to Members by the Conservation Officer and English Heritage be circulated to all Members as he had found it very informative.

► Action Note

That if possible the presentation by the Conservation Officer and English Heritage be circulated to all Members for information.

44. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 12.40pm.