

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Commission for Rural Communities held at the Forli Room, Town Hall on 11 January 2011

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Councillors D Over (Chairman), G Nawaz (Vice-Chairman), R Dobbs, D Harrington, D Sanders and N Sandford

OFFICERS PRESENT:

Mike Heath	Commercial Services Director
James Cooper	Open Spaces Management Officer
Alana Diffey	Governance Officer
Maxine Grimes	Partnership Officer
Jenny Harris	Lawyer - Property
Graeme Law	Strategic Planning Advisor
Leonie McCarthy	Neighbourhood Manager - Citywide
Anne Senior	Economic Participation Programme Manager

Also in attendance:

John Wratten	Manager, Kickstart Norfolk
Sally Jackson	Peakirk Parish Council

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Shaheed. Councillor Sandford was acting as nominated substitute.

2. Declaration of Interest

Councillor Sandford declared a personal interest in agenda item 9, Tree and Woodland Strategy, on the basis of his employment with the Woodland Trust.

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 2 November 2010 were approved as a true and accurate record.

4. Responses to Recommendations Made by the Commission

The report provided an update on the response to the recommendation made by the Commission at its meeting held on 2 November 2010 with regard to the introduction of 20mph speed limits around rural schools.

The Cabinet Member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Planning had considered the recommendation and agreed to support the introduction of the speed limits. The Commission was delighted with this outcome and thanked the Cabinet Member for his support. It was hoped that future speed surveys around rural schools following the implementation of the speed limit would demonstrate that the action taken by the Commission had been worthwhile.

5. British Transport Police

PC Christopher Thompson-Chambers of the British Transport Police was unable to attend the meeting to discuss level crossing and rail line issues in rural Peterborough due to unforeseen circumstances.

ACTION AGREED

It was agreed that PC Thompson-Chambers be invited to the meeting of the Commission that was scheduled to take place on Tuesday, 8 March 2011.

6. Peterborough Moped Initiative

The Commission received a presentation from Mr John Wratten, Manager of Kickstart Norfolk, who explained that Kickstart was a charitable social enterprise which sought to assist people in gaining transport to work through a moped borrowing scheme. During his presentation, Mr Wratten made the following points:

- The scheme was a simple one which was open to anyone aged between 16-65 years old with little or no access to public transport and with no private transport of their own. The mopeds would enable people to gain or retain their employment.
- The scheme had commenced in rural Norfolk, with similar schemes being rolled out in Peterborough and expanding into Cambridgeshire and Suffolk.
- Users of the scheme were generally 18 – 25 year olds in rural areas who wanted to work. Users received training, safety equipment and assistance in remaining mobile whilst contributing to the cost of the moped. Users became owners of the moped at the end of 4 months and the scheme had a good safety record.
- The scheme is becoming popular in Peterborough.

The Partnership Officer explained that the scheme was about breaking the barrier for individuals wanting to work and was open to people living and / or working within the Peterborough boundary. Officers were hoping that the Commission would champion the scheme, which was already up and running and simply needed further promotion.

Mr Wratten commented that the mopeds had a maximum speed of 30mph which made them self limiting to journeys of about 15-16 miles and trustees of the scheme were reluctant to increase the speed of the mopeds though faster mopeds were available. The mopeds provided cheap and economical travel and the scheme provided a full back up service.

Councillor Harrington sought clarification as to what would happen should a person leave employment during the loan period. The Partnership Officer explained that if the person was still seeking employment or simply between periods of employment, they would be able to retain the moped under the scheme. If they were re-entering unemployment, the moped would be reclaimed by the scheme and any funds already paid toward the moped would be refunded. The scheme was designed to be as fair as possible to service users.

In response to questions raised by Councillor Sanders, Mr Wratten advised that the cost of each moped was £1,200 all in. The current scheme saw repayments made by users which left a shortfall of £400 per moped. This shortfall was currently funded by East of England Development Agency grant. As the scheme was introductory, it was designed to lose money in its first year and then break even in the future.

Councillor Sanders responded that this approach was disappointing given the current financial climate and he did not consider this the best use of tax payer money, otherwise he would be keen to support the scheme. He also felt that this scheme was unfair to those individuals who worked hard to save for their own bikes but were not eligible for the moped

scheme. Mr Wratten explained that the scheme was designed to help those who were unemployed and unable to obtain finance to secure a vehicle to assist them in finding or maintaining their employment.

Councillor Sanders stated that he could not see the need for the scheme to be subsidised in the first year, though the scheme itself was highly commendable as not everyone could afford or had access to transport. Mr Wratten said that the scheme needed to reach a critical mass to break even, but was operating without public funds in Norfolk now that it was established. The scheme assisted 500 people on the road in the last year.

ACTION AGREED

It was agreed not to take up the opportunity to champion the Peterborough Moped Initiative.

7. Effective Delivery of Rural Infrastructure - the Implications of the 'New Localism'

The Commission received a presentation from the Neighbourhood Manager – Citywide on the possible impact of the government's new localism bill on identifying, prioritising and funding rural infrastructure. During her presentation, the Neighbourhood Manager – Citywide explained that:

- Methods of engaging with and obtaining the views and support of rural communities needed to be improved and the perceptions that consultations were Peterborough City Council led and one sided needed to be changed.
- There needed to be an integrated approach to planning policy to ensure that the views and needs of rural communities were taken into account and that these held weight in the planning process.
- Changes would reduce the emphasis on targets and performance indicators and would empower communities to make it possible for them to buy up community assets, deliver their own services and shape their own areas. More funding would be made available for local communities through money coming through from development.

The Strategic Planning Advisor explained that:

- Peterborough City Council would need to work with rural communities to determine their priorities and ensure their sustainability into the future when taking into consideration changes in rural population, changes to the climate, improvements in technology, rural employment and travel.
- New technology could be embraced, for example via the government's new scheme to create digital hubs in all rural communities.
- Ageing communities needed to be taken into consideration, for example how housing could be adapted to have older people living for longer in their communities, perhaps through changing planning policy to make it easier for people build annexes to their homes.
- The village hall could become more of a centre for the community, for example by adding solar panels to generate energy and income for the community, and become the digital hub.

The Neighbourhood Manager – Citywide explained that this had been brought to the Commission to ascertain whether Members agreed with the views and approach suggested by officers in tackling these challenges going forward. The Neighbourhood Manager – Citywide suggested that this supporting role could be absorbed within the Rural North Neighbourhood Council following the review of Neighbourhood Councils.

Councillor Sanders commented that he felt the presentation focussed on buzz words and jargon, and that a lot would need to happen to improve communication between rural

communities and the Council before rural communities actually felt that they were heard and responded to. Some rural communities have attempted to take part in consultations, have expressed their views and been ignored. A lot would need to happen to show that S106 money was actually going to be distributed fairly. Parish Councils should be the decision makers and spokespeople for their local communities and Councillor Sanders was very disappointed with the proposal.

Councillor Harrington suggested that officers assist communities with being more proactive in attracting external funding to deliver the outcomes that local communities wanted for their local areas. It was best to keep Neighbourhood Councils out of this process. More help was needed for local communities to access all the funding that was available – the will was there to do the work, but there was no facilitation from the Council. Many communities say what they want but are then told that it can't be funded, and some things should be easier to deliver, for example a new footpath.

Councillor Sandford agreed that there was a perception that Peterborough City Council consults but does not take action on the comments received. It was important to focus on the outcome of what this localism and decentralisation process was trying to achieve rather than getting bogged down in the mechanics. The frustration is that Peterborough City Council talks a lot about giving power to parish councils and neighbourhood councils, but has not yet done anything meaningful. It was hoped that following the review of Neighbourhood Councils this would change.

Councillor Sanders commented that there were already too many meetings focusing on the needs of rural areas, and instead of arranging even more, Parish Council chairmen should be invited to the meetings of the Scrutiny Commission to join in the debate. The Scrutiny Commission should be taking the lead from parishes, and their involvement was needed to assist good decision making.

Councillor Harrington stated that the main ingredient missed in all these processes was the public as there just hasn't been the engagement. Neighbourhood Councils tried to engage but were not successful.

ACTION AGREED

It was agreed that officers continue to develop these plans and to report to a future meeting of the Rural Commission.

8. Play Facilities, Playing Fields and Open Space

The Commission considered a report which provided Members with an information update about the play area improvement programme, plus information about play improvement and refurbishment works which had been completed since the last report to the Commission in March 2009. The report also informed Members about projects which were scheduled to be completed by April 2011, about playing field provision within the Council's green spaces and recommendations for the future, and information relating to the design, development, maintenance and management of Peterborough City Council (PCC) green space, including developers S106 obligations.

In presenting the report, the Commercial Services Director advised that:

- PCC had many play facilities however they were old and no longer fit for purpose. Designing a good play area was difficult as to be attractive they needed to have an element of danger and challenge. The focus was to have better quality play facilities, but fewer of them around the city.
- PCC had been successful in obtaining funding from various avenues, though the Playbuilder scheme offered no further funds at present.

- PCC recognised that not every village wanted a play area and that sometimes they could cause their own problems, for example bringing more people to the village to use them.

Councillor Sanders expressed thanks to the Head of Operations for his work with the Open Space Group which assisted Eye in securing £1 million, however Councillor Sanders was disappointed that the open space provision for Thorney Road in Eye at the new Larkfleet development was withdrawn.

Councillor Sandford commented that it was often assumed that people living in rural areas had access to green open space, which was often not the case as much of the land was privately owned.

ACTION AGREED

It was agreed that the report be brought back for an update on progress in 9 – 12 months and that a strategy specifically addressing open space requirements in rural areas be developed.

9. Tree and Woodland Strategy

The Commission received a report which provided a strategy for directing the care of Peterborough's trees and woodlands. The strategy updated the 1998 Tree and Woodland strategy and accommodated the changes that have taken place over the last twelve years, including the influences of the Biodiversity Strategy.

The Chairman invited Sally Jackson to address the Commission on the item. In addressing the Commission, Ms Jackson made the following comments:

- The Landscape Character Assessment scheme which was overseen by National England should be taken into consideration when looking at the future of Peterborough's trees and woodlands.
- It was felt that Peterborough City Council has not engaged with the community to obtain their views on what was important in terms of historic tree belts and hedges. This Landscape Character Assessment was considered to be more important than a village design statement or community action plan and ought to be taken to planners and taken into consideration.
- This work had not been done anywhere else at parish level. An electronic document to plot areas within the character assessment needed to tie into other Council planning systems. The Parish Council was willing to take on the work to support this. Local people wanted to know about how to manage Victorian trees and to be in control of the process.

Councillor Sanders commented that he was happy to support the sentiments of the Parish Council and that Peterborough City Council should take the views of Parish Councils on board.

Councillor Sandford welcomed the comments made by Ms Jackson and felt that the Landscape Character Assessment reference should be included in the Tree and Woodland Strategy and that the Council should make use of information to protect the woodland Peterborough already had and to identify areas for woodland development and landscape enhancement.

The Open Spaces Management Officer advised that the strategy was sensitive to what was already established in villages in rural areas, specifically through Priority VR 1.3 which sought to "to replant using suitable native trees except where this would result in loss of familiar vernacular".

The Commercial Services Director advised that this item underwent long debate when considered by the Environment Capital Scrutiny Committee. The task and finish group established to review this had raised some concerns around at least 8 changes having been made to the document to include certain comments. The changes had a significant impact for rural, Council owned trees however it was acknowledged that most trees in rural areas were in private ownership. The strategy was designed to give the Council a generic framework for dealing with trees generally.

The Open Spaces Management Officer commented that the strategy reflected the Council's work to be more proactive in managing the Council's trees and woodland, through developing management programmes for more mature trees to manage decline and the suitable replacement of the trees where necessary.

Councillor Sandford commented that this strategy was originally drafted by a group of Councillors in 2006 and the strategy presented in 2010 had significant changes made to it. Councillor Sandford would prefer for the Council to go back to the original draft, however it was acknowledged that a number of removed items had been restored. The fundamental problem was that the 2006 strategy referred to the expected number of trees required to enhance woodland cover and this had been removed. The government was commencing a national tree planting campaign and this should contribute to the increase in Peterborough's woodland. On the whole the strategy was okay but said nothing significant about increasing the tree population or the amount of woodland.

The Open Spaces Management Officer advised that external funding was being sought to support the growth of the tree population and woodland areas and it would be possible to include a reference to this in the strategy. The strategy was focussed on looking after the trees and woodland that the Council already have, and to nurture this to maturity.

The Chairman thanked Ms Jackson for her attendance and contribution.

ACTION AGREED

It was agreed that the measures to increase the tree and woodland population be included in the Tree and Woodland Strategy.

10. Forward Plan of Key Decisions - 1 January 2011 - 30 April 2011

The latest version of the Forward Plan, showing details of the key decisions that the Leader of the Council believed the Cabinet or individual Cabinet Members would be making over the next four months, was received.

No items on the forward plan were identified as areas for scrutiny, however it was noted that the Local Transport Plan would be considered in the future by a Joint Scrutiny meeting.

11. Work Programme

The Commission reviewed and confirmed its work programme for the remainder of the municipal year.

12. Date of the next Meeting

The Chairman advised that the next meeting of the Scrutiny Commission for Rural Communities was scheduled to take place on Tuesday, 8 March 2011 commencing at 7.00pm

CHAIRMAN
7.00pm - 8.58 pm