Localism Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Localism Committee of South Norfolk Council held at South Norfolk House, Long Stratton on Monday 15 October 2012 at 2.00 pm.

Committee Members Present: Councillors M Wilby (Chairman), P Allen, B Spratt

Apologies: Councillors D Bills, M Edney, J Overyton, B Riches

Substitutes: Councillors Y Bendle (for M Edney), C Kemp (for D Bills), L Neal (for J Overyton), G Walden (for B Riches)

Officers in Attendance: The Chief Executive, the Senior Executive Assistant, the Head of Localism and Growth and the Scrutiny Officer

Also in attendance: J Pennell (Community Representative - Tas Valley Neighbourhood Board)

4 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following member declared an ‘other’ interest in the matter listed below.

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<th>Minute No.</th>
<th>Councillor</th>
<th>Reason for Declaration</th>
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<td>6</td>
<td>P Allen</td>
<td>Chair on SNYA Executive Board</td>
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5 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Localism Committee held on 24 July 2012 were agreed as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Arising from minute number 2 Cllr B Spratt queried the latest position regarding the apprenticeship scheme at Hethel Engineering Centre. The Chairman confirmed that he would contact Cllr D Bills for an update.

6 REVIEW OF NEIGHBOURHOOD BOARDS SCRUTINY TASK & FINISH GROUP

The Chairman introduced the item confirming that the report (including recommendations) had previously been considered by the Scrutiny Committee on 2 October 2012. The Scrutiny Committee resolved to recommend to Cabinet a number of recommendations, and these would be considered by Cabinet on 29 October 2012.
The Chairman commended the work of the Task and Finish Group for the thorough examination and review that had been undertaken. He suggested that members may wish to discuss the recommendations made by the Scrutiny Committee.

Cllr P Allen expressed concern that a number of members of the Committee were absent. The Chairman advised members that those unable to attend had good reasons for their absence, and that substitutes had been selected from the absent members’ Neighbourhood Board, in accordance with the Council’s Constitution.

Cllr Allen went on to advise the Committee that she had been a member of the Task and Finish Group and, as part of the review process, she had attended seven of the ten Neighbourhood Board meetings. She pointed out that the Task and Finish Group had been concerned at the lack of consistency across the Boards, explaining that it was acknowledged that each Board would have different ways of working, but that certain procedures should be recognised across all Boards. One example given by Cllr Allen was the method used by the Boards to co-opt community representatives. In view of the important decisions being made by the Boards, particularly in respect of funding, Cllr Allen’s view was that a uniform and transparent method of recruiting community representatives should be encouraged.

Members explored this issue further, and considered various options, including the method currently used by the Eastern River Valleys Neighbourhood Board whereby District members of the Board put forward the names of potential community representatives, providing some written detail about the potential representative to members. An informal vote would then take place. Another suggestion was a pro-forma to be completed by prospective representatives seeking nomination. It was emphasised that all members of the Boards (both district/county councillors and community representatives) represented the whole of the neighbourhood area, and not just any particular part of it.

Members went on to consider the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee. With regard to 6.1 c) the Chairman suggested that this approach was unworkable. He advised the Committee that his concerns about this specific recommendation were shared by a number of the Chairmen of the Neighbourhood Boards. Cllr L Neal concurred with this view, advising members that the Chairman of the Eastern River Valleys Neighbourhood Board was happy with the current arrangements for membership. Cllr Neal advised the Committee that all ward members were already encouraged to attend the Boards, and ‘have their say’. She felt that making all ward members full voting members of the Boards would make them ‘top-heavy’ and the general public may view the Boards as being ‘driven’ by the Council. Cllr Y Bendle was of the same opinion, raising a further concern that increasing membership to include all ward members could damage the relationship with community representatives.

Cllr C Kemp drew members’ attention to the recommendation at 6.1 i) suggesting that quorum should not be increased to five, advising that it was in fact standard practice at most Council meetings for the quorum to be three members. Members were in agreement that at least one member present should be a community representative.

With regard to recommendation 6.1 i) Cllr Kemp suggested that this should be reworded as the role of shadow portfolio holder was not defined in the Council’s Constitution. He suggested that it may be preferable to recommend that the Leader of the Council and the Leader of the Opposition nominate persons to these ex officio posts.

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Cllr Kemp stressed the importance of training for the community representatives on the Boards in order that they were made aware of the Council’s expectations in respect of principles and standards. Cllr Walden concurred with this view, confirming that the use of community representatives gave a responsibility to the Council to ensure that those co-opted were well informed and knew what would be expected of them. Cllr Allen was of the view that training was necessary for all members of the Board. Cllr B Spratt expressed concern that the requirement to attend training could deter the very people the Council was hoping would become community representatives, such as young people and young mothers.

Members considered recommendation 6.2 a), discussing in particular the name and format of the proposed non-public meetings. There was some concern about referring to such meetings as pre-meetings, whilst a number of members were also concerned at the perceived lack of transparency by holding non-public meetings. The Senior Executive Assistant suggested that the Boards might like to consider a more flexible approach to the meetings in a similar way to the Policy Committees where meetings can be designated in advance as either formal or informal.

In summary, the Chairman confirmed that there appeared to be a consensus amongst the Committee regarding the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee and it was

RESOLVED: To Recommend to Cabinet that the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee be agreed, subject to the following changes:

(a) Recommendation 6.1 (c)
This recommendation be rejected and that membership of the Neighbourhood Boards would remain unchanged. Boards would continue to be made up of five District Councillors, one County Councillor, and 6 community representatives

(b) Recommendation 6.1 (e)
The number of community representatives to remain at six, but representation should cover a broad range of age, experience, expertise and relevant agencies. An expression of interest questionnaire would be introduced and utilised by each Neighbourhood Board as part of the nomination process for community representatives.

(c) Recommendation 6.1 (i)
Quorum be reduced to three Board members (two district councillors and one community representative)

(d) Recommendation 6.1 (j)
A proportionate level of training and development would be provided to Chairmen and all Board members, for example, presentation skills and chairing skills. Consideration would be given to mentoring. There would be an expectation that appropriate standards training would be provided for community representatives.

(e) Recommendation 6.1 (l)
The Leader of the Council would nominate one member from the Cabinet and the Leader of the Opposition would nominate one member from the Shadow Cabinet to be given observer status at all Board meetings excluding the Board on which they were a member.
(f) Recommendation 6.2 (a)  
The number of formal meetings would be three per year. Non-public meetings would be arranged as necessary and would be known as informal meetings. Consideration would be given to a joint meeting of all Boards once or twice a year, under the auspices of the South Norfolk Alliance.

(g) Recommendation 6.2 (b)  
A programme of formal meetings would be fixed for a year in advance. Informal meetings would take place on an ad hoc basis.

7 FUTURE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

The Head of Localism and Growth sought members’ views on the shaping of Council policy with regard to the future of neighbourhood working and the provision of the localism agenda to local communities. Members were asked to consider the future of the ‘Your Neighbourhood, Your Choice’ initiative and the participatory budgeting scheme, particularly with regard to community engagement.

During discussion, members generally felt that with regard to the participatory budgeting pilot scheme ‘Your Neighbourhood, Your Choice’, there were two issues of concern. Firstly, that the proposals were not specific enough, so members of the public were not clear on what specific services they were voting for. Secondly, members were concerned with the voting system and considered it to be too simplistic.

Members suggested that more work should be done with community groups in future to increase the level of understanding and education about the process.

Members discussed the allocation of monies by Neighbourhood Boards, with Cllr P Allen concerned that applications meeting the criteria for funding through the Neighbourhood Boards were being diverted instead to the Grants Panel when the Boards’ funds had been depleted. The Chairman informed members that the Council was in the process of recruiting a Funding Manager to the Localism and Growth Team and that issues such as these would be considered by the new post-holder. A full review of the Council’s funding arrangements, including the Grants Panel, would be undertaken by the Funding Manager.

Responding to members’ questions, the Chief Executive reminded members that monies were allocated by the Boards in accordance with set criteria which were used to analyse (amongst other issues) local need and requirements.

The Committee discussed various methods of engaging with communities, particularly with regard to young people and parish councils. Mr J Pennell suggested the possibility of arranging an event at South Norfolk House to inform, educate and engage with parish councils. Cllr P Allen advised members that young people were not likely to want to attend Neighbourhood Boards and it would be more appropriate for officers to seek young people’s views at another, more age-appropriate forum, and feed these back to the Boards.

A general discussion took place regarding volunteers with examples of successful local schemes such as the handyman scheme, first responders and footpath wardens. Members were advised that a number of local volunteers had been trained on the use of the SAM machine. Members also discussed the issues around the installation and use of defibrillator equipment, particularly with regard to insurance. Mr Pennell reminded members that the Norfolk Association of Local Councils would give free legal advice to town and parish councils.
The Chairman thanked the Committee for the constructive feedback and suggestions.

RESOLVED: To Recommend to Cabinet:

(a) That authority be given to the Neighbourhood Boards to commence a further Participatory Budgeting exercise, actively involving existing community groups.

(b) That a review of the Grants Panel be undertaken with the assistance of the Funding Manager (once in post) with a Task and Finish Group of members. The review to include the possibility of Neighbourhood Boards having responsibility for local funding applications, and to a specific allocation being made from each Board for that purpose.

(c) That a Parish and Town Council Conference be arranged by the Neighbourhood Boards to improve the involvement of local councils in the process.

8 WORK PROGRAMME

Members noted the work programme.

The meeting closed at 4.00 pm

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Chairman