

**MINUTES OF THE FINANCE, POLICY & ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE
HELD ON MONDAY 29 SEPTEMBER 2008 AT 7.30 PM IN THE ROBIN
ROOM, THE CASTLE, HERTFORD**

PRESENT: Councillor Miss C J Geall, in the Chair

and Councillors J F Cook, J C Hedley, P A Ruffles, Dr L E Radford
Mrs B M Wrangles

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor Mrs H P Durbin
Ms N L Villa, Town Clerk
Mr S Davies, Finance and Administration Manager
Miss M C Challis, Assistant to the Town Clerk

120. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies of absence were received from Councillors S J Bright, Miss K P Darby, Mrs S M Newton and Miss J C S Sartin.

121. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors Miss C J Geall, Mrs B M Wrangles and P A Ruffles declared a personal interest in Item 11 as they were members of Hertford Civic Society.

Councillor P A Ruffles declared a prejudicial interest in Item 12 as a Trustee of Hertford Museum. Councillor Miss C J Geall declared a personal interest in the same item.

122. THE MINUTES

It was **RESOLVED** that:

The Minutes of the Finance, Policy & Administration Committee held on Monday 30 June 2008 be approved as a correct record and the Chairman authorised to sign the same.

123. ACTION SHEET

It was **RESOLVED** that:

The action sheet be received and noted.

There were no Matters Arising:

124. QUESTIONS AND/OR STATEMENTS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

Mr Andrew Sangster of Hertford Civic Society read the following statement in support of the Town Plan:

‘Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee.

My purpose is to confirm the full support of the Civic Society to the proposal to prepare a Town Plan. We think that this is a good opportunity to identify how the residents of Hertford would like the town to look in the future and how it will feel to live in it. It will also add flesh to the bones of the District Council’s Local Plan and will pull together in one document the involvement of the various statutory bodies. An agreed Plan would help the Council and others in considering development proposals.

We would be particularly pleased if you vote tonight to proceed with the preparation of the Plan, because the Society tried to initiate a similar exercise some ten years ago, but regrettably the Town Centre Management Board and the then Town Council lacked the will to implement our proposal.

There are many organisations in the town that would be interested in participating in the Plan’s preparation and have significant experience and expertise to offer. Certainly the Society has views on the provision of facilities for walking and cycling, on public transport, retail outlets, the visual aspects of buildings and streets, and the maintenance and enhancement of the open spaces both within and around the town.

We note the second stage of public consultation. Firstly, we would hope that interested parties can make input to any draft document before it is published for public consultation. Otherwise they will be involved in trying to change what has been written – too often a difficult task with unsatisfactory outcomes. Better to get some agreements in principle before writing a first draft.

Secondly, no doubt it will be a requirement to demonstrate involvement and consultation of the public, but we would urge a cautious approach in order to avoid raising expectations beyond what is likely to be possible to achieve. In our view groups of people with common interests are more likely to have considered opinions and ideas, and to be aware of the limitations and constraints to be taken into account in preparing the content of the Plan. That is not to say that there will not be some good ideas and suggestions from individuals that will at least merit consideration.

The Civic Society urges the Council to adopt the resolution to go ahead with preparation of a Town Plan’.

Mr Reg Harman introduced himself as having a background in Town Planning and a special interest in transport issues, especially walking within the town and read the following statement in support of the Town Plan:

'The Town Council's proposal Finance, Policy & Administration Committee, 29 September 2008) to produce a Town Plan for Hertford is very welcome. Only the Town Council is in a position to set out a review and strategy for Hertford that reflects the town's needs and opportunities on a cohesive and integrated basis. This should act as a basis for the Town Council to set priorities for other stakeholders – larger public bodies and also commercial interests – to take stock of. It gives the Town Council a stronger basis for making the most of opportunities offered to achieve its objectives.

The proposed list of topics fails to include Transport. How people get around in the town, and how goods are moved and delivered, is an essential component of the town's existence. Gathering information on transport and considering options should at form a distinct workstream, as for the other key topics; but like them it should also be treated on an integrated basis with other topics in considering the quality of life in the town.

Walking is a major form of transport at local level. But it is widely ignored in local transport and planning policy and especially in practical measures. This is very regrettable, as Hertford is a small town where walking should form a preferred means of getting about. In fact it probably accounts for a good proportion of travel within the town anyway: about two-fifths of all trips to the town centre, a higher proportion of travel to junior schools, and one quarter of commuting trips.

Increasing the levels of walking in Hertford can prove important for a number of reasons:

- People get to know the town and to meet other people casually more, so this strengthens community links and involves more people in the town's development and activities.
- There is more incentive to use local shops and businesses, so strengthening the local economy.
- More people on foot means that there is more casual observation locally and thus better security against misbehaviour and minor crime.
- To the extent that people use their feet instead of a car, the pollution and disturbance and pollution from traffic are reduced, especially in Hertford's many smaller or narrower streets. It also reduces the pressures for car parking.
- Walking increases physical fitness and wellbeing, reducing the pressure on the town's medical services and enabling them to function more effectively.
- Changes in the world's climate and economy may well make it better to enable a more localised focus for society and the economy than the dispersed living patterns currently found in the UK, and providing for

walking as a priority could help to enable this, benefitting Hertford's population generally.

A particular feature of walking is that it is a dominant means of travel for the weaker and more disadvantaged groups in society: the elderly, the young, and the poor. Most of the people in these groups do not have access to a car but do value their independence.

However, conditions for walking in Hertford are generally poor and sometimes appalling. Some of the problems encountered in getting around on foot require expensive solutions, perhaps achievable only in the longer term (but still essential). But many of the difficulties involve failures in ways which could be addressed by simple measures taken in the short term. These include:

- Poor maintenance of footways, leaving broken and irregular surfaces, which are uncomfortable to walk on.
- Failure to trim back vegetation, by both the local authorities and by frontages, so that pavement widths are narrowed and walking become uncomfortable, especially in wet weather.
- Wheelie bins placed on pavements, either by householders or by East Herts Council's own waste collection staff.
- Promotional display boards placed across pavements by local businesses (mostly in shops in the town and local centres).
- Temporary road advice signs (usually about road works) placed on pavements by County Council staff and contractors. (Why are they not placed on the roads whose users they are put out for?)
- People cycling on the pavements and footways. (Usually younger and often proceeding at speed.)
- Cars and vans parked across the pavements.

Many of these come together to create uncomfortable and unsafe conditions for walking, in association with more structural problems. For example, the North Road / St Andrew Street corridor is a major pedestrian thoroughfare, especially for access to the town centre in one direction and to North railway station in the other. Yet much of the pavement surfaces and edges along it are broken and irregular, there are a lot of low hanging trees and some projecting bushes, a number of shops closer to the town centre block part of the pavement with tier display boards, and cycling on it is common (despite a marked cycleway on the adjacent road). In addition the pavements are narrow in places, they are further interrupted by lampposts, street signs and bollards, there is poor crossing provision over the main road and side streets, and heavy and sometimes fast-moving traffic is immediately alongside.

It is hoped that the Town Council will seek to gain a proper understanding of the vital role of walking in improving the effectiveness and quality of life in Hertford and will set out priorities for prompt action at least on the problems listed above'.

125. TOWN PLAN

The Committee **RESOLVED** to move Agenda Item 11 forward so that Mr Sangster and Mr Harman were able to listen to the debate.

The Committee received a report regarding the production of a Town Plan for Hertford.

Cllr P Ruffles spoke in favour of the production of a Town Plan and advised that from his experience of Parish Plans, the Council needs to be realistic about the deliverables of any such project undertaken by the Town Council. He also stressed the importance of not rushing such a large and important project and while acknowledging the key role played by stakeholders and other consultees, he stressed the requirements for the Council to retain ownership. He also recommended close liaison with East Herts. Council to ensure early engagement and to prevent any overlap of work already undertaken by that authority.

Cllr J Cook also voiced his support for the plan and suggested that as it is such a large project, a Working Group comprising one Councillor from each ward be formed to progress the development of a plan.

Cllr C Geall outlined some of the history and reasoning behind the report, stressing that this would be a Town Council led project but that early engagement with key stakeholders would be vital as is a 'fact finding' exercise, to confirm what studies have already been undertaken and to ensure the most effective use of officer time.

Cllr H Durbin spoke in support of a plan, suggesting that it would add strength to the comments and observations that the Town Council makes on Planning Applications.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

The Committee agreed 'in principle' to the production of a Town Plan and requested that the Town Clerk work with Councillors to compile a more detailed project plan for the next Finance, Policy and Administration Committee meeting.

126. MILL BRIDGE ROOMS DRY ROT UPDATE

The Committee received an update report on the Dry Rot situation at the Mill Bridge Rooms. Cllr P Ruffles queried when the Mill Bridge Rooms were last painted and whether the lack of regular painting/inspection contributed to the spread of the Dry Rot. The Committee acknowledged this may have been a contributory factor, but also recognised that this problem had been identified due to an inspection by Facilities staff. There was also some discussion about whether more formal reviews from the Facilities Officers would be beneficial although it was recognised that they may not have the technical expertise to identify such issues.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

- a) The report on Mill Bridge Rooms dry rot update be received and noted
- b) The Committee approve the emergency expenditure as authorised by the Town Clerk.

127. QUALITY STATUS UPDATE

The Town Clerk provided an update regarding the progress of the Council towards Quality Status and the additional requirements of the new scheme. The Town Clerk advised that the portfolio would be submitted for verification the following day.

Cllr P Ruffles highlighted the difficulties that the Planning Sub Committee face in achieving point 9 of the Discretionary Communication activities, as often the List B of Planning Applications arrives from East Herts Council too late to allow proper consultation with residents. It was accepted that the Council consider how to facilitate better engagement with the public on planning issues and to consider what if any action could be taken to alleviate Cllr Ruffles concerns.

Cllr H Durbin suggested that a notice be placed on the town centre notice boards to advise members of the public that all minutes of Council meetings are available for inspection at the Castle, Library and Tourist Information Centre.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

The report on the revised Quality Status criteria be received and noted.

128. COUNCIL CONSTITUTION – NEW POLICIES

The Committee received a report regarding new policies for inclusion in the Council's Constitution.

Cllr P Ruffles proposed that item 1.4 of the Member Development policy should be reworded to encourage rather than require Councillors to actively participate in training. He also suggested that there should be specific reference to training to help Members with their responsibility to engage with and represent all of the electorate. Both of these amendments were agreed. There was also acknowledgement that a number of councillors attend training with other councils and other organisations which contribute towards their effectiveness as town councillors and that the Town Clerk should keep a log of such activities as advised to her.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

Subject to the above amendments, the Committee **RECOMMEND** to Full Town Council that the new Internet and Staff Development policies be adopted and included in the Council's Constitution.

129. JOB EVALUATION/SALARY REVIEW PROCESS

The Committee received a report regarding the proposed job re-evaluation, which was last carried out in 2001.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

- a) The Committee approve the virement of £5,000 from the Management Training Budget (7016) to Personnel Procedures budget (7018) to cover the cost of the review.
- b) The Committee approve the proposed job evaluation process for all Hertford Town Council staff, the results of which will be presented to the next meeting.

130. MAJOR INCIDENT PLAN

The Committee received a report and some background information on the proposed Major Incident Plan, which all Town and Parish Councils have been asked to complete by Hertfordshire County Council.

Cllr P Ruffles suggested making it clear that the Mayor's 'nominated deputy' for the purposes of the Major Incident plan should be an Elected Member of the Council.

Cllr Dr Radford and Cllr Mrs Wrangles asked that their personal details be corrected prior to publication.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

The Committee **RECOMMEND** to Full Town Council that the Major Incident Plan be approved for inclusion in the Council's Constitution.

131. HERTFORD MUSEUM ADOPT AN OBJECT SCHEME

Councillor P A Ruffles left the room.

The Committee received a request from the Museum for sponsorship funding of £80 for a former Mayor's Robe and £2,000 for a conservation mannequin.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

- a) The Committee approve Hertford Museum's request for sponsorship of £80 for the Mayor's Robe as part of the Adopt an Object scheme.
- b) The Committee defer a decision to provide additional grant funding towards the purchase of a conservation mannequin once more information about the features of such an item have been received and understood by the Committee.

Councillor P A Ruffles returned to the room.

132. NEWSLETTER

The Committee noted that so far the Newsletter has been well received and various Councillors agreed that they are willing to assist with the distribution of the Newsletter, and therefore the amount printed will be increased from 500 to 750.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

The Committee approve the next edition of the Newsletter, subject to some content alterations.

133. FINANCE - PAYMENT SCHEDULES

It was **RESOLVED** that:

The Payment Schedules to date be received and noted.

134. FINANCE – BUDGET SUMMARY

It was **RESOLVED** that:

The Budget Summary up to end of September be received and noted. The Committee also noted the Bank Reconciliation documents for June and July which were presented for inspection.

135. FINANCE – INTERNAL/EXTERNAL AUDIT

It was **RESOLVED** that:

- a) The Committee receive and note the findings of the Internal Auditor
- b) The Committee approve the Review of the Internal Audit for 2007/08 as adequate and effective.
- c) The Committee receive and note the findings of the External Auditor for 2006/07.

- d) The Committee approve the revised Financial Risk Assessment.

136. FINANCE – BUILDING RESERVES

The Committee received a report on the current expenditure on building maintenance, the projected end of year figure and noted the previous Committee decision to allow any under spend to fall in to an earmarked building reserve.

Cllr J Cook suggested that a surveyor be engaged to inspect the buildings every 3 years to ensure that such issues are identified early. It was agreed that a report exploring the value and feasibility of this approach would be presented to the next committee.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

- a) The Committee receive and note the report on the creation of an earmarked reserve.
- b) The Committee consider the projected closing balance of the Building Maintenance Reserve and under spends again during the 2009/10 budget setting process.

137. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

It was **RESOLVED** that:

In view of the confidential nature of the following items, which related to the business matters of other individuals and organisations, the public was excluded whilst the following items were discussed. This was in accordance with the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, as amended by the Local Government Act 1972.

138. PAST DUE DEBTS

It was **RESOLVED** that:

A report and schedule of debts outstanding for more than 90 days at 19 September 2008 be noted and the Finance Manager was requested to continue to seek payment

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