

CASTLEREAGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

Minutes of the proceedings of the Special Council meeting held in the Council Chamber, Civic & Administrative Offices, Bradford Court, Upper Galwally, Castlereagh, BT8 6RB on Wednesday 20 January 2011 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor V McCoy
(in the Chair)

ALDERMEN: J Beattie MBE
M Henderson MBE
G Rice MBE
J White

COUNCILLORS: AM Beattie
M Copeland
S Duncan
B Hanvey
R Hughes MBE
T Jeffers
M Long (until 8.05 pm)
S Skillen
J Spratt MLA
D Vitty

IN ATTENDANCE: Chief Executive, Director of Technical & Environmental Services, Community Services Manager, Client Services Manager, Planning Officer, Assistant Member Services Officer

APOLOGIES:- Apologies were received on behalf of Alderman Norris and Councillors Bunting, Chambers, Cochrane, Drysdale, Hall, Robinson and Tosh

2011/01 : WELCOME AND CONGRATULATIONS

The Mayor welcomed the new Chief Executive to his first meeting of Council.

Alderman Henderson referred to the fact that Alderman Beattie had received an MBE in the New Year's Honour List and congratulated him on his award. On behalf of their party colleagues, Alderman Rice and Councillor Hanvey also congratulated Alderman Beattie.

2011/02 : DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members and officers were invited to declare any pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests (including gifts and hospitality) they should have in respect of items on this agenda. There were no declarations of interest.

2011/03 : ENGAGE WITH AGE

The Mayor welcomed Ms Margy Washbrook, Manager, Engage with Age, and Ms Teresa McVeigh, Community Development Officer, to the meeting.

Ms Washbrook then presented an overview of the work of Engage with Age. She reminded Members that Engage with Age had started 10 years ago in Castlereagh as a community development project. It had been so successful that funding had been obtained to continue and develop the service within Castlereagh and to expand into East and South Belfast.

She referred to the issues facing older people including poor health, social isolation, mental health issues, fear of crime and poverty including fuel poverty. Engage with Age provided a range of activities and projects to address these issues such as 'Stress Express' dealing with mental health issues, 'Going Bananas' dealing with diet and nutrition, 'Words Alive' addressing personal development and creativity. Other activities included skills training and IT, capacity building with groups and organising trips and activities to get people out and about.

Ms Washbrook stated that, while Engage with Age was a small organisation, it achieved a lot by facilitating contact between older people's groups, helping new groups to form and by working in partnership with other agencies including Councils and the Health Trust. She advised that the funding received from the Council contributed towards the employment of the Community Development Officer who worked full time in Castlereagh providing programmes for older people's groups and intensive support for Castleragh Lifestyle Forum.

Ms Washbrook stated that in the past year the Forum had attracted 19 new members, each of them representing an older people's group and 5 of them had been men.

Ms Washbrook referred to Engage with Age's participation in campaigns on issues affecting older people and welcomed the Assembly's recent agreement to appoint an Older People's Commissioner.

She stated that Engage with Age worked in partnership with local groups within Castlereagh including Castlereagh Community Safety Partnership, Tullycarnet Healthy Neighbourhood, Castlereagh Home Accident Prevention Group and the C-SAW Partnership. She also advised that Castlereagh Local Forum and

Engage with Age had succeeded in accessing funding from the Arts Council for a photography project for older people

With regard to the issue of social isolation among older people, Ms Washbrook advised that Engage with Age had applied for Big Lottery funding for a project entitled 'HOPE', which stood for hubs for older people engagement. The project involved a partnership between Engage with Age and local Housing Associations which would provide facilities and activities for older people from within the housing scheme itself and from the local neighbourhood. She indicated that a pilot scheme had been launched in East Belfast on the Beersbridge Road and was proving very successful in involving hard to reach older people. If the application was successful, project funding would be in the region of £500,000 over 5 years.

Ms Washbrook completed her presentation by asking the Council to continue its funding of Engage with Age to allow the work with older people within the Borough to continue and to progress.

The Mayor thanked Ms Washbrook for her presentation and invited Members' questions.

In response to a query by Councillor Duncan, Ms Washbrook confirmed that at least one of the hubs for the HOPE project would be located within Castlereagh.

Councillor Hanvey referred to the large numbers of older people within the Borough and expressed concern about the well-being, both physical and mental, of those old people who did not come forward to participate in the services and activities provided within the community. He enquired as to what more could be done to address social isolation amongst older people.

Ms Washbrook advised that social isolation was one of the main issues that the HOPE project was designed to tackle. She also advised that Engage with Age was working in partnership with health services to keep older people aware of and involved in social activities. She referred to a recent scheme that had taken place called 'Summer Fun' that had involved a series of outings and activities for older people. This had been organised during the summer because many of the older people's groups did not meet during the summer months and it had given older people the opportunity to meet new friends and build up new social networks.

Councillor Copeland enquired whether the government's proposals to keep people in work beyond the usual retirement age would impact adversely on Engage with Age's activities. Ms Washbrook stated that Engage with Age did not have a view on this issue. She stated however that the number of older people within society was increasing and Engage with Age wanted to encourage people who were retired or nearing retirement to become involved in their communities.

She felt it important that groups such as Engage with Age attract older people of all age groups.

Councillor Skillen thanked Ms Washbrook for her presentation and expressed her appreciation of the work done by Engage with Age and by the Community Development Officer in particular within her area.

Alderman Henderson referred to the Department of Health's statement that elderly people created the biggest strain on its budget and he welcomed the indication by Ms Washbrook that there were people in their nineties still active within their communities.

Alderman Rice expressed concern about funding for services for older people and enquired about Engage with Age's funding arrangements. Ms Washbrook advised that Engage with Age received funding from 6 sources. She advised that funding was often for specific projects and for specified periods of time and that project funding did not cover core costs. She stated that Engage with Age was constantly seeking new funding opportunities.

Councillor Spratt joined the meeting and Councillor Jeffers left the meeting at 7.35 pm

The Mayor thanked Ms Washbrook for her presentation and the Engage with Age representatives then left the meeting.

Noted.

2011/04 : REPRESENTATION FROM PLANNING SERVICE ePIC TEAM

The Mayor welcomed Mr Eamon Leneghan from the Planning Service ePIC Team. Mr Leneghan indicated that he would set out in broad terms what ePIC was and how the electronic planning process would affect the work of the Council. He advised the ePIC stood for Electronic Planning Information for the Citizen.

Councillor Skillen left the meeting at 7.40 pm

Mr Leneghan explained the process whereby, when the Planning Service received a planning application, the details were keyed into the system and accompanying documents were scanned in as pdf files. He advised that the Planning Service had wished to ensure that the new system did not involve additional costs for Councils or for members of the public.

He stated that the Planning Service was making a major investment in additional technology whereby, if users touched one part of a map or plan and then another part, the distance between the two would be measured. Consultations with

Environmental Health, Councillors, Building Control, etc would be electronically forwarded and responses to the consultation could also be forwarded electronically back to the Planning Service.

Mr Leneghan stated that the Planning Service was making a major investment in a web browser called Public Access that would allow Councillors and members of the public to look at all applications received for a particular area or within a particular time scale as well as accessing accompanying documents and plans. He advised that details of the Planning Service's decision and the Planning Officer's report outlining the considerations that had been taken into account in the decision making process would also be available on line.

Mr Leneghan advised that initially the ePIC team's focus had been to roll the system out across all 26 Councils and this had now been completed. He stated that the team was now coming back to revisit the process and to iron out any problems where the process was not operating as planned and to develop the process further.

The Mayor thanked Mr Leneghan for his report on the ePIC system and invited Members' questions.

Alderman Rice referred to problems in using the system. She stated that many people did not have Adobe Acrobat and therefore could not access files. She felt that the Planning Service should have ironed out all the problems before rolling it out to Councils.

Councillor Copeland left the meeting at 7.50 pm

Mr Leneghan stated that careful consideration had been given to the mechanism used for accessing the site and that Adobe Acrobat was a universal data format that was accepted across the globe. He stated that the system would identify the fact that a user did not have Adobe Acrobat and would then lead the user to the site where Adobe Acrobat could be downloaded free of charge. He stated that, as part of a continuous and ongoing review, the ePIC team were reviewing the system to see how it could be made simpler and easier to use.

Councillor Long stated that, when the ePIC system worked, it was very useful but that there were still glitches and problems in getting on to different applications. He agreed with Alderman Rice that these glitches should have been ironed out before the system went live.

Councillor Skillen returned to the meeting at 7.55 pm

Mr Leneghan stated that extensive testing had been carried out before the system was rolled out but he welcomed the feedback from Members and indicated that their comments would be taken into account in the review process.

He stated that the last few Councils had gone live on 13 December 2010 and the first statistics were emerging which indicated that there had been a decrease in the numbers of people visiting planning offices while traffic on the site was increasing.

Councillor Long stated that it would be useful to know the age profile of those attending the planning offices in order to see if older people were having more difficulty using the website. Mr Leneghan advised that everything that existed electronically was also available in hard copy and that it was not the intention to force people to use the electronic format.

Councillor Spratt confirmed other Members' accounts of difficulty using the website and stated that Assembly colleagues and professional officers had also indicated similar difficulties. He stated that if people became frustrated during their initial attempts to use the website, then they would be discouraged from using it on an ongoing basis. He also felt that the reduction in footfall in planning offices could be due to other reasons such as the holiday period or severe weather conditions rather than because people were using the website to access information. He referred to the scale of the investment in the system and enquired as to how much the Department had spent to date.

Mr Leneghan stated that the Councils that had gone live most recently were not having the same level of difficulty as those Councils, including Castlereagh, that had been amongst the first to access the system. He stated that he would be willing to come along to the Council to give dedicated training to Members and officers in the ePIC system.

Councillors Copeland and Jeffers returned to the meeting at 8.00 pm

Mr Leneghan indicated that the version of software on a computer would dictate how well the system would perform and that most people used Internet Explorer 8 as the browser. He stated that the ePIC system was a major infrastructure investment and the overall investment in the system had been in the region of £12.5m.

Councillor Hanvey expressed concern that, when planning was eventually transferred to Councils, the costs of updating the ePIC system and dealing with its inherent problems would be passed on to Councils. He sought an assurance that the Department would provide a 5 year service agreement to cover the ePIC system after transfer. He referred to current problems with the system including slowness of the processes, the lack of an email alert in respect of new applications or consultations and the fact that emails to the Council's Environmental Health Manager were addressed to the wrong person.

Mr Leneghan advised that he was not in a position to give a commitment regarding a service level agreement between Councils and the Department as this would be agreed at a more senior level.

Councillor Long left the meeting at 8.05 pm

Mr Leneghan apologised for the wrong name being included for the Council's Environment Health Manager and undertook to have this corrected. He acknowledged that there had been difficulties with the system, some of which had been addressed and others that still needed to be resolved but he stated that everything that could be done was being done.

Alderman Henderson enquired whether the introduction of the new system would lead to an increase in planning fees. Mr Leneghan stated that consultation was currently taking place regarding a revised fee structure but he advised that any changes to the fee structure had not been caused or influenced by the ePIC system.

Councillor Copeland left the meeting at 8.10 pm

In response to a further query by Alderman Henderson, Mr Leneghan confirmed that the longterm aim in introducing the ePIC system was to speed up and streamline the planning process.

Alderman Beattie stated that he chaired the NILGA Working Group on Planning and was glad to hear that there had been improvements to the ePIC system since Christmas. He stated that the transfer of planning to Councils was scheduled to take place by 2012 and he hoped that all the problems in the system could be resolved by that date. He referred to the scale of the investment in ePIC and expressed the view that it had to provide real benefits to users.

Councillor Duncan suggested that a powerpoint presentation to Council might have been of benefit in explaining the ePIC system. Mr Leneghan stated that he had been asked to come along to answer specific questions and therefore had not put together a power point presentation but that he could do this in the future if the council took up his offer of specific training. He said that the ePIC system did not require Councils to invest in substantial or additional hardware and was designed so that the user only needed a computer and internet access to use it.

Councillor Vitty stated that the issue was not how quickly planning applications could be submitted but how quickly the Planning Service could issue its decisions. Mr Leneghan responded that the longterm objective of the new system was to increase the throughput of applications and shorten the amount of time it took for them to be considered.

Councillor Hanvey asked the Council's Planning Officer whether she had all the necessary hardware to enable her to deal with the requirements of the ePIC system. The Planning Officer advised that, following correspondence with the ePIC team, she had obtained a new computer. She advised that the additional cost to the Council would be the costs of reproducing plans and drawings which had previously been ordered from and provided by the Planning Service. She stated that she had been concerned that she would require a plotter to determine measurements on plans but she welcomed the statement by Mr Leneghan that that new software would allow measurements to be determined on screen.

The Mayor then thanked Mr Leneghan for his presentation to Council and he left the meeting at 8.25 pm

RESOLVED: that the Council take up the offer of training in the ePIC system and that this be progressed as soon as possible.

2011/05 : LANDFILL FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT

Members considered two reports by the Client Services Manager on the Landfill Framework Agreement, one previously circulated and an addendum tabled at the meeting providing an update on subsequent developments.

Members were reminded of the background to this issue whereby the Landfill Directive had imposed obligations on EU Member States in relation to the closure of landfill sites between July 2001 and January 2004. Ten landfill sites closed in that period had been identified in Northern Ireland, five of them owned and operated by Councils and five privately owned. A number of meetings between the five affected Councils, their legal advisers, the DoE and the Minister had taken place and several drafts of a Landfill Framework Agreement had been drawn up.

In his updated report tabled at the meeting, the Manager advised that a further meeting had been held between the five Councils and their legal advisers on 14 January 2011 and concern had been expressed about the lack of certainty regarding DoE funding for the potential remediation works that would be required following site assessments. At that meeting it had been agreed to seek a further meeting with the Minister to establish the principles on which future funding would be based.

It was also reported that one of the five Councils had a site closure planned at an advanced stage. The Department had been asked to give urgent attention to this plan so that Councils could have an early indication of remediation requirements and costs. A copy of a letter to the DoE from the Chief Executive of Antrim Borough Council on behalf of the five Councils was tabled for Members' information.

Members were provided with a copy of an updated draft Framework Agreement reflecting the most recent discussions and legal advice. It was reported that separate stand alone agreements had been prepared for each Council to reflect the local context as well as including the generic wording and principles common to all five Councils.

It was reported that the main changes as the draft agreement had developed were:

- The agreement only ran as far as the report at the end of the assessment period
- The DoE had agreed to assist with funding of the site assessments
- Councils had added a 'subject to agreement on funding' clause

It was recommended that Members endorse the request for a further meeting with the Minister and await the outcome of this meeting and any further legal advice before considering the draft Landfill Framework Agreement.

The Director of Technical & Environmental Services made the point that, while the Department had indicated that it would fund up to 50% of the site assessment costs up to a maximum of £20,000, the major costs would be incurred in carrying out remedial works after assessments had been completed.

Councillor Vitty left the meeting at 8.30 pm and returned to the meeting at 8.32 pm

Councillor Spratt proposed that the Council accept the officers' recommendations and that the Chair of the Finance & General Purposes Committee and the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Technical & Environmental Services Committee together with professional officers be appointed as the Council's representatives to attend the proposed meeting with the Minister.

Alderman Rice seconded the proposal. She stated that the big issue was the availability of funding from the Department and that Councils required clarity with regard to the financial commitment that would be required to deal with this matter.

Alderman White referred to work that had already been carried out at the Council's landfill site to deal with leachate and gas and enquired whether that would alleviate some of the costs of future remedial works. He also referred to the five landfill sites that had been privately owned and suggested that the Council write to the Department to enquire what measures were being put in place to deal with those sites and who would cover those costs.

The Director of Technical & Environmental Services advised that queries had been raised with the Minister regarding the privately owned sites and the only

information obtained was that these sites did not fall within the areas of the five affected Councils. He also advised that Limavady District Council had submitted a closure plan for a landfill site to the Department which had rejected it as inadequate, but had not specified why or how it was inadequate.

Alderman White proposed that the Council write to the Minister to enquire as to who would bear the costs in relation to the five privately owned landfill sites. Alderman Henderson seconded this proposal.

After further discussion it was felt that the query raised by Alderman White should be put to the Minister after the meeting had taken place regarding the Council owned sites.

Alderman Rice suggested that officers should put together a briefing paper for representatives attending the Ministerial meeting. The Mayor advised however that a pre-meeting would be held for Members and officers to consider the issues they wished to raise. After discussion it was

RESOLVED:

- (a) that the Council adopt the officer's recommendation to endorse the request for a further meeting with the Minister and await the outcome of this meeting and any further legal advice before considering the draft Landfill Framework Agreement.
- (b) that the Chair of the Finance & General Purposes Committee and the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Technical & Environmental Services Committee together with professional officers be appointed as the Council's representatives to attend the proposed meeting with the Minister.
- (c) that, following the meeting with the Minister, the Council write to him to enquire what measures were being put in place to deal with the five privately owned landfill sites and how would the costs in relation to these sites be covered.

Alderman Rice left the meeting at 8.55 pm

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

2011/06 : CONSULTATION ON THE PLANNING BILL

The Chief Executive advised that the closing date for responses to the consultation on the Planning Bill was the next day and the Planning Officer had drawn up a draft response on behalf of the Council. Members expressed concern about the tight deadline imposed in the consultation process. Councillor

Spratt indicated that the timescale had been drawn up to ensure that the legislation could be passed by the Assembly.

It was proposed by Alderman Henderson, seconded by Alderman White that the Council submit the response drafted by the Planning Officer and that any further issues/amendments could be considered at the Council meeting. Councillor Spratt indicated that, if there were any additional issues regarding the legislation, he could raise these at the Assembly.

RESOLVED: to submit the response document drafted by the Planning Officer to the Department as the Council's response to consultation on the Planning Bill.

There being no further business, the meeting ended at 9.00 p.m.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

MAYOR