

BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY COUNCIL
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMISSION
4.00PM 2 JUNE 2009
COUNCIL CHAMBER, HOVE TOWN HALL
MINUTES

Present: Councillors Mitchell (Chairman); Alford, Meadows, Morgan, Older, Pidgeon (Deputy Chairman), Randall, Wakefield-Jarrett and Watkins

PART ONE

1. PROCEDURAL BUSINESS

1a Declarations of Substitutes

1.1 Councillor Watkins was acting as substitute for Councillor Elgood. Councillor Peltzer Dunn, now Chairman of Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, had given his apologies.

1b Declarations of Interest

1.2 Councillor Meadows declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest in Item 3 as Chair of East Brighton Trust. Councillor Morgan declared a personal interest as trustee of the Crew Club. Councillors Randall, Morgan and Mitchell declared personal interests in Item 6 as they were local Credit Union members.

1c Declarations of Party Whip

1.3 There were no declarations of party whip.

1d Exclusion of Press and Public

1.4 In accordance with section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, it was considered whether the press and public should be excluded from the meeting during the consideration of any items contained in the agenda, having regard to the nature of the business to be transacted and the nature of the proceedings and the likelihood as to whether, if members of the press and public were present, there would be disclosure to them of confidential or exempt information as defined in section 100I (1) of the said Act.

RESOLVED: That the press and public be not excluded from the meeting.

The Chairman reminded the Commission that the meeting was being webcast.

In line with Centre for Public Scrutiny advice on agenda planning, this meeting was planned to have been brief but to include matters worthy of in-depth scrutiny. The sustainable community strategy had been scheduled for this meeting but is now expected to be on the agenda for 14 July.

With the agreement of the Chairman Item 3 was considered after Item 4.

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

2. **RESOLVED:** That the minutes of the meeting held on 21 April be agreed and signed by the Chairman.

3. LETTER FROM COUNCILLOR CAULFIELD

3.1 Councillor Caulfield spoke to the Commission about her request for scrutiny of EB4U and East Brighton Trust which had been set up under the New Deal for Communities programme. Councillor Caulfield outlined the aims of the programme and reminded the meeting that a scrutiny review of EB4U had been completed in 2005. Action following the scrutiny panel recommendations had been reported back to the panel's parent committee, the former Overview and Scrutiny Organisation Committee in October 2007.

3.2 Ward residents were now concerned about resources and outcomes from EB4U and they wanted future work to be more open and transparent, Councillor Caulfield said. More information was needed in her view, such as: a list of all the funded projects and how much was spent on each; the criteria for rejection or support; assets acquired to fund future projects via EB4U Ltd; assets now being generated for East Brighton Trust, roles and responsibilities of East Brighton Trust and a regular update on progress.

3.3 Some projects were now struggling and the long-term sustainability of community groups had not been sufficiently taken into account, Councillor Caulfield said.

3.4 The Chairman set out a range of options for the Commission to consider and the Commission discussed the letter.

3.5 Councillor Morgan, ward councillor for East Brighton stated that no resident had contacted him about this and therefore he questioned how many residents say they are concerned. Councillor Watkins who had served on the panel said the council was responsible to ensure the EB4U funding was properly spent and accounted for, and a full report was made to the Government of the South East.

3.6 Councillor Meadows told the meeting that she had been working in this part of the City for many years and that she was disappointed to see the letter on the agenda. There were many other organisations (in addition to East Brighton Trust, which she chaired) that were built on the EB4U pilot projects and were going ahead successfully. Some examples were the two Children's Centres, the Healthy Living Centre, dedicated police team and a range of social enterprises. Councillor Meadows spoke of the successes of the Crew Club, Valley Social

Centre, Manor Road, the Bridge, Whitehawk Inn and St George's Hall and minibuses used by local schools.

3.7 After discussion and a vote the Commission did not agree to a scrutiny review. Members asked that the 2005 scrutiny report and 2007 update be circulated to the Commission and suggested that any concerned residents were welcome to contact the council via the usual channels.

3.8 RESOLVED: that a scrutiny review of EB4U and East Brighton Trust be not agreed.

4. SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES ACT

4.1 Introducing the report on Round One of the Sustainable Communities Act the Acting Head Cabinet Support said future proposal rounds were expected to be arranged annually, though this timing was unconfirmed by the government.

4.2 There was a high level of enthusiasm amongst active communities, after some initial cynicism. As many as 23 proposals had been submitted to the council on a variety of subjects including business rate relief, housing, renewable energy, food growing and others. Of these 16 were eligible ideas, in line with the Act.

4.3 All eligible proposals had been considered by the 12-member Local Panel which included one councillor from each of the four political groups. The final agreement between the Panel and the Administration would be reported to 9 July Cabinet where the decision on the council's submission to the Local Government Association (LGA) would be taken.

4.4 Councillor Watkins was serving on the Local Panel and questioned the process for agreeing which proposals would be submitted.

4.5 The Acting Head Cabinet Support said that no decisions had been taken. The Administration had considered the Panel's view and had responded with several suggested amendments. Negotiations were currently underway between the Panel and the Administration via e-mail as the application deadlines under this first round did not allow for an additional Panel meeting. It was re-iterated that no formal decision had been taken. The decision would be made at 9 July Cabinet where details of the process and the proposals would be available.

4.6 Cllr. Wakefield-Jarrett thanked the officers working on the Sustainable Communities Act and recognised the problems caused by the lack of guidance and information from the Local Government Association regarding their short-listing process.

4.7 RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Overview and Scrutiny Commission notes the work being carried out by the Council and its partners under the Sustainable Communities Act.
- (2) That the Overview and Scrutiny Commission requests officers to generate a bank of ideas, as result of its work, which could be submitted under future rounds of the Act.

5. WORKFORCE DIVERSITY

5.1 The Head of Human Resources said the council was not yet reaching its targets for numbers of BME and disabled people in its workforce but numbers had been increasing since 2004.

5.2 Work was being undertaken on a range of initiatives to improve performance in this area, an equalities impact assessment had been completed on the recruitment and selection policy. This would come to the meeting on the 14 July along with a more general update on equalities work and the feedback report from the peer assessment.

5.3 The Head of Human Resources clarified that on Table 2, the ‘% offers’ column was based on the total number of candidates at each stage of the process which would be different.

5.4 The Commission were pleased with the gradual increase in the representation of the minority groups within the work force and acknowledged the importance of the action being taken in terms of risk and opportunity management implications.

5.5 It was generally felt that in view of the 7% proportion of economically active BME people within the local community, that the BVPI target for BME could be raised higher than 3.5% as at present. Some Members were also of the opinion that a BVPI target for sexual orientation of applicants for vacancies or employees of BHCC should be considered despite there being no legal requirement to do so.

5.6 Asked about disabled workers, the Head of Human Resources outlined what was being done to encourage disabled job candidates. The Council displayed the ‘two ticks’ disability symbol awarded by Job Centre Plus and its Disabled Worker’s Forum discussed more ideas. Further suggestions would be welcome.

5.7 Regarding blind or partially-sighted staff and job applicants, relevant work was not restricted only to telephone operations but to jobs across the whole range of opportunities. The Council collected data on disabilities but not on the nature of the disability.

5.8 The Chairman referred to report paragraph 3.5.2 and the Council achieving level 3 Equality standard following the completed Peer Review. Councillor Mitchell said the inspection report had not been circulated to Group Leaders as had been agreed, and went on to ask for the full inspection report, albeit in sketchy or bullet-point form, to be presented to OSC.

5.9 RESOLVED:

(1) that the report be noted

(2) that officers be requested to bring the unabridged version of the equalities peer inspection report, with separate dialogue and additional material to 14 July Commission meeting.

6. THIRD SECTOR RECESSION ACTION PLAN

6.1 The Communities Team Manager introduced the report that considered how to support community and voluntary sector groups through the recession and emerge strongly and more influential afterwards.

6.2 Officers were making groups aware of the help already available including the business relief package for small businesses and some charities and voluntary groups in the city. Community and voluntary groups not involved trading were being advised of other types of support to help them survive and take new opportunities in the economic downturn.

6.3 Charity shops for instance were enjoying a boom but conversely were receiving fewer gifts and less stock. Therefore officers would be working together with the third sector and LSP members on a specialist plan that extended beyond traditional types of business support.

6.4 Answering a question about discretionary grant funding for local community groups the Communities Team Manager said there needed to be a balance between smaller and larger groups, the latter being more likely to be trading. Most income into the City's third sector – around £26 million - was via contracted commissioned work whereas the council's grants funding accounted for only around £2 million. So it was important to influence procurement in the City.

6.5 Analysis by the Community and Voluntary Sector Forum indicated that some smaller groups spent a high proportion of funding on administration or accommodation. Larger groups may be to support smaller ones for example by sharing premises to cut costs.

6.6 Members congratulated the officers on the 'excellent' advice and information for this year's round of discretionary grants round. The Credit Union, and Back to work and Debt advice services were regarded as particularly important and some members stated that Housing Associations could potentially do more to support the third sector locally.

6.7 The Commission welcomed the report and the approach to the action plan. There was a level of caution about improving cost-efficiency especially of smaller local groups as in some cases this could adversely affect goals and achievements. When organisations started to grow and employ more people, this was often the stage when they needed extra help.

6.8 RESOLVED: that the Overview and Scrutiny Commission

(1) Endorses the development of a Third Sector Recession Action Plan in partnership with the Community and Voluntary Sector Forum and the LSP.

(2) Instructs officers to bring the draft Plan back to the Commission for comment and Member input prior to its agreement.

7. POTENTIAL EFFECTS OF THE RECESSION ON BUSINESS

7.1 The Head of Culture and Economy introduced the report on the potential effects of the recession on business in the City, drawing Members' attention to Appendix 1, extracted from data provided by the Brighton & Hove Business Forum.

7.2 Different studies had shown that the recession was affecting the City less badly than other parts of the country and south-east region. These are based on key data such as footfall in retail areas, numbers of people receiving job-seekers allowance, and levels of empty retail premises. The findings, which were consistent, were important for two reasons, in using as positive PR, helping boost public confidence and in launching the Business Retention and Inward Investment Strategy and as an indication of how Brighton and Hove might recover from the impact of the recession more rapidly.

7.3 The Head of Culture and Economy outlined a range of initiatives that had been undertaken in recent months to combat the impact of the recession such as the Be Local Buy Local Campaign run by the Communications team, a series of intensive advisory sessions for different business sectors under the banner Business Lifebelt run by Business Link and the Chamber of Commerce.

7.4 Looking ahead, a number of other initiatives were planned that focussed on increasing activity in the city, tourism marketing programmes and free events, artwork in empty shop premises and a local tourism 'Greeter' volunteer scheme.

7.5 A report by HSBC bank had identified Brighton & Hove as 1 of 5 most recession-proof 'Super-Cities,' where alternative business models can grow and likely to recover quickest from the recession. The current scrutiny review of environmental industries could help contribute to developing an action plan for the development of this kind of business activity.

7.6 There were active links with the community and voluntary sector. For instance the third sector is represented on the Economy Task Force and LABGI (Local Authority Business Growth Incentive) is partially funding the Social Enterprise Strategy. The Arts Council had also launched a fund called 'Sustain' for recession proofing activities for the cultural sector.

7.7 The Commission discussed the introduction of a Welcome Pack provided to business start-ups and the use of empty shops as shop fronts for cultural organisations. The latter was being coordinated between the LSP, arts organisations, Business Centre Forum and the Council. There were questions about payment of invoices and providing high quality flexible office space for small cooperatives in accessible locations.

7.8 Members were supportive of the schemes and initiatives and looked forward to tangible results from the ideas and actions.

7.9 The Chairman welcomed the report and innovative schemes and said that for a thriving economy of the future a strategic look at the physical infrastructure of the City as a whole was needed. Significant development at Sussex County Hospital was due to start later in the year and further funding was available to improve public buildings and highways, improving public space and air quality. This would further increase the attraction of the City, as a place to live and work.

7.10 RESOLVED: that the activity currently being undertaken by the Council in support of business and in response to the recession be noted.

8. ICT RISK - BUSINESS CONTINUITY

8.1 The Head of ICT Technical Services introduced the report in response to possible concerns at the February Audit Committee regarding ICT systems risks. The report was to provide reassurance on the actions that were being taken.

8.2 The business continuity plan for ICT includes annual testing of the resilience of the core infrastructure for data and telephony systems and the new Assistant Director of ICT in post since November was developing and driving through the plans previously in place.

8.3 The plans allowed for communications internally and externally in the event of disaster. For the future they were being extended to include better use of currently deployed technology to meet more of the authority's business needs in the event of different scenarios.

8.4 Members were concerned that there had been no ICT Assistant Director in post for more than a year. There was a question as to whether the public would have confidence that calls were being dealt with locally, if non-geographical phone numbers were to be introduced.

8.5 Replying to a query about staffing, the Head of ICT Technical Services said there were partnership arrangements for IT specialists to support systems across the authority in the event of a disaster. Staff training in the use of different ICT systems was important and there was provision for key staff to work remotely for example if in a disaster buildings could not be accessed.

8.6 The Commission discussed home working and the possible use of videoconferencing. The Head of ICT Services said that with the migration to 'outlook' e-mail and the availability of instant messaging there was now a unified communications framework to help support staff away from their desks.

8.7 A Member group to monitor progress on ICT developments was suggested.

8.8 RESOLVED: that the report be noted.

9. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2008 - 2009

9.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Commission discussed the draft annual report and agreed that the profile of O&S needed to be raised. Some members felt that the name 'scrutiny' may have negative connotations and imply that officers were under.

9.2 The Commission was pleased that the media protocol was being revised to include the needs of both scrutiny and the executive.

9.3 Members congratulated the Head of scrutiny for the report and thanked him for his work in developing scrutiny.

9.4 RESOLVED: that the report be endorsed for presentation to full Council on 16 July.

10. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION WORK PLAN 2009 - 2010

10. RESOLVED: that the work plan be noted.

11. ITEMS TO BE TAKEN FORWARD

11.1 Members noted that the Annual Report of Overview and Scrutiny would be presented to full Council and the report on ICT risk would be taken back to the Audit Committee.

The meeting concluded at 6.00pm

Signed

Chair

Dated this

day of