

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF SCRUTINY  
HELD AT FOLLATON HOUSE, TOTNES ON THURSDAY 23 APRIL 2009**

**MEMBERS**

\* Cllr C M Pannell - Chairman

\* Cllr K J Baldry - Vice-Chairman

\* Cllr J H Baverstock

\* Cllr P H Cook

\* Cllr G J Fielden

\* Cllr R D Gilbert

\* Cllr J W Squire

\* Cllr J A Westacott MBE

\* Denotes attendance

**Also in attendance and participating:**

Cllrs R M Lawrence and M F Saltern

**Also in attendance and not participating**

Cllrs B E Carson, P W Hitchins, D W May and R J Tucker

**Officers in attendance:**

For all items: Member Support Services Manager and Member Support Officer;  
Item 7: (Minute SC.63/08 below refers) Vice Chairman and Treasurer – Police Authority, Inspector P Morgan, Community Safety and Emergency Planning Officer and Anti-Social Behaviour Officer;

Item 8: (Minute 64/08 below refers) Chief Executive and Tor Homes Board Chairman; and

Item 9: (Minute SC.65/08 below refers) Head of ICT

**SC.61/08 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of Scrutiny held on 19 March 2009 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Since the last Group meeting, the Chairman provided an update in respect of the indoor swimming pool leak at Ivybridge Leisure Centre (minute SC.56/08 refers). It was noted that the leak had been identified and could incur a cost of £20,000 to the Council to solve the problem.

**SC.62/08 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Members were invited to declare any interests in the items of business to be considered during the course of the meeting. These were declared as follows:-

Cllr J H Baverstock declared a personal interest in item 7: 'Police Authority' (minute SC.63/08 below refers) due to his previous employment with the police and being in receipt of an Authority pension and whilst he remained in the room he did not take part during the debate on this item.

**SC.63/08 POLICE AUTHORITY**

The Treasurer and Vice Chairman of the Police Authority thanked the Group for the invitation to attend the meeting and to be given the opportunity to discuss policy and budgetary matters.

During the question and answer session, the following matters were raised:

- a) A Member queried the future direction of the police bonus culture and whether it was going to continue in its current format or be discontinued. In reply, the Treasurer wished to dispel any perceived views that Senior Officers were in receipt of bonuses akin to that of city bankers and gave assurances that the sums of money involved were comparatively small. The percentages of salary paid in bonuses were set nationally and was a matter on which the Authority had no influence. Currently 15% of annual salary could be paid to a Chief Constable and 10% to an Assistant Chief Constable, provided they were at the top of their pay scale. He further advised that locally, within the Devon & Cornwall Constabulary, there were no officers in a position to receive such a bonus. The Group noted that it was not felt that bonus payments were a motivating factor to officer performance. However, it was acknowledged that in a low earning region, and in the current economic climate, any such bonus payments would not be perceived in a positive light;

The Group was informed that the process to ascertain eligibility for receipt of a bonus was complex and involved factors including: the measurement of achievement in terms of performance indicators and recommendations from the Chief Constable to the Police Authority. As it was perceived that there was no measurable performance benefit from the payment of bonuses, it would be considered reasonable to suggest that they were phased out in favour of a standard salary only. However, the Authority was not aware of any current moves to dispense with bonus payments;

- b) With regard to the measurement of performance, a lot of effort was expended to generate and maintain data. In light of one of the main strategic objectives of the Constabulary being to become one of the top ten performing forces in the country, such accurate and reliable data was deemed extremely useful and could highlight areas of underperformance in order to redirect focus and resources;
- c) A Member enquired how Authority pensions were funded. In reply, the Group was informed that the pensions used to be funded from council tax but were now funded from general taxation. The representatives agreed with the view that ideally the pensions should be paid from a properly constituted fund. However, Members noted that it would be a difficult proposition for any Government to resource the level of funding required, as the ringfenced funds would have to be substantial in order to pay out the current pensions of retired officers, as well as resource the future provision for current officers.

It was this dilemma that had stalled previous attempts to set up a separate fund. However, the current situation would also be unsustainable in the future and would require addressing;

- d) It was also noted that the service life of a police officer (i.e. 30-35 years) was comparatively short, which had an impact on policing. A huge investment was made in training an officer throughout their career, but they could retire with only a months notice. Moreover, the short service life compressed careers, as in order to progress through the ranks to become a senior officer, employees would have to progress very quickly. Whilst this led to continuity problems, the point was made by the local Inspector that it was also unrealistic to expect police officers to remain on frontline duty until they were 60 years old, and if police service careers were to be extended, a certain amount of back office role provision would be required;
- e) A Member asked why, following minimal consultation, the Police Authority had imposed a 4.9% increase in the council tax precept, at a time when most others had endeavoured to keep their increase to the rate of inflation or below. In reply, the Group was informed that the Authority had moved from a position of annual budget and financial planning, to a three year rolling programme, enabling the Authority to relate strategic aspirations to a longer timescale. Also, some years ago, the Police Authority had put up the precept by 40% after public consultation had ascertained that there was a demand for more visible policing. The increased funds enabled the long term funding required to increase the number of sworn officers from 2,800 to 3,500 and additionally fund the 3,600 PCSOs. More recently, present increases had been in response to continual public demand for more visible policing and more action regarding criminal damage and anti social behaviour.

The Group was further informed that the decision had also been taken to redeploy 200 sworn officers from back office roles to front line positions, which required 196 civilians to be trained to undertake the roles vacated by police officers, which was an additional reason for the increase in precept. The Vice Chairman informed that other forces may incur reductions in the number of sworn officers on their establishments (e.g. by not replacing officers who leave or retire), but that it was the firm intention of Devon & Cornwall Constabulary to maintain officer numbers. The Vice Chairman also stated that he was impressed by the visionary capabilities of the new rolling three year budget setting programme and stressed that the Authority remained one of the lowest setting council tax precepting forces;

- f) A Member enquired whether there was enough expenditure spent on public relations and engaging with ethnic and other minority groups, who may not typically engage with the Police. In reply, the Vice Chairman advised that public perception would be vital to the strategic aims of the Force. Hence, they had a media based strategy to balance negative stories.

The local Inspector advised that in terms of neighbourhood policing, the force had regular columns in local newspapers and had introduced a new interactive website. He further invited Members to contact either himself or his colleague who were happy to receive feedback on local issues;

- g) A Member commented that in her experience, Police Authority Liaison Meetings were often poorly attended, and asked if they were the most effective tool for public involvement. In acknowledging the point, the Vice-Chairman stated that they had a duty to consult and liaise with the public and the meetings also provided an opportunity for neighbourhood watch co-ordinators to express their views. He further advised that they also had the facility of the Community Messaging Service (telephone based) which could be used to disseminate and target information quickly and cheaply and work was currently being undertaken to develop the potential of the service;
- h) The matter of charging for the policing of local events such as the Dartmouth Regatta was raised. In reply, the Group was advised that the policy regarding how much could be charged for events had been produced by the Association of Chief Police Officers. There had been a much publicised backlash particularly in respect of long standing events such as the regatta, and it was recognised that this region was particularly rich in such community events. The Police Authority therefore understood the feelings of the public on this issue. However, the Inspector advised the Group that the issue was one of cost recovery and not charging.

In the case of the Dartmouth Regatta, it took 1,200 police hours to police the event which could not be resourced locally. As a result, the neighbouring communities received a reduced policing service for the duration of the regatta. Previously, officers from other sectors had been deployed to come in on rest days at overtime rates to police the event which had put a strain on the local sector budgets. The Inspector informed the Group that he had spent the last two years in negotiations with event organisers, in an attempt to resolve these matters and reiterated that there were other costs incurred by the organisers, such as Highways Authority and the Red Arrows;

- i) A Member raised concerns arising from her voluntary work experience regarding the length of time it still took for some victims of crime to receive feedback and updates from the police which she felt was inadequate. In reply, the Group was informed that there had been a huge drive to improve communication and establish confidence and, in due course, this should improve;
- j) It was confirmed that all new recruits, regardless of their qualifications, had to join at constable level and undertake at least two and a half years experience at this rank;

The Chairman thanked the representatives for their attendance in what had been an informative and beneficial agenda item.

**SC.64/08 TOR HOMES**

The Chief Executive of Tor Homes gave a presentation entitled '10 years of Tor Homes' which provided a background on the large scale voluntary housing transfer, and other activities and services that the organisation was involved in such as CHICKS (Country Holidays for Inner City Kids) and the 24 hour call line.

The Chief Executive and Chairman of the Board then engaged in a question and answer session where the following matters were raised:-

- a) A Member stated that the Government had challenged local authorities to build more affordable homes and asked if this responsibility should fall with the Council or the Housing Association. The Chairman replied that the Local Authority played a crucial role and Tor Homes would like to develop more housing in the South Hams, with the help of the Council;
- b) A Member asked if the Association was well placed to survive the current building crisis and build homes. The Chief Executive replied that they had a strong financial base, but were concerned about the predicted longevity of the credit crunch and cost of borrowing. Therefore, Tor Homes would be looking to explore other avenues of funding, such as capital markets, but reassurances were given that they were well placed for the next eighteen months;
- c) The Chief Executive advised that the Government had indicated that they intended to fund capital projects and, therefore, Tor Homes would seek to take advantage of this opportunity, but there were concerns about future constraints in public spending;
- d) A Member commented that they noted the Warm Front Scheme did not apply to social housing. In reply, it was stated that during the transfer, a lot of work had been undertaken to raise the thermal quality of the stock (e.g. in installing double glazing and central heating). However, Tor Homes was conscious of the environmental low carbon footprint agenda and work was undertaken in this regard in addition to satisfying the requirements of residents;
- e) A Member informed that in Modbury, there was a shared ownership scheme whereby residents paid 50% mortgage and a small ground rent, which was more affordable than paying a mortgage and rent on the remaining unowned share, and he asked whether Tor Homes had considered this model. The Chief Executive replied that they kept rents as low as possible and charged less than 3% rent on unowned share to assist families with the problems they faced but that ultimately income did have to be sought;

- f) It was asked if Tor Homes had a policy regarding garden maintenance, as some tenants' left unsightly rubbish in their gardens which upset other residents. In reply, it was noted that residents were encouraged to maintain their gardens through incentives such as competitions, but it was a problematic issue;
- g) An Executive Member present advised that the Association did hold Estate Walkabouts and Members and town and parish council representatives were welcome to participate. The Chief Executive advised that he would notify local Members and town and parish councils of forthcoming dates.

The representatives were then thanked for their attendance and the informative discussion.

## SC.65/08 **ICT SERVICE REVIEW**

The Head of ICT presented a report to Members that provided a detailed analysis of the service and which set out the Council's investment in it, together with the role that the department played in supporting the Council's Priorities and in underpinning the delivery of Council Services.

During discussion, the following points were made:-

- a) A Member commented that they felt the report submitted had not provided sufficient data to enable measurement, assessment and comparisons of the cost of the ICT Service with other district councils, e.g. per head of population and per numbers of staff, as well as against other business in the private sector. The Member felt that the number of staff in the service was high compared to a medium sized business in the private sector, and was a big cost to the Council and on that basis felt it needed particular scrutiny. He further felt that there may be scope for shared services opportunities and overall questioned the report linking the service to Council Corporate Priority 6 (Value for Money).

In reply, the Head of ICT informed that the Council had been undertaking benchmarking of the service for approximately 10 years, the majority of this as part of the comprehensive Society of ICT Managers' (SOCITM) annual Benchmarking survey. Due to the wide ranging activities involving ICT, benchmarking was not a simple process, and indicators need to be compared overall, rather than in isolation. More than 100 elements were required to complete the Performance Indicators and this represented quite a commitment. Only a few other District Councils currently took part and South Hams was the only District Council in Devon in the 2008 survey.

The Officer guarded against comparisons of ICT staffing levels with a medium sized company, as it was likely that such a business would have a network and desktops to manage, and their ICT systems would not be as extensive as a local authority. For example, the Council had a very wide range of additional systems which needed to be supported, including Housing Benefits, Council Tax, Planning, Environmental Health and Parking contravention. The Head of ICT offered to meet with any Member to discuss this issue in more detail.

With regard to shared services, the Officer advised that a report had been submitted to the Executive in July 2008 regarding this but progression of this matter had been put on hold pending a decision on the Local Government Review. Members were informed that reducing ICT staff to cut costs could be a short sighted view, as ICT was often the means to create efficiencies and savings in other services. Further, the modernising agenda was challenging public services to invest in ICT, and to transform service provision in order to create efficient and effective services and it was therefore considered that ICT was essential to deliver all Council Services;

- b) An Executive Member present expressed concern at the direction and tone of the debate. He advised Members that the Executive had received presentations from all Heads of Service, who were aware of the need to examine potential areas for cost savings. He considered there to be a real risk that this exercise was being undertaken twice and therefore the role of the lead Executive Member with responsibility for ICT was being duplicated. It was unfortunate that the Lead Executive Member was unable to be present at this meeting. Therefore, he felt that the Officer had given explanations to questions asked and those answers should be accepted. Moreover, the Member believed that the direction of the debate had the potential to demoralise staff and he agreed with the Officer that when cuts in staffing were made, more often than not, they arose through improved ICT systems. ICT was an investment that did come at a cost, however the investment would be useless if the Council did not then have professional ICT staff to support these systems and keep them running effectively. Lastly, he felt that decisions needed to be made from an informed position.

A Member also felt that the tone of the comments directed at the Officer from the Scrutiny Member were misdirected, as the report was the first one of its type to be presented following the 2009/10 budget review. In highlighting the importance of the Lead Executive Member being present, he also noted that this meeting had a negligible representation of Executive Members in attendance.

The Shadow Scrutiny Member for the ICT Service also stated that during his meetings with his Executive counterpart and the Head of ICT, he was content that the Service was being run both effectively and efficiently;

- c) A Member expressed concern at the level of dependency on ICT. In reply, the Officer advised that to attempt to manually undertake processes such as Council Tax, which involved complex calculations, creating bills and summonses, would require hundreds of staff. Also, it was noted that anti-spam software filtered out over 9 million emails which would amount to an extra 90 emails per day, for each member of staff. Use of ICT was in reality likely to increase, as each year there would be requests from other Heads of Service for systems to assist them with service delivery and efficiencies and savings, and it was the task of ICT to help them implement and support those systems;
- d) A Member expressed frustration with using Citrix and his Council email system, and specifically the inability to attach a document from his own PC. In reply the Officer informed the Group that the current process was in place for security reasons and to protect the integrity of Council information. Furthermore, Members were reminded that the project was still in its initial stages. However, feedback was welcomed on any issues Members might have in using ICT and the service would endeavour to make any improvements that would benefit Members without undue compromise of security. Members were also advised that a new solution for remote access to the network would be deployed over the next few months to meet the stringent security requirements of the Government Connect 'Code of Connection', with which the Council must comply. A Member suggested that Members be shown such software to test its suitability, however, the Officer indicated this would not be feasible.

It was then:-

### **RESOLVED**

That for future service review reports, the Lead Executive Member be present to support the Head of Service. Whilst Scrutiny notes the contents of the presented report, it requests further information in order to determine whether savings could be made through Shared Services at a later date, when a clearer direction on LGR is known.

#### **SC.66/08 SCRUTINY SHADOWING ROLES**

Members confirmed that they were kept fully briefed by their Executive counterparts, and continued to meet frequently.

#### **SC.67/08 AGENDA ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS OF SCRUTINY**

##### **Local Government Review**

Members wished for this item to be programmed onto the 23 July 2009 agenda.

**Use of Consultants Update**

Since a similar report was presented to the Group at its 20 April 2006 meeting, Members requested that an update report be programmed onto a future meeting agenda.

**Call in procedure**

In light of the pending review of the Council's Constitution, Members expressed a wish to consider the Council's current call in procedure at the meeting on 18 June 2009.

**Service Budget Analysis**

If possible, Members wished to receive reports in relation to Corporate Services and Human Resources at its next meeting on 18 June 2009.

(Meeting commenced at 10.00 am and concluded at 1.10 pm).

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Chairman