

**STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
MINUTES**

**Date: Thursday 29 August 2013**

**Time: 9:30 a.m.**

**Place: Shimkent Room, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage**

Present: Councillors J Thomas (Chair), J Brown, S Speller, H Tessier  
and S Walker.  
The Leader, Councillor S Taylor OBE CC

Also Present Stephen Hollingsworth 'Critical Friend'

Start / End Time Start Time: 9:30 a.m.  
End Time: 3:10 p.m.

**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M Cherney-Craw, G Clark, M Hearn, R Parker CC and B Underwood.

There were no declarations of interest.

**2. INTRODUCTION FROM THE CHAIR**

The Chair outlined the scope and purpose of the meeting and lead roles for questioning were reallocated due to the absence of several members of the committee.

**3. MINUTES – OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 29 JULY 2013**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 29 July 2013 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

**4. SCRUTINY REVIEW OF MEMBERS' EXPENSES AND HOSPITALITY**

Introductions were made and the Chair welcomed the Leader, the Constitutional Services Manager, the Member Services Officer and the 'Critical Friend', Stephen Hollingsworth to the meeting.

The Committee had before it information that had previously been circulated and requested by Members.

The Committee then asked a number of questions relating to Members' Expenses.

## **Sandwiches**

The Committee was advised that the provision of sandwiches for meetings was in lieu of claiming a subsistence allowance. This had resulted in savings in excess of £12,000 for the Council, but there remained a belief with some Members that the cost of sandwich provision could be further reduced by, for example imposing a cap on the cost of the sandwich and not providing fruit or cakes. Other Members spoke in favour of the existing system. The Leader requested that Members advise Member Services in good time when they required refreshments before a meeting in order to reduce wastage.

## **Town Twinning**

In reply to a question concerning the methods of transport used for town twinning trips to Europe the Leader made a case for the use of flights to the tripartite meeting in Autun which was acknowledged by the Committee.

The Committee was advised that the Town Twinning activities might be given a low priority by townspeople in consultation events and that the Leader was intending to conduct a review of Town Twinning activities and would be liaising with counterparts in France and Germany.

## **Conferences**

The Committee expressed the view that there was a disproportionate number of Executive Members attending conferences and that the purpose of conferences was often inadequately explained to non-Executive Members. The Leader acknowledged the disproportionate number of attendances by Executive Members and explained that this was necessary for them to remain up to date in their particular areas of responsibility. She added that it was an expectation that all Members, especially Chairs, should take advantage of conferences and training opportunities to add to their personal and skills knowledge base and would wish to see all Members with a Personal Development and Training Plan. It was felt by the Committee that attendances at events might increase if a brief description of the event in any publicity issued to Members was included.

There followed a discussion about expense claims made for conference attendance and concerns were expressed that Members might feel pressured not to claim expenses for attending conferences and thus not be able to afford to attend.

## **Community Reception**

It was suggested that the Community Reception be renamed to reflect the civic element implicit in the evening, for example 'The Mayor's Reception, however the Leader reminded the Committee that the event received significant sponsorship, which had allowed the event to continue.

The Committee was advised that the event was seen as a 'thank-you' for those in the community that had contributed to the Town during the year and was, as such, not an extravagant event. There was no desire within the Council to further reduce the significance of the event.

A Member commented that it would be helpful if Members were given the option of paying for their meal.

### **Mayoral Expenses**

The Committee was advised that considerable savings for the Council had been realised following the disposal of the Mayor's car and it was not possible for the decision to be revisited.

The importance of the public's perception of the Mayor was stressed and the Committee was advised that the Mayor's visits were reviewed on a weekly basis and that a higher quality vehicle was requested from the taxi company if appropriate.

### **Equalities Issues**

The Committee debated whether a lack of understanding of the structure of the allowances and expenses scheme inadvertently debarred interest from minority groups or those with caring or childcare responsibilities in becoming a Councillor.

It was noted that as a matter of principle no group should be excluded.

### **Travel and Car Parking**

The Leader advised the Committee that there was a voluntary agreement that Members would not claim mileage for attending events in town and had a responsibility to use the most cost efficient method of transport to events held outside of the town. Members would be assisted in the process by Member Services.

The Committee was advised that car mileage rates paid by the Council were above the levels set by HMRC and therefore had tax and National Insurance implications for both staff, Members and the Council. The Committee was further advised that this situation was under review and linked to the ongoing Single Status negotiations.

### **The 'Critical Friend'**

Stephen Hollingsworth advised the Committee that the allowance and expenses scheme should cover the costs of Members so that people could undertake the role without either being financially disadvantaged or feeling that they could not afford to do so. He considered that there might be too much emphasis on cost cutting without looking at the value that the allowance and expenses scheme added either in encouraging people to stand for office or promoting the town (through the office of the Mayor) in the eyes of the townspeople.

The Chair thanked the interviewees and Stephen Hollingsworth for their input into the

meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 12:30 and reconvened at 1:00pm.

### **Interview with Strategic Director (Resources)**

Following the break the Committee posed a number of questions to the Strategic Director (Resources) who had not been in attendance for the first part of the meeting.

In his replies the Strategic Director (Resources) advised the Committee that despite the budget cuts the amount available for Member training had not been reduced and that Directors and Heads of Service could liaise more with Executive Portfolio Holders and Chairs to proactively encourage other Members to take advantage of training and conferences. He did, however, caution against raising expectations to unrealistic levels.

In reply to a further question the Strategic Director (Resources) said that he believed the Members' allowances system to be open and transparent.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the input from Stephen Hollingsworth be noted and that the use of a critical friend be encouraged in subsequent reviews.
2. That the real and symbolic value of the Mayor, and the level of support needed be recognised.
3. That the proposed realignment of staff and Member mileage rates under the Single Status agreement to those advised by HMRC be noted
4. That the reduction in the refreshment spend be noted.
5. That the following recommendations be incorporated in to the final report for the Portfolio Holder:
  - That consideration be given to renaming 'The Community Reception' 'The Mayor's Community Reception'
  - That any policy regarding Mayoral transport should be supportive of a situation whereby the Mayor attending particular civic functions should not self drive.
  - That the Committee is supportive of a Leader led review into of Town Twinning activities
  - That there should be more publicity to advise Members of the availability of conferences and training events
  - That Members attending courses and conferences should be encouraged to share their experiences with all Members, perhaps through MMP sessions.
  - That Members should be encouraged to give feedback should they consider a course or conference to be poor value
  - That there should be a review of the induction process for new Members especially with regard to expenses, allowances and support services so that new Members are clear as their entitlement to claim for and take advantage of

training opportunities

- That new Members be teamed with a mentor
- That all Members should have a Personal Development and Training Plan
- That the Carers Attendance Allowance be reviewed, particularly in respect of the ability to pay family members for performing caring duties and the monthly payment cap.

**5. URGENT PART 1 DECISIONS AUTHORISED BY THE CHAIR OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

None

**6. URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

None.

**7. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That, under Section 100(A) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in paragraphs 1-7 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act as amended by SI2006 No. 88.
2. That, having considered the reasons for the following report being in Part II, it be agreed that maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighed the public interest in disclosure.

**8. PART II DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE**

None

**9. URGENT PART II DECISIONS AUTHORISED BY THE CHAIR OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

None.

**10. URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

**Chair**