

STRONGER COMMUNITIES SELECT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 16 FEBRUARY 2010

Councillors: Irene Neill (*Chairman*) (P), Ellen Crumly (P), David Holtby (P), Mollie Lock (P), Alan Macro (*Vice-Chairman*) (AP), Ieuan Tuck (P)

Also present: Ruwan Uduwera-Perera (Vice-Chairman of the Stronger Communities Partnership) and Stephen Chard (Policy Officer)

PART I

20. APOLOGIES.

An apology for inability to attend the meeting was received on behalf of Councillor Alan Macro.

21. MINUTES.

The Minutes of the meeting held on 5 October 2009 and 11 November 2009 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

22. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

There were no declarations of interest received.

23. STRONGER COMMUNITIES PARTNERSHIP BRIEFING.

The Committee considered a presentation (Agenda Item 4) concerning the work of the Stronger Communities Partnership (SCP).

In the course of the presentation Ruwan Uduwera-Perera made the following points:

- This was the newest sub partnership of the West Berkshire Partnership (WBP). Its purpose was to develop and deliver a long term strategic approach to improving the quality of life of people living, working and visiting West Berkshire. This was done through working in partnership to deliver the Sustainable Community Strategy for West Berkshire – ‘A Breath of Fresh Air’.
- The agenda of the SCP would widen from April 2010 when the new Equalities Act was due to be published.
- The remit and lifespan of the SCP had been decided by its members and it was intended that the work of the SCP would come to a close after a three year period.
- A focus of activity during that time was to mainstream the Stronger theme of accessibility through the other sub partnerships, thereby removing the need to retain the SCP. This included access to health services, education, transport, the environment, the ability to access the economy, housing and cultural services. All the aspects were inter-related and were about building social capacity across the whole community and minimising deprivation.
- While membership of the SCP was sufficient, there was a need for greater representation from some sectors. Current members sought to increase this through the groups they represented.

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- The SCP priorities were to:
 - (1) Foster a stronger sense of belonging within West Berkshire.
 - (2) Reduce inequality and disadvantage.
 - (3) Encourage participation and engagement in community life, including increasing local involvement in volunteering.
 - (4) Ensure local services remained accessible to the population they served.
- The number of volunteers was a success, with West Berkshire being one of the best areas in the country for attracting and engaging volunteers. Much of this was down to the good work of the Volunteer Centre and the affluence of some communities in West Berkshire which gave people, particularly retired people, the time to volunteer, generally in their own community. However this was not true for all areas of the District.
- Areas of work for the SCP included:
 - the development of a Partnership Quality Mark to recognise the achievements of community groups;
 - support given to the Greater Greenham Project;
 - support given to the Hate Crime Scrutiny Panel;
 - support given to Community Cohesion conferences and Community Planning conferences.

Members then discussed areas of deprivation and it was queried whether the people in these communities were aware of this and whether there was a risk of them being labelled. Ruwan Uduwera-Perera gave his view that there were instances where communities were labelled, through the work of organisations including estate agents and employment agencies.

The ability of people in deprived areas to seek, for example, benefits advice was queried. Ruwan Uduwera-Perera advised that there was a greater demand for more specialist support and advice than previously and the number of organisations who could give such advice was reducing. Many people accessed the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB), but advice given by the CAB was often of a more general nature.

The need to improve the level of affordable housing was highlighted. In particular the use of empty properties was mentioned as a way to reduce the number of people on the housing waiting list. It was agreed that this would be added to the work programme as an area for investigation.

Finally Ruwan Uduwera-Perera stated that the SCP was keen to have critical friends and challenge, and invited the Select Committee to raise issues with the SCP whenever necessary.

RESOLVED that the use of empty properties to improve the level of affordable housing in the District would be added to the work programme as an area for review. An aspect of this would be to seek to reduce the number of people on the housing waiting list.

24. SUPPORTING SMALL SCHOOLS.

The Committee considered a report (Agenda Item 5) concerning the work to be undertaken by the Select Committee to support small schools in West Berkshire.

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Councillor Irene Neill advised Members that this piece of work had been requested by Management Board. A review was therefore being led by the Head of Education Services. Councillors Irene Neill and Alan Macro were representing the Select Committee in this work, which was scheduled for completion in the summer of 2010.

In order to avoid duplication, the work being conducted by the Select Committee would not commence until the report from the Education group had been received. However this would not be just to approve the report, but would be an opportunity for the Select Committee to scrutinise the work undertaken and the proposals to help support small schools. Terms of Reference for the scrutiny work would be drawn up nearer the time and relevant officers, Headteachers, Governors and parents could be invited to provide evidence should the Select Committee want this approach. It was also suggested that the work of small school federations should be considered.

It was queried whether John O'Gaunt, which was a relatively small secondary school, could be incorporated into the work of the Education group and the Select Committee. Councillor Irene Neill agreed to take this suggestion to the first meeting of the Education group and it could also be added to the Terms of Reference for the work to be conducted by the Select Committee.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) The Select Committee's work to support small schools would commence on receipt of the Education Service's report.
- (2) Councillor Irene Neill would suggest the inclusion of John O'Gaunt to the Education group at its first meeting.

25. WORK PROGRAMME.

The Committee considered the work programme for the remainder of 2009/10 and 2010/11 (Agenda Item 6).

Further work was required on the school standards report before it was brought to the Select Committee for approval, to ensure it fully reflected the work undertaken. When completed the report would be sent to the Select Committee for approval via e-mail before going to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission (OSMC) for its endorsement.

The joint work with the Greener Select Committee to review accessibility of public transport had commenced.

An item had been added to the work programme by the OSMC to consider ways to reduce the number of people on the housing waiting list. This linked with the issue raised earlier in the meeting.

Items for the next meeting on 26 April 2010 were identified as:

- A review of the policy for private housing sector renewal.
- A briefing from either the Housing Sub Partnership of the WBP or on the work of the Greater Greenham project.
- Partnership activity in response to the recession, to assess the impact of the measures taken to mitigate the local effects of the recession.

Discussion then followed on whether measures taken to stop smoking on school sites were adequate and whether it was a potential area for scrutiny. It was agreed

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that this would be more appropriate for the Healthier Select Committee and therefore the suggestion would be forwarded to them to consider its inclusion on their work programme.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) Once completed the school standards report would be e-mailed to the Select Committee Members for approval before going to the OSMC for endorsement.
- (2) The work programme would be noted and the potential item with regards to smoking on school sites would be forwarded to the Healthier Select Committee for their consideration.

(The meeting commenced at 6.30pm and closed at 8.15pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature: