



Lewes District Council

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Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held in the **Telscombe Room, Southover House, Southover Road, Lewes** on **Thursday 7 November 2013** at **10.00am**

Present:

Councillors S J Osborne (Chair), P F Gardiner, S J Gauntlett, E C Merry, E E J Russell, J Stockdale and I J White

Officers Present:

R Allan, Scrutiny and Committee Officer
S Jump, Head of Finance
L Lacon, Head of Communications
J Rowlands, Chief Executive

In attendance:

Councillor James Page

Minutes

55 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 5 September 2013 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

56 Apologies

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors D R Edmunds and J M Harrison-Hicks.

57 Declaration of Interest

Councillor J Stockdale declared his personal, non-prejudicial interest in Agenda Item 6 (Paying for Open Spaces – Consultation Feedback).

58 Paying for Open Spaces – Consultation Feedback

The Committee received a presentation from the Head of Finance regarding the consultation feedback on Special Expenses. He explained the background to the consultation and how Special Expenses related to the work of the Council.

Special Expenses were a legislative mechanism that enabled the cost of local services provided by the District Council to be paid for by residents in the town/parish locality in which the services were provided. This mechanism mitigated the claim of double taxation which could arise where some local services were provided by town/parish councils and paid for by residents through their local town/parish precept. At the same time, these residents also paid towards the cost of similar services provided by the District Council in other areas across the District.

The Head of Finance took Councillors through the raw data that was collated from the online consultation that had taken place in September and October 2013. He advised that there was further qualitative data to be analysed from the open questions, as part of the online questionnaire and the focus groups that had taken place.

In response to a Councillor's question, the Head of Finance explained that the results of the online questionnaire were that residents in Lewes were not in favour of adopting Special Expenses, but that residents in most other areas in the District supported the introduction of Special Expenses.

The Committee questioned whether, as the data collected was of such a small sample, it could aid their consideration of Special Expenses. The Head of Finance explained that although the number of respondents of the online consultation was higher than other questionnaires the Council had previously analysed, it was not statistically significant. The Committee noted that the low turnout rate could be due to a lack of interest in this topic by residents.

The Head of Finance informed the Committee on how the consultation process had been managed at the Council. In response to a Councillor's question, the Chief Executive explained that the questions had been deliberately written in such a way as to not appear biased. She added that it may have been more useful if some questions had been given sliding scales as answers.

The Head of Communications advised that a series of focus groups with residents had taken place to discuss Special Expenses. The Chief Executive explained that the first focus group had included an open invitation as well as an invitation to the current Lewes District Council Citizen's Panel members. She advised that this had led to a bias within the group, and that additional groups had been arranged with an external facilitator to ensure the Council had independent results.

The Committee considered the fairness of Special Expenses, and questioned whether open spaces were used by residents who did not live in the same town in which that the open space was located in. It was noted that open spaces from some of the larger towns, such as Lewes and Newhaven, were enjoyed by residents who lived in other areas of the District, but that residents in Lewes and Newhaven may also use open

spaces in the smaller areas of the District.

In response to a Councillor's question, the Head of Finance explained that a transitional scheme to mitigate the impact on council tax arising from the introduction of Special Expenses had been considered, but was not advised and could lead to a loss of income for the Council.

The Leader of the Council explained to the Committee that Special Expenses were intended to make taxes fairer, in order that some areas of the District were not subsidising the larger towns.

(Note: Councillor Stockdale declared his personal, non-prejudicial interest in this item as he was a member of Lewes Town Council and, therefore, was able to take part in the consideration, discussion and voting thereon)

Resolved:

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| 58.1 | That the Head of Communications be requested to email all members of the Scrutiny Committee with the final qualitative analysis of the Special Expenses consultation; | HC |
| 58.2 | That the Leader of the Council be requested to ensure that future consultation exercises are run in accordance with best practice at the Council; | LC |
| 58.3 | That Members of the Scrutiny Committee be requested to email any further comments on Special Expenses to the Scrutiny and Committee Officer by 16 November 2013; and | SCO |
| 58.4 | That Members of the Scrutiny Committee wish it to be noted that no comment on Special Expenses will be reported to Cabinet at this stage. | SCO |

59 Scrutiny Review – Strengthening our Relationship with the Voluntary and Community Sector

The Committee considered the draft Report regarding the Scrutiny Review- Strengthening our Relationship with the Voluntary and Community Sector.

The Chair of the Scrutiny Panel took the Committee through the Report. He advised that this Report was due to be considered at the Cabinet meeting on 6 January 2014.

Councillors held the view that, in light of the forthcoming restructure at the Council, a Report requesting new staffing arrangements would be best considered after the new Director for that Department had joined the Council.

In response to a Councillor's question, the Chair of the Scrutiny Panel explained that the Panel had made the decision not to include a recommendation regarding the re-establishment of the Local Strategic

Partnership

Resolved:

59.1 That the Scrutiny and Committee Officer be requested to arrange a meeting of the Scrutiny Panel and the Director of Business, Strategy and Development to consider the draft Report regarding the Scrutiny Review - Strengthening our Relationship with the Voluntary and Community Sector; and

SCO

59.2 That the draft Report regarding the Scrutiny Review - Strengthening our Relationship with the Voluntary and Community Sector be postponed to a future meeting of the Cabinet in Spring 2014.

SCO

60 Date of Next Meeting

Resolved:

60.1 That the next scheduled meeting of the Scrutiny Committee to be held on Thursday 21 November 2013 at 10.00am in the Telscombe Room, Southover House, Southover Road, Lewes be noted.

All to note

The meeting ended at 11.50am

S J Osborne
Chair