

OPEN SESSION: There were a number of members of public present.

MINUTES OF A SPECIAL MEETING OF RINGWOOD TOWN COUNCIL

Held on Wednesday 16th June 2010 at 7.45pm

PRESENT: Cllr L C Ford (Town Mayor)
Cllr B H Terry (Deputy Town Mayor)
Cllr N J Chard
Cllr N R G Clarke
Cllr D R Cole
Cllr J Heron
Cllr Mrs G O'Reilly
Cllr W S Rippon-Swaine
Cllr M A Steele
Cllr Mrs J Terry
Cllr Mrs A Wiseman
Cllr Mrs B Woodfield

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr T Simpson, Town Clerk
Mrs J Stannard, Deputy Town Clerk
Mrs A Greenfield, Finance Officer
Simon Hookins, Student Advisor
John Mascal, Executive Director, NFDC
Chris Elliot, Head of Planning and Transportation, NFDC
District Cllr M Thierry

Prior to the meeting, The Town Clerk reported that apologies for absence had been received from Cllr P Chambers and Cllr Mrs M Urwin.

C/5051 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllrs Ford, Heron and Rippon-Swaine all declared a personal and prejudicial interest as Members of the District Council. They made statements, answered questions and left the room for the remainder of the meeting.

C/5052 GATEWAY PROJECT

Members considered the Town Clerk's report regarding the Ringwood Gateway Scheme (*Annex 'A' attached*).

Having declared a personal and prejudicial interest, Cllr Heron made a statement. He fully supported the proposal to bring all three local authorities into one building and said this would bring substantial benefits to the town and its residents. This was an opportunity to provide a unique "one-stop shop" service at a time when all council services were under review and resources were tight. The scheme would offer significant savings and would safeguard services for the town, which might otherwise be reduced or lost. He believed that further savings could be identified in addition to those outlined in the report to Cabinet as running costs and staff costs could be reduced. He said that the risks identified in the report must be addressed, but felt that these could be minimised and in some cases eliminated.

Cllr Clarke said that running costs would be critical to the Town Council as its capacity to absorb additional costs was minimal. He asked Cllr Heron if he agreed that costs must be made clear at an early stage in order to move the project forward. Cllr Heron said that the

project could be delayed in order to obtain absolute certainty on the costs. However, there was a high risk that the funds for this project may then be used elsewhere in the District and there would be no second chance. This could lead to the toilets not being replaced and the Visitor Information service being withdrawn. He agreed though that there was a need for an accurate forecast of costs without delay.

Cllr B Terry asked if Cllr Heron agreed that there should be a single partner managing the operation of the building. Cllr Heron felt this was essential in order to deliver savings. There was a need for a single point of delivery and true joint working was required to deliver a “one-stop shop”.

Having declared a personal and prejudicial interest, Cllr Ford made a statement. She endorsed Cllr Heron’s remarks and supported the project wholeheartedly, and stated that staffing matters and running costs must be resolved without delay.

Having declared a personal and prejudicial interest, Cllr Rippon-Swaine made a statement. He accepted the principle of the scheme and emphasised that this was a one-off and unique opportunity not to be missed. He said that the project would provide significant savings for the town in the long term. The gateway building would be iconic and a beacon for visitors.

Cllrs Ford, Heron and Rippon Swaine withdrew from the meeting at 8.10pm.

The Town Clerk agreed that this was a one-off opportunity at a time when money was tight. He said that there was only a vague reference to the operation of the building in the District Council’s report and there was a need to eliminate any doubt and clear up any misunderstandings, as staff should be made aware of how the move would affect them. He also highlighted that his investigations had shown that “one-stop shops” run by one agency worked in other areas of the country. He also felt that there were opportunities for further savings to be made, but it would not be possible to identify these until the operational arrangements had been agreed.

Cllr Clarke stated that, given the minimal capacity for the Town Council to absorb additional cost, there should be a cap on both capital and revenue costs. He was concerned about the impact should one partner drop out and the Town Council have to absorb any consequential costs. This could have a negative impact on future precepts.

Mr Mascall, Executive Director at New Forest District Council, said that there had to be trust, honesty and transparency between all three authorities in the partnership. He said that all three authorities would be represented at all levels, both Members and officers, and therefore the project management team should be trusted to report back at critical stages. He said that the project would provide a new building bringing all three authorities together in a central location, with new toilets and an enhanced Visitor Information service and would provide value for money.

Following a question from Cllr Steele, the Town Clerk clarified that the Town Council’s contribution would come from disposing of the building plot at the rear of Greenways and raising a loan against Greenways. Greenways would be retained as a capital asset and the income from letting out the building would service the loan.

Cllr Clarke was concerned what would happen if there was a delay in realising both the Town and District Councils’ assets. Mr Mascall hoped that there wouldn’t be a delay but said that this would be covered in a detailed risk management plan to be prepared as part of the project.

In response to Cllr Wiseman’s concerns about costs and design of the building, Mr Mascall explained the procurement procedure. He said that contractors on the County Council’s

approved tender list would be invited to bid to become partners in the scheme. Involving contractors in this way brings about a high level of cost certainty prior to any contract being let. He added that the design included with the report was an initial sketch design to identify the footprint of the building. Some new designs had already been drawn up, which were aesthetically more pleasing, and these would be shown in a public exhibition.

Cllr Woodfield stated that many people were concerned about the loss of parking spaces. Mr Elliott, Head of Planning and Transportation at New Forest District Council, said that any lost parking must be replaced and existing parking enhanced as part of the scheme. He confirmed that it would be possible to provide additional spaces and improve the layout of the existing car park. Members asked that this information be included in the public exhibition to reassure residents.

Cllr J Terry said that she had spoken to several members of the public who liked the “one-stop shop” idea. However, many people were concerned about the proposed unisex toilets and particularly the facilities for disposal of needles and sharps for drug users. She felt very strongly that the Councils should not condone the use of drugs by including such facilities in the toilets.

Mr Mascall replied that the proposed toilet design had been proven to be very successful in Keyhaven and Fordingbridge and the public had been supportive. The proposed layout eradicates internal meeting spaces, reduces antisocial behaviour and is easier to clean. He said that facilities for the disposal of sharps had been proven to be beneficial to society, but if Members felt strongly about this, it could be discussed further by the project management team.

It was noted that there was scope for the “one-stop shop” to deal with enquiries from multiple agencies, in addition to the three councils. This would mean that staff would be trained and have the technology to deal with enquiries for other agencies, such as the National Park Authority and the Police.

Cllr Chard suggested that all staff should be employed and managed by the Town Council. He was also concerned that staff and Members would lose the current benefit of free on-site parking and said that this needed to be addressed. The Town Clerk confirmed that these issues would be considered by the project management team. Members agreed that these issues, together with more accurate costing information, must be dealt with as a matter of priority.

Simon Hookins, Student Advisor, felt that this was a positive scheme for the town and would provide one user friendly building to serve the public. He encouraged Members not to let the small issues cloud their judgement and to proceed with the scheme.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Gateway scheme, as detailed in the report to the District Council's Cabinet, be welcomed and approved, subject to:
 - a) the Town Council's capital contribution being capped at £455,000 + 10%;
 - b) further discussions being undertaken on the operation of the building and its servicing in line with the proposals explained in paragraphs 4.8 and 4.9 (*please see Annex 'A' attached*);
 - c) in order to provide certainty as to revenue costs and charges of partners in operating a “one-stop shop”, a long term agreement be entered into governing changes in such costs and charges;
 - d) formal consultations be undertaken with staff about implementation and operation of the Gateway scheme; and

- e) Policy & Finance Committee consider final arrangements for implementing the scheme, including the taking of any loans, and make recommendations to Council.
- 2) That the Town Clerk's action, in consultation with the Chairman of Policy & Finance Committee, to appoint Messrs Meesons, the Council's solicitors, to represent the Council in matters relating to the agreement for this project be approved.
- 3) That Policy & Finance Committee be requested to consider authorising up to four Members to take any action necessary that needs to be taken between meetings of that Committee, subject to a report being made to the next meeting of that Committee.

RECEIVED AND ADOPTED
30th June 2010

TOWN MAYOR