

COUNCILLOR JEFFREY CHEETHAM MAYOR

MINUTES OF: THE COUNCIL OF THE BOROUGH OF ROSSENDALE

Date of Meeting: 13th December 2005

PRESENT: The Mayor Councillor J Cheetham (in the Chair)
Councillors Alcroft, Atkinson, A Barnes, D Barnes, L Barnes, Challinor, Crosta, Disley, Entwistle, Graham, Hancock, Lamb, Neal, Nicholass, Ormerod, Pilling, Robertson, Ruddick, Sandiford, Starkey, H Steen, P Steen, Swain, Thorne, Unsworth and Young.

IN ATTENDANCE: Owen Williams, Chief Executive
Phil Seddon, Head of Financial Services
Julian Joinson, Democratic Services Manager

APOLOGIES: Councillors Farquharson, Forshaw, J Pawson, S Pawson and McShea.

BUSINESS MATTERS

1. MINUTES

Resolved:

That the minutes of the Council meeting held on 16th November 2005 be signed by the Mayor as a correct record.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE MAYOR, THE LEADER OR THE HEAD OF THE PAID SERVICE

The Mayor reported the death on Sunday of Graham Woodcock, who had previously served as a County Councillor for Rossendale. Details of the funeral arrangements were provided.

There were no communications from the Leader or Chief Executive.

4. MEMBERS' QUESTION TIME

Councillor Alcroft asked the following question:-

As I understand it, all Council staff will have been moved out of the Town Hall

by Christmas, leaving the building empty.

- Could the leader confirm that this is the case and tell me for what period the building is to remain empty?
- What is the expected cost of maintaining the building, which may be subject to vandalism, fly posting, etc?
- Could the Leader also provide similar information on the Neighbourhood Offices in Waterfoot and Haslingden, which are also scheduled for closure?

The Leader replied that the changes formed part of the Council's Accommodation Strategy, which had been agreed earlier in the year. In respect of the Town Hall, the majority of staff would leave before Christmas and remaining staff should leave the building by the end of January 2006. The building would remain empty until the beginning of the development of the new Valley Centre. Options for the site included the quick demolition of the building and use of the land as a car park for the One Stop Shop, or retention of the shell for marketing purposes.

Budgetary provision of £38k had been made for the mothballing of all vacated properties as part of the Accommodation Strategy and steps would be taken to minimise the impact of vandalism. The Neighbourhood Offices would close on 23rd December 2005 and would be marketed as quickly as possible after that. The Waterfoot Office had been offered to the County Council as sitting tenant, but no formal response had yet been received.

Councillor Disley asked the following question:-

Is the Leader aware of the letter sent by the Refuse Department to all customers on the Assistance List and the upset caused to elderly, disabled and infirm residents? Do you agree with the demands for supporting evidence in the form of a pension book (now obsolete) or a doctor's letter (difficult and expensive to obtain) as proof of qualification for assistance. Are you aware that the Council's letter had required a form to be submitted, but had not included any return envelopes?

The Leader responded that he had received a copy of the letter. That letter had referred to benefit books, rather than pension books. The Assistance List identified those residents who were unable to move their own bins and who Council would wish to continue to help. However, there was an acknowledgment that people's needs might change over a period of time. There were currently around 10% of residents on the Assistance List, which had not been reviewed for some time. The rate of assistance in Rossendale was double that of comparable Authorities. Accordingly, the list was being updated to ensure that services continued to be provided to those in genuine need.

It was acknowledged that the wording of the letter had perhaps not been as customer friendly as had originally been intended. However, the letter did

contain the relevant information about how residents might contact the Council to continue to access the service. The provision of supporting documents would clearly be helpful, but these were not essential. Officers would subsequently arrange to visit customers to determine their needs.

The Mayor expressed the view that the press might be in a position to assist the Council in reassuring its residents that those in need would continue to receive assistance.

Councillor Neal asked the following question:-

In respect of the Whitworth Area Forum meeting, would the Leader consider the use of an alternative venue from Whitworth Community High School from now on such as, maybe, Whitworth Day Care Centre, which is Disability Discrimination Act compliant, would be far more cost effective than the High School and is also much easier to get to being situated on a main bus route?

The Leader thanked Councillor Neal for his suggestion of an alternative venue for the Whitworth Area Forum. Officers would look into the suitability and availability of the venue for possible future use. Any suggestions from Members about venues arising from their local knowledge was always welcomed.

The difficulty experienced at Whitworth Community High School, which had led to the cancellation of the Forum meeting on 5th December 2005 was the result of an uncharacteristic error on the part of the school. Representatives of the school had apologised to the Council for the error and any inconvenience caused.

Councillor Neal enquired whether the Leader could explain the cancellation of a number of recent I&DeA training events and give an assurance that further training events would not be postponed.

The Leader replied that the Council was currently participating in a pilot programme of Member Development provide by the I&DeA, known as the Community Leadership Fitness Check. This pioneering piece of work involved Member Peers meeting a small number of councillors in their own ward to discuss their community leadership role (known as Ward Walks) and a follow-up workshop event open to all Members.

Ward Walks successfully took place on 30th November and 2nd December 2005 in Irwell, Cribden, Hareholme and Stacksteads. A date provisionally arranged on 1st December 2005 for additional Ward Walks was postponed to enable a more suitable date to found to maximise take up of this development opportunity. The workshop proposed for 4.30 pm on 8th December 2005 was postponed because it would not have been accessible to those Members who worked and to hold the event later in the day would have clashed with a meeting of the Licensing Committee. It was anticipated that further Ward Walks and the workshop would now take place early in the new year.

Every effort was made to ensure that training events proceeded as planned, but it was not possible to give an assurance against circumstances causing a future event to be postponed.

Councillor Hancock asked the following question:-

Can the Leader give an assurance that, in view of the importance of the Town Hall site adjacent to the new One Stop Shop, any vandalism and fly-posting will be cleared as a priority?

The Leader answered that the Town Hall site had a high profile and that any vandalism would be dealt with quickly. He had already discussed these issues with the Chief Executive and it was likely that early demolition would emerge as the preferred option in order to minimise vandalism and to provide a car park for the One Stop Shop. However, as stated previously, the use of the building as a marketing tool for the regeneration process was also being considered.

Councillor Hancock also enquired whether Leader would give an assurance that people who were unable to provide documentary evidence in respect of the Assistance List for waste collection would not be automatically be excluded from the list. The Leader reiterated that the Council would take a sympathetic approach where residents were clearly in need of assistance. Councillor Lamb asked that care should be taken in the future to ensure that letters to vulnerable customers did not cause any unnecessary distress and the Mayor suggested a process of quality control for such letters. Councillor Challinor expressed the view that a letter surveying the waste collection needs of all residents should have been distributed. Councillor Disley asked if a notice could be placed in the Free Press to clarify the situation regarding the requirement for a doctor's letter. The Leader undertook to look at the whole situation afresh.

Councillor Hancock raised the following:-

Can I ask that we begin the process to appoint a new Chief Executive immediately, also that Members who will form the interviewing panel receive specific training prior to the interview and short-listing process?

The Leader responded, stating that an advertisement was due to be published in the second week of January 2006. The Council was also in competition with neighbouring authorities and hence would use a recruitment agency in order to ensure a professional approach. An Appointment Panel would be established and training provided. Councillor Hancock would normally be a Member of that Panel. The Council was determined to appoint the right person for this key post.

Councillor Swain asked the following question:-

Can the Leader report on the customer satisfaction survey carried out recently?

The Leader replied that the Council was currently undergoing the direction of travel self-assessment process with the Audit Commission. A report had recently been provided to the Overview and Scrutiny (Audit and Performance Management) Committee and the Cabinet. Part of that assessment process had involved the regular customer satisfaction survey. An independent organisation had carried out a new survey of 800 customers. Under the latest survey results 62.4% of customers were fairly or very satisfied. A further 19.1% had not expressed a negative view as to their levels of satisfaction. The survey results showed that the improvements made to the Council's services were having a positive effect.

Councillor Robertson asked the following question:-

Can the Leader report on what the Council is doing about the proposed closure of Ward 11 at Rossendale General Hospital? It was understood that staff had been sent home on some occasions, or had been transferred to other hospitals. However, there remained a large number of patients in the Rossendale. It was also claimed that the telephone on Ward 11 often remained unanswered.

The Leader responded that some thought was being given to health issues. There were six consultations underway from various health organisations operating within the Lancashire and Greater Manchester areas, which might affect Rossendale residents. The closure of Ward 11 was of particular concern to the Council. However, the reasons for the change put forward by the proposers was that the health service was changing and that a specialised regional centre was required. He indicated that the Council should have a full debate on health issues and that an item would be placed on the next Council agenda.

A number of Members then spoke on health issues. The Mayor indicated that he had contacted Janet Anderson MP about the possibility of new hospital facilities being provided. Councillor Young stressed that he was opposed to the gradual erosion of hospital facilities and emphasised the need for local hospitals. Councillor Neal outlined the ongoing trend towards larger specialist hospitals, but that the public did not want to travel too far for services. Councillor Hancock asked that the matter of the telephone on Ward 11 be raised as a matter of urgency with the appropriate health body. He also suggested that the Council should have a greater say in the various health consultations and should make its views known in order to secure the best services for its residents.

Councillor A Barnes indicated that Rossendale had not previously been proactive in its dealings with the various Primary Care Trusts, but was now beginning to do so. There was a need for the Council to take a strong lead in this role on behalf of the community. The Mayor indicated that other Councils had successfully adopted this role. Councillor Sandiford stated that she served on the Lancashire Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Health Equalities, which had a consultative role in respect of health issues. That body

had established a joint Committee with the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities to consider the cross boundary health issues. This process would ensure that provision for Rossendale did not fall through any 'gap'.

The Leader indicated that there was a need for a balance between local and specialist provision and that some changes would be inevitable. He indicated that Members could take a more active role in the discussion of health issues through the LSP Health Theme Group. He also reiterated that an informed debate would be held within the Borough.

5. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

A Member of the public, Mr I Swingewood, circulated a paper at the meeting entitled 'Hands Off Our Hospital' and spoke against the closure of Ward 11 at Rossendale General Hospital. Mr Swingewood indicated that he had first hand experience of the facilities at Ward 11, through the illness and treatment of a close family member. He expressed concern at the information which had been made available by the relevant health organisations and requested that Members of the Council speak to service users, carers and health staff to ascertain the full facts.

Mr Swingewood expressed the view that the incidence of drug abuse among young people was likely to give rise to high levels of patients with psychiatric problems in the future. He also stated that financial reasons appeared to be taking priority over patients' needs and that the hospital was being stripped of its assets. He referred to a proposed reduction in service from 20 beds to 2 acute beds.

Mr Swingewood suggested that local and county councils should have a measure of control over changes to health provision. He also indicated that he would be happy to attend any debate on the Ward 11 proposals at a future meeting of Council.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL

Cabinet – 7th December 2005

There were no recommendations to Council from the Cabinet meeting held on 7th December 2005.

(The meeting started at 7.00 pm and concluded at 8.15 pm)