

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SAFER AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES
POLICY & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNTY HALL CHELMSFORD, ON
18 JUNE 2010**

Membership

Councillors

Members

Kevin Bentley	Eddie Johnson
Jude Deakin	John Knapman
* Margaret Fisher	* Chris Pond (Vice Chairman)
* Mike Garnett	* Michael Skeels
Elizabeth Hart	* Simon Walsh (Chairman)
* Ray Howard	Mavis Webster
(* present)	

Also present:

The following officers were in attendance throughout the meeting:-

Graham Redgwell Governance Officer
Janet Mills Committee Officer

The meeting commenced at 10.00 am

27. Apologies and Substitutions

The Committee Officer reported apologies and substitution notices as follows:

Apology

Substitution

Councillor J. Deakin
Councillor J. Knapman
Councillor E. Hart
Councillor E. Johnson
Councillor M Webster

28. Committee Membership

Membership appointments to this Committee had been made at the full Council Meeting 11 May 2010. Since that time a number of changes had been made. The Committee officer circulated a revised membership list giving final details of the new membership of this Committee. The Committee noted the following membership information.

Members

Kevin Bentley
 Jude Deakin
 Margaret Fisher
 Mike Garnett
 Elizabeth Hart
 Ray Howard

Eddie Johnson
 John Knapman
 Chris Pond (Vice Chairman)
 Michael Skeels
 Simon Walsh (Chairman)
 Mavis Webster

Substitute Members

John Baugh
 Janet Whitehouse
 Elizabeth Webster

29. Declarations of Interest

The following declarations of interest were recorded

Member	Personal Interest as:
Councillor S Walsh	Resided in a Grade 2 Listed Windmill Member of the Police Authority
Councillor Pond	Chairman of the Local Historical Society User of the Essex Records Office for past 40 years Member Loughton Town Council/Loughton Residents Association Member of the Loughton Town Council Conservation and Heritage Sub Committee
Councillor M Skeels	Member for Tendring Rural East (Heritage properties in his division were discussed during the meeting).
Councillor M Fisher	Member of the Police Authority
Councillor R Howard	Trustee of the Cleanaway Trust Fund Member of the Royal British Legion

30. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

With minor textural changes, the minutes of the meeting held on 16 April 2010 were agreed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

31. Continuation of the Essex Heritage Scrutiny

The Committee received report (SSC/11/10) from Graham Redgwell Governance Officer. The report summarised the information gathered to date and put forward some matters for further consideration. The Committee discussed and considered the following matters before agreeing its initial findings and recommendations. The Committee agreed that the first draft of its formal report, containing its initial findings and recommendations would be forwarded to Councillor Jeremy Lucas Cabinet Member who was not able to attend today's Committee meeting and had forwarded his apology.

Brown and White Signage

Currently the signs appeared in villages close to the tourist attraction. The Committee concluded that there was a need for a more consistent approach to the placing of tourist attraction brown and white signs on major routes/trunk roads to give directions to those people travelling from further distances away. The Committee proposed that the Councils Highways department should work jointly with the Tourism department to look at the current Brown and White Sign Policy to ensure it was still relevant. The Committee also agreed that appropriate officers from the Highways and Transportation department be invited to a future Committee to give their comments and views on the matter.

Blue Plaque Scheme

The Committee agreed that the scheme undertaken in Loughton was to be considered as good practice.

Essex Record Office - Achieves

With regard to record storage, the Committee agreed that digitalisation seemed the best way forward, as this method of storage was unlikely to be changed or superseded by new or different technology.

It was suggested that it would be beneficial for the Essex Record Office to change its charging policy. Currently there was a charge (£10 per day) for anyone wishing to copy and digitalise information.

It was proposed that the charge could be reduced for individuals willing to deposit a copy of any digitalised images with the Record Office

War Memorials

The importance of retaining War Memorials to commemorate those who had died during the recent 'modern day' conflicts and those who had died during World War I and World War II was acknowledged by the Committee.

The Committee concluded that in many cases, War Memorials had historically been commissioned and erected by organisations and adhoc committees that no longer existed. For this reason it was unclear who was now the rightful owner or who now had responsibility for their upkeep.

The Committee suggested that under the 1923 Act, powers could be delegated to Parish Councils to be the lead body responsible for establishing ownership of War Memorials in their catchment areas. District Councils could take the lead role where no Parish Councils existed.

National Issues

The Committee acknowledged that, due to the current national economic downturn, Government funding would be limited for the foreseeable future.

With regard to how English Heritage distributed its funding between public sector and private owners, it was concluded that the Committee could not influence the English Heritage policy on the matter.

The Committee acknowledged that there could be substantial costs incurred by private owners for the upkeep and maintenance of listed buildings. With regard to buildings in private ownership being left to deteriorate the Committee agreed that they had seen little evidence that private owners did not keep their properties in good order. For this reason the Committee would not seek to change the Councils existing policy on this matter. The Committee acknowledged that at any one time, a number of publicly owned buildings often stood empty. With regard to repairs and upkeep of these buildings councils needed to set a good example.

The Committee concluded that shop frontages had often been rebuilt inappropriately, these were often not in keeping with the remainder of the building or the local street scene. The Committee proposed to ask District Councils to stringently enforce the rules when agreeing planning applications, especially in conservation areas.

Particular Local Issues

The history of Essex was synonymous with buildings wooden construction, for this reason these were of particular interest. The Committee concluded that there were some difficulties when endeavouring to preserve these. In particular, where buildings did not meet the 'official listing' status there were inconsistencies in the listing process, The Committee acknowledged that the local listing scheme had no legal status, but concluded that it would be helpful if District Councils should adopt the local listing register process and be keener on enforcement issues, especially in extreme cases of neglect. It was acknowledged that the local listing register was also used by the Fire Authority to establish whether buildings were historical, listed in some way or had thatched roofs.

School buildings

It was acknowledged that Essex Council was undertaking the 'Building Better Schools for the Future', a school regeneration initiative across the county. The Committee suggested that where ever possible, school buildings deemed to be of historical interest should be entered on to the local list, and be repaired or upgraded rather than be demolished.

Designation and Control of Conservation Areas and Buildings

The Committee acknowledged and accepted that areas must develop organically and that not all buildings would need to be hundreds of years old, before receiving an official or local listing.

The role undertaken by Essex County Council, the District, Town and Parish Councils was discussed. From the evidence collected to date the Committee reached the following conclusions:

Essex County Council

The Essex County Council Heritage department, was well managed, operated the right ethics and where possible implemented best practice. Its officers were well respected across the county for their experience and expertise and their ability to communicate effectively on all levels and with the public.

District Councils

- There was a lack of consistency in the level of priority given by District Councils to conservation areas
- District Council officers, did not always have the right level experience and expertise or support required to deal with some heritage and conservation matters. Positive action was often dependent upon the interests and enthusiasm of the individual officers.
- There was inconsistency in designation of new conservation areas
- There was inconsistency in the use of local listing and applying conservation status where buildings/areas had for some reason not met the 'official listing' criteria.
- District Councils should stringently enforce planning rules especially in conservation areas.
- Enforcement was also needed where possible, to ensure preservation of original signage, street furniture the local indigenous planting to ensure preservation of the complete 'street scene'. With regard to Essex county Council highway schemes the Committee suggested that the Highways Department be asked to consider the need to preserve historic street furniture and where appropriate either restore or sympathetically replace these items as a matter of course during highway schemes. The Committee acknowledged that when undertaking this requirement that extra costs may be incurred.
- Enforced repair notices should be applied more often. There was a need for a consistent approach to when councils should begin the repair notice process.
- Where appropriate the compulsory purchase process should be put into action.

Town Councils

- There was a lack of consistency in the involvement with Town Councils. Often the level of expertise within Town Councils was overlooked or disregarded

Parish Councils

- There was a lack of consistency in the involvement with Parish Councils.

The Committee discussed the above conclusions and proposed that the Essex County Council Heritage Department should in collaboration with District Councils, take on a more overarching role, across the whole county. The Committee considered that by joining resources together this may enable staff to be more proactive rather than reactive. The Committee also considered that this would also be more cost effective.

Buildings Standing Idle

The Committee raised a general concern regarding buildings that had been purchased but were standing idle. The future of properties, some of historical interest, procured by BAA if the G2 project at Stansted Airport did not proceed was unclear as was the future of properties owned by other large land holders such as railway companies, (with land containing railway heritage), was briefly discussed. The Committee acknowledged that the Essex County Council had a responsibility to ensure proper management of its own historical buildings, and 'highways holdings' if they were standing idle.

Security

The need to provide a level of security on the sites of idle historic buildings, to prevent vandalism and damage was briefly mentioned.

Heritage Street

The possibility of introducing a 'heritage street', such as the Museum Street in Loughton into each district of Essex was acknowledged as being a good idea and was briefly discussed by the committee.

32. Night Time Street Lighting

The Committee noted that this matter would be dealt with in July 2010. Graham Redgwell, Governance Officer advised the Committee that Councillor Norman Hume Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation would be attending the Committee in July to give his responses to the recommendations made in the Committees Night Time Street Lighting Scrutiny report.

33. Urgent Business Part 1 Business

In light of the recent review of "Buncefield Incident" the Chairman accepted a letter which had previously been seen by the Essex County Council Scrutiny Board from Councillor Ray Howard. The letter from Mr. George Whately, a Canvey Island resident, the letter gave details of a recent incident at one of the two COMAH sites in Canvey Island and asked that the Essex County Council ensure that a safe siting policy be in place at the sites. The matter was discussed.

Resolved

It was agreed that a Task and Finish Group, to include membership from the appropriate emergency services and local district councils would be set up to look into the matter. The Group would report its findings to the Safer Stronger Communities Policy Scrutiny Committee by December 2010. .

Due to the nature of the information being discussed some of the Task and Finish meeting may be held in private.

34. Date of Future Meetings

Members noted that the following dates had been reserved for this committee as activity days, and may comprise:

- Meetings in private
- Meetings in public
- Working groups
- Sub-committee meetings
- Outside visits

Friday 16 July 2010

Friday 17 September 2010

Friday 15 October 2010

Friday 19 November 2010

Friday 10 December 2010

Friday 14 January 2011

Friday 11 February 2011

Friday 14 March 2011

There being no urgent business the meeting closed at 11.30 am

Chairman