

# minutes



Meeting CROSS SERVICE AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS SELECT COMMITTEE

Date Wednesday, 15<sup>th</sup> December 2004 (commencing at 10.30 am)

## Membership

Persons absent are marked with `A`

## COUNCILLORS

Councillor Roy R J Barsley (Chair)

Councillor M Brandon-Bravo OBE (Vice-Chair)

	Mrs Sue Bennett	A	Joe Lonergan MBE
	Joyce Bosnjak JP	A	J T A Napier
A	S Carroll		D E Pulk
	V H Dobson		Mrs S Smedley
A	Andy Freeman		M Suthers OBE
	E Llewellyn - Jones		

## Also in attendance

Councillor Mrs S Place

## MINUTES

The minutes of the last meeting on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2004, having been circulated, were confirmed and signed by the chair.

## APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from:-

Councillor Joe Lonergan MBE

“ Andy Freeman

“ JTA Napier

## DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

None.

## **PRESENTATIONS ON THE FUTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

Roger Poole, Deputy Director of the Government Office East Midlands (GOEM) explained that, in view of the result of the referendum in the North East, the Government was revising its strategy for devolution in England and information should be available in the New Year. Already approved are the Regional Assemblies Act, which will assist the scrutiny of the regional economic strategy; the Planning and Competitive Purchasing Act to control funding; and the merging of the Housing and Planning Boards, to enhance the role of planning strategy. Proposed Government funding to the Regional Assemblies for 2007/8 is £21 m. National policy and funding on transport, housing and economic issues could be influenced by a report that is due out in March 2005.

He explained that Government Offices work in partnership with the private sector to promote regional priorities and budget policies, using public sector agreements to even out the disparities between North and South. He assured the Committee that the Government will continue its commitment to bring together the national and local levels of government, decentralising decision making and developing issues to boost the local economy. The Government Office East Midlands, the Regional Development Agency and the Local Government Association are currently looking at roles, strategies and funding to provide greater coherence in the East Midlands region.

Martin Briggs, Chief Executive of the East Midlands Development Agency, gave a brief history of the Regional Development Agencies and how regional development has evolved from the 1970's to the present day. Since 1997, when the Government renewed its commitment to devolution in Scotland and Wales, Regional Development Agencies have been created in England to allow the regions to focus on their own particular needs and decide their own economic strategies, working with Regional Assemblies. The Government Office will continue to monitor each region's economic performance.

The result of the referendum in the North East means that the next stage of devolution in England, to which the Government remains committed, will require a new agenda. He commented that devolution and decentralisation were not the same thing. Issues raised include whether it is possible to decentralise without devolution, and whether public service reform is required to manage local and regional responsibilities. Other areas that may be added to the social, economic and environmental policies currently under the umbrella of the Government Office, the Regional Development Agency and the Regional Assembly are health, education and skills and transport. Future

plans will need to include decisions on regional funding and expenditure. Councillor Barsley spoke of the need for information to ensure that local government is aware of all the opportunities available, and stressed that accountability was a serious issue that still needed to be addressed.

Councillor Bosnjak asked how much of the funding being provided to Regional Assemblies was being wasted in the duplication of administration costs, and who was measuring the success and effectiveness of the regional bodies. Roger Poole explained that performance evaluation was a continual process in order to achieve PSA targets. The Government Office was keeping costs tight and using local area agreements to reduce costs further. Martin Briggs pointed out that there were 15 key performance indicators agreed with government and regional agencies, these being reported at 3, 5 and 10 years.

Councillor Martin Brandon-Bravo was concerned that the regions reflect a genuine identity, and felt that leaving the Local Government Association out of the regional decision making arrangement was a mistake, it needed more input at local level to improve the situation. Roger Poole agreed, and pointed out that the metropolitan infrastructure means that changes may be required at local level, and, whilst the Assemblies were set up to bring in the business voice and independent ideas, the Local Government role was crucial to their effectiveness.

In reply to a question from Councillor Stella Smedley, Martin Briggs explained that some things were better dealt with at regional level – regeneration could be administered nationally with decisions decentralised to regional level to encourage fundamental collaboration across all areas. Councillor Smedley expressed concern that regional assemblies had been given more fundamental freedoms than local authorities ever had.

Councillor Martin Suthers pointed out that, since more than half the electorate did not bother to vote, the public appeared to have been alienated and it will require major changes for the policy to be accepted. The regional structure was Government driven when it should begin at local level; the representation of 1 member per 1½ constituencies was not acceptable and there was a need to give proper powers to local elected representatives who were accountable to their electorate.

Janet Ward, Chief Executive of the East Midlands Regional Local Government Association, commented on the collaboration between the Government Office, the Regional Development Agency and the Assembly. The Regional Assembly had no legal structure, it was a voluntary body that currently resides under the Local Government Association umbrella with the Local Government Association retaining responsibility for staff and administration. In the future it may become a company limited by guarantee, which will facilitate the funding issue.

On behalf of the Committee Councillor Barsley thanked everyone for attending

and hoped that the Study Group would take on board the questions raised by the presentations. He repeated the invitation to all members to contribute to the study group since the issue was of utmost importance to the future of local government, and its proper representation and accountability to its electorate.

### **STUDY VISIT TO THE EAST MIDLANDS REGIONAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION GENERAL MEETING AND THE DEBATE ON THE FUTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

The report was presented by Lynn Senior, Head of Scrutiny, who informed the Committee that the Local Government Association would be providing its own report on the event, which would be available for the next meeting.

Members reported back to the Committee on the issues discussed in the individual groups they attended at the event.

Janet Ward, Chief Executive of the East Midlands Local Government Association, confirmed that the government would be made aware of the report. The Local Government Association would add the information to its business plan and set an agenda on behalf of Local Authorities to improve operations and accountability.

Councillor Barsley was concerned that there appeared to be less scrutiny at regional level. Councillor Bosnjak agreed and was curious about the role of the Local Strategic Partnerships, including their costs and effectiveness, and felt this warranted some investigation.

Janet Ward reported that she is now able to provide political briefings and to speak at Assembly meetings but underlined that, since local government representatives have the majority on the Assembly, they need to be well briefed, must deliver reasoned arguments and be aware that voting was crucial.

### **STUDY VISIT TO DIRECTIONS FINNINGLEY – ROBIN HOOD AIRPORT – DONCASTER/SHEFFIELD**

Councillor Place, who took part in the visit, reported that everyone had been impressed with the corporate image and the clear evidence that all the agencies were working well together.

The apprenticeship scheme was interesting and has accepted 12 candidates, 25 % of them from the North Nottinghamshire area, which was encouraging. There have been reports of some problems with transport arrangements, especially for people travelling to work at the airport from North Nottinghamshire, and this issue will be raised at a partnership meeting. The high expectations of some of the applicants for airport jobs had highlighted a lack of practical skills and interview techniques that had been

identified and would be corrected.

In reply to an enquiry from Councillor Stella Smedley, Lynn Senior confirmed that the East Midlands Development Agency was not currently involved with the projects at Directions Finningley although Directions Finningley was keen to develop links as highlighted in the study visit report.

### **STUDY GROUP MEETING DATES**

This discussion was postponed until the next meeting of the Committee on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2005.

The meeting closed at 12.25 pm

### **CHAIR**

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