

THE ABERDEEN CIVIC FORUM

ABERDEEN, 22nd November, 2003. - Minute of Meeting of the Civic Forum.
Present:- Lavina Massie (Chairperson); and Jane Adam, Anne Anderson, Billie Arthur, Ron Bird, Tom Bruce, Kate Collins, Jeanette Copland, Andy Finlayson, Stanley Flett, Kath Forman, Eileen Grassick, Michael Heaney, Colin Henderson, David Henderson, Isobel Hunter, Anna Kidd (substituting for Catherine Drever), Anne Knight, John Lamond, Abdul Latif, John Lawrence, Gregor McAbery, Dave MacFarlane, Rita Meres, Isobel Reid, Tracy Reid, Bill Roadnight, Ian Ross, Hilda Yemisi Smith, Alex Stocks, and Alastair Williamson.

Apologies - Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Esther Adams, Alexander Bisset, Isobel Boyter, Bill Cormie, Catherine Drever, Dawn Galashan, Guus Glass, Esther Jamieson, William McGee, Alan Muir, Duncan Munro, Margaret Neil, Sue Rae, Marjory Skinner, Bill Traynor, Jennifer Wheeler, Patricia Wokoma and Christina Wood.

In Attendance – Councillor Neil Fletcher; Gordon Edwards (Director of Finance and ICT), Wendy Turnbull (Committee Services Officer), Kate Anderson (Community Learning and Development), Dave Valentine, Jackie Burns, Grace Mamman and Sandy Scott (Community Development) .

MINUTE OF PREVIOUS MEETING

1. The Minute of the previous meeting of 4th October, 2003, had been circulated and was approved as a correct record.

The Chairperson advised that meetings on the Local Plan would be held throughout the week commencing the 24th November, 2003, with a final opportunity to input into the consultation process on Saturday, 29th November, 2003 at the Maritime Museum.

THE COMMON GOOD

2. The Chairperson welcomed Gordon Edwards, Corporate Director for Finance and ICT Services, Aberdeen City Council, and Councillor Neil Fletcher, Convener of the City Council's Resources Management Committee, who were in attendance to seek views on the Common Good.

There had been circulated to members (1) copies of the slides used in Gordon Edwards' presentation; (2) the Common Good Revenue Budget 2003/04 which also showed the budget and the estimated out-turn for 2002/03; (3) a list of criteria used for the award of civic hospitality; and (4) a map of Aberdeen showing land and property held by the Common Good.

Mr. Edwards welcomed the opportunity to address the Civic Forum on the Common Good Budget. He outlined the origin and history of the Common Good since it was granted by Robert the Bruce in 1319. Aberdeen City Council was now statutorily

responsible for the administration of the Common Good. Within the context of administering the fund for the benefit of the community as a whole, the Common Good could be used to uphold the dignity of the City, for example, civic ceremonies; the management and upkeep of property held on by the Common Good; safeguarding the corporate rights of the community; granting donations to public institutions or charities; and any other purpose which, was in the reasonable judgement of the Council, for the good of the community as a whole. The general principles of administering the Common Good were to preserve the capital of the Common Good; to spend annual rental income and investment income; and to make exceptional or one-off spends from the cash balances as long as the overall value of the Common Good was preserved.

The total value of the Common Good as at March, 2003, was £30.751m. Mr. Edwards stated that the Common Good was, overall, in a healthy financial position, its value having gradually increased in the last four years. He explained that annual deficits incurred prior to the City Council inheriting the fund in 1996 were largely due to payments to the Recreational Facilities Trust in respect of the Beach Leisure Centre development.

Mr. Edwards made reference to the costs of the development of the Accord Card which were partly met through the Scottish Executive Modernising Government Fund monies and partly from the Common Good. The Council's auditors had suggested that the £1m used for this purpose could be reimbursed from the General Revenue Budget and this had now been done.

Mr. Edwards also made reference to the position in respect of funding capital expenditure from the Common Good. The Council had previously challenged a decision that the Common Good could not fund capital projects without the Secretary of State's approval. He advised that the forthcoming change in arrangements for local authorities' capital spending from Section 94 consent to the prudent management regime would remove this restriction and be beneficial to the City. Mr. Edwards concluded by advising that the possibility of producing user friendly leaflets explaining the use of the Common Good had been considered.

The Civic Forum then heard from Councillor Neil Fletcher, Convener of the Resources Management Committee, on the aspirations of the Liberal Democrat/Conservative administration of the Council for the Common Good Fund. He stressed the new administration's eagerness to consult with and be influenced by residents of Aberdeen. The administration would strive to maintain a prudent financial regime. Councillor Fletcher made reference to various costly and high profile projects and advised that of the Council's £546m expenditure in 2002/03, 14.5% had been raised through Council Tax. Although accepting that the Council was legally responsible for administering the Common Good, he felt that it was the people's money and that Aberdeen was fortunate to have Common Good of such a significant size. He suggested that the Common Good could be used to maintain buildings and parks which were part of the City's cultural heritage and that it could be used to improve the quality of life in Aberdeen and Aberdeen's economy by boosting the City's profile.

Councillor Fletcher stated that he wanted to see the Common Good be more transparent and, in future, to involve non-Councillors in making decisions about the Common Good.

The Chairperson then invited questions from members of the Civic Forum.

Question - What role did Lord Provost Meff play in the purchase of land for the Common Good in the 1920s and 30s?

Answer - Gordon Edwards undertook to provide more information if required.

Question - Some areas shown on the map as belonging to the Common Good are tiny, is the cost of administering these areas excessive?

Answer - Some areas are small but attract high rents because of the location. The Council's property service was examining the capital assets of the Common Good to ensure best use of resources.

Question - If land or buildings are sold would the money be reinvested in property?

Answer - This would be an option, although there are legal issues if the Common Good wishes to buy capital property.

Question - The problems of transparency associated with the Council administering the Common Good could be resolved by the establishment of a Trust Board. Shouldn't the Council be looking at increasing value of the Common Good to benefit future generations?

Answer - The Council would not be fulfilling its legal responsibility if it established a Trust Board to administer the Common Good. Councillors could agree to establish Advisory Boards. The Common Good is currently increasing in value and the cash balances identified in the funding strategy will be index-linked for the next four years. Councillor Fletcher indicated that he felt it would be wrong not to spend any of the fund.

Question - In relation to capital spending, what mechanism will replace the Secretary of State approval.

Answer - From 1st April, 2004, the Council will be able to incur capital expenditure if it can afford to rather than be constrained by Section 94 capital consent levels, determined by the Secretary of State.

Question - Is there is a minimum cash level which has to be maintained in the Common Good?

Answer - There is no statutory minimum however the Council took a decision that minimum cash reserves would be £4m and that they would be index-linked in the next four years. The current cash reserves already exceed that level.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Forum, thanked Mr. Edwards and Councillor Fletcher for their informative and interesting presentation.

Members of the Forum then split into small discussion groups, comments from which would be reported to Mr. Edwards.

REPRESENTATION ON CHALLENGE FORUMS

3. The Chairperson raised concerns of the Civic Forum's representatives on Challenge Forums and of the Lead Group about communication and reporting mechanisms between these groups.

Dave Valentine suggested this role was becoming increasingly important as community planning developed. It was noted that there are three representatives on each of the fourteen Challenge Forums in addition to representation on other Community Planning Forums. The Civic Forum was asked to consider how best representatives could report back to the Civic Forum.

The importance of members of the Forum being able to feed into the Challenge Forums was also raised and it was suggested that representatives contact details could be published. It was also suggested that a diary of the meetings of the Challenge Forum be published on the website so people could feed in at the appropriate time. It was recognised that the degree of feedback from each group would vary throughout the year. Dave Valentine indicated that Challenge Forum Minutes would be available on the Community Planning Website when operational. It was felt that circulation of all these minutes to Civic Forum would be excessive.

Reference was made to the position regarding representation on NESTRANS. The Chairperson indicated that this matter was continuing to be pursued.

The Civic Forum resolved:-

that the Lead Group consider this matter further and that it be discussed at the next meeting of the Civic Forum.

ELECTIONS

4. Members divided into their relevant groups for the following elections to vacancies on the Lead Group.

North

One vacancy existed. No nominations were made.

Communities of Interest

Two vacancies existed. No nominations were made.

Central

Two vacancies existed. Three nominations were made and Willi Jaffrey and Isobel Reid were elected.

LAVINA MASSIE, Chairperson.