

Minutes of a special meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the Barum Room, Brynsworthy Environment Centre, Barnstaple on Thursday 13th April 2017 at 1.00p.m.

PRESENT: Members

Councillor Greenslade (Chair)

Councillors Chesters, Ley, Mathews, Webber, White and Worden.

Also present:

Councillors Brailey and Harrison.

Mr. P Heaton-Jones North Devon MP.

Sir N. Harvey Former MP for North Devon
and Minister of State for the
Armed Forces.

Councillor Crowther Parish Councillor - Heanton
Punchardon.

Officers:

Chief Planning Officer (MK), Lead Officer – Planning Policy (AA), Economic Development Manager (EV) and Corporate and Community Services Officer (KS).

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bonds, Crabb, Patrinos and Roome.

2 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Ley to the Committee.

The Chairman invited the Leader of Council to address the Committee regarding an update in relation to Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) systems and their use in Council car parks. The Leader advised that he had received a letter from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy confirming that ANPR systems were not authorised for use in Council owned car parks.

RESOLVED, that a copy of the letter be circulated to all Members.

3 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest announced.

4 RMB CHIVENOR

The Chairman advised that he had called the special meeting to commence discussions surrounding the proposed closure of RMB Chivenor and the importance of retaining a military presence at the site.

He outlined a number of key issues, which had been raised following discussions at previous Committee meetings:

- There was a strong campaign for the retention of a military base by the Council in the early 1990s following the plans to withdraw the RAF from the base and subsequently the Marines moved onto the base.
- Having the military base within the community provided an income to the area and also retained pupil numbers within the local primary and secondary schools.
- Was there another military alternative for the site?
- The potential impact upon the local economy if the base was to close.
- The complex flooding issues for the site if housing were to be developed.
- Potential planning issues for the site.

The North Devon MP Mr P. Heaton-Jones addressed the Committee. He advised that he was grateful for the opportunity to attend the meeting and welcomed the Committee's examination of the proposal. He added that it wasn't a party political issue and had an impact upon the whole of North Devon.

He explained that he had stressed the importance to the Secretary of State for Defence that he made time to visit the RMB Chivenor base and meet members of the Community Stakeholder Groups together with representatives of North Devon Council and local military families. He was pleased to report that the Minister had visited the base and attended a round the table meeting and listened to what the group had to say.

He added that there was no firm resistance to a future military use of the site, which was a significant moving of the goalpost.

He referenced the following points that had been made at the round table meeting:

- The historical and deep cultural links between RMB Chivenor and North Devon together with the clear affection for the base.
- Not to approach as a spread sheet exercise and the acknowledgement that one size doesn't fit all in terms of criteria.
- The requirement to treat as a special case with the built estate reducing by 30-40% over the coming years.

- North Devon would not have any decisions imposed upon them and would insist on full consultation with the Council and local community as a whole.

He stated that the Secretary of State for Defence was now considering the issues and would be investigating the points raised in further detail. He added that the government shouldn't close the door to the opportunities for the base at the current time and keep an open mind to the potential future military use of the base. He added that he would do everything within his power to lobby the government on behalf of the residents of North Devon.

Sir Nick Harvey addressed the Committee in his capacity as the former MP for North Devon and Minister of State for the Armed Forces together with his involvement in the departure of the Royal Air Force (RAF) from the Chivenor base.

He gave an overview of the situation regarding his involvement in the departure of the RAF from the site in the early 1990s. He added that the principal purpose of Her Majesty's Armed Forces was to act for and defend the country. The key reason for the Royal Marines' location within the South West was for the very purpose of reacting quickly to a developing situation.

He explained that a large majority of the Royal Marines were located in Arbroath in Scotland and there had been a significant amount of work and effort over the years to bring those personnel to RMB Chivenor. He added that the most recent proposals that he was aware of was to move the Royal Marines to HMS Raleigh and close Chivenor and Norton Fitzwarren. There was however doubts as to whether the HMS Raleigh site had enough capacity to accommodate additional personnel from both RMB Chivenor and Norton Fitzwarren. The announcement was made in the House of Commons without any clear investigation as to how it would be put into practice and had that work been undertaken prior to the announcement the logistical difficulties would have been identified.

He urged the Committee to pursue the retention of military presence on the site and explore alternative options for other armed forces personnel, whilst being mindful to the other potential uses for the site.

The Committee discussed and raised the following points:

- The serviceability of the existing runway and potential costs involved to bring it up to standard.
- The vast amount of potential housing on the existing site and concerns that it would fall into disrepair following the withdrawal of the Marines from the site.
- The huge potential of the airfield if it were to be utilised properly.
- The potential risk that the Marines departed from the site all at the same time and the delay in the availability of the site.
- Concerns were raised that only half of the site had been mapped in terms of flood zone risk.

- Flooding was a big concern for the site and any potential expansion and development of further housing on the site could cause issues further up stream in Barnstaple.
- The requirement to involve North Devon Homes in future housing discussions.
- The existence of pipes within the ownership of Braunton Marsh Drainage Board which travelled through the Chivenor site.
- The potential loss of 200 pupils from Southmead Primary school and the impact upon the budget.
- The potential future use of the site if it were to close.
- The requirement to keep pressure upon the government to ensure the retention of the base and secure the future economy of the North Devon area.

In response to a number of questions, the North Devon MP and Sir N. Harvey advised the following:

- The Secretary of State had indicated an 11 year time frame for closure and withdrawal from the base if plans were to be approved.
- The role of land values in the analysis and the extent of flood risks across the site would play a key role in the final capital receipt and future viability of the site.
- The government would be looking to maximise its capital receipt for the site and would in effect sell to the highest bidder.
- The housing stock on the base was sold to a private company in 1996 and no longer under the ownership of the Ministry of Defence (MOD).

In response to a question regarding the tabled paper from the Environment Agency, which indicated the flood zone areas on the site, the Lead Officer – Planning Policy advised that the blue and green codes indicated the locations of flood zones two and three respectively. The other colours of red and orange indicated areas of extreme and significant flood hazards on the site, calculated through projected depth and velocity.

The North Devon MP apologised for not inviting Heanton Punchardon Parish Council to the round the table meeting with the Minister. He advised that he had spent time in Braunton with representatives from the Environment Agency on the previous day. He added that he had reported the key issues directly to them and added that Chivenor was top of their list for identified areas of work.

The Leader of North Devon Council added that the Secretary of State had been quite clear at the meeting that the cost of keeping the Chivenor base open would be £6m. He advised that the time scale for withdrawal from the base varied depending on who you spoke to. He indicated that the Council needed to get a plan in place to prepare for the potential closure of the base.

Mr S. Crowther Parish Councillor for Heanton Punchardon Parish Council added that the Parish Council were in the process of developing their

Neighbourhood Plan and felt that working in parallel with neighbouring Parish Councils would address many of the issues. The North Devon MP welcomed the suggestion for collaborative working between the parishes.

The North Devon MP thanked the Committee for inviting him to attend the meeting and added that he was happy to continue to lobby the Government on their behalf.

The Committee thanked the North Devon MP for his attendance at the meeting.

The Committee welcomed the Economic Development Manager to the meeting.

The Economic Development Manager advised that it was important to understand the value of RMB Chivenor to the local economy at the present time. North Devon was challenged with some of England's lowest wage levels and highest salary:housing costs. The area had a predominance of small independent businesses and very few larger employers, of which Chivenor is one. This meant the health of the economy was vulnerable should any large employer leave the area.

She added that RMB Chivenor was a large employer with high salaries and that it was really important for the government to understand the nature of that and its contribution to the local economy, which was a central thread to that.

She explained that there was an initiative called "One Public Estate", which was a mechanism designed to involve all key parties to work with the government in cases like these, to ensure benefits for the local community were realised. She advised that she would be scheduling a meeting with Devon County Council towards the end of April to hold initial discussions about such an approach. She added that there had been no study undertaken to ascertain the exact economic value of Chivenor site.

The Chairman added that he had raised the issue at the Cabinet meeting at Devon County Council and received a positive response in terms of their support for the retention of military personnel at RMB Chivenor.

The Chief Planning Officer addressed the Committee and gave an overview of the military estates and assets within the North Devon area. He added that in planning terms there were two potential scenarios:

1. That the base remained as a whole or in part with an opportunity for the Council to be involved.
2. That if the base were to close and the Council was reliant on the market alone then the Council may not achieve their desired outcome for its redevelopment given recent market performance and continuing market uncertainty .

He explained that if there was a disposal of land to the Council there was potential within the site to contribute to a continuing five year land supply and added that it was important to work strategically with Exeter and Plymouth. The Chivenor site encompassed 93 hectares and the market couldn't be relied upon solely to deliver preferred land uses without significant support and intervention.

He added that he had been contacted by the Defence Infrastructure Organisation in May 2016 requesting information regarding potential planning constraints for the Chivenor site. In his response, he detailed the various issues within the site and expressed an interest in the Councils being involved in the master planning of development to involve Heanton Punchardon and Braunton Parish Councils.

He drew the Committee's attention to the requirement to improve infrastructure and transport links to the site. The dual carriage ended 1.5 miles from the base and this required consideration as part of any future proposals for the site.

In response to a question regarding the inclusion of Barnstaple Members in any discussions, the Chief Planning Officer advised that the Council would be as inclusive as they could be to include Barnstaple.

The Lead Officer – Planning Policy addressed the Committee and advised that the Joint North Devon and Torridge Local Plan up to 2031 would be adopted at the end of the year. Following publication, officers from both Councils would need to start looking at a review up to 2045 to develop an early stage vision and objective for the plan for which all available sites would be considered. If the site was identified for closure in the future, the new plan could plan and guard against any alternative usage of the site. A policy could be developed if the site were to become available and could be incorporated into the Heanton Punchardon Neighbourhood Plan.

The Chief Planning Officer added that as part of the government's growth agenda the Council could, if the opportunity arose, look to develop land for housing, employment and associated infrastructure. Recently announced policy changes would require Councils to identify previously developed land and the Chivenor site would fall within that criteria and be added to the register of brownfield sites. Any such designation could be taken through either the masterplan approach or neighbourhood planning.

The Committee agreed the following:

- To lobby the government to ascertain if there was an alternative military use for the site.
- To pursue the further information regarding the relocation of the Marines to Plymouth.
- To explore the options for realistic utilisation of the site and potential costs of each option.

- To investigate the traffic issues and the surrounding infrastructure together with the surrounding towns, villages and schools.
- The potential financial contribution from a developer to the affected schools within the immediate proximity of the base.
- To consider the impact upon the schools within the local area if the base were to close together with the potential for additional housing on the site and its impact.
- To explore whether there would be any financial support from the government to the local Education Authority to ease them through the transitional period.
- The impact upon the health service and the potential reduction in size of the North Devon District Hospital.
- That the neighbourhood plan process be included as part of the development of particular policies.
- The development of a credible Economic Impact Assessment.
- Explore the potential for any covenants outside the curtilage of the existing housing stock, which was managed by a private company.
- That further conversations be held with the Environment Agency to discuss the wider flood issue together with options for the sale and usage of the site.

RESOLVED, that the former First Sea Lord together with Admiral Sir Mark Stanhope be invited to attend a future meeting of the Committee to discuss the RMB Chivenor site.

Councillor Greenslade declared a personal interest as a Director of Exeter Airport.

The Chairman thanked members of the Committee together with external parties for their attendance at the meeting.

Chairman

The meeting ended at 2.55p.m.

NOTE: These minutes will be confirmed as a correct record at the next meeting of the Committee.