

**Report of the Meeting of the previously established
East Centre 'Feasibility Study' Group
Tuesday 13th February 2018 at 4:00 pm**

PRESENT

Cllr Gerry Price (Chair), Cllr Chris Cuthbert, Cllr Eileen Burt, Mr George Hepburn (representing Prudhoe Community Partnership)

On 28th January 2018 it was AGREED by Prudhoe Town Council to initiate a meeting with members of the 'East Centre Feasibility Group' to make clear the Town Council's position on the Community Asset Transfer of The East Centre and to wind up the group and clear the air with regards decision making and future relations.

It was AGREED the meeting should have an agenda and minutes should be taken.

1. To discuss the reason the 'Feasibility Study' and joint venture was initiated and how it was expected to proceed

The report of the very first meeting between PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL and PRUDHOE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP was received and it was discussed that the reason for moving the matter forward was as a result of the decision by Northumberland County Council to sell the East Centre, later rescinded but still uncertain. The minute of the report being received by full council was also received.

It was discussed that although the terms of reference were agreed, Cllr Price did so but acknowledged that they did extend beyond the objective of PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL which was to retain the Youth Service at The East Centre. This referred to the question 'Opportunity to redevelop the site in whole or in part'.

Discussion evolved and it was clear that there was a difference of opinion as to whether retaining the Youth Service at The East Centre was the prime purpose of the Feasibility Study. Whilst Cllr Price asserted that the main aim of PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL was retention of the Youth Service, PRUDHOE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP maintained that this was out of the control of the parties and Cllr Burt stated that for this reason they wished to separate the issues with respect to the Feasibility Study. It was AGREED that it was unlikely parties would concur on this matter but that the 'Terms of Reference' for the Feasibility Study were agreed by the chair of PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL, as authorised by the council.

The aim of the Feasibility Study was discussed with respect to identifying who would be best placed to take on the building under a 'Community Asset Transfer' and there was debate as to whether this was one of the main aims of the study. It was AGREED that this was an aim but not the only one.

2. To identify when collaboration and a joint vision broke down and how this could be avoided in the future

The timeline of decisions from June 2017 through to January 2018 were received along with emails communications between members of the Feasibility Group throughout June and July 2017.

The suggestion that collaboration broke down was questioned and it was discussed that the email communication leading up to the terms of reference being agreed represented an on-going dialogue rather than a break down in the joint vision.

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No further discussion on this matter took place as this was seen an interpretation of the administrator rather than how the parties involved felt.

3. To identify and discuss the rationale behind both Prudhoe Community Partnership and then Prudhoe Town Council wishing to continue independently of each other

The email sent by Mr Hepburn in advance of the Town Council meeting, to receive the Feasibility Report, was received and discussed.

Mr Hepburn said that his email sent to Cllr Price in advance of the Town Council meeting on 10th January was to inform Cllr Price of the Partnership's likely position about the Feasibility Study. It was sent because Cllr Burt, as PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL representative on the Partnership, was not able to attend the meeting on 10th January. The email said that the Partnership had not yet formally discussed the Feasibility Study and that his view was based on informal discussions with Partnership trustees.

His email said that the Partnership would prefer to deal directly with the County Council as this would be a quicker, easier and less costly way of the Partnership getting to the position where it would run East Centre which was the recommended end goal in the Feasibility Study.

The email did not rule out the other option of an asset transfer to the Town Council who would then lease The East Centre to the Partnership, as recommended in the Study. It was not intended to exclude the Town Council from being involved in the process. It was just an easier way to get from A to B.

The Partnership did not expect this to be their final word on the subject and fully expected to have further discussion with the Town Council to agree a way forward.

There is clear disagreement as to the interpretation of the email and of comments made in the informal meeting when the Feasibility Report was first received by both parties. PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL took from this that Mr Hepburn did not wish to work with the Town Council and wished to deal directly with NCC, whereas Mr Hepburn made clear that was not what he meant and the implication was that PRUDHOE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP would prefer to receive the asset transfer directly and deal directly with NCC, as it would be easier and quicker and they have experience, but not that they would have a problem working with PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL.

Cllr Cuthbert stated that as well being involved throughout Feasibility discussions she was also at the meeting when the report was presented to both parties and she recalls that Mr Hepburn was clear in his desire for PRUDHOE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP to work without interference from PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL, her words 'to plough their own furrow'. Cllr Cuthbert stated that at this meeting Cllr Jennifer McGee did say she that she was very sorry to hear that.

Cllr Price indicated that what was said in the presentation was further communicated in the email sent by Mr Hepburn, but that Councillors made their recommendation based on the results of the Feasibility Study.

The minutes of the meeting of 10th January 2018 were received and discussed.

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The record of the meeting, with respect to including statements of third parties, was challenged. The administrator attempted to explain that the minutes are a record of what is said, rather than what is correct in the first instance and what is in the minutes reflects only what was said at the meeting. As the third party referred to, Mr Hepburn denied that he had ever said that "it would be difficult to work in partnership with the Town Council", as reported in the minutes as being said by Cllr Jennifer McGee.

The issue of verbatim minutes as opposed to brief, 'agreement only' minutes were debated; it was acknowledged that this was a matter for the full council.

The Partnership representatives said they were surprised and disappointed that PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL had made a decision to go forward with the asset transfer and had immediately publicised this decision without having a further meeting with the Partnership to find an agreed way forward.

The email sent by Mr Hepburn was further discussed. It was asserted by Mr Hepburn that PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL could have come back to PRUDHOE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP and a dialogue would have been appreciated prior to going public.

The Administrator clarified the haste in going public related to accusations on social media about the future of the East Centre and the receipt of the 'Feasibility Study' being 'cloak and dagger'.

Mr Hepburn questioned why when the Feasibility Report concluded that PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL was the best-placed applicant for a CAT with PRUDHOE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP best-placed as an 'Asset Manager', did PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL decide that it would become applicant and asset manager.

Cllr Cuthbert stated that the feeling around the table was that PRUDHOE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP may not protect the Youth Service and there was also strong feeling that the council could move in and save costs.

The Administrator stated that the reasons for the decision were that PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL was a public body, was accountable to the public and decision relation to the East Centre would be in the public domain.

Cllr Price stated that the lead factor was the youth service and that it must be protected.

The administrator advised that PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL had discussed the CAT of the East Centre again on 28th January and although the minutes were not drafted yet, the discussion does indicate PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL taking the asset and the management of the building on themselves, not leasing to another.

Mr Hepburn stated that the Partnership had skills and experience in developing and managing community buildings and that it would be good for the town if PRUDHOE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP was involved with the East Centre. Cllr Price said that this could be put forward as a proposal as he, as chair, was not ruling out working with anyone in the future. Mr Hepburn

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said that the Partnership would be only too pleased to be involved in managing a lease on The East Centre if PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL invited them to do so.

4. To agree how to move forward amicably and in the interest of the town

Recent emails between Mike Robbins and PRUDHOE TOWN COUNCIL were received and discussed.

It was AGREED that the administrator would email Mike Robbins to make clear that the minutes of the meeting on 10th January may record a Cllrs interpretation of what Mr Hepburn said, but that he refutes that he said that 'he did not wish to work with the Town Council'.

It was AGREED that the 'Feasibility Report' would be received as part of the public session of the Town Council's meeting on 28th February and therefore would be available in full on the website. It was also AGREED that a copy would be emailed to Cath McEvoy, Wayne Daley and Sharron Pearson without delay.

It was AGREED that it would be useful to have a further meeting between the Town Council and the Partnership to look more generally at how the two organisations could better work together, noting that Cllr Burt would soon be retiring from both bodies.