

# **FINANCE & PROCEDURES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 12 DECEMBER 2002**

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Minutes of the meeting of the **Finance & Procedures Overview & Scrutiny Committee** held on **12 December 2002** when there were present:

Cllr T G Cutmore (Chairman)

Cllr Mrs J R Lumley  
Cllr J R F Mason  
Cllr C G Seagers

Cllr C G Seagers  
Cllr M G B Starke

## **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs D F Flack, T Livings and G A Mockford.

Apologies were also received from Mr J Sheaf of the South East Essex Chamber of Commerce, Mr K Wickham of the Federation of Small Businesses and the Rayleigh District Chamber of Trade.

## **REPRESENTING THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY**

W H R Squire - Rochford and District Chamber of Trade and Commerce

## **OFFICERS ATTENDING**

P Warren - Chief Executive  
R Crofts - Corporate Director (Finance & External Services)  
R J Honey - Corporate Director (Law, Planning & Administration)  
D Deeks - Head of Financial Services  
T Metcalf - Audit & Process Review Manager  
J Kevany - Audit Officer  
J Bostock - Principal Committee Administrator

## **616 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 November 2002 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

## **617 PROGRESS ON DECISIONS**

The Committee received the schedule relating to Progress on Decisions. Outstanding matters would be carried forward.

## **618 NATIONAL NON-DOMESTIC RATES - CONSULTATION**

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Financial Services on consultation with the business community about the plans for the 2003/04 Budget Strategy.

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By way of introduction, the Corporate Director (Finance & External Services) provided details of the recent Central Government announcement on Council Tax as reported to the meeting of the Policy and Finance Committee on 5 December (Minute 592/02 refers). The Corporate Director also advised that Holmes Place had now indicated that the profit share element of the leisure contract available to the Council may be in the region of £50,000-£75,000 this year. The precise figure would only be available following the audit of their accounts. The figure was likely to be variable on a year by year basis. For example, income would be reduced for the period when Clements Hall was closed for refurbishment.

It was noted that the Corporate Director would be recommending that any monies available from the profit share arrangement should be targeted at the Park Sports Centre fund, rather than the core budget. This was on the basis that an increase in the contribution to capital would reduce ongoing costs. Officers were still reviewing possibilities, but proposals would be by way of amendment to the draft Three Year Budget Strategy.

The Chairman welcomed Mr Squire, the representative from the business community.

Mr Squire made a number of observations. These, together with the Officer response, are set out below:-

- It would be interesting to note what the Holmes Place monies represented in terms of the percentage of total capital spend.

The Corporate Director (Finance & External Services) advised that, within its leisure contract, the Council made contributions to Park School and the Mill Hall, but not Clements Hall.

- It was good to see that work on Rochford Town Square was concluding. Whilst it was understood there is a debate about the respective advantages of close circuit television or lighting and addressing crime problems, it would be useful to now be able to further the proposal for CCTV for which the Parish had been granted of £5,300 by the District.

Officers advised that the CCTV grant was still available for use. The Council could be consulted should proposals move away from CCTV.

- It was pleasing to note that the Authority was a Member of the South Essex Thames Gateway Partnership with the associated likelihood of inward investment. Membership of the East of England Local Government Conference would seem of value in the context of maximising sources of funding.

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The Chief Executive advised that the Council was a Member of The East of England Local Government Conference and very much involved with the regional agenda. The South Essex Thames Gateway Board was a useful vehicle for communicating with the Conference. The East of England Development Agency allocated money to the Thames Gateway Project. A County Councillor from within the District's area had recently been appointed to serve on the Agency Board.

- It would be of interest to know the precise costs associated with the three planning appeals lost over the previous year.

Officers confirmed that they could provide this information.

- The Thames Gateway Project had provided a useful financial contribution towards the Cherry Orchard Jubilee Park. It would be of interest to know if the £20,000 shown in the budget strategy was ongoing.

The Corporate Director (Finance & External Services) advised that the £20,000 in the budget strategy would be used for revenue purposes, including aspects of Health and Safety.

- It would be of interest to know the contribution made by the District to flood defence.

The Chief Executive advised that flood defence contributions were contained within the County Council's precept. The District had a direct financial responsibility for any issues around areas of land in its own ownership. In recent times problems associated with water running off land had been more significant than sea defence problems.

At the conclusion of discussions, Mr Squire observed that it may be of value for consideration to be given to introducing cleaning at Rochford Town Square on Saturday mornings given the litter which can collect over Friday evenings. The Corporate Director (Finance & External Services) referred to the recent Town Centre chewing gum/stain removal trial which had been abandoned due to an element of poor pre-planning by the Company undertaking the trial. From liaison with the Company it was clear that their system may not provide some of the remedies originally envisaged. For example, Cleaning over night in a residential area could take a number of hours and produce significant noise.

### **Resolved**

That the observations from the business community be received and made available to the meeting of Full Council on 28 January 2003, when all issues relating to the budget will be determined. (HFS)

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### **619 CORPORATE PLAN/BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE PLAN 2002/03**

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive on progress made to date in respect of the Corporate Plan and the Best Value Performance Plan.

Responding to Member questions, the Chief Executive advised that:-

- The corporate plan progress schedule was a statement of where the Authority was at the current time in the context of specific commitments within the Corporate Plan.
- The difficulties experienced by Housing Condition Survey Consultants in gaining access to the District's Private Housing Stock was no doubt due in part to work undertaken as part of the Crime Reduction Strategy in communicating the dangers of answering doors to unknown callers.
- There are a series of criteria which the Authority needs to match before it can confirm that the policies, procedures and standards associated with written enforcement policies are monitored and reported on with variations addressed via a Service Action Plan or Best Value Performance Plan. The Audit Commission was currently reviewing statutory performance indicators.
- It was pleasing to note that the Council was now below the national average in terms of planning decisions overturned on appeal.

During debate on recycling, reference was made to the recent Council decision to be supportive of the campaign for doorstep recycling services to every home to 2010 on the basis that central Government provide fully the resources. The Committee endorsed the observation of the Chairman that it was excellent news that over 28,000 trees had been planted so far this year at the Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park site. The Committee endorsed the comprehensive nature of the report.

#### **Resolved**

That the progress to date be noted. (CE)

### **620 PLANNING WEEKLY LIST ARRANGEMENTS**

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Planning Services on the arrangements for dealing with items referred from the weekly list.

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During debate reference was made to the difficulties which could be experienced when an item is referred from the Weekly List at a very late stage without the appropriate Ward Councillor(s) necessarily being aware. When papers are supplied on the day of the meeting it is possible that Members attending to daytime work will have little or no time to read them.

Responding to Member questions, the Corporate Director (Law, Planning & Administration) advised that:-

- Documentation for Committee meetings needed to be on deposit for the public for five days. The currently Weekly List arrangement was able to satisfy this requirement
- The Weekly List mechanism had many virtues from the perspective of the effective throughput of planning business.
- It would be possible for officers to review arrangements for the supply of the Weekly List with a view to achieving the earliest possible communication. This could perhaps be through a combination of electronic mail/fax.

The Committee endorsed the suggestion of the Corporate Director that it would be appropriate for officers to review and introduce a revised mechanism for a trial period.

### **Resolved**

That Officers explore and introduce lines of communication aimed at providing Members with items referred from the Weekly List at the earliest possible time. Arrangements to be for a trial period concluding at the end of the next cycle of meetings. (HPS)

## **621 AUDIT AND INSPECTION**

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive on the recommendations of the external auditors, including Best Value and value for money reports, the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate and suggested Best Practice from Audit Committee publications.

In presenting this item the Chief Executive detailed the background associated with the production of the various report appendices.

Responding to Member questions, officers advised that:-

- the remit of the Council's external auditors was relatively wide The auditors would be an inherent part of the scoring process associated with Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

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- Detailed Euro planning had not been undertaken. Whilst money had not been expended on Euro issues at the current time, should national events lead to a need for the introduction of Euro compliant facilities within a tight timeframe, associated costs could be significant.

During debate it was observed that an element of consultation had been undertaken with electors via the Corporate Plan process. It was noted that guidance was still awaited on the resources required to deliver Best Value Performance Plan review programme. It was likely that there would be new regulations and guidance changing the thrust of Best Value and concentrating on Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

### **Resolved**

- (1) That the updated monitoring sheet for the Audit Commission publications be agreed.
- (2) That the monitoring for the External Audit recommendations, including the value for money reports, be agreed.
- (3) That the monitoring sheet for the Best Value Performance Plan recommendations be agreed.
- (4) That the monitoring sheet for the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate recommendations be agreed (CE)

### **622 AUDIT PLAN PROGRESS REPORT**

The Committee received and noted the report of the Chief Executive which showed the first six months of completed audit work to plan.

### **623 BROOK ROAD INDUSTRIAL ESTATE, RAYLEIGH – IMPROVEMENT SCHEME**

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive which sought endorsement for the Economic Development Officer to work with the Rayleigh Chamber of Trade at the Brook Road Industrial Estate to identify projects that would receive funding through the Industrial Estate Improvement Scheme and to enhancement of the Estate.

#### **Recommended to Council**

- (1) That the time contribution of the Economic Development Officer to support a bid by Brook Road Industrial Estate to the Industrial Estate Improvement Scheme be agreed.
- (2) That authority be delegated to the Chief Executive to agree a supporting submission on behalf of the Council, subject to it being within agreed budgetary parameters. (CE)

**Exclusion of the Press and Public**

**Resolved**

That the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the remaining business on the grounds that exempt information as defined in paragraphs 11 and 14 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 would be disclosed.

**624 AUDIT REPORT**

The Committee considered the exempt report of the Chief Executive drawing attention To completed audit investigations and providing an update of audit recommendations.

**Resolved**

- (1) That the conclusions and results from the audits set out in the reports be agreed.
- (2) That the updated information on the audit recommendations outlined in Appendix 2 of the report be agreed. (CE)

**625 PAY STRATEGY REVIEW**

The Committee considered the exempt report of the Chief Executive on the options available to the Council for pay negotiations as an alternative to the National Employers Organisation.

Responding to Member questions, the Chief Executive advised that the introduction of a capacity building mechanism would be consistent with the approach taken when developing the three year budget strategy.

**Recommended to Council that:-**

- (1) The Authority stays within the National Employers Organisation arrangements for pay bargaining at the present time.
- (2) This decision be reviewed in the light of the findings of the Local Government Pay Commission next Autumn.
- (3) The opportunity be taken to make representations to the Local Government Pay Commission on the matters covered in its terms of reference.
- (4) Consideration be given as to whether to look at the impact of what could be some large increases in staffing costs in future years within the budget debate for the coming financial year. (CE)

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The meeting closed at 9.02pm.

Chairman: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_