

Policy & Finance Committee – 7 April 2005

Minutes of the meeting of the **Policy & Finance Committee** held on **7 April 2005** when there were present:-

Cllr T G Cutmore (Chairman)
Cllr S P Smith (Vice-Chairman)

Cllr C I Black
Cllr C A Hungate
Cllr J R F Mason
Cllr P K Savill

Cllr C G Seagers
Cllr D G Stansby
Cllr Mrs M A Starke
Cllr M G B Starke

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs K H Hudson and J Thomass

SUBSTITUTES

Cllr Mrs L Hungate

OFFICERS PRESENT

P Warren - Chief Executive
R J Honey - Corporate Director (Law, Planning and Administration)
R Crofts - Corporate Director (Finance and External Services)
S Clarkson - Head of Revenue and Housing Management
S Logan - Revenue and Benefits Manager
J Bourne - Leisure and Contracts Manager
J Bostock - Principal Committee Administrator

144 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 8 March 2005 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

145 ISSUES ARISING FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

(1) Community Transport – Longer Term Funding

The Committee considered the report of the Finance and Procedures Overview and Scrutiny Committee setting out recommendations relating to longer term funding of the Community Transport Project and encouraging the establishment of a Community Transport Trust.

It was noted that the budget associated with the Taxi Voucher Scheme had been increased from £90,000 to £120,000 for 2005/06. The Committee concurred with the view of a Member that, where necessary, an alternative provision should be considered in six months times.

Resolved

- (1) That the Rochford and Rayleigh Association for Voluntary Services be encouraged to establish a Community Transport Trust as soon as possible.
- (2) That, subject to (1) above, the Council commit to a five-year support plan for Community Transport as indicated in the report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and subject to Essex County Council funding continuing at expected levels.
- (3) That, for the present time, the taxi voucher scheme be retained and expanded, although, where necessary, an alternative provision be considered in six months time. (HRHM)

146 PROGRESS ON DECISIONS

The Committee received the schedule relating to Progress on Decisions.

CCTV Evaluation (Minute 308/04)

The Chief Executive advised that he would write to Members detailing the status of the tender process. There had been no indication from the Town and Parish Councils or Chambers of Trade that they would be willing to contribute towards the cost of CCTV Evaluation. The main conclusions from the evaluation would be available publically.

Taxi Tariff Review (Minute 358/(7)(b)/04)

It was noted that the Environmental Services Committee had considered the recommendations of the Taxi Licensing Sub-Committee on deregulation of the authorised fare tariff at its meeting on 3 March 2005.

147 NATIONAL NON-DOMESTIC RATE – DISCRETIONARY RATE RELIEF

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management on a revised scheme for determining the level of discretionary rate relief, the period of the award and the procedure for the granting of relief.

It was noted that, should the proposed procedure arrangements be agreed, officers would keep Members informed of awards made via the Members' Bulletin.

Responding to questions, the Head of Revenue and Housing Management advised that:-

- It is permissible for an authority to delegate the consideration of the merits of each case to an officer. An objective of Government guidance was to preclude the setting of a "blanket" policy by individual authorities. Each case needed to be considered on its own merits. The final sentence of report paragraph 10.2 was not intended to identify any

conflict with the principle that each case be considered in this way and could be removed.

- There were less than a dozen new applications each year.

The Committee felt that it would be appropriate to build in provision for reviewing the working of any revised procedural arrangements in one year's time and it was:-

Resolved

- (1) That Discretionary Relief be awarded based on the criteria set out in the report.
- (2) That Discretionary Relief should be awarded for a fixed period for no longer than three years.
- (3) That authority to award Discretionary Relief be delegated to the Corporate Director (Finance and External Services).
- (4) That any case which the Corporate Director (Finance and External Services) considers includes circumstances not covered by the criteria set out in the report, be referred to Policy & Finance Committee for decision.
- (5) That the working of the revised procedural arrangements be reviewed in one year's time. (HRHM)

148 RETIREMENT AGE

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director (Law, Planning and Administration) on revision of the Council's policy on compulsory retirement at 65 as a move to best practice and to help elevate recruitment and retention issues in some areas.

Resolved

- (1) That the retirement age for employees remains at 65 years.
- (2) That staff are permitted to work beyond the age of 65 (on an annual fixed-term basis) up to the age of 70 where a business case for this exists and subject to annual Performance Development Review.
- (3) That this policy is kept under review in the light of changing legislation. (CD(LP&A))

149 ROCHFORD REGENERATION PROJECT

It was noted that the report under the item 'Market Town Health Check Study' covered this item (Minute 151 refers).

150 HOUSING BENEFIT PERFORMANCE STANDARDS – 2005 REVIEW

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management on the revised housing benefit performance standards, which came into force on 1 April 2005.

Members endorsed the observation of the Chairman that it was pleasing that standards would now focus on delivery and performance.

Officers confirmed that there would be a report on the Council's performance in the context of new criteria to the Committee in July 2005.

Resolved

- (1) That the new Housing Benefit Performance Standards be adopted.
- (2) That the reporting cycle be July/December until all Standards are met. (HRHM)

151 MARKET TOWN HEALTH CHECK STUDY

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive on the Market Town Health Check Study produced by the Rochford Regeneration Group.

Members agreed that it was pleasing to note that there had been a wide representation of views, with 718 individuals having participated in the study.

Resolved

That in the planned future reviews of its own Strategies and Action Plans, particularly the Local Development Framework and the development of the Council's own vision as a District as a whole, the District Council considers the suggestions made in the Study and determines the most appropriate course of action for the Authority. (CE)

152 TIMETABLE OF MEETINGS 2005/06

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Administrative and Member Services on the adoption of a timetable of meetings for the 2005/06 Municipal Year.

During debate, it was recognised that future discussions on the Overview and Scrutiny process and the Planning Services Committee, as engendered by the Comprehensive Performance Assessment Improvement Plan process, could have implications for the timetable. It was also observed that the venue for the last budget strategy awayday had proved particularly suitable.

It was noted that it was not possible to predict the number of times that the Licensing Committee would need to convene with regard to liquor licensing hearings.

The Committee concurred with the view of the Chief Executive that, given that there would be a need to approve a Gershon related statement by 15 June 2005, it would be appropriate to relocate the proposed Council (Strategies) meeting from 28 June to 14 June to include that purpose.

RECOMMENDED to Council that, subject to the Council (Strategies) meeting being moved from 28 June to 14 June 2005, the timetable of meetings 2005/06, as set out in the appendix to the report, be adopted. (HRHM)

153 COUNCIL TAX IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management on progress towards implementing the Council Tax Improvement Plan.

In presenting the report the Head of Revenue and Housing Management advised that, given comments in the report against actions 8.5, 16.5, 16.6 and 19.4, it would be appropriate for these actions to be deleted. A comprehensive report on actions 2.1, 3.13, 3.14, 8.1, 8.2, 9.2, and 9.5 would be submitted to the Committee on 12 October 2005. The Council's own training officer could undertake the evaluations and Quality Assurance Checks associated with the Housing Benefit Performance Standards identified under action 16.3.

In considering the deletion of some actions, the Committee noted that there was no reason to think that deletion would compromise any scoring associated with the Comprehensive Performance Assessment process. If the authority achieved the various objectives associated with Council Tax and Housing Benefits, it would be improving. The type of deletions proposed would also align with the need to be mindful of working within available capacity/prioritising. In addition to introducing service improvements internally, the authority needed to be mindful of capacity building possibilities across the County.

Resolved

- (1) That, subject to the deletion of actions 8.5, 16.5, 16.6 and 19.4, the revised action plan for Council Tax Service Improvement, as set out in the report, be endorsed.
- (2) That the action plan be reviewed again in October 2005 and April 2006. (HRHM)

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 1 and 9 of Part 1 of Schedule 12(A) of the Local Government Act 1972 would be disclosed.

154 REVENUE AND BENEFITS – CAPACITY BUILDING AND SERVICE ENHANCEMENT

The Committee considered the exempt report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management on proposals for capacity building and enhancements to the revenue and benefits service.

Responding to questions, officers advised that:-

- Whilst there were few disadvantages to the proposals, the main one related to the fact that financing proposals included a non-repeated element of Government funding and that, if the service was to continue in future years, there would be additional costs unless savings were identified. There could, however, be possibilities for identifying savings.
- Whilst telephone operators normally stated the name of the Council that they are serving when answering the phone to first-time callers, it would be possible for the authority to tailor all aspects of calls, including this. A team of telephone staff would be dedicated to the District Council and responsible for meeting Council targets. Any contract would be monitored on a month-by-month basis.
- In the context of Government terminology, the term “capacity building” could include partnering. Involvement in a project such as this could be of value in terms of developing an in-house understanding of the advantages/disadvantages of such projects on a manageable scale.
- The timing of pilot commencement would depend on finalised technology links, although it was likely that arrangements could be put in place during May.
- If proposals are agreed, arrangements would be made for a Member visit to the service provider via the Members’ Bulletin. Officers would also keep Members apprised of developments via the Bulletin.

During debate, it was agreed that it would be important to have a specific clause precluding operation of the service overseas. It was also observed that an appropriate timeframe would need to be built into any contract that gave the Authority sufficient time to introduce alternatives should project termination need to be considered.

The Chairman highlighted the value of proposals in terms of addressing key performance indicators.

Resolved

That, subject to a specific clause precluding operation of the service overseas, the telephone calls management project, as set out in the exempt report, be adopted as a twelve month pilot with a review and report back to this Committee after six months operation. (HRHM)

155 STAFFING MATTERS

The Committee considered the exempt report of the Chief Executive on vacancies, long-term sickness absence and maternity absence within the authority.

The Chief Executive provided a verbal update on the long-term sickness schedule and advised that, overall, the sickness rate appeared to be reducing.

Resolved

That the current level of vacancies, long-term sickness and maternity absence within the Authority be noted.

156 KERBSIDE RECYCLING SCHEME

The Committee considered the exempt report of the Corporate Director (Finance and External Services) on proposals for a green waste contract.

On a motion, moved by Councillor S P Smith and seconded by Councillor D G Stansby, it was:-

Resolved

That the report be referred for consideration to the meeting of Full Council on 28 April 2005. (CD(F&ES)/HAMS))

The meeting closed at 8.53pm.

Chairman

Date