

Policy & Finance Committee – 7 December 2005

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

Chairman: Cllr T G Cutmore
Vice-Chairman: Cllr D Merrick

Cllr C I Black
Cllr J R F Mason
Cllr Mrs J A Mockford
Cllr C G Seagers
Cllr D G Stansby

Cllr Mrs M A Starke
Cllr M G B Starke
Cllr J Thomass
Cllr Mrs M J Webster

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Cllr C A Hungate.

OFFICERS PRESENT

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

495 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 15 November 2005 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

496 ISSUES ARISING FROM OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY – REVIEW OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY IN ROCHFORD

The Committee considered the report of the Policy & Finance Committee on the use of performance indicators to evaluate the Council's overview and scrutiny process from 2006/07.

During debate it was observed that the recent Member Budget Away Day had seen a high priority suggested for the introduction of a post of Overview and Scrutiny Officer. Reference in the report submitted to the Committee on the value of a plain English version of protocols making clear the relationship between Policy Committees and overview and scrutiny was endorsed.

Resolved

That the following performance indicators be used to evaluate the Council's Overview and Scrutiny process from the Municipal Year 2006/07:-

- (1) Completion of Overview and Scrutiny work programme on time.
- (2) Number of occasions when Overview and Scrutiny comments/recommendations on organisational performance are acted upon.
- (3) Whether sufficient information is provided to witnesses about the Overview and Scrutiny process.
- (4) View of policy committee members as to whether Overview and Scrutiny adds value; and what improvements could be made to the relationship.
- (5) Views of public on aspects of meetings: accessibility of venue; ability to see, hear and follow the proceedings; interest and relevance of topics; clarity of reports.
- (6) Witnesses' views of value added by Overview and Scrutiny meetings.
- (7) Percentage of Overview and Scrutiny recommendations accepted.
- (8) Percentage of Overview and Scrutiny recommendations implemented.

497 PROGRESS ON DECISIONS

The Committee reviewed the progress on decisions schedule.

(1) CCTV Evaluation (Minute 308/04)

Responding to questions, the Chief Executive outlined the background to the development of the proposal to evaluate Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) systems and how the original quotations received to undertake evaluation had proved cost restrictive.

Nowadays CCTV cameras soon became outdated for purpose. There remained a need to work with the Police on identifying the cost of upgrading machines to maximise their effectiveness, together with the possibilities for cross system linkages.

Whilst Home Office advice suggested that improved lighting can be more effective than CCTV in reducing crime, surveys had indicated that the presence of cameras provided some comfort to residents. Cameras have been helpful in providing intelligence and narrowing down suspects.

(2) Council Tax Improvement Action Plan – Best Practice Proposals (Minute 390/05)

It was noted that the recent Member Budget Away Day had seen a proposal that £5,000 be included in the 2006/07 budget for the purpose of applying for Charter Mark accreditation across services.

(3) Revenue and Benefits Service – Partnership Working (Minute 391/05)

It was noted that officers were now going to develop a formal operational protocol for collaborative working. Detailed proposals would be submitted to a future meeting.

(4) The Local Authorities (Indemnity for Members and Officers) Order 2004 (Minute 196(15)(a)/05)

The Corporate Director (Law, Planning & Administration) confirmed that the comments in the Schedule represented the current position.

(5) Motion on Notice by Councillor C I Black, C J Lumley, Mrs J R Lumley and R A Oatham (Minute 225/05)

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group, Councillor C I Black, indicated that there would be concern if proposals associated with an all-weather pitch at the Rayleigh Leisure Centre site involved the pitch running from north to south, rather than east to west. East to west would be needed to keep the pitch as far away from residential housing as possible.

The Corporate Director (Finance and External Services) advised that the outcome of the appeal in respect of Sweyne Park had yet to be received.

498 BUDGET STRATEGY 2006/07

The Corporate Director (Finance & External Services) reported verbally on the draft Government settlement for 2006/07 and the indicative figures for 2007/08. The report detailed the new four block grant system (relative needs/relative resources/central allocation and floor damping).

The headline figure for 2006/07 of £4.408m was £344,000 higher than the sum estimated for the purposes of the recent Member Budget Away Day. The settlement was for a period of two years, with the sum of £4.748m being suggested for 2007/08.

On the basis of the figures, should the Council decide to maintain its current policy of setting a tax increase at just below 5%, this would mean that the five year Budget Strategy is safe and that there could be some limited funds for capacity building – perhaps £150,000 during 2006/07 and £50,000 the year

after. Officers were currently in the process of reviewing draft budgets to maximise monies that are available for Council wish list projects.

Responding to questions, the Corporate Director (Finance & External Services) advised that:-

- Whilst the settlement was better than those of previous years, it still meant that the District was receiving the second lowest settlement in the County on a per head of population basis.
- Further work needed to be undertaken on the fine detail of the figures to fully identify conditions that are likely to be associated with the settlement. Some of the monies will no doubt be required for new functions that the Council will be required to manage.
- This year's settlement covered a two year period to align with the Chancellor's recent budget statement. Current indications are that figures for 2008/09 will cover a three year period.

The Chairman confirmed that work was in hand on a press release associated with the settlement. The release would include reference to the fact that Rochford had received the second lowest settlement figure in Essex.

499 COMMUNITY TRANSPORT PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

The Committee concurred with the observation of the Chairman that, given that a number of Members would appreciate further time to consider the information from officers on the Community Transport Partnership Agreement and that the cut off date associated with signing the Agreement was 28 February 2005, it would be appropriate to defer final consideration until the next meeting of the Committee on 12 January 2006.

Resolved

That this matter be deferred and referred for consideration at the next meeting of the Committee. (HRHM)

500 TAXI VOUCHER SCHEME

Given the connections between the report on the Taxi Voucher Scheme and the item on the Community Transport Partnership Agreement it was:-

Resolved

That this matter be deferred and referred for consideration at the next meeting of the Committee. (HRHM)

501 WYVERN COMMUNITY TRANSPORT TRUST – ACCEPTANCE OF TAXI VOUCHERS

Given the connections between the report on the Wyvern Community Transport Trust and the item on the Community Transport Partnership Agreement it was:-

Resolved

That this matter be deferred and referred for consideration at the next meeting of the Committee. (HRHM)

502 IMPLEMENTING ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Administrative and Member Services on the Implementing Electronic Government 2005 Return.

Resolved

That the Implementing Electronic Government 2005 Return, as detailed in the report, be approved for submission to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. (HAMS)

503 THE NEW HOUSING BENEFIT PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management on scoring against the new housing benefit performance standards.

It was noted that claims processing now averaged 25 days (one of the highest processing figures within the County) and that the service was particularly responsive to dealing with changes in circumstances.

Responding to questions, officers advised that achievements associated with the new skills and competencies matrix could be directly related to the dedicated trainer and that part of the joint working with Castle Point and Maldon Councils included making capacity available for aspects such as training.

During discussion the Chairman referred to how pleasing the upgrade in performance was in the context of his role as the Council's Benefits Champion. The service was there to meet the needs of more vulnerable parts of the community and it would be important to maintain momentum.

In thanking officers for their work the Committee agreed that they should be named in any press release associated with the successes.

Resolved

- (1) That the self-assessment score of 4 (Excellent) be noted and the Compliance Timetable set out at Appendix 4 of the report agreed (with monitoring on a six-monthly basis).
- (2) That officers seek to publicise both the service improvements and that the Council's Revenue & Benefits Team is recognised as delivering an excellent service judged against National guidelines. (HRHM)

504 MEMBERS ALLOWANCES

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director (Finance & External Services) on amendments to the Scheme of Members Allowances to come into effect from 1 April 2006.

In introducing this item, the Corporate Director advised that a Basic Allowance of £3,800 would place Rochford at the average of Essex District and Borough Councils. As was the case with previous Remuneration Panels, the Panel appointed for this year was recommending the inclusion of a Carer's Allowance to facilitate social inclusiveness on the basis that carers should not be penalised or more out of pocket than any other Members.

Responding to questions, the Corporate Director advised that:-

- If a Remuneration Panel recommends involvement in the County Superannuation Scheme, the Authority can decide whether or not to accept the recommendation. The Panel considers this question each year. If there is no Panel recommendation then non-involvement is binding.
- In considering an allowance for Sub-Committee Chairman the Panel appreciated that the number/frequency of meetings could vary.
- Costs associated with a Carer's Allowance would depend on the type of care needed. The Remuneration Panel had concluded that any Allowance would need to be invoice/receipt based, otherwise it becomes taxable and may be detrimental to any benefits.
- Subject to need being demonstrated, the Carer's Allowance would include child carers.
- There is a duty on the Authority to be socially inclusive.
- Approximately half of Essex authorities included a Carer's Allowance within their Schemes. Some made payments on the basis of receipts, others on the basis of receipts with a cap.

- Claims for overnight stays in hotels are rare and an increase in the figure to, say, £120 and £180 in Central London would not have budget implications. Any claim would have to be submitted in the context of an approved duty on the basis that the allowance figure is the upper limit.

During general discussion on the reality of the cost of stays in hotels it was agreed that a figure of £120 (£180 in Central London) would be more appropriate. With regard to a Carer's Allowance it was observed that there is no statistical way of gauging the costs that could be associated with introducing such an Allowance. There had been significant increases in the Allowances that are currently available to Members over recent years and it is possible that, depending on circumstances, financial support for carers would be available from the Government. It was agreed that it would not be appropriate to introduce a Carer's Allowance.

Recommended to Council

(1) That the Member Allowance Scheme comprise:-

- A Basic Allowance of £3,800.
- The existing cascade system and percentage allocations of Special Responsibility Allowances.
- The introduction of an Allowance for Chairmen of Sub-Committees.
- The maintenance of the Co-optees' Allowance at £300 per annum.
- Travel and subsistence to be paid at the same rate as for officers as at 1 April 2006 subject to a maximum of 40p per mile. The Allowances for a passenger, motorcycle and bicycle to be retained at the same rate.
- The upper figure for overnight stays in hotels to be £120 (£180 in Central London).
- That Allowances should not be pensionable.
- That index linking should not be applicable.

(2) That a Carer's Allowance be not introduced.

Note: Councillor C I Black wished it to be recorded that he had voted against the above recommendation. Councillor J R F Mason wished it to be recorded that he had voted against the recommendation that a Carer's Allowance be not introduced.

505 NATIONAL NON-DOMESTIC RATE – WRITE OFFS

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director (Finance & External Services) which sought approval to write off some National Non-Domestic Rate debts.

The Corporate Director provided some detail on case 1511. It was noted that case 1883 should have been replaced with case 1960 (amount £18,329).

Resolved

That, subject to case 1883 being replaced with case 1960 (amount £18,329), the debts shown at Appendix 1 of the report be written off against the National Non-Domestic Rate Pool. (CD(F&ES))

506 REPORT OF THE TOURISM STUDY SUB-COMMITTEE

The Committee considered the report of the Tourism Sub-Committee setting out recommendations relating to the 2005/06 and 2006/07 budgets and the undertaking of a review exercise.

Responding to questions, the Chief Executive confirmed that any information on leaflets that are produced would ally to information on the Council's website and that endorsement of the recommendations would enable important groundwork on informing people of what is available within the District, increasing the District's profile and developing recommendations for areas where adjustments to policy could be appropriate.

Resolved

- (1) That the sum of £7,000 currently within the 2005/06 budget for Tourism provision be applied to:-
 - A destination print project.
 - A visitors website project (allying to the destination print project).
- (2) That work commence on the development of a mechanism for engaging the business community/commencing networking with other bodies.
- (3) That, subject to the final outcome of overall budget considerations, the following projects be first priority for any tourism monies that are available during 2006/07:-
 - Walks Leaflet.

- Activities Leaflet.
 - Rights of Way Leaflet.
 - Heritage Trail/Churches Leaflet.
- (4) That the Sub-Committee be tasked in the first instance with undertaking a review exercise to ascertain whether there is tourism potential within the District in the areas of bird watching and caravanning/camping. (CE)

The meeting closed at 8.59pm.

Chairman

Date