

Policy & Finance Committee – 12 July 2005

Minutes of the meeting of the **Policy & Finance Committee** held on **12 July 2005** when there were present:-

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

Cllr C A Hungate
Cllr J R F Mason
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

OFFICERS PRESENT

P Warren - Chief Executive
R J Honey - Corporate Director (Law, Planning & Administration)
S Fowler - Head of Administrative & Member Services
D Deeks - Head of Financial Services
S Clarkson - Head of Revenue & Housing Management
J Bostock - Principal Committee Administrator

VISITING

Cllr Mrs M S Vince

275 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 16 June 2005 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

276 PROGRESS ON DECISIONS

The Committee received the schedule relating to Progress on Decisions.

CCTV Evaluation (Minute 308/04)

The Chief Executive advised that alternative possibilities were now under consideration to take this initiative forward and that a meeting was to be scheduled with the Police.

Community Transport – Longer Term Funding (Minute 145(1)/05))

It was noted that the five-year support plan for Community Transport had emanated from a detailed review by the Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee and that the Community Transport Scheme served a different client base to the Taxi Voucher Scheme. It was also noted that there had been some delay to Trust Formation associated with appointments to the Trust Board. Officers were in regular contact with the County Council on the continued availability of Community Transport funding.

It could be recognised that the Taxi Voucher Scheme was notably efficient and worked well.

Council Tax Improvement Plan (Minute 153/05)

The Head of Revenue and Housing Management confirmed that Action Plan review reports would be submitted to the Policy and Finance Committee at its meetings in October 2005 and April 2006.

Draft Animal Welfare Charter (Minute 555(13)(a)/04)

It was noted that consideration of extending the Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park and of developing wildlife walks at Foulness with observation posts in order to encourage greater appreciation of wildlife could ally with the development of the Council's Tourism Strategy.

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

It was noted that a response was awaited from the Local Government Association with regard to its views of the adequacy of the insurance provided and the possibility of the Association lobbying for improvements to the indemnity that can be made available to Members.

The Committee endorsed the observation of the Chairman that this subject should be an item for consideration at the next meeting of the Committee.

Development and Access to Land at 5 Weir Pond Road, Rochford (Minute 196(15)(c)/05)

The Corporate Director (Law, Planning and Administration) confirmed that Members would be provided with the precise market value figure associated with the land at the end of Oast Way, Rochford.

Kerbside Recycling Scheme (Minute 198/05)

It was noted that, as part of the publicity associated with the voluntary kerbside recycling scheme, there was to be an article in Rochford District Matters and information would be included in Council Tax correspondence.

277 ROCHFORD MARKET TOWN FUNDING

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive on the County Council's decision to allocate a sum of £50,000 to fund initiatives in association with the market town of Rochford.

It was noted that final project recommendations would be considered by the Chairman of the County Council's South Essex Area Forum.

There was general agreement that, whilst merit could be associated with all the projects identified in the report, a focus on the main gateways to the town would be particularly appropriate given that they are key to first impressions of Rochford. Specific reference was made to the value of introducing improvements to the railings and area around Bradley Way/Station Road down to the railway bridge.

Resolved

That the following main project be put forward for further discussion with the Parish Council, the Regeneration Project Group and Essex County Council, with a view to ensuring that the £50,000 allocated by the County Council is spent by August 2006:-

Improvements to the town's main gateways – South Street junction; West Street junction; North Street/Weir Pond Road and Weir Pond Road/East Street (with particular reference to the railings and area around Bradley Way/Station Road down to the railway bridge). (CE)

278 ASSET MANAGEMENT PLAN 2005

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director (Law, Planning and Administration) which presented the Council's Asset Management Plan 2005 for formal approval.

During discussion it was agreed that it would be appropriate to include reference to the work of the Playspace Sub-Committee on public playspaces within the plan and to revise two of the timescales identified on page 11.19 of the report.

Resolved

That, subject to the inclusion of reference to the work of the Playspace Sub-Committee on public play spaces and to 'September 2005' being indicated in the timescale against items 2 and 3 on page 11.19 of the report, the Asset Management Plan 2005 be endorsed. (CD(LP&A))

279 ASSET MANAGEMENT – PROPERTY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director (Finance and External Services) on information reported to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in the autumn, the issues around Best Value indicators and the provision of information for local performance indicators to assist the Council in developing the Asset Management Plan.

Responding to questions, officers confirmed that some further work was required on the space utilisation figures identified at Appendix C of the report to ensure that all locations were captured.

Resolved

That, subject to review of the space utilisation figures identified at Appendix C of the report to ensure that all locations are captured, the changes in performance indicators from 2003/04 to 2004/05 be noted. (CD(F&ES))

280 IMPLEMENTING ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Administrative and Member Services that contained the Implementing Electronic Government 2005 Mid Term Return (IEG 4.5) for comment and approval prior to submission to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister by 18 July 2005.

Responding to questions, officers advised that:-

- The Council set aside some of its own monies for the development of information technology.
- Revenue implications associated with all information technology developments were built into the Council's Budget Strategy and, should no other sources of funding be available, required expenditure on information technology would need to be part of the strategy.
- Although annual software maintenance is an ongoing requirement, the Government grant associated with Implementing Electronic Government activity is a capital grant used for items that should have a long life-cycle. Officers were always mindful of potential impact on the Council's own budgets when identifying initiatives to pursue. Further information could be provided on the likely ongoing information technology costs once the funding associated with Implementing Electronic Government is concluded.

The Committee concurred with the view of a Member that officers should be congratulated on their work in the development of information technology and the successes associated with Implementing Electronic Government activity.

It was observed that, based on experience in other areas, there was a possibility that the Government will continue to have expectations for the development of information technology, even when specific funding for initiatives is no longer available. In this context it would clearly be appropriate to remain alert to all possible sources of grant funding.

Resolved

- (1) That the IEG 4.5 Mid Term Return for submission to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister be approved.
- (2) That the work to implement the 'Government Connect' programme through a partnership approach with the Essex Online Partnership be approved. (HAMS)

281 COUNCIL TAX SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management on specific elements of the Council Tax Service Improvement Plan as they relate to policy decisions of the Council.

During discussion it was observed that the successful record of tax collection could be applauded. It was also observed that it was unfortunate that the fine associated with a successful Magistrate's Court prosecution relating to Council Tax recovery went to the Exchequer and not the Council, although the Council bore the cost of prosecution

Resolved

That no action be taken on the seven elements of the Action Plan detailed in the report. (HRHM)

282 KEY PLANS AND ACTIONS FOR 2005/06

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive which provided an update on the key plans and actions for 2005/06.

It was agreed that the regular reporting of key plans and actions was a valuable tool in monitoring main priorities.

There were some discussion on recycling percentages. It was noted that the Waste Management and Recycling Sub-Committee would now be considering the outcome of the DEFRA bid associated with extension of the kerbside recycling scheme and that the final bullet point on page 15.5 of the report should refer to a "sensory garden"

Resolved

That the progress made to date be noted. (CE)

283 THE UK LOCAL GOVERNMENT POST TSUNAMI SUPPORT PROGRAMME IN SRI LANKA AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ESSEX CONSORTIUM TO ASSIST MULLAITTIVU DISTRICT

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive on whether to agree to joining any Essex Consortium established to assist Mullaittivu District in Sri Lanka.

Members felt that the Council should not join the proposed Essex Consortium. There would be resource implications for the Authority and it could be that specific financial contributions would be sought in the future. There was no question of the worthiness of the cause, but it could be recognised that there are many areas of significant need.

Resolved

That the Council does not join the proposed Essex Consortium. (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 paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 would be disclosed.

284 HOUSING MANAGEMENT – STAFFING

The Committee considered the exempt report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management that addressed issues surrounding Sheltered Housing Management, the Supporting People Grant, the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002, the Housing Act 2004 and the Stock Option Appraisal Exercise.

During debate officers confirmed that, whilst it could be recognised that issues were associated with the ongoing availability of supporting people funding, such funding would not be required for the proposals set out in the report.

Resolved

That a Housing Finance Officer post be created on Scale SO1 with effect from 1 August 2005 on the basis set out in the exempt report. (HRHM)

285 STAFFING MATTERS

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

Resolved

That the current level of vacancies, long-term sickness and maternity absence, as set out in the exempt report, be noted. (CE)

The meeting closed at 8.37pm.

Chairman

Date