

Policy & Finance Committee – 3 October 2002

Minutes of the meeting of the **Policy & Finance Committee** held on **3 October 2002** when there were present:-

Cllr P F A Webster (Chairman)
Cllr J E Grey (Vice-Chairman)

Cllr C A Hungate
Cllr C C Langlands
Cllr C J Lumley
Cllr C R Morgan

Cllr P K Savill
Cllr S P Smith
Cllr Mrs M A Starke

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs A J Humphries and Cllr J M Pullen.

SUBSTITUTES

Cllr Mrs B J Wilkins

OFFICERS PRESENT

P Warren	Chief Executive
R Crofts	Corporate Director (Finance & External Services)
R J Honey	Corporate Director (Law, Planning & Administration)
S Clarkson	Head of Revenue and Housing Management
S Fowler	Head of Administrative and Member Services
A Wilson	Supporting People Officer
S Logan	Benefits Manager

470 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 10 September 2002 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

471 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr C C Langlands declared a personal interest in the items on Housing Benefit, Council Tax, Business Rates, Former Tenant Arrears and Sundry Debtors – Write-Offs; Housing Benefit Performance Framework; Housing Benefit Overpayment Recovery Policy and Tenant Participation Officer by virtue of being a leaseholder of a former Council property.

472 ISSUES ARISING

The following issue arising from the meeting of the Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 17 September was considered:-

Frail Elderly Housing (Minute 426/02)

Resolved

That additional funding of £10,000 be provided in order that the Consultants carry out the following work:-

- (1) Map the supply of specialist accommodation against needs at a local level.
- (2) Establish the voids and lettings of Registered Social Landlords with Sheltered Housing in the District along with their own plans for tackling difficult to let stock and re-modelling services for older people or developing different or additional provision.
- (3) Undertake an option appraisal of the Council's Sheltered Schemes. (HHHCC)

The following issues arising from the meeting of the Finance & Procedures Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on 24 September 2002 were considered:-

Capital Programme Update (Minute 441/02)

Resolved

- (1) That the revised Capital Programme be agreed.
- (2) That £100,000 be allocated to Local Authority Social Housing Grants and £67,000 to Private Sector Renewal Grants. (HFS)

Closure of Account & Revenue Account (Minute 443/02)

Resolved

That the budget amendments identified in the report be agreed. (HFS)

473 OUTSTANDING ISSUES

The Committee noted the progress of the outstanding issues and the following matters arising:-

Market Car Park – Rayleigh Operatic and Dramatic Society (RODS) Scenery Store (Minute 446/02)

A planning application has been received . RODS hope to be able to vacate the scenery store by the end of October. (CD(F&ES))

Land at Francis Walk, Rayleigh (Minute 450/02)

Officers agreed to advise a Member in writing of the amount realised by the sale of land. CD(F&ES))

National Non Domestic Rating – Applications for Discretionary Rate Relief (Minute 236/02)

Discretionary Rate Relief has been granted to Happy Days Nursery. (HRHM)

Essex & Southend Waste Local Plan – Proposed Modifications (Minute 177/01)

Officers will update Members on whether legal advice has been gained.
(HPS/CD(F&ES))

Housing Corporation Funding Bids (Minute 441/01)

Swan Housing Corporation have put in a number of bids, including one for Hardwick House. Following a meeting with the Housing Corporation, they now feel sufficiently confident to undertake the preparatory work on the Hardwick House project which will cost in the region of £20,000.

Outstanding Issues would be carried forward.

474 HOUSING BENEFIT, COUNCIL TAX, BUSINESS RATES, FORMER TENANT ARREARS AND SUNDRY DEBTORS – WRITE-OFFS

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director (Finance & External Services) which invited Members to note items which had been written off under the Corporate Director's delegated authority.

Appended to the report was a list of cases which fall outside the delegated authority and which Members were invited to approve.

Resolved

- (1) That items written off under the Corporate Director's delegated authority be noted.
- (2) That items shown in the Appendix to the report be now written off in the accounts of the authority. (HRHM/HFS)

475 HOUSING BENEFIT PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK – ADOPTION OF VISION STATEMENT, POLICY OBJECTIVES AND SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The Committee received the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management which recommended that Members adopt the Vision Statement and Policy Objectives associated with the delivery of the Housing Benefit Performance Framework (HBPF).

A Service Improvement Plan had also been appended for approval. Members noted that:-

- in June the Council had become one of the first Local Authorities in the country to adopt the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Performance Standards for Council Tax Benefits and Housing Benefits.

- the Plan had been broken down into seven functional areas, aimed at ensuring the timely delivery of the Performance Standards for Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit.
- in some areas the standards are met in full, whilst others would require input from senior staff and Section Managers.
- The work would be financed from within the division's staffing resources
- Progress reports would be brought back to this Committee on a 6 monthly basis.
- Any recommendations relating to a change in delivery of the revenues and benefits services as a result of the customer survey responses would be brought to this Committee.

Resolved

- (1) That the Vision Statement and Policy Objectives for delivering the HBPF be adopted.
- (2) That the Service Improvement Plan be adopted and reviewed annually by this Committee, along with any resource issues arising so that these can be considered as part of the budget making process.
- (3) That subject to Government support being received, appropriate resources be devoted to ensuring the plan remains on target.
- (4) That the Head of Revenue and Housing Management bids for Government finance to advance the plan.
- (5) That an annual customer survey be undertaken to ensure the plan is delivering customer demands. (HRHM)

476 HOUSING BENEFIT OVERPAYMENT RECOVERY POLICY

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management which considered the adoption of a revised policy on Housing Benefit Overpayment Recovery (HBOR) following the adoption of the Housing Benefit Performance Standards (HBPS).in June this year.

Members noted that:-

- this is a mechanism for improving the delivery of Housing Benefit across a whole range of service areas.
- a report setting out a 5 year work plan to achieve these standards had already been discussed on this Agenda.
- the policy for the administration and recovery of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit overpayments now needs to be reviewed and had been appended to the report.

Resolved

That the Housing Benefit Overpayment Recovery Policy, as specified in the Appendix, be adopted. (HRHM)

477 TENANT PARTICIPATION OFFICER

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management which recommended that Members of the Committee consider the appointment of a part-time dedicated Tenant Participation Officer as part of the Tenant Compact Review.

Members noted that:-

- The officer would act as a link between the tenant and the Council. Whilst the person would be based at Rochford, it is the intention that they will be out regularly meeting with tenants.
- That this would be funded fully from the Housing Revenue Account budget
- The Council needs to meet the principles of Best Value, but that currently tenant participation levels are low and attempts to generate interest to date have failed.
- A dedicated specialist Tenant Liaison Officer would be able to undertake many new tasks that are essential in order to demonstrate this Council's commitment to its Tenant Participation Compact., including developing methods of consultation.
- This will be an area which would be monitored within the Comprehensive Performance Assessment framework.

Resolved

That a part-time specialist Tenant Liaison Officer be appointed for 25 hours per week, on a fixed term contract of three years on a pro-rata salary on scale 2/4 and this to be met fully by the Housing Revenue Account. (HRHM)

478 CORPORATE GOVERNANCE ASSESSMENT

The Committee received and noted the report of the Corporate Director (Finance & External Services) in respect of Corporate Governance Assessment.

Members noted that the major areas of work which need to be undertaken during the year relate to the community plan and the development of corporate risk management.

479 TREASURY MANAGEMENT ANNUAL REPORT

The Committee received and noted the report of the Head of Financial Services for treasury management for the year 2001/02.

480 ROCHFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL CONSULTATION STRATEGY

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive which updated Members on proposals to develop a wider consultation mechanism with a view to developing a more cost effective and rigorous method of consultation with the community.

At a meeting of the Policy & Finance Committee held on 11 April 2002, Members had requested that investigations be undertaken to establish community consultation mechanisms for public consultation and at the same time to provide responses which are statistically robust in a cost effective way.

Members noted that following investigation by officers of a number of options, the following two proposals had emerged to which this Council could contribute:-

- One is being led by Essex County Council and involves other partners such as Essex Police and the Strategic Health Authority. It is seeking to set up a Citizens Panel of 2000 residents throughout the county. Officers considered that this approach would not be financially viable.
- The second option would be to work in partnership with Castle Point and Rochford Primary Care Trust (PCT). A copy of a draft specification and proposal for consultation with the residents of Rochford District Council and Castle Point Borough Council, in partnership with Castle Point and Rochford Primary Care Trust was appended to the report. A local partnership approach to community consultation has the potential to save all partners money and is considered to be statistically robust.

Resolved

That the approach being taken to develop a consultation consortium involving Castle Point Borough Council and the Local Primary Care Trust be endorsed, with a view to being operational from 2003/2004. (CEX)

481 COUNTY PERIODIC ELECTORAL REVIEW

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Administrative & Member Services which sought Members' views on the current County electoral division boundaries, in the light of the commencement of the periodic electoral review of Essex County Council.

Members noted that:-

- the broad objective of the review would be to ensure that the number of electors per councillor in each division is similar, reflects the identities and interests of local communities and secures effective and convenient local government.

- the Rules also provide that, in considering County division boundaries, the Boundary Committee should give consideration to achieving coterminosity between the boundaries of divisions and wards.
- Following the re-warding of the District Council, 10 very small polling districts had to be created to take account of the fact that the new District ward boundaries were not coterminous with the present County division boundaries. This had involved a polling district being created for one property involving three electors.

Resolved

That it be recommended to the Boundary Committee that, in its consideration of the new electoral arrangements for Essex County Council in the District of Rochford, the Committee should have regard, not only to electoral equality but also to coterminosity with the District ward boundaries. (HAMS)

482 LOCAL DEMOCRACY WEEK

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive which provided Members with details relating to the nationally promoted Local Democracy Week and sought Members' view as to whether the Council should support a motion being promoted by the Local Government Association in connection with Local Democracy Week.

Resolved

That the motion be supported as outlined and that the Chief Executive write to the two local Members of Parliament accordingly. (CEX)

483 LOCAL SERVICE AGREEMENTS – PROGRESS REPORT

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive which updated Members on the progress made on this initiative and sought Members' agreement to the way forward.

At Council in July, Members had considered a report concerning the potential for establishing a Local Service Agreement (LSA) between Essex County Council and this Authority, aimed at securing improvements in service delivery/target achievements through negotiation and agreement between the tiers. Members had agreed that exploratory talks be held with the County Council around the potential for such an agreement. Services which had been identified as possibilities for investigation included the elderly, youth services, highways and back office issues such as recruitment, training and development.

The Chief Executive outlined details of discussions to date and proposed that premises/assets and IT developments be included within the Local Service Agreement negotiations.

Resolved

That the areas outlined in this report plus the areas of premises/assets and IT be submitted to the County Council as the basis of this District's submission under the Local Service Agreement Initiative. (CEX)

The meeting ended at 8.07 pm.

Chairman

Date