

Finance & Procedures Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 9 December 2004

Minutes of the meeting of the **Finance & Procedures Overview & Scrutiny Committee** held on **9 December 2004** when there were present:-

Cllr P F A Webster (Chairman)
Cllr Mrs S A Harper (Vice-Chairman)

Cllr P A Capon
Cllr K A Gibbs

Cllr T Livings
Cllr D Merrick

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs J E Grey and Mrs J R Lumley.

SUBSTITUTES

Cllrs Mrs T J Capon and C J Lumley.

OFFICERS PRESENT

P Warren - Chief Executive
R Honey - Corporate Director (Law, Planning & Administration)
R Crofts - Corporate Director (Finance & External Services)
D Deeks - Head of Financial Services
S Rom - Economic Development Officer
J Bostock - Principal Committee Administrator

ALSO PRESENT

K Wickham - Federation of Small Businesses
J Stanton - Hockley Chamber of Trade
R Amner - Hockley Chamber of Trade
C Norton - Rayleigh and District Chamber of Trade
H Squier - Rochford Chamber of Trade
J Sheaf - South East Essex Chamber of Commerce

535 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 18 November 2004 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

536 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Mr R Amner declared a personal interest by virtue of being a District Councillor.

Mr H Squier declared a personal interest by virtue of being a Parish Councillor and owning property within the District.

537 PROGRESS ON DECISIONS

The Committee received the schedule relating to progress on decisions.

538 BUDGET STRATEGY CONSULTATION WITH THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Financial Services on consultation with the business community regarding the setting of the Council tax for 2005/06.

In presenting the report, the Head of Financial Services provided some detail on the nature of the recent draft settlement and the financial issues faced by the Council in the context of Government expectations.

Hockley Chamber of Trade

The Chamber extended compliments to the Council on the value of its website in providing information on planning applications.

The Chamber wished to raise specific concern about levels of graffiti, particularly relating to street furniture. Given that effective education was a key element in addressing graffiti, it would be appropriate to ensure that the budget was sufficient. Quick responses to graffiti issues were also important.

Officers advised that whilst some Home Office funding was available to tackle graffiti, this was currently being applied to graffiti of a particularly abusive nature. The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill was likely to provide for local authorities to be further involved in tackling graffiti, although at this stage it was not clear whether appropriate funding would be available. The Police had had some success in tackling individuals directly associated with graffiti problems. Graffiti would feature in the next District-wide Crime and Disorder Reduction Strategy.

Federation of Small Businesses

The Federation wished to raise the following matters:-

- It would set a useful example if the Council's leisure contractor could avoid using fencing in the vicinity of its premises to hang banners.
- There was a lack of facility for small businesses to remove small quantities of waste to appropriate disposal sites. The Federation had had ongoing meetings with the County on waste matters and would be grateful if the District Council could provide support in asking the

County on behalf of small businesses to facilitate the removal of small quantities of waste (businesses were prepared to consider a small payment for such a service). A key objective was to avoid fly tipping.

- There was a shortage of managed workspace for start-up businesses within the District.

Officers advised that the Council's planning policies were aimed at facilitating small units for businesses where possible. Also, the Thames Gateway Economic Baseline Study currently being commissioned should help identify the key business sectors across South Essex and the problems and opportunities associated with their development.

Rochford Chamber of Trade

The Rochford Chamber wished to raise the following matters:-

- Whilst small businesses were generally supportive of the new supermarket facility at Rochford, it was seen as important for there to be a significant link with the Town Square. The Chamber felt that, if the Authority was to purchase the current library site, it would be possible to open up two of the archways to create a wider entrance between sites.
- There was an interest in knowing what would be delivered through the development of the Council's vision and the review and rationalisation of the Council's existing strategic framework.

Officers advised that work on developing the Council's vision and rationalising the existing strategic framework was one of the outcomes of the recent Comprehensive Performance Assessment process. Monies to do this would be sought from the Government's Capacity Building Fund. It was hoped over time there could be some slimming down on the high number of strategies currently in existence. Also, it was felt that work in this context would help the Authority in the Thames Gateway bidding process.

South East Essex Chamber of Commerce

The South East Essex Chamber wished to raise the following matters:-

- The nature of the £100,000 expenditure associated with the Local Development Framework.
- That the year-on-year tax increases over a five year period seemed high in the context of inflation and the ageing population of the District. Given that the Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park was well used by residents of a neighbouring authority, a view could be taken that it should be lower down the list of priorities.

Officers advised that many services now provided by the Authority had been the result of specific Government requirements. Sufficient funding did not always follow such requirements. There had been a number of financial successes, such as the leisure contract. The gearing mechanism associated with Council Tax meant that a 1% increase in budget could equate to a 2% increase in Council Tax. Up to the current time, expenditure associated with the Country Park had been minimal as the majority of monies had been achieved via grant funding. Expenditure on the Local Development Framework would be associated with necessary staff and consultancy support, as the new framework would need to be in place by 2008.

Rayleigh Chamber of Trade

The Rayleigh Chamber indicated that it was pleased to see investment in the Brook Road Industrial Estate.

The Chamber wished to raise the following matters:-

- The difficulties of finding a car parking space in Rayleigh at busy times.
- The levels of traffic congestion in the Town, which seem to be worsening.
- The pressures placed on the road infrastructure by new housing developments and the associated increase in vehicles.
- Concerns at the increased use of lamp posts for advertising by retail businesses.

Officers advised that the Council was aware of the importance of taking a strategic view of parking and that some parking issues had been exacerbated by the introduction of decriminalised parking enforcement. The Council could take advantage of an ability to borrow money through a prudential borrowing code, but needed an associated revenue stream. There has been a review of the parking facilities at Websters Way as part of the option appraisal process of that site.

The business representatives wished to thank Susan Rom for the assistance provided to local commerce and industry. Responding to questions, officers advised that consideration would be given to providing a tailored version of the Council's business directory to business rate payers and that the directory would include reference to low cost start-up provision. The Head of Financial Services confirmed that he would meet with business representatives once the Council had finally determined its priorities.

Resolved

That the views of the business community be included in the report to Council when the priorities and budget for the Council are determined. (HFS)

**539 RAYLEIGH, ROCHFORD AND DISTRICT ASSOCIATION FOR
VOLUNTARY SERVICES (RRAVS) - CORE FUNDING SUPPORT**

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive on a request from RRAVS to look at increasing its core funding support to help the organisation address increasing demands.

Responding to questions, the Chief Executive advised that:-

- The proposed investigations set out in the report should not have any financial consequences for the 2005/06 financial year. Any changes in future years would depend on the final arrangements put in place.
- Other funding sources may be open to RRAVS in the future, such as the Local Strategic Partnership, for example.
- Not all voluntary groups within the District were signed into RRAVS.

Resolved

- (1) That the commitment to providing core funding to RRAVS at the existing level of grant (plus inflation) for 2005/06 be confirmed.
- (2) That officers investigate with other key partner agencies funding RRAVS as to how the capacity of the organisation can best be secured to meet the demands now placed upon it and in the future, including a broader look at other similar voluntary agencies within the District, with a report back by March 2005.
- (3) That RRAVS be invited to a future meeting to explore ways of expanding core capacity to meet the growing demands now placed upon it. (CE)

The meeting closed at 8.42pm.

Chairman

Date