

Policy & Finance Committee – 7 December 2004

Minutes of the meeting of the **Policy & Finance Committee** held on **7 December 2004** when there were present:-

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

Cllr C I Black
Cllr K H Hudson
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
Cllr J Thomass

OFFICERS PRESENT

P Warren - Chief Executive
R J Honey - Corporate Director (Law, Planning and Administration)
R Crofts - Corporate Director (Finance and External Services)
D. Deeks - Head of Financial Services
S Fowler - Head of Administrative and Member Services
C McClellan - Human Resources Manager
J Bostock - Principal Committee Administrator

520 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 11 November 2004 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

521 PROGRESS ON DECISIONS

The Committee received the schedule relating to progress on decisions.

(1) CCTV Evaluation (Minute 308/04)

It was noted that not all Parishes/Chambers had CCTV schemes – those that did were to be approached.

(2) Budget Strategy 2004/04 – 2008/09 (Minute 46/04)

It was noted that the person specification for the vacant housing service improvement officer post had been developed in consultation with officers from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

522 COUNCIL TAX 2005/06 - UPDATE ON GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Financial Services providing an update on Government announcements relating to the Council Tax 2005/06.

Responding to questions, officers advised that:-

- . Officers were now focusing on options available to the Council and information on these would be detailed in the financial schedules being prepared for the Members' Away Day. The schedules would include detail on the individual and total cost of Government requirements.
- . Monies that had been lost due to the ceilings arrangement would need to be excluded from any considerations.
- . The capping criteria will be applied to each Authority individually.

It was noted that officers would be happy to meet with Group and other Members to advise on the financial position.

Resolved

That officers provide full budget projections and options for priorities for the Members' Away Day on 15 January 2005. (HFS)

523 WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director (Law, Planning and Administration) on progress to date in connection with the production/implementation of the Workforce Development Plan and the way forward.

Responding to questions, officers advised that:-

- . The work associated with the development plan should be seen as helping equip both officers and Members in facing future challenges.
- . Separate reports would be supplied identifying any non-budgeted costs.
- . Whilst there is to be a number of new regulations associated with the Local Government pension scheme, at present these will not change the underlying principle of it being a final salary scheme. There would be a need to be mindful of the potential of new regulations on recruitment and selection.
- . Work had commenced on workforce development matters prior to the need to formulate this particular plan, the Council having been involved in piloting work with other authorities in the Eastern Region.

Resolved

- (1) That progress made on the Workforce Development Plan to date be noted.
- (2) That reports be received in due course around work-life balance and recruitment and retention in accordance with the timescales outlined in the Plan. (CD(LP&A))

524 IMPLEMENTING ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT (IEG4) STATEMENT

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Administrative and Member Services that contained the Implementing Electronic Government 4 Statement for comment and approval prior to submission to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister by 20 December 2004.

The Committee noted that the County Council would be making a few changes to the wording of some of their responses in the document. It was also noted that the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister had indicated that, as long as progress is planned, the Authority is unlikely to be penalised with regard to the current status of requirements R27 and G24.

Responding to questions, officers advised that:-

- The term “(deep) hyperlink” referred to a connection that enabled the user to go direct to a specific page on the website of another organisation.
- ODPM guidance included the statement that failure to submit a satisfactory return could potentially lead to the ODPM taking back funding already provided and/or the withholding of funding in 2005/06. The Council’s work on a number of strategies had pointed to the likelihood of withdrawal being remote where an authority had a track record of making good use of available funding.
- It could be observed that grant funding is never likely to be sufficient given the many plans that an authority has and that IT equipment can become quickly obsolete.
- The current audit associated with requirement G20 included third party suppliers.
- One aspect of requirement G4 was the webcasting of Council Meetings, which some authorities were piloting with a view to a possible Countywide approach.

During debate, reference was made to the partnership working aspects of developing the IEG Statement. A Member observed that, notwithstanding the

likelihood, the existence of an ODPM statement that, potentially, funding already provided could be taken back could be viewed as somewhat disturbing.

The Committee thanked the Head of Administrative and Member Services for all the work undertaken in developing the Statement. The Chairman asked that Members be advised should there be any difficulties in achieving the plan.

Resolved

That, subject to the inclusion of any changes from the County Council, the IEG4 Statement be approved for submission to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. (HAMS)

525 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 2005.

In presenting the report, the Corporate Director confirmed that the proposed basic allowance would align with the policy objective of the Remuneration Panel that this is eventually brought up to the Essex average. He also reported that the Panel wished to emphasise the view that a carer's allowance should be introduced given its potential social inclusion value in providing an attraction to individuals that, but for the non-existence of such an allowance, may come forward to be Councillors. The Panel had indicated that they would continue to recommend a carer's allowance.

With regard to payment for mileage, it was noted that each Member would need to ensure that they had appropriate vehicle insurance cover. It was also noted that, should Members wish to introduce an allowance in any area that is higher than that recommended by the Panel, this would need to be justified.

Responding to questions, the Corporate Director advised that:-

- The proposed bicycle allowance was based on guidelines from the Inland Revenue.
- The introduction of a carer's allowance should be seen in the context of the Member situation, rather than the situation of officers (who are paid employees). There are no specific guidelines for such an allowance at the moment, but these could be developed in consultation with other Local Authorities where such an allowance is paid.

During debate, reference was made to the possible advantage of introducing a carer's allowance in terms of the Council being able to attract potential

Councillors from a broad age range. Reference was also made to the fact that such an allowance was not made available by a number of organisations.

Recommended to Council

That the Members' Allowance Scheme comprise:-

- A Basic Allowance of £3,000.
- The existing cascade system and percentage allocations of Special Responsibility Allowances.
- The maintenance of a co-optees' allowance at £300 per annum.
- The payment of travel and subsistence at the same rate as for officers as at 1 April 2005, subject to a maximum of 40p per mile and a passenger allowance of 5p per passenger per mile being introduced. In addition, new allowances of 24p per mile for a motorcycle and 20p per mile for a bicycle.
- That Allowances should not be pensionable.
- That Index-Linking should not be applicable.

(**Note:** Councillor C I Black wished it to be recorded that he had voted against the decision not to proceed with a Carer's Allowance).

526 CHANGES TO THE SYSTEM OF PLANNING FEES IN ENGLAND

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Planning Services which outlined the Government's proposed changes to planning fees to be introduced on 1 April 2005.

During debate, Members concurred with the observation of the Chairman that a comment that planning fees should be set at a level that is self-financing should be included in the response to the paper.

Resolved

That, subject to an additional comment that planning fees should be set at a level that is self-financing, the officer observations set out in the report form the basis of the Council's response to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. (HPS)

527 LONDON SOUTHEND AIRPORT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE – MEMBERSHIP

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Administrative and Member Services on a revision in the number of appointees to the London Southend Airport Consultative Committee.

Recommended to Council

That membership of the London Southend Airport Consultative Committee be increased from one to three Members, the additional two appointees to be Councillors K H Hudson and D G Stansby for the remainder of this Municipal Year. (HAMS)

528 FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT – THE REGULATIONS

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director (Law, Planning and Administration) on the charging regime for Freedom of Information Act requests.

It was noted that regulations had yet to be published regarding fees to be charged relating to requests for information. Mindful of a recent speech by the Secretary of State, it would be appropriate for the Council to agree that requests estimated to exceed the indicated financial limit of £450 would not be processed except on the specific authority of the Chief Executive at the full cost to the Authority of providing the information.

Responding to questions, the Corporate Director advised on his understanding of the current position relating to the use of emails by Members and officers and confirmed that the Council's approved record retention policy had been in place for a twelve month period.

Resolved

That requests estimated to exceed the proposed financial limit should not be processed except on the specific authority of the Chief Executive at the full cost to the Authority of providing the information. (CD(LP&A))

EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Resolved

That the public and press be excluded from the Meeting for the remaining item of 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.

529 STAFFING MATTERS

The Committee received the exempt report of the Chief Executive on the current position regarding vacancies and long term sickness absence within the Authority.

Responding to questions, officers clarified the current position relating to maternity leave and aspects of partnership work being developed with other Authorities to help address recruitment difficulties.

Resolved

That the current level of vacancies and long term sickness absence and maternity absence be noted. (CE)

The meeting closed at 8.59pm.

Chairman

Date