

## **Policy & Finance Committee – 12 October 2005**

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

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

Cllr C I Black  
Cllr C A Hungate  
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 Mrs M J Webster  
Cllr Mrs C A Weston

### **OFFICERS PRESENT**

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

### **ALSO PRESENT:-**

Elaine Adams, Essex County Libraries Strategic Manager (Digital Citizenship) and David West, Capita Contact Centre Manager.

### **379 MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 13 September 2005 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

### **380 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Mrs J A Mockford declared a prejudicial interest in item 17 of the agenda by virtue of being a Member of Rayleigh Town Council and left the meeting during its consideration.

### **381 PROGRESS ON DECISIONS**

The Committee reviewed the Progress on Decisions schedule.

#### **(1) CCTV Evaluation (Minute 308/04)**

The Chief Executive confirmed that the Town and Parish Councils had not been enthusiastic with regard to contributing towards the cost of evaluation.

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

The Head of Revenue and Housing Management detailed the background to an earlier request from the Community Transport Trust for consideration to be given to accepting taxi vouchers on the community bus and confirmed that no further action need be taken until the Trust is in a position whereby it wishes to raise the matter again.

(3) **Rochford Market Town Funding (Minute 277/05)**

The Chief Executive advised that a bid from the Rochford Regeneration Project Group had now been considered by the Local Strategic Partnership and referred for approval to Essex County Council. Whilst tacit approval had been given, the County now required detailed information. The County was currently intending to bring together representatives from appropriate agencies to discuss the brief so that proposals can be drawn up for costing. A detailed design would then need to be produced. Work is also in hand on the identification of additional monies.

It was observed that, given the improvement project is likely to cause congestion/disruption, there would be value in it being timed away from other town centre highway drainage works.

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

Responding to questions, the Chief Executive advised that information on the safety of animals in emergency situations would be included on the Council's website in tandem with the review of emergency planning information. The development of wildlife walks at Foulness needed to be considered in the context of the development of the action plan associated with the Council's Tourism Strategy.

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

The Corporate Director (Law, Planning and Administration) confirmed that the Local Government Association had been and would continue to be pressed for a response with regard to the adequacy of insurance provided and the possibility of lobbying for improvements.

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

Members noted the market value fee that was associated with the land at the end of Oast Way, Rochford.

### (7) Motion on Notice (309/05)

The Chief Executive confirmed that, based on the motion, the St George's flag was flown on St George's Day and the Union flag on other appropriate days.

### 382 FUTURE DIRECTION OF LIBRARY SERVICES

The Committee received a presentation from Elaine Adams of the Essex Library Service on the future direction of library services. The presentation covered the context for library services, the reasons for change, current pathfinder projects, the County Council's approach to consultation (including audiences and methods) and the consultation timetable.

Responding to questions, Elaine Adams advised that:-

- The library service already had books on disc and books were still the mainstay of the service. Technology would be applied wherever possible over the next ten to twenty years to deliver better services.
- The possibility of using some social services accommodation at Rayleigh Library was currently being explored.
- The world wide web was not regulated, and facts gleaned from general internet searches should not necessarily be trusted. The library service had internet gateways that gave recommended sites and also subscribed to sites on behalf of customers.
- A community would need to comprise between 5000 to 7000 people before being considered eligible for a static library.
- The library service had established that the availability of nearby parking was key to attracting customers. The possibilities for re-introducing a disabled customer parking facility at the Rayleigh library site would be reviewed.
- There had been some recent work with a private contractor on the introduction of hot drink facilities at Chelmsford and Colchester libraries. As an alternative consideration was now being given to the introduction of drink vending machines, the library service having previously relaxed the rules on eating and drinking at libraries.
- The library service was intending to introduce wireless extensions to existing fixed networks at thirty to forty sites across the County.
- The majority of books are now paperbacks (apart from novels only released in hardback and some factual books).

- The library service was aware that customers had issues around the current opening hours associated with the Rochford library. The hours of this library were due to be reviewed in tandem with the supermarket development, including the possibility of alignment to supermarket opening hours.
- Nationally, consideration was being given to the possibilities for developing a national library digital resource.

During debate, it was observed that there are probably a number of small interest/focus groups across the County that cannot afford the cost of formal meeting accommodation and might find it of value if libraries with refreshment facilities could be accessed. This was also the case with young people.

The Chairman thanked Elaine for the presentation and confirmed that Members would no doubt complete the discussion framework questionnaire associated with the review. The library service should feel free to leave questionnaires in the Council's reception areas.

### **383 REVENUE AND BENEFITS – CAPACITY BUILDING AND SERVICE ENHANCEMENT**

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management and an associated power point presentation delivered by the Revenue and Benefits Manager supported by David West of Capita, on extension to the one year pilot for telephone cover provided by Capita Plc.

Responding to questions, officers/David West advised that:-

- The contract included written assurances precluding operation of the service overseas.
- Salary savings to date had been achieved by the freezing of a part-time and full-time post and revision of a full-time post to part-time hours (the establishment now being 38.5, rather than 40.5 full time equivalent posts). A further reduction equivalent to 0.5 of a post would be required if £10,000 was not included in the 2006/7 budget.
- Capita operated contracts of between six months and four years duration and welcomed one year rolling contracts.
- When phoning the service, customers are asked if they need council tax, payment facilities or benefits. Once a choice is made, it takes an average of 18 seconds for contact to be made with a Capita representative.
- The pattern of calls associated with Rochford District does not fit the national 'norm' and the trial had seen a settling-in period.
- Capita welcomed 'mystery' shopping.

- Officers would be in contact with Members to arrange a visit to Capita's Coventry site.
- Officers can monitor live calls and received regular reports on queuing times.
- If a Member has a specific query relating to a constituent they should, in the first instance, make contact with the responsible manager at the Council Offices.
- The contract involved random phone calls to 250 recent customers to ascertain satisfaction levels. The outcome of this activity would be reported through the Members' Bulletin.
- Ten to fifteen percent of calls to Capita involved referral to Council officers. With such calls, customers are guaranteed a response back within 48 hours of initial enquiry.

During debate a Member observed that individuals could, at times, find call centres impersonal and that they may also be inappropriate for some questions. Notwithstanding this, it could be recognised that the new arrangement had been successful in terms of moving the service to the top quartile and freeing up the Council's staff.

### **Resolved**

That a bid for £10,000 be included in the 2006/07 budget to enable the dedicated call centre service to continue on the basis set out in the report. (HRHM)

### **384 COMPREHENSIVE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT – LESSONS LEARNT AND A FRAMEWORK FOR DISTRICT COUNCILS FROM 2006**

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive on feedback from the Audit Commission on the lessons learnt from the 2003/04 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of District Councils and the options now out for consultation on the way District Councils are to be inspected from 2006.

Responding to questions, the Chief Executive advised that:-

- The 300 written responses received by the Audit Commission in consulting on the CPA framework for District Councils from 2005 had had an influence on the Commission. Some initial proposals had been delayed and focus group activity had pointed to the Audit Commission having reconsidered their approach to the assessment of District Councils, given their wide differences. The new methodology is supposed to recognise local priorities, although there will no doubt be issues around weighting/scoring.

- Option 4 within group B included service assessments, which can be seen as key to the public's view of District Councils.
- The Audit Commission appeared to be beginning to recognise the impact that the CPA process can have on both the Member and Officer resource. The Group B option modules should have less of an impact in this regard, although much of the Commission's activity seems to be based on a presumption that there is an 'executive' caucus within authorities. It is difficult to apply such presumptions to fourth option authorities.
- Some authorities were developing person specifications/job descriptions for the role of Councillor.

### **Resolved**

That the Council's response to the Audit Commission Consultation Paper be on the basis of paragraphs 4.1 to 4.9 of the Chief Executive's report. (CE)

### **385 FUTURE VISION – KEY ACTIONS FOR ROCHFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL**

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive which provided feedback from the Members Training and Development sessions carried out to date and sought agreement to the proposed way forward on vision.

Responding to questions, the Chief Executive advised that:-

- The Council's Local Plan included proposals to extend the Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park at both ends. The suggestions under the Environment heading of the 'wish list' would develop this further. Suggestions would also fit in with the Green Grid approach of the Thames Gateway South Essex Partnership.
- The Environment Agency was the responsible/lead agency for flooding. The District Council's website had information on flooding with links to the Agency. A key current issue within the District was run-off. Through its overview and scrutiny arrangements, the Council could undertake a review of key issues associated with flooding, such as flood defence, calling in various partners with a view to developing an increased awareness and understanding of flood defence issues.
- It was hoped that any early responses from public consultation could be fed into the Council's Budget Strategy process.

During discussion, reference was made to the connection between a number of the 'wish list' suggestions and Thames Gateway Project aspirations.

The Committee endorsed the inclusion of a number of additional suggestions within the 'wish list' set out at Appendix 1 of the report.

### Resolved

- (1) That, subject to the addition of the following, the 'wish list' set out at Appendix 1 of the report be endorsed as the first part of the visioning process:-

Under the Healthy Living/Quality of Life heading, expand to include:-

- More youth facilities in Rayleigh, specifically in the parts of the town not close to the warehouse centre.
- Revision of the suggestion relating to doctors and dentists to read 'encourage the provision of more general practitioners and dentists in the District as a priority, together with a satellite clinic to serve Rayleigh, Hullbridge and Hockley'.

Under the Community Development heading:-

- Revision of the first suggestion to read 'increase young people's and persons under 50 involvement in local decision making process'.

Under the Service Development heading:-

- Revision of the second suggestion to read 'continue holding Council meetings in the purpose designed, air-conditioned Civic Suite in Rayleigh'.

Include under the Environment heading, a new 'wish list'

- Adoption of the Canewdon target of 1.68 hectares (or 4.16 acres) of sports pitches per 1,000 residents for the whole of the District.

- (2) That the 'wish list' be subject to further consultation via the Joint Citizens Panel so that the communities' thoughts on priorities/non-priorities can then be fed into the process prior to further decisions on the way forward.  
(CE)

### 386 LOCAL AREA AGREEMENT FOR ESSEX

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive on the Government's Local Area Agreement initiative and its progress in Essex, together with the implications for the District Council.

In presenting the report, the Chief Executive tabled the finalised Local Area Agreement initial Prospectus to Go East ( a joint submission by the Essex Partnership, Essex County Council, Essex's NHS and Police and Essex's twelve Local Strategic Partnerships and District and Borough Councils).

Responding to questions, the Chief Executive advised that there will be some areas of local priority of more specific interest to the District than others. However, the District would need to be clear about the role it wishes to play and the associated resource implications.

### **Resolved**

- (1) That the progress on the Local Area Agreement process to date, the emerging priorities as outlined in the appendix to the report and the timescales involved for agreement be noted.
- (2) That the leader of the Council and the Council's representatives on the various Partnership forums be authorised to contribute to the Local Area Agreement process to secure maximum potential benefits for the residents of the District.
- (3) That the Chief Executive report back over the period until March 2006 on progress on the Local Area Agreement process. (CE)

### **387 KEY PLANS AND ACTIONS FOR 2005/06: PERFORMANCE UPDATE**

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive on progress on the key plans and actions for 2005/06, as outlined in Chapter 7 of this year's Performance Plan.

### **Resolved**

That progress made to date be noted. (CE)

### **388 ESSEX POLICE AUTHORITY AND POLICE BEST VALUE REVIEW – POLICING AND FORCE STRUCTURE**

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive on the conclusions of the Best Value Review of the Essex Police Structure, which was now open for consultation.

Members endorsed the comments suggested in the report subject to the inclusion of an indication that the District Council strongly opposes all three options. It was also agreed that the Local Members of Parliament should be asked to support the Council's views, a copy of which should be sent to County Councillor Mrs E M Hart in her capacity as a Member of the Police Authority.



### Resolved

- (1) That, subject to the inclusion of an indication that the District Council strongly opposes all three options, the officer comments set out in the report form this Council's response to the structural review by Essex Police.
- (2) That both local Members of Parliament be notified of and asked to support this Council's views on the proposals. A copy of the views to also be sent to County Councillor Mrs E M Hart in her capacity as a Member of the Policy Authority.
- (3) That Castle Point Borough Council be requested to formally support this District Council in its comments on the proposals. (CE)

### 389 CONTRACTORS' ACCESS TO RAYLEIGH PAVILION

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Planning Services on a request for Rayleigh Town Council to allow contractors' vehicles to access the Pavilion building through Websters Way car park.

The Committee noted that:-

- The Car Parking Order did not allow vehicles over 2 tonnes weight to enter the car park because this was believed to be the tolerance level of the surface of the Council's car parks.
- There was likely to be high levels of pedestrian activity at this location at specific times of the day.
- It is possible that re-instatement of the car park surface could result in patches and have an adverse impact on the existing treeline.
- It is likely to be cheaper to re-instate turf than other surfaces.
- It may be that consideration could be given to introducing a temporary road surface through an existing gate. The introduction of a temporary road surface at the playing field location may not be too intrusive at what is a quieter time of year.

Responding to questions, the Chief Executive confirmed that the District Council would not be managing the contract and did not have the resources to oversee the project.

On a motion, moved by Councillor Mrs M J Webster and seconded by Councillor C G Seagers, it was:-

### **Resolved**

That the request from Rayleigh Town Council to allow contractors' vehicles to access the pavilion building through Websters Way car park be not agreed. (HPS)

### **390 COUNCIL TAX IMPROVEMENT ACTION PLAN – BEST PRACTICE PROPOSALS**

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management on progress towards implementing the Council Tax Improvement Plan.

Members endorsed the suggestion of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management that a bid in the sum of £1,500 should be included in the 2006/07 budget for the purposes of applying for Charter Mark accreditation for the Revenue and Benefits service.

### **Resolved**

- (1) That the upgraded plan and progress towards achievement be endorsed, the plan to be reviewed again in April 2006.
- (2) That a bid in the sum of £1,500 be included in the 2006/07 budget for the purpose of applying for Charter Mark accreditation for the Revenue and Benefits Service. (HRHM)

### **391 REVENUE AND BENEFITS SERVICE – PARTNERSHIP WORKING**

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management on current developments in partnership working and extending these should the opportunity arise.

It was agreed that the proposals could be commended and:-

### **Resolved**

That the current progress on collaborative working be noted and the proposals for further work with partners, as detailed in the report, be endorsed. (HRHM)

### **392 LOG OF CONSTITUENTS' ISSUES**

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive on the introduction of a corporate record of contacts with constituents. The written comments subsequently received from a Ward Councillor against the scheme were reported.

Whilst noting that some indicators can point to a need for Members to have an understanding of how they respond to constituent's queries at Councillor Ward level, it was felt that the proposals would be too bureaucratic in application.

On a motion, moved by Councillor M G B Starke and seconded by Councillor C I Black, it was:-

### **Resolved**

That a log of constituents' issues be not introduced. (CE)

The meeting closed at 10.07pm.

Chairman .....

Date .....