

## **FINANCE & GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE – Item 11(1) 14 February 2002**

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Minutes of the meeting of the **Partnership Sub-Committee** held on **24 January 2002** when there were present:-

Cllr R S Allen – Chairman

Cllr T G Cutmore  
Cllr Mrs J Hall

Cllr G A Mockford  
Cllr Mrs M J Webster

### **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received Cllr G Fox (Rochford District Council), Cllr S C Castle (Essex County Council), Cllr P Beckers (Rayleigh Town Council), Cllr Mrs P Pearse (Rayleigh Town Council), Cllr Mrs S Merton (Rawreth Parish Council), Cllr A Dobson (Sutton Parish Council), B Summerfield (Sutton Parish Council)

### **SUBSTITUTE**

Cllr P Stebbing

### **VISITING MEMBERS**

Cllr R E Vingoe

### **REPRESENTING OTHER COUNCILS**

Mrs M R Beckers  
I Rooke  
J Morgan  
Mrs M Morgan  
L Van Houten  
Mrs J Smith  
I Puzey  
Mrs H Allen  
K Bobbin  
D Collins  
Mrs K Morgan  
Mrs M Vince  
Mrs J Rigby  
T G Cutmore  
Mrs L Campbell-Daley  
Mrs E M Hart

Rawreth Parish  
Hawkwell Parish  
Hawkwell Parish  
Hawkwell Parish  
Canewdon Parish  
Canewdon Parish  
Paglesham Parish  
Barling Magna Parish  
Essex County Council  
Hockley Parish Council  
Hullbridge Parish  
Rochford Parish  
Stambridge Parish  
Ashingdon Parish  
Hullbridge Parish  
Essex County Council

### **OFFICERS PRESENT**

P Warren – Chief Executive  
Mrs H Drye – Corporate Policy Manager  
Mrs M Martin – Committee Administrator

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#### **119 MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 18 October 2001 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to it being noted that Cllr P Beckers had been representing Rayleigh Town Council and not Rawreth Parish Council as recorded.

#### **120 QUALITY TOWN AND PARISH COUNCIL – CONSULTATION PAPER**

The Sub-Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive which detailed the consultation paper from the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR).

Members noted that whilst the Quality Town and Parish Council status would be discretionary, certain achievements would need to be demonstrated. These were outlined in the report.

The District Council's Quality Town and Parish Council's Working Group had met to consider this White Paper and the views of the group had been appended to the report.

The Working Group had been concerned at the potential Quality Status and whether this would result in accredited Councils gaining preferential treatment or better services than those who were not.

The Working Group's views on the specific requirements for Quality Status were as follows:-

- Electorate Mandate – the requirement to have all seats filled by Members who have stood for election at the beginning of each four year term would mean a major change in policy and did not take account of the current position whereby casual vacancies could be advertised and Members co-opted during the Council's term. In addition increased elections would add to the burden on the District Council's resources.
- Number of meetings – the Town and Parish Councils should be able to fulfil the requirement to hold at least six meetings per year together with setting aside time for public participation.
- Competency of Clerk – Members questioned the resource implications of the requirement that Clerks should be able to demonstrate possession of the necessary skills to carry out their duties
- Published Annual Report – it was felt that the requirement to prepare and make public an annual report by the 30<sup>th</sup> April each year was desirable.

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- Newsletter – producing a newsletter on a quarterly basis might be an onerous task for smaller Parishes, particularly those covering a large geographical area.
- Properly Audited Accounts – Members questioned whether smaller Parishes could be charged less than those with a larger electorate and larger budgets, in order to comply with the requirement to prepare and make public an annual report by 30<sup>th</sup> April.

The White Paper would also require all Town and Parish Councils to be chartered. The onus would be on the District Council to provide help, advice and support with the Charter requirements. Many of these are already in place and examples were appended to the report.

It was also felt that the last reorganisation of Local Government had sought to clarify service provision and that these proposals could seek to undermine that. The District Council would seek to work with the Town and Parish Councils where possible, whilst recognising resourcing constraints. Members were concerned that the proposals did not take account of the vast differences between the rural and town parishes within this District.

Members of the Town and Parish Councils noted that they were required to return their own comments on this White Paper to the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs by 14 February 2002. The District Council would respond separately.

During debate the following additional comments were noted:-

- The cost to the Town and Parish Councils to achieve the status of a Quality Council, particularly those with limited revenue and no full time Clerk or Parish office, would prove prohibitive.
- There was disappointment that no additional resources had been identified in the White Paper, although it was noted that this was only the consultation stage.
- The introduction of the term “quality” implies that local Councils are not already recognised for the good work that already exists with the resources available to them.
- Where a Council applies for Quality Status and is refused, this would imply to their residents that they were of inferior quality, in effect the fourth tier of local government.
- More money spent on trying to achieve this status would mean a reduction in standards of the existing quality.
- The requirements for Quality Status were too prescriptive.
- It was important that local Councils do not allow the financial implications to stop them from examining generally the services they provide to the public and looking at where improvements could be made.
- Concern was raised that Town and Parish Councillors may be reluctant to stand for election, preferring to be co-opted.

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- Concern that the proposals could lead to the Town and Parish Councils losing their unique identity and becoming more like small 'district councils'.
- The District Council would shortly be determining how to elect the one Parish representative for the Standard's Committee.
- A Parish representative can always attend meetings of the District's Planning Services Committee.
- There is a need to ensure that delegating responsibility for appropriate services to a local council does not result in a reduction in the quality of that service and is value for money.
- The Parish Partnership Fund set up by the District Council for this year existed to support local projects, particularly within the smaller parishes.
- Planning workshops had been set up to offer practical support to Town and Parish Councils on relevant planning matters.
- The White Paper appears to place too much emphasis on measuring outputs which do not necessarily indicate the quality or relevancy of the services provided by local councils.
- Whilst many Town and Parish Councils already produce a newsletter, it was considered that it would be a waste of their resources to publish one to satisfy the quality guidance if there was insufficient new information to include.
- Concern that there was no reference to encouraging Towns and Parishes to produce Internet web sites for the use of residents.

There was a need for clarification relating to the following points:-

- Electorate Mandate - DEFRA had indicated that all seats should be filled at the beginning of the 4 year period. The consultation suggested that flexibility would be given for co-opting between 4 year periods. It is important that Parishes comment on this issue when they respond to the consultation document.
- Parishes may wish to question as a response to their feedback whether the public participation at annual meetings would fulfil the requirements of the White Paper.
- In order to fulfil the requirement to make the annual report public, could it be included in one of the existing newsletters or within a District Council publication?

### **Recommended**

That the views of the Quality Town and Parish Council's Working Group together with the additional comments above form the District Council's response to the consultation document. (CEx)

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The meeting closed at 9.10 pm

Chairman .....

Date .....