

## **Finance & Procedures Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 9 December 2003**

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Minutes of the meeting of the **Finance & Procedures Overview & Scrutiny Committee** held on **9 December 2003** when there were present:-

Cllr T G Cutmore (Chairman)  
Cllr J Thomass (Vice-Chairman)

Cllr P A Capon  
Cllr Mrs H L A Glynn  
Cllr Mrs S A Harper

Cllr T Livings  
Cllr C R Morgan

### **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr K A Gibbs.

### **OFFICERS PRESENT**

P Warren	Chief Executive
R Crofts	Corporate Director (Finance & External Services)
J Honey	Corporate Director (Law, Planning & Administration)
D Deeks	Head of Financial Services
S Clarkson	Head of Revenue & Housing Management
S Rom	Economic Development Officer
M Martin	Committee Administrator

### **REPRESENTING THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY**

C Norton	Rayleigh Chamber of Trade
J Sheaf	Essex Chamber of Trade
J Stanton	Hockley Chamber of Trade
H Squier	Rochford Chamber of Trade
K Wickham	Federation of Small Businesses

### **561 PROGRESS ON DECISIONS**

The Committee received the Schedule relating to Progress on Decisions.

### **562 CONSULTATION WITH THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY**

The Committee noted the report of the Head of Financial Services, which invited Members to receive the views from the business community relating to the Budget Strategy. The Chairman welcomed representatives of the business community to the meeting.

During debate, the following issues were raised:-

- The difficulties encountered by small businesses in disposing of waste and the need to work up some sort of strategy for sharing information using, for example, the internet and green business clubs. Free green audits had been advertised, but to date there had only been one response.
- Minutes of the regular quarterly meetings between officers and members of the business community had not been regularly reported back to Members. This would be rectified using the Members' Bulletin.
- The business community was currently represented on many groups such as the Local Strategic Partnership, and the Crime & Disorder Partnership.
- A survey would be carried out in the new year around the incidence of business crime. Police statistics focus on reported crime rate figures only. However, premiums for insurance policies indicate that there are perceived issues.
- The security arrangements on Brook Road and Purdeys industrial estates were still in operation, although businesses became disillusioned if they failed to see any return on this type of approach. Members agreed that it would be good to see the results of the proposed business crime survey once completed, and to be able to give publicity to any relevant facts.
- Business crime is a key theme of the Crime and Disorder partnership.
- The Thames Gateway initiative was looking at the future of the District over a 20-25 year timeframe. The emphasis, as far as the District was concerned, would be on leisure, recreation and tourism within the Gateway context.
- The Council is a full Member of the Thames Gateway Board and had been successful in securing funding commitments for specific projects, such as Cherry Orchard Business Park and Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park.
- The successful development of the Cherry Orchard Business Park offered considerable employment opportunities. £1.5 m Thames Gateway funding via the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), phased over three years, had been allocated to pump prime the necessary infrastructure improvements in the immediate area.
- The LOTS (London to Southend) Study had focussed on the London to Southend corridor. It was understood its findings would be published in January.
- The Council's policy is to resist any outer Rochford by-pass.
- The District Council is an active member of the Essex Waste Consortium looking at relevant future waste and recycling issues.
- Business representatives were pleased that no increases were planned in parking charges, but raised some concerns at the perceived lack of public parking spaces close to the town centre, particularly in Rayleigh.
- The Council were unlikely to be able to directly provide significant numbers of extra parking spaces due to the costings involved, although some more spaces were to be released within the Market car park in Rayleigh on Wednesdays. Any new parking was likely to be delivered via private redevelopment.
- Decriminalisation of parking would be able to pick up issues around illegal parking within town centres.

- People would make more use of public transport if services were improved. Particular problems cited related to when buses are delayed, resulting in more than one travelling in quick succession to the same destination. The Committee agreed that officers should write to the relevant companies about this issue.
- The proposed future supermarket development in Rochford should address the issue of adequate linkage between the Market square and the proposed site.
- The Council had now agreed to a Business Consultation Protocol.
- The current Crime & Disorder Reduction Strategy would run until 2005 when it would be superseded by a new strategy.
- A meeting would be taking place between the Police, Hawkwell Parish Council and various other community groups in relation to the recent spate of criminal damage and youth nuisance in that Parish.

Representatives from the business community thanked the Members of the Committee for providing them with the opportunity to share their concerns.

The Head of Financial Services reported that he would be meeting again with the business community after the budget strategy had been agreed to report back on the decisions taken and the reasons for those decisions, in accordance with the Business Consultation Protocol.

On a Motion moved by Cllr T Livings and seconded by Cllr Mrs H L A Glynn it was:-

**Resolved**

- (1) That a letter be sent to the main area offices of the two bus companies operating within the District, inviting them to consider employing someone in authority to control routes when services are delayed.
- (2) That, on the basis of the response, representatives of the bus companies be invited to attend a meeting of the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee to discuss the relevant issues.
- (3) That the Chairman of this Committee be nominated as the Business Champion for the Council. (CE)

**563 FINANCE BEST VALUE REVIEW**

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director (Finance & External Services), which appraised Members of the revised action plans emanating from the Best Value review.

Members noted that the revised action plan in respect of Financial Services had been appended to the report and that the action plan for Benefits had

been included with a concurrent report to this Committee dealing with Performance Framework.

During debate on the Service Action Plan the following was noted:-

- The survey of all regular creditors in relation to the payment of bills had been undertaken around 18 months ago.
- The Council was rated as the top in Essex for the prompt payment of invoices.
- The internal survey on Financial Services performance had been undertaken around 18 months ago with good results.
- The target of January 2004 for the full implementation of housing benefit payments as well as creditors by BACS instead of cheques was a realistic one.
- The Authority keeps up to date Treasury Management practices in line with CIPFA code.
- The Draft Annual Audit Letter had been reported to this Committee at its last meeting, which covered the action requirements relating to final accounts.
- In relation to the financial strategy for the Park Sports Centre, Holmes Place would be providing data to determine the VAT status of the scheme.
- In relation to the new banking contract, credit slips had been removed and there would be a review to remove the receipt of paid cheques in the New Year; the new banking arrangements were working well.

### **Resolved**

That the proposed action plan be agreed. (CD(F&ES))

## **564 HOUSING BENEFIT PERFORMANCE STANDARDS**

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management and noted the progress towards meeting the Housing Benefit Performance Standards (HBPS), which were adopted in June 2002.

Appended to the report was a schedule which identified areas for improvement in the strategic management module.

The Head of Service tabled a handout produced by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) illustrating, by way of bar graphs, Rochford's progress towards achieving the Standards.

During debate, the following was noted in relation to areas identified in the appendix: -

- 2.9 – long-term vacancies still existed and the team were currently running at 60% capacity. Discussion had taken place with Human Resources with a view to identifying improvements in the recruitment and retention of staff in this area.

- 2.21 – the Committee were being requested to identify a “Benefits Champion”, which would ensure that Members were regularly updated on the key performance indicators.
- 2.119 – networking with other Essex authorities and agencies to provide an overarching strategy to address ethnicity and diversity issues, whilst always bearing in mind the need to justify costs in relation to the demands of minority groups. The Head of Service agreed to report back with actual ethnicity ratio.
- 2.120 – the meaning of abbreviations were as follows - Racial Equality Strategy (RES); Workforce Development Plan (WFDP); Performance Development Review (PDR).

Members congratulated officers on the extensive work that had been undertaken and on a Motion moved by Cllr P A Capon and seconded by Cllr Mrs S A Harper, it was:-

**Resolved**

That the actions outlined be taken to ensure that identified weaknesses meet the standards required. (HRHM)

**Recommended to the Policy & Finance Committee**

- (1) That a bid for £15,000 be included in the 2004/05 Draft Budget (subject to the outcome of the Standards Fund bid).
- (2) That the Chairman of this Committee be appointed as the “Benefits Champion”. (HRHM)

**565 TELECOMMUNICATIONS INSTALLATION IN CASTLE ROAD CAR PARK, RAYLEIGH**

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management, which invited Members to consider the siting of a telecommunications mast in Castle Road Car Park, Rayleigh.

During debate, Members noted that:-

- Maintenance would only be required once every three years and this would not cause any parking issues within the car park.
- The whole installation would be vandal proof and the existing railings between the Council’s car park and the drop down to the Somerfield car park would be continued around the site.
- The land would be reinstated, should it no longer be needed for this purpose
- The Head of Service had recently received another application to site a telecommunications mast in Freight House car park and Members agreed to adopt the consultation process in respect of this request.

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### **Recommended to Policy & Finance Committee**

That a small parcel of land in Castle Road Car Park be leased for the installation of telecommunications equipment on terms outlined in the report. (HRHM)

The meeting closed at 10.02 pm.

Chairman .....

Date .....