

Policy & Finance Committee - 1 October 2003

Minutes of the meeting of the **Policy & Finance Committee** held on **1 October 2003** when there were present:-

Cllr P F A Webster (Chairman)
Cllr Mrs M A Starke (Vice-Chairman)

Cllr J E Grey
Cllr K H Hudson
Cllr C J Lumley
Cllr J R F Mason

Cllr P K Savill
Cllr C G Seagers
Cllr S P Smith
Cllr D G Stansby

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs A J Humphries and C A Hungate

SUBSTITUTES

Cllrs Mrs T J Capon and M G B Starke

OFFICERS PRESENT

P Warren - Chief Executive
R J Honey - Corporate Director (Law, Planning & Administration)
R Crofts - Corporate Director (Finance & External Services)
D Deeks - Head of Financial Services
S Fowler - Head of Administrative & Member Services
S Garland - Community Safety Officer
J Bostock - Principal Committee Administrator

430 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 September 2003 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

431 ISSUES ARISING FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

(1) Business Representative Consultation Protocol

The Committee considered the report of the Finance and Procedures Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 18 September 2003.

Resolved

That the Business Representative Protocol be approved as a framework for consultation with the business community. (CE)

432 PROGRESS ON DECISIONS

Note: Cllr C G Seagers declared a personal interest in Minute 331/03 by virtue of being a Great Woking Parish Councillor.

The Committee received the schedule relating to progress on decisions.

Application for Waiver of Public Entertainment Licence Fees - Village Fair, Great Woking (Minute 331/03)

It was noted that the overall costs associated with the provision of public address facilities were proving restrictive to the organisers.

Park Sport Centre - Detailed Costings (Minute 298/03)

There had been no indications that archaeological dig findings at the site would impact on the timing associated with submission of the planning application. The key factor remained the need for the County Council to progress site disposal.

433 RISK MANAGEMENT APPROACH TO THE BUDGET STRATEGY

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Financial Services on identifying the key elements of risk within the budget strategy and agreeing a monitoring process.

During debate a Member observed that independent performance bonds could be a useful vehicle in helping address potential risks associated with supplier performance.

Responding to questions, the Head of Financial Services confirmed that the District Council's band D had been used in the equation for identifying the minimum revenue budget sum which should be considered.

Resolved

That the items to be reported and the frequency of reports, as set out at appendices A and B of the report, be agreed. (HFS)

434 ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION LINKS

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Administrative and Members Services on further improvements to electronic communication links.

Responding to Member questions, officers advised that:-

- The majority of the Council's significant software systems were installed on terminal servers at Rochford.
- One advantage of the thin client solution would be extension to the useful life of PCs at the Civic Suite/less need for them to be upgraded. The software available for use on a terminal server would enable quick, effective and regular backup of records.
- Existing backup arrangements for data were aimed at minimising risk and included data being kept off-site in a secure fireproof area at the civic suite.
- The Authority had experienced a computer virus approximately two years ago.
- There would be costs associated with facilitating increased Member access to the Council's systems. This would need to be addressed as further thought was given to the use of technology by Members.

Resolved

- (1) That the upgrading of the Council's electronic communication links, as set out in paragraphs 4.1 to 4.8 of the report, be approved.
- (2) That the upgrading of the link to the internet, as set out in paragraph 4.9 of the report, be approved.
- (3) That the upgrading of the Council's website, as set out in paragraphs 4.10 and 4.11 of the report, be approved. (HAMS)

435 POLICE COMMUNITY SUPPORT OFFICERS

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive which apprised Members of the role of the Police Community Support Officer and sought views on a request by the Essex Police Authority for additional funding support for this initiative.

Responding to Member questions, the Chief Executive advised that:-

- Notwithstanding emergency demand situations, it may be possible to ally any supported funding from the District to a clause aimed at ensuring a community support officer presence within the District. This would need to be the subject of consultation with the police. As an operational matter, any views the Council had on the working hours of support officers would need to be discussed with the local Chief Superintendent.

- Further detail on proposed powers in the following areas could be ascertained from the police:-
 - Removal of abandoned vehicles.
 - Seizure of vehicles used to cause alarm.
 - Carrying out road checks.
 - Stopping vehicles for the purpose of testing.

The ways in which proposals for Essex may differ from schemes in other parts of the country, if any, could also be ascertained.

- The information received to date had not specified whether the Police Authority had been in direct contact with the business community. The Crime and Disorder Partnership worked with the business community and would no doubt include them in their own considerations on this matter.
- The consultation feedback received to date on the draft Community Strategy suggested a community desire for increased police presence.

During debate, reference was made to the likelihood of there being occasions when a community support officer would be diverted from duties to attend major incidents outside the District. From the public's perception, proposals could be seen as a form of double taxation given that expenditure would be additional to the police precept.

It was envisaged that there may be difficulties with introducing an arrangement whereby Councils that are prepared to contribute financially expect to see a greater police presence. Such an arrangement did not seem to accord with an expectation that it was a principal responsibility of the Police Authority to ensure staff resources were planned and allocated in accordance with the demands of the Authority, not those of other bodies.

Specific reference was made of the possibility that, without a power of arrest, police community support officers could be physically vulnerable in a number of circumstances. It was also observed that there may be staff retention difficulties should the support officer role be seen as a precursor to full entry into the police service.

Resolved

That the taking of any decision on providing funding support for this initiative be deferred pending:-

- (1) A decision from the Rochford Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership as to whether it would be prepared to provide matched funding for the years 2004/05 and 2005/06 and at what level.
- (2) Feedback from discussions with the Parishes and the Town Council around the budget process and an indication from them as to whether they, individually or collectively, would be prepared to support financially such an initiative. (CE)

436 THE CYCLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS IN ENGLAND - CONSULTATION PAPER

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Administrative and Member Services on the Electoral Commissions' consultation paper on the cycle of local government elections in England.

It was noted that, as part of previous submissions to the Commission relating to electoral changes, the Council had supported the retention of current arrangements.

Resolved

That the Council's previous position whereby the status-quo is maintained be endorsed. (HAMS)

437 THE MINIMUM AGE OF VOTING AND CANDIDACY IN UK ELECTIONS - CONSULTATION PAPER

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Administrative and Member Services on the Electoral Commission's consultation paper on the minimum age for voting and candidacy in UK elections.

During debate, reference was made to the possibility that lowering the age of candidates to 18 may assist in encouraging early involvement in local government. It was felt, however, that the main arguments for supporting the status-quo, as set out in paragraph 7.1 of the report, were persuasive. It was also observed that, whilst 17 year olds could join the armed forces, this was a voluntary career route rather than part of a national service programme.

On a motion, moved by Cllr M G B Starke and seconded by Cllr S P Smith, it was:-

Resolved

That the views set out in the report form the basis of this Council's response to the Consultation Paper. (HAMS)

EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

Resolved

That the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the remaining items of business on the grounds that exempt information as defined in paragraphs 7 and 9 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 would be disclosed.

438 LAND AT BRADLEY WAY, ROCHFORD

The Committee considered the exempt report of the Corporate Director (Law, Planning and Administration) on the options available to the Council in connection with some land at Bradley Way, Rochford.

During consideration of this item, the Corporate Director advised on the background history of the site, current financial returns, the financial liabilities which may fall to the Council should lease foreclosure be sought and the likelihood of arbitration. Members noted that it should be possible to make further enquiries and seek acceptable references in respect of the person submitting the highest offer.

During debate, reference was made to the value of being mindful of current interest rates and returns which could be achieved from rental income. Reference was also made to the financial implications should there be cessation of rental income.

It was agreed that care should be taken with the terminology associated with site use. It would be appropriate to use a term that maintained the standards envisaged when the lease was established. It was also agreed that it would be appropriate to ascertain as much detail as possible on the purchaser associated with the highest offer.

Resolved

That authority be delegated to the Corporate Director (Law, Planning & Administration), in consultation with the Committee Chairman, to accept the highest offer available for sale of the site freehold, subject to:-

- (1) The receipt of acceptable references/detail pertaining to the purchaser.
- (2) The retention of appropriate terminology associated with property use and provision for car parking as outlined in the report (CD(L,P&A))

439 REDUCTION OR REMISSION OF BUSINESS RATE LIABILITY

The Committee considered the exempt report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management on an application for the reduction or remission of business rate liability.

Reference was made to previous relief which had been awarded to the applicant. It could be observed that it would be inappropriate to continue to make a special case for the business in question, which should be able to trade without relying on relief.

Resolved

That no further rate relief be granted to the applicant as set out in the exempt report. (HRHM)

440 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.

Resolved

That the current level of vacancies and long-term sickness absence, as set out in the exempt report, be noted. (CE)

The meeting closed at 9.11pm

Chairman

Date