

ROCHFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the Reconvened Member Budget Monitoring Group

At a Reconvened Meeting held on 2 December 1999. Present:
Councillors D E Barnes (Chairman) and P F A Webster.

Apologies: Councillors V H Leach, C R Morgan and R E Vingoe.

Substitutes: Councillors Mrs J Helson and V D Hutchings.

Visiting: Councillor Mrs M J Webster

67. LEISURE ASSETS – IDENTIFICATION OF OPTIONS

The Working Group had, at its Meeting on 25 November 1999, given further consideration to the issues associated with future use of the former Rayleigh Sports and Social Club building on the Mill Hall Complex, the Leisure Contract and the Council's Leisure assets/buildings. It had been agreed to adjourn that Meeting to enable the preparation of site sketch plans, and to obtain additional information on the former Sports and Social Club site and details concerning the possible appointment of specialist professional consultants to advise the Council about the strategic issues associated with the Leisure Contract.

The Chairman welcomed to the Meeting Mr Peter Johnson from the Council's Leisure Contractor, Leisure Connection plc, who gave a short presentation outlining three possible options for the redevelopment of the Mill Hall Complex to increase its use by the community. The details of those options, outlining their advantages and disadvantages, were circulated at the Meeting.

Mr Johnson was thanked for his presentation and he then left the Meeting.

Before proceeding to discuss in detail the options that the Group wished to recommend to Council for redeveloping the Complex the Chairman drew Members' attention to the need to set these recommendations within the context of the Authority's budgetary position and the limited funding that would realistically be available. The following were identified as key schemes and issues that the Council would wish to pursue/address over the short, medium and long term, and which would have substantial budgetary implications:

- Town Centre improvements, at Hockley and Rochford
- Park School/Sweyne Park
- Blatches Farm
- Mill Hall Complex
- Recycling initiatives
- I T related issues.
- Contract renewals. Any variations to the existing contracts were likely to have financial implications.

- Housing management and provision.

A number of potential sources of finance (both capital and revenue), and areas within which potential savings could be made, were also identified, as follows:

- Finance that had already been set aside for some of the above projects.
- Disposal of land and property assets.
- Review of the Capital Programme
- Websters Way Development.
- Receipt from the sale of land at Etheldore Avenue.
- Increasing the income from the Council's car parks.
- Reducing the costs of the leisure contract.
- Review the allocation of funding for the Mill Hall scheme.
- Transfer assets and functions to the Parish Councils, for example (play equipment)
- Cease the Grants Programme.
- White goods collection should become self-financing.
- External funding sources.

Taking these factors into account, the Working Group then considered the options it wished Council to consider in respect of the Mill Hall Complex, which would also reflect discussions that had taken place at the Group's recent Meetings. Referring all the potential options to Council would enable full consideration to be given by the political Groups, including the possibility of retaining the status quo. Following suggestions prompted by the presentations given over the past few weeks, a number of key issues had been identified on which a Council decision was now required: the possible demolition of the former Sports and Social Club and the re-use of the land upon which it stood for car parking; renovation of the windmill and enhancing its visual impact within the Complex and beyond; upgrading Mill Hall's facilities including, for example, air conditioning and refurbishing the ground floor patio and bar area; and "tidying up" the overall site to improve its aesthetic appearance. It was recognised that some of these suggestions would need to be linked, in order that the necessary finance was available.

The Chairman then introduced and welcomed to the Meeting Mr David Timson (Property Maintenance and Highways Manager, Leisure and Client Services) who had prepared an indicative plan showing a revised parking arrangement for the Rayleigh Sports and Social Club site. This incorporated the following features:

- an additional 37 parking spaces on the site of the former Sports and Social Club
- improved pedestrian access
- enhanced vista for the windmill
- three separate parking areas

- improved access for the disabled to Mill Hall
- traffic calming measures
- raised paving and removal of steps
- a feature being made of the millstones
- re-location of the beacon
- the possibility of gated access to give added security to the inner site.

The Group was informed by the Corporate Director (Finance and External Services) of the funding currently earmarked for the Mill Hall project. The possibility of developing partnership arrangements, and obtaining external sources of funding were also considered, and it was suggested that discussions in this vein should be held with the National Trust. If such an option was to be pursued, the existing arrangements under which the windmill was let would need to be clarified.

Details of the likely cost of the scheme outlined above were received, and it was estimated that demolition of the Social Club, paving, surfacing, lighting and improvements to the Mill Hall would total approximately £185,000.

The Corporate Director reported that, as far as the leisure contract as a whole was concerned he had, as requested at the last Meeting, obtained some details of the likely scope and cost of using consultants' advice concerning strategic issues. A "menu" of possible options had been received from one company and was circulated at the Meeting. The likely cost of these options was noted.

The Working Group was grateful for the detail given in the redevelopment scheme as presented and thanked Mr Timson for his presentation. It was considered that the proposals incorporated the key issues previously recognised by the Group, and therefore represented an appropriate basis upon which Council should be asked as to whether to proceed, coupled with additional maintenance/renovation of the Windmill. The capital savings which would arise could be used to fund an upgrade to the Mill Hall, with monies also being returned to the Capital Programme.

The Working Group then considered proposals with regard to those areas of land the subject of the Member site visit that had taken place on 27 November 1999 to review a number of non-leisure sites, as previously identified by the Group. Noting that some Ward Members had missed the opportunity to comment on specific sites because the visits had proceeded ahead of schedule, it was proposed that the Groups' recommendations should go through Corporate Resources Sub-Committee. These properties, together with the suggested course of action that had been suggested as a result of the visit, are listed in the private and confidential appendix, (attached to the signed copy of these Minutes)

It was acknowledged too that a report would be coming forward to a future Meeting on the future of the land to the rear of the Civic Centre, Rayleigh.

The Chief Executive reported to Members that, at a Meeting of Finance and General Purposes Committee on 30 November 1999, it had been resolved:

“(1) That the proposals of the Blatches Farm Working Party set out in the report of the Head of Administrative and Member Services, together with a number of questions submitted by Councillor Mrs J Helson be referred to the Member Budget Monitoring Group to enable consideration of the financial implications in advance of the next Meeting of Full Council.

(2) That the recommendations of the Member Budget Monitoring Working Group, together with the above questions, be referred for consideration to a Meeting of the Blatches Farm Working Party in advance of the next Meeting of Full Council.

(3) That all proposals be referred to the next Meeting of Full Council for consideration.”

The views of the Working Group on the financial implications of the Blatches Farm proposals were therefore sought.

Because of the lateness of the hour and Members’ other commitments it was not possible to consider the Officers’ response to Councillor Mrs Helson’s questions. However, Officers confirmed that there had as yet been no provision in next year’s Capital Programme for any expenditure on this scheme. Although Members recognised the present difficulty in identifying any funding sources for the scheme, it was considered unlikely that the Country Park proposals would proceed unless there was some injection of capital either from the District Council alone or in association with possible partners. It was considered necessary to identify the minimum sum that this Council would need to contribute to allow the scheme to proceed, and the Chief Executive explained that further discussions with potential partners would be necessary in order to clarify the size of the required contribution. Members endorsed this approach.

RECOMMENDED

(1) That, in respect of the Mill Hall Complex the Council considers:

(a) The proposals for the redevelopment of the site, as outlined above, at a cost of £200,000 (provision for which is already included within the Capital Programme).

(b) That consultants be engaged to advise upon the Council’s leisure strategy, to be funded by savings accruing from the Leisure Contract.

(c) That £200,000 be set aside for improvements to the Mill Hall building.

(d) That an additional £25,000 be included within the repairs and maintenance budget for the refurbishment, internally and externally, of the windmill.

(e) That the remainder be set aside for other Capital projects. (CEX)

(2) That, in respect of the proposed disposal of the non-leisure sites listed above, the Group’s recommendations be considered by Corporate Resources Sub-Committee, taking any views expressed by local Ward Members into account. (CD(LPA)).

(3) That, with regard to Blatches Farm, the Chief Executive be endorsed to hold discussions with potential partners on the basis of the Council's business plan to provide a Country Park, in order to identify the minimum contribution that would be required from the Council to enable the scheme to proceed.
(CEX)

The Meeting adjourned at 8.05pm

Chairman

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Date

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