

Finance & Procedures Overview & Scrutiny Committee

– 22 September 2005

Minutes of the meeting of the **Finance & Procedures Overview & Scrutiny Committee** held on **22 September 2005** when there were present:-

Chairman: Cllr K H Hudson
Vice-Chairman: Cllr P K Savill

Cllr R G S Choppen
Cllr K J Gordon
Cllr Mrs S A Harper

Cllr T Livings
Cllr P F A Webster

VISITING MEMBER

Cllr C I Black

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Mrs J R Lumley and P R Robinson

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
M Martin - Committee Administrator

352 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 8 September 2005 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

353 REVIEW OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY IN ROCHFORD

Members were in receipt of the notes of the informal meetings which the Committee had held on 28 July, 8 August and 31 August 2005 and the notes relating to the presentation that the Committee had received providing an expert view of the overview and scrutiny process from Andrea Staltmeier.

The Chief Executive expressed his thanks to the Chairman and the Committee for the extensive work that had been carried out and advised Members that, in recent talks with Ian Davidson (Relationship Manager, Audit Commission), the following further recommendations had been made:-

- That particular reference should be made to Strategic Performance which should fall to the principal policy committee. This committee should be the Policy, Finance and Strategic Performance Committee.

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- To deal with cross-cutting issues, the Leader in conjunction with the Chief Executive would determine which policy committee should take the lead or a Policy, Finance and Strategic Performance Committee might be requested to review the issue as a whole and then request one or more specific policy committees to consider the matter.
- User Focus and in particular customer satisfaction and feedback should be part of the regular agenda of the Policy, Finance and Strategic Performance Committee, which would have an overview of the strategic performance of all policy committees.

On behalf of the Committee, the Vice-Chairman congratulated the Chairman for the amount of work that he had undertaken personally on their behalf throughout this review. Members agreed that the proposals should be presented to a special meeting of the Policy and Finance Committee to be held on 19 October 2005.

During debate, the following points of clarification were provided:-

- It was envisaged that, should the proposed committee model be adopted, it would lead to four additional meetings per year. However, the flexibility of the Review Committee to meet only when necessary could mean that in fact fewer meetings might be held.
- The Review Committee would be autonomous and, as such, would provide a forum that would be as easily accessible to those outside the Council as from within.
- Members of the Review Committee could not also be members of policy committees. However, other Members would be able to serve on more than one policy committee and all Members could serve on regulatory committees.
- Whilst the titles of the policy committees were lengthy, the descriptive wording easily identified their role.
- Development Control more accurately described the work of that committee in determining planning applications as opposed to, for example, the development and publication of the Local Plan, which under the current arrangements would be carried out by the Environmental Services Overview and Scrutiny and Environment Policy Committees.
- The practice would continue whereby the Leader of the Council would be the Chairman of the proposed Policy, Finance and Strategic Performance Committee.

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- The Remuneration Panel would be tasked with considering the issue of whether the Chairman of a Sub-Committee should be financially rewarded for this position.
- A review of the Planning Services Committee was currently being undertaken by the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

As a result of the progress made on the review, including a considerable amount of research and information gathered, Members were in agreement that their findings could now be presented to the Policy and Finance Committee for endorsement prior to final agreement being taken by a meeting of the Full Council in December 2005.

Resolved

That the Finance and Procedures Overview and Scrutiny Committee present its findings to a meeting of the Policy and Finance Committee on 19 October 2005. (CD(LP&A))

354 COMPREHENSIVE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT (CPA) IMPROVEMENT PLAN: UPDATE ON PROGRESS

The Committee received the report of the Chief Executive providing feedback on the last CPA Improvement Panel meeting and updating Members on the progress made on the CPA Improvement Plan.

In noting the contents, the Chief Executive advised that the progress assessment would be received just before Christmas and the Direction of Travel and Value for Money assessments would be published in March 2006.

In response to Member comments/questions, greater clarification was provided as follows:-

- The slippage indicated against the Essex Waste Procurement Project was not the responsibility of this Authority. This had been explained at the meeting of the Improvement Panel and the item would be re-worded to take account of this.
- The Council's Housing Strategy had achieved 'fit for purpose' status; all strategy documents were increasingly moving towards overt reference to corporate documentation.
- Services such as the gardening service for the elderly and the handyman service would continue to be well publicised via both the Council's newspaper and key agencies as evidence of the voluntary sector compact in action.

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- Services such as these were dependant upon the amount of cash injection from the Council and its partners, together with attracting an appropriate labour force.
- Further consideration could be given to the Council's funding of such services at the November Budget Away Day.
- The gardening service had, in the past, been pump primed via the Crime and Disorder budget on the basis that a tidy garden aided crime prevention.
- The Rochford Crime and Disorder Partnership was to launch a 'bogus callers' initiative imminently as a further action in addressing local crime and fear of crime.
- Discussions were continuing with Essex County Council around future housing provision for older people. All the evidence available indicated that people were preferring to stay in their own homes for as long as possible and, as such, the Council's current provision was not fully responding to the needs of the frail elderly.
- The Council continued to work with its partners within the Thames Gateway South Essex Partnership to produce affordable housing units and this might include some of its needs being met by another district, and vice versa.
- The Council is not large enough to move towards the Government's target of a choice based letting system for housing and, therefore, needed to work in partnership with other authorities.
- As the Council continued to monitor its policy on the provision of affordable housing, it would be possible to gain a greater understanding of the typical occupations of residents of such properties.

355 CLOSURE OF ACCOUNTS 2004/05

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Financial Services on some of the detail associated with the Statement of Accounts submitted to Full Council on 28 July 2005.

In considering the variations to the budget, the following was noted:-

- The Works Account variance figure should have been shown as a favourable one by adding brackets.
- All housing benefit payments now come from the General Fund.

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- Figures for rent allowances have to be estimated because the number of likely applications and the level of rents was unknown.
- When closing the accounts, a reserve was created in relation to the subsidy grant paid as new legislation made the final grant payment uncertain.
- With regards to weekly incorrect benefit, until recently housing benefit claims had been reviewed on an annual basis. However, they are now the subject of a pro-active review with appropriate adjustments being made that could produce incentive payments to the Authority.
- Salary on-costs were included in the figure, such as National Insurance and Pension payments.
- Electricity was paid on a monthly direct debit basis. In seeking new suppliers for electricity, the billing process was almost as important as the tariff for the supply of electricity.
- In relation to housing rents and charges, due to the loss of key staff, it had been necessary to close the accounts on the best estimate available. In addition, a number of problems had been experienced with the stream of income into the Housing Revenue Account coming via the County Council in relation to 'supporting people' funding.

Recommended to Council

That the budget amendments identified in the report be agreed. (HFS)

The meeting closed at 9.05 pm.

Chairman

Date