

Policy & Finance Committee – 12 January 2006

Minutes of the meeting of the **Policy & Finance Committee** held on **12 January 2006** when there were present:-

Chairman: Cllr T G Cutmore
Vice-Chairman: Cllr D Merrick

Cllr C I Black
Cllr C A Hungate
Cllr J R F Mason
Cllr Mrs J A Mockford
Cllr C G Seagers
Cllr D G Stansby

Cllr Mrs M A Starke
Cllr M G B Starke
Cllr J Thomass
Cllr Mrs M J Webster

VISITING MEMBER

Cllr T Livings

OFFICERS PRESENT

P Warren - Chief Executive
R Crofts - Corporate Director (Finance & External Services)
A Bugeja - Head of Legal Services
S Clarkson - Head of Revenue and Housing Management
S Logan - Revenue and Benefits Manager
J Crawford - Transportation Manager
J Bostock - Principal Committee Administrator

4 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 7 December 2005 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

5 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Councillor T Livings declared a personal interest in the item relating to the Community Transport Agreement by virtue of being Company Secretary of the Wyvern Community Transport Trust.

6 COMMUNITY TRANSPORT AGREEMENT, TAXI VOUCHER SCHEME AND WYVERN COMMUNITY TRANSPORT TRUST - DEFERRED REPORTS

The Committee considered the reports on the Community Transport Agreement, Taxi Voucher Scheme and Wyvern Community Transport Trust referred from the last meeting.

(a) Community Transport Partnership Agreement

In presenting this item the Head of Revenue and Housing Management tabled a supplementary paper setting out further statistical analysis relating to community transport and taxi vouchers.

Responding to questions, officers advised that:-

- Whilst specific mileage figures can be obtained from the Community Transport Trust, they cannot be identified from surrendered taxi vouchers. Statistics indicate that the average length of journey on the community bus is four miles. This is similar to the average length of a taxi journey. Mile by mile analysis is also difficult due to the arrangement whereby journeys of up to five miles on the community bus cost £2.
- Bullet points three and four of the supplementary paper should have referred to 'charge' rather than 'cost'. The cost of the community transport journey is £10.78. The cost of the taxi voucher journey is £12.07. The information set out in the supplementary paper will be issued to all Members of the Council.
- The Council is unique amongst Essex authorities in that it is the custodian of County grant monies for community transport (part of which is direct from the Government) on the basis that Rochford has a taxi voucher scheme.
- Essex County Council would contribute approximately £1.1 million per annum towards the funding of community transport schemes within the administrative boundaries of Essex for the duration of the five-year agreement. The County would increase this financial contribution annually in line with the prevailing national rate of inflation, providing funds are available in the budget.
- Rochford should passport funding to the Wyvern Community Transport Scheme for the duration of the agreement. The funding would represent 66% of the community transport grant received from Essex County Council and be paid in one lump sum in April each year. Limiting expenditure to 66% would mean that the District was not over committing.

During discussion it was observed that, notwithstanding that the Wyvern Community Transport Scheme is grant funded, it can be seen as important to ensure that value for money is being achieved in that grant funding monies emanate indirectly from the tax payer. It was also observed that some Members had expressed concern about the administrative costs associated with the scheme since it had been established that voluntary drivers could not be attracted. It was noted that the County Council Cabinet Member for

Highways and Transportation, Councillor R Bass, had expressed interest in Rochford's Taxi Voucher scheme.

Resolved

- (1) That Rochford District Council enters into a five year funding agreement with Essex County Council.
- (2) That Rochford District Council provide funding to the Wyvern Community Transport Scheme for the duration of the agreement. The funding to represent 66% of the Community Transport Grant received from Essex County Council and to be paid in one lump sum in April each year. This to be reflected in Appendix B of the agreement.
- (3) That funding for taxi vouchers remains at £106,000 in the 2006/07 Budget. (HRHM)

(b) Taxi Voucher Scheme

Responding to questions, the Head of Revenue and Housing Management advised that any monies remaining at the end of a financial year are carried over into the next year. Taxi vouchers are valid for three-month periods. There tends to be higher levels of usage at Christmas time and during periods of cold weather.

Resolved

- (1) That the current number and value of vouchers issued be maintained for 2006/07.
- (2) That budgetary provision of £106,000 (including an estimated contribution from Essex County Council in excess of £21,700) be set for the 2006/07 financial year. (HRHM)

(c) Wyvern Community Transport Trust – Acceptance of Taxi Vouchers

Responding to questions, the Head of Revenue and Housing Management indicated that the introduction of taxi vouchers to the Community Transport Scheme could be implemented by 1 April at latest.

Resolved

That Taxi Vouchers be accepted on the Wyvern Community Transport Trust Bus on the same accounting basis as existing taxi firms. This to be implemented by 1 April 2006 at the latest. (HRHM)

7 REVENUE AND BENEFITS – POLICIES, PROCEDURES AND ACTION PLANS

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management inviting endorsement of a policies and procedures portfolio for the Revenue and Benefits Service.

Responding to questions, officers advised that:-

- Targets detailed within the documentation are already being met. Ongoing Member monitoring will be achieved via six-monthly reports into Committee.
- Customers sometimes formulate a variety of arguments in an attempt to avoid Council Tax payment, such as commenting that future political considerations might change the nature of the tax.
- The celebration of success is about effective internal and external publicity. Where successes in the Revenue and Benefits Service are associated with effective processes it is often the case that the lessons learnt can be applied to other service areas within the Council.
- If appropriate it is indicated to customers that it is not possible to assist them effectively if they are using abusive language or aggressive behaviour. If a customer continues to be aggressive or abusive they are referred upwards.
- The Department of Work and Pensions sets the targets and standards that relate to levels of compliance and the associated quartile statistics.

The Committee endorsed a suggestion of the Chief Executive relating to the revision of a sentence within the complaints section and it was:-

Resolved

That, subject to the words 'upwards in accordance with the Council's complaints procedure' replacing the words 'to the Chief Executive' in the penultimate paragraph on page 10.7 of the report, the policies and procedures portfolio be endorsed. (HRHM)

8 REVISED PROTOCOL FOR OUTSIDE BODIES

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Legal Services on the adoption of a revised protocol for outside bodies.

Responding to questions, officers advised that:-

- It was not open to the Council to provide insurance beyond the provisions of the Local Authorities (Indemnity for Members and

Officers) Order 2004. The indemnity available under the Order is restricted to cases in which a Member is carrying on a role on an outside body by virtue of being appointed by the Council. It does not extend to cases where a Member is involved in an outside body in any other capacity.

- The protocol can be reworded to reflect the current position whereby appointees should report twice per year into the Members' Bulletin.
- The Council cannot delegate authority to a single Member to make a decision on its behalf.
- Whilst each case would depend on the individual circumstances, an appointee to an outside body will generally have indemnification if they act in a reasonable manner, honestly and in good faith.
- Given the circumstances relating to a number of joint working arrangements requiring Members appointed to those bodies to act on Council direction and policy the words 'unless it is with the authority of the Council in order to implement a decision which the Council has made' could be added within the paragraph relating to delegation to clarify the extent of their authority.
- The term 'and/or' should be included in Section 1 of the protocol, as appropriate.

Resolved

That the revised protocol for Outside Bodies be adopted, subject to the following:-

- Inclusion of the words 'unless it is with the authority of the Council in order to implement a decision which the Council has made' at the end of the fourth sentence in the first paragraph.
- Inclusion of the term 'and/or' in Section 1 (after 1(a)).
- Revision of the report back requirement under Section 3 to reflect the current position whereby appointees should report twice per year into the Members' Bulletin. (HLS)

The meeting closed at 8.37pm.

Chairman

Date