

# STRATEGIC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

## 14 JULY 2009

*Present :-* Councillor Christopher Arnold (Chairman)  
Councillors Nick Barlow, Mark Cory, Kim Naish,  
Gaye Pyman, Laura Sykes, Dennis Willetts and  
Julie Young

*Substitute Members :-* Councillor Sue Lissimore  
for Councillor Jackie Maclean  
Councillor Andrew Ellis for Councillor Nick Taylor

### **8. Minutes**

*RESOLVED* that the minute of the meeting held on 16 June 2009 was confirmed as a correct record.

### **9. Review of the Budget Strategy and Timetable**

Mr. Charles Warboys, Head of Resource Management and Sean Plummer, Finance Manager, attended the meeting for this item. Mr. Plummer presented the report '2010-11 Budget Strategy, Medium Term Financial Forecast and Budget Timetable' to the panel.

Mr. Plummer confirmed to the Chairman that whilst not recorded on the Budget Timetable, the Budget Update would be reported to the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Panel on 9 December 2009. Mr. Plummer also said that it would be the intention to show where funds had been shifted to priority areas and where savings had been made, and the appropriate links, if any, with the Strategic Plan. It was envisaged the December report would be developed to show the movement of resources. Councillor Arnold welcomed this change from the previous years budget reporting.

In response to Councillor J Young, Mr. Plummer said there are links between the Local Area Agreement targets and the Strategic Plan Action Plan, some funded or enabled through grants. Mr. Plummer said consideration would be given to making linkages with this information and the budget papers. Councillor Young said this would be helpful, for example, making the links to fight childhood obesity.

Mr. Warboys confirmed to Councillor Young that the Concessionary Fares scheme was currently at the stage of consultation, though as it stands District Councils do have the ability to fund discretionary elements of the scheme, confirming that all Essex Districts do have an agreement to commence the scheme daily from 9.00 am.

Mr. Plummer responded to Councillor Barlow saying past experience suggested the Council will be notified of the Government Grant and Comprehensive Spending Review during the summer of 2010, possibly as late as December 2010, for the three years from 2011-12 onwards. Mr. Plummer, in response to Councillor Arnold said the pressure on Public Sector Finance will become apparent in due course at a local level, but this might not necessarily reflect what happens nationally.

Mr. Plummer, in response to Councillor Willetts, said the budget process would continue along the lines reported, with workshops held with Cabinet Members and Senior Management Team, a Budget Group comprising of members and senior officers meeting monthly, and during the course of this year, a series of Fundamental Service Reviews (FSR).

Councillor Arnold said that it would be helpful to all members and improve transparency if the process of FSR included offering up these reviews for scrutiny.

*RESOLVED* that the panel noted the 2010/11 Budget Strategy, Medium Term Financial Forecast and Budget Timetable.

## **10. Housing Delivery, including affordable housing units**

Ms. Lindsay Barker, Head of Strategic Policy and Regeneration, Mr. Richard Hughes, Housing Strategy and Research Coordinator and Ms. Karen Syrett, Spatial Policy Manager attended the meeting for this item, and Mr. Hughes presented the report on 'Housing Delivery, including affordable housing units'.

In response to Councillor Ellis and Arnold, Mr. Hughes confirmed that if 1082 affordable housing units were delivered annually for the next five years, this would satisfy demand including the backlog from the Housing Needs Register, but this was very unlikely. Mr. Hughes said there were many initiatives that would work alongside the planning system to help deliver the number of affordable housing units needed, including the Homes and Community Agency funding and Housing Associations and private sector lettings, and that perversely, a recession did give the impetus to provide more units.

Ms. Barker said there are opportunities to develop Council owned land and potential sites are being looked at. Mr. Ian Vipond, Lead Executive Director at the meeting said providing affordable housing was a local area agreement priority, with an Essex wide group formed to look at ways to increase delivery and thereby help districts to meet their need, and with an emphasis on increasing affordable housing in rural areas and decreasing the number of empty properties.

In response to Councillor Ellis, Ms. Syrett said the Core Strategy had a 35% target of affordable housing as a percentage of all housing developments, and was in accordance with the East of England Plan, and this target was aspirational. The thresholds for building affordable housing have been lowered to 10 units in urbanised areas and 3 units in rural areas as a measure to help try to meet this target though it would take some time for this measure to be established and take effect, given there are still some 7,500 properties that could be built out without renegotiating the S106 agreements. Ms. Syrett said Colchester was not breaking new ground, with Tendring and Braintree having 40% targets. Ms. Syrett said it would be more appropriate to review this policy in one year's time to consider this new measure and get a better idea of the effectiveness of the policy. Ms. Barker said the Council were looking for the impact of this new policy over a two year period.

In response to Councillor Young, Ms. Barker said officers have been tasked by the Cabinet to look at the options and implications of building new Council homes, and the report is to be considered by Leadership at the end of July. Councillor Arnold said the review of the relevant Portfolio Holder would be an opportune time to ask about the outcomes of this paper.

Mr. Hughes confirmed to Councillor Arnold that the Cowdray Avenue development was anticipated to provide 28 affordable housing units in January 2010, 9 units in May 2010, 7 units in December 2010 and the remainder of the 40 units in 2011.

Mr. Hughes responded to Councillor Barlow saying the Council is proactive in trying to find opportunities to move affordable housing schemes forward, though historically new schemes have evolved from both the Council and the developer. Stalling on schemes was a relatively recent scenario reflecting the economic downturn, though developers know the Council is in a position to move developments forward and where possible assistance is given. Ms. Syrett said the Council had identified adequate land supply for development, ensuring we will be well positioned for when the market turnarounds. Mr. Vipond said it was conceivable that the number of affordable housing units could increase this year, with some developers asking for new S106 agreements to develop affordable housing units and help them survive the recession.

Councillor Arnold thanked officers for the presentation and the information given on the new affordable housing initiatives.

*RESOLVED* that the panel commented on, and noted the housing delivery figures within the borough.

## **11. Review of the work of the Portfolio Holder for Communications, Customers and Leisure**

Councillor Hunt, Portfolio Holder for Communications, Customers and Leisure attended the meeting for this item. Councillor Hunt gave a brief resume' of the work undertaken by himself since his previous review earlier in the year.

Having explained to panel members the new dates for the SOS Bus to visit villages in outlying rural areas and including Rowhedge, Layer, Marks Tey, Langham and Tiptree, Councillor Hunt said the criteria for selecting these villages was that they were in areas with the most deprivation. It was explained that Tiptree was having a second visit to cover villages such as Birch who it was considered did not have a suitable site for the SOS Bus. Members questioned the selection criteria and the suggestion that villages like Birch did not have a suitable site for the SOS Bus and asked Councillor Hunt to speak with Mosaic in light of the Councillor's comments.

In response to Councillors Lissimore and Naish, Councillor Hunt said the Council did have a policy for keeping allotment sites clean and tidy, officers did regularly inspect all allotment sites and warnings and enforcement action was taken as and when required. Councillor Hunt also confirmed that all allotment sites had substantial waiting lists. Councillor Hunt also confirmed that he would confirm to panel members the current state of the allotment sites at the Irvine Road and Bergholt Road.

Councillor Hunt understood Councillor Willetts comments that the current IT equipment and document access system provided to members was primitive, but confirmed that it was the Council's intention to improve communication and document access for members, with a new document information system and the VOIP system to be introduced to members as soon as possible.. Councillor Willetts said he hoped the Council's developing IT Strategy would be more responsive to member's needs. Councillor Hunt said whilst he understood there will always be some people who will never arrange access for on-line communication, it was the intention to provide better website access and thereby reduce the number of customers needing to communicate via telephone or in person.

Councillor Hunt thought it would be difficult, with improved on-line access to customers, to envisage a policy of satellite council offices in rural areas providing a range of Council services.

Councillor Hunt confirmed that the sudden excessive increase in incoming calls to Customer Services, brought on by the economic downturn, and an increase in non-English speaking residents for which it took longer to complete telephone interviews, the waiting time for telephone customers had

increased from an average low of two minutes up to four minutes. Councillor Hunt said this current problem had been addressed through the employment of three additional staff in the Customer Services Centre, some through redeployment, and this was already having a positive effect on reducing waiting time.

Responding to Councillor Barlow, Councillor Hunt said the move from Angel Court to Rowan House was as originally scheduled, to be completed by the end of December. The CCTV service area would remain in Angel Court and the Council would be retaining space on the first floor of Angel Court some of which would be sublet to other organisations. The front of the Angel Court building is to undergo a much needed facelift, though throughout all these changes customers should not see a change to the services provided.

Councillor Young asked Councillor Hunt to consider monitoring communications and outcomes between officers and members and feeding any concerns into Council. It was envisaged that this may be possible in the future with the upgrades on the telephony and IDOX systems.

Councillor Hunt responded to Councillor Arnold's enquiry about what he saw as draconian cuts to some of services within his portfolio by saying the cuts made were quite modest but had had a disproportionate media effect. In reference to one such cut, recently referred to as 'Shrubgate', Councillor Hunt said he aimed to change the planting area schedules to show high and low priority areas and to fund these on a priority basis through a reallocation of funds rather than a cutting of services. Councillor confirmed that the flowerbeds managed by Colchester Borough Homes would be unaffected by this change of policy, though the control of parked vehicles on verges was a highways problem. Councillor Hunt agreed with panel members that it would be a useful piece of work for the Head of Street Services to provide an analysis of how shrub and flower borders are funded in other Essex Districts.

*RESOLVED* that the panel;

- i) Thanked Councillor Hunt for attending the meeting and responding to members questions.
- ii) Requested Councillor Hunt to speak with Mosaic in light of the Councillor's comments concerning the SOS Bus schedule.
- iii) Requested Councillor Hunt to give an update to panel members on the current state of the allotment sites at the Irvine Road and Bergholt Road.
- iv) Requested Councillor Hunt to ask the Head of Street Services to provide to panel members an analysis of how shrub and flower borders are funded in other Essex Districts.