

POLICY REVIEW AND DEVELOPMENT PANEL

20 JUNE 2011

Present :- Councillor Nigel Offen (Chairman)
Councillors Nigel Chapman, Mark Cory, Marcus
Harrington, Lesley Scott-Boutell and Julie Young

Substitute Member :- Councillor Richard Martin
for Councillor Margaret Fairley-Crowe

Councillor Nigel Chapman and Councillor Nigel Offen (in respect of being a member of the Board of Colchester Borough Homes) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)

3. Debt Management Policy

The Panel considered a report by the Head of Resource Management inviting the members to review the Council's Debt Management Policy.

The Council had first adopted a Corporate Debt Policy in 2002 and the procedures had recently been reviewed and strengthened in response to changes in legislation and best practice. It was intended that a consistent approach would be adopted throughout the Council and all possible opportunities taken to recover the debt, including guidance to recovering monies subject to bankruptcy or liquidation. In addition, procedures had been included to help customers who were suffering from financial difficulties such as appointments at a weekly Debt Clinic.

Debbie Greenwood, Enforcement Manager, and Councillor Smith, Portfolio Holder for Resources and ICT, attended the meeting to assist members in their discussions. Ms Greenwood explained that the first part of the policy document covered the general procedures to be followed, whilst appendices had been added to cover detailed actions to be taken for each service or type of debt. The intention was that the individual appendices could be reviewed and revised as necessary, without the need to amend the overall policy.

A Corporate Debt Working Group had been established to look at common issues and to work at improving recovery procedures which included all services as well as Colchester Borough Homes. Areas for further work already identified by the group included joint tracing arrangements and devising methods of sharing information obtained.

The Panel gave particular consideration to the following issues:-

- The positive work undertaken since the introduction of the Debt Advice Clinic and the need for increased publicity of this service;
- The use of the SOS bus to provide a Debt Roadshow in rural and other out of town venues;
- The working close ties developed across the areas of Council Tax, Housing and Colchester Borough Homes;

- The benefits of flexible working providing an ability to contact customers and also take payments outside of usual working hours;
- The need for the principles contained in the policy to be consistent across all areas of the Council;
- The classification of priority and non-priority debts in court proceedings;
- The popularity of independent debt clinics operated by Citizens Advice Bureau and the potential for joint appointments to be undertaken;
- The recent changes which provided for Housing Benefit payments to be made to tenants rather than landlords;
- The potential for the Council to accept debt payments from credit cards.

RESOLVED that the contents of the revised Debt Management Policy be noted.

4. Open Space Events Policy

The Panel considered a report by the Head of Life Opportunities inviting the members to review the draft Colchester Open Space Events Policy prior to its further development and formal adoption.

Bob Penny, Parks and Recreation Manager, and Councillor Dopson, Portfolio Holder for Communities and Diversity attended the meeting to assist members in their discussions. Mr Penny explained that an Open Space Events Policy has been in existence since 2007 but had not been formally adopted but was used as guidance. It was recommended that the Policy be reviewed and adopted to provide a reference framework for future decisions regarding the use of parks and open spaces within the Borough.

It was explained that there were a large number of open spaces available but only a few tended to be hired for use. The intention was to encourage a wide variety of events at a number of different sites, bearing in mind the need to balance the needs of local residents.

The Panel gave particular consideration to the following issues:-

- The inclusion of mass balloon releases and events with performing animals as policy exceptions in terms of permitted events;
- The need for an Equality Impact Assessment to be undertaken prior to the final version of the policy being drawn up
- The responsibilities for event organisers in relation to the Licensing laws;
- The requirement for public liability insurance to be provided for all events and whether there was potential to waive this in certain circumstances;
- The need for the policy to specify that the final decision regarding the cancellation of an event will rest with the Head of Service and that in the circumstances of a cancellation, the event organiser will remain liable for any costs incurred or a specified cancellation fee, whichever appropriate;
- The intention to encourage social gatherings in order to encourage use of open spaces, subject to there being no impact on the enjoyment for other users;

- The need to consider excluding events of a political and religious nature in order to ensure all such events are treated equitably;
- The need to amend the reference to no charging for charities from 'may be' to 'will be';
- The need for consultation to be undertaken specifically with regular event organisers in order to obtain their views on the contents of the policy

RESOLVED that the contents of the draft Open Space Events Policy be noted and the Portfolio Holder be requested to consider addressing the issues identified by the Panel for inclusion in the adopted version of the document.

5. Work Programme 2011-12

The Panel considered a report by the Head of Corporate Management giving details of the provisional scheduling in the Panel's work programme for the forthcoming year, bearing in mind that this was likely to evolve as items of business were commenced and concluded.

The report provided an update on the current situation regarding the Task and Finish Groups, explaining that the 20 mph Speed Limit Group had been suspended pending an announcement from Essex County Council, it was hoped that agreement would be reached to call a meeting of the Waste Prevention and Recycling Options Appraisal Group in late July 2011 and the Older Persons Accommodation Group would be meeting on 11 July 2011.

Reference was made to recent guidance issued by the Government on speed limits and whether this may have led to any change in policy at Essex County Council on the matter and the need for the terms of reference of the Older Persons Accommodation Task and Finish Group to be amended to include future as well as current provision.

Councillor Offen explained that the Liberal Democrats group had agreed to change their memberships on the 20 mph and Waste Task and Finish Groups such that his place would be taken by Councillor Cory.

More recently the Panel had been asked to consider setting up a Task and Finish Group to look into the various issues relating to the future of the Magistrates' Courts in the Town Hall.

RESOLVED that –

- (i) The contents and scheduling of the work programme, the current situation and changes in membership regarding the various Task and Finish Groups be noted;
- (ii) Arrangements be made, if possible, for an update report on the subject of 20 mph speed limits to be submitted to the August meeting of the Panel;
- (iii) The suggestion to set up a Task and Finish Group to investigate the future of the Magistrates' Courts in the Town Hall be accepted;

(iv) The terms of reference of the Older Persons Accommodation Task and Finish Group be amended to include future as well as current provision.