

STRATEGIC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

14 DECEMBER 2010

Present :- Councillor Dennis Willetts (Chairman)
Councillors Nigel Chapman, Mark Cory, Andrew Ellis,
Bill Frame, Theresa Higgins and Nigel Offen

Substitute Member :- Councillor Philip Oxford for Councillor Gerard Oxford

Also in Attendance :- Councillor Anne Turrell
Councillor Paul Smith

24. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 November 2010 were confirmed as a correct record, subject to the following amendment. The first resolution to minute 20, Street Services Fundamental Services Review to read "That the Cabinet agree for all future FSR that effect all or most of the residents of the Borough, all members of the Council are involved from the outset of the review, and in a way that does not impede progress, together with the other relevant stakeholders".

25. Have Your Say!

Mrs. Paula Whitney addressed the Panel to speak about recycling waste. Mrs. Whitney said that due to the Council's original Fame vehicles being replaced, collected glass was now mashed and therefore sold on at a reduced price. Mrs. Whitney asked that the Council revert to the original more environmentally friendly method of glass collection that would also increase income.

In regards to garden waste collection, Mrs. Whitney said the lower garden waste tonnage collected during this year was in the main due to more residents taking green waste directly to the County run waste collection sites.

Mrs. Whitney concluded by asking Colchester to consider adopting the methods of food waste collection as done by Chelmsford, the methods that came as part of Chelmsford's successful food waste trials.

Councillor Offen, in response to Mrs Whitney said the action as mentioned in the Strategic Plan Action Plan was about trade glass collection and Members had been informed at the recent Street Services Fundamental Service Review that there are plans to increase revenue by outsourcing this work.

26. 2011-12 Budget - Update

As a preface to this item Councillor Willetts said that it was the job of the Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel to look at budgets and finance reports in detail, and the role of this

Panel was to attempt to track budget changes within the Strategic Plan, that is, what are the implications of the Budget on the Council's Strategic programme.

Mr. Sean Plummer, Finance Manager, gave a brief presentation of the 2011-12 Budget report update, explaining that this was an opportunity to review the report as presented to Cabinet on 1 December 2010, prior to the final Budget report being presented to the Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel and the Cabinet on 25 January 2011 and 26 January 2011 respectively. Mr. Plummer said the report gave a revised 2011/12 budget gap forecast of £711,000.

In respect of the Government's grant settlement announced yesterday, Mr. Plummer said the current budget estimate had assumed a reduction of 10.7% in the grant, whereas the actual reduction is 15.5%, worsening the budget gap by a further £500,000.

Councillor Anne Turrell, Leader of the Council, said because the Government announcement on grant settlement comes so late in the year it is not possible to reflect the implications to the Council's strategic programme within this Budget update. Councillor Turrell said January was a more appropriate time to be discussing the Budget proposals in detail.

Councillor Smith, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Diversity reiterated that the 10.7% reduction in the grant settlement as built into the Budget was an estimated figure, and confirmed the recent budget consultation had proved useful in determining the overall budget strategy.

There was a general agreement that in future the Budget report should be presented a time that would enable the report to include the implications to the Council's Strategic Plan.

Councillor Willetts thanked Councillor Turrell for attending the meeting.

RESOLVED that the Panel;

- i) Considered and noted the 2011/12 Budget as presented to the Cabinet on 1 December 2010.
- ii) Asked officers when considering the 2012 -13 Budget Strategy and Timetable, to schedule a pre-scrutiny report to the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Panel once all grant settlements are established, outlining the implications of the new Budget on the Council's Strategic Plan.

Councillor Theresa Higgins (in respect of her membership of Essex County Council) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)

27. Half yearly Performance Report including progress on the Strategic Plan

Action Plan

Ms. Lucie Breadman, Head of Corporate Management, presented the Half Yearly Performance report.

Ms. Breadman briefly spoke of the national changes and approach for performance reporting, with the demise of the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA), National Indicators to be replaced with a 'single reduced list', Local Area Agreements (LAA) no longer mandatory, and no performance reward grant. Ms. Breadman confirmed that whilst changes would happen, for the immediate future the Panel would continue to receive half yearly performance reports as previously agreed.

In regards to performance, in summary, Ms. Breadman said 64% of the reported National Indicators are on target as are 74% of Strategic Plan targets.

Progress on cleanliness and recycling was 42.67%, exceeding the 41% target, the average time to re-let council houses was down to 22 days from 36 days for the same period for the previous year, and sickness leave was down to 7.5 days per person per year, lower than the public sector average of 9 days, all noteworthy achievements.

In conclusion, Ms. Breadman said the key actions within the Strategic Plan Action Plan that were experiencing difficulties did on the whole have links to partnership activities where funding issues had arisen.

Councillor T. Higgins said staff should be commended for the reduction in sickness levels during these times. Councillor Smith, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Diversity explained that the reduction in staff sickness was evident since the commencement of the new flexible working arrangements. Councillor Smith said one of the benefits of flexible working was the ability of staff to work from home when feeling under the weather, whereas in the past it would have been easier to have a sickness leave day.

Councillor Offen said the Visitors Information Centre should be commended for their continual year on year receipt of awards and accreditations, excellent work.

Councillor Turrell addressed the Panel to explain the progress of those actions within the Strategic Plan that are not achieving their target. In the main, these actions had been subject to financial restraints, and whilst all funding opportunities will be considered, it would shortly be decided which of those actions would be retained or removed from the Strategic Plan.

In regards to the action on swimming lesson provision, Councillor Offen asked that if the review of primary school swimming lessons identifies schools not offering swimming lessons, that the Portfolio Holder should write to the Essex County Council Portfolio Holder to encourage County to ensure all schools are given the opportunity to allow their pupils to learn to swim.

RESOLVED that the Panel;

- i) Considered and commented on the half yearly Performance Report,

including progress on the Strategic Plan Action Plan.

ii) commended and thanked staff for reducing sickness levels at a time of major change in working practices and reductions in staffing levels.

iii) Requested the Portfolio Holder for Communities to write to the Essex County Council Portfolio Holder, if a review of primary school swimming lessons identifies schools not offering swimming lessons, to encourage the Portfolio Holder to ensure all schools are given that opportunity.

Councillor Theresa Higgins (in respect of her membership of Colchester Twinning Society) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)

28. Review of the work of the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Diversity.

Councillor Smith, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Diversity attended the meeting for the review of his work in respect of the resources and diversity portfolio.

Councillor Smith took the opportunity to give a summary of the highlights of the work undertaken within his portfolio.

Councillor Smith received monthly updates from service areas, and gave details of current performance levels, identifying improvements in performance, for example, Council Tax and Benefit processing, an excellent result given the reduction in staffing levels as a result of the recent fundamental service review. Councillor Smith said the Council's various Fundamental Service Reviews have had a big impact on the work of Human Resources, who support the process and ensure it is equal and non discriminatory. Councillor Smith spoke about the positive discussions with the Twinning Society and the ongoing discussions with the current IT Contractor on a renegotiated contract, hopefully in partnership with neighbouring authorities that will provide reductions in costs through the economies of scale.

In response to Councillor Willetts, Councillor Smith said where there are cuts made in the level of service provision, these services remain under constant review, with performance statistics monitored on a month to month basis. In Revenues and Benefits for example, whilst changes including staff reductions have been made, new working practices are improving performance, having a positive effect on the level of service provision.

As a point of clarification, Councillor Smith confirmed that there was a funding agreement between the Council and Firstsite, not a service level agreement.

In response to Councillor T. Higgins, Councillor Smith confirmed his support for the Member Development Charter, and whilst the timeframe for achieving this charter had slipped the Council remained committed. Once the 2011-12 Budget is finalised, a new timeframe will be evaluated. Councillor T. Higgins said member development could be

improved, for example, a 6-monthly in-house training refresher course on Planning. Councillor Frame also suggested more Licensing training would be very helpful to members.

In response to Councillor Frame, Councillor Smith said Councils can choose a Council Tax discount to 2nd home owners of between 10 – 50 per cent. Colchester has historically chosen the minimum discount of 10%. Councillor Smith said he wished there was a way to remove this discount, but he did not have the power to do so.

Councillor Smith responded to Councillor Ellis on details of the Icelandic Bank investments. The overall £4 million investment was made up of £2 million in rolled-over investments and £2 million of new investments. Local Authorities have been informed that 93% of investments will be repaid, over a number of payments, the dates of the payments to be confirmed. Councillor Smith said the actual investment sums remain capital funds whilst the interest accrued is revenue income. As a rough estimate, a £4 million invested at 0.5% would accrue £20,000 income per annum.

Councillor Frame commented that he was not sure of the value of what is achieved through the portfolio holder reviews. Whilst the schedule of reviews would continue until the end of the year, Councillor Frame asked that thereafter members consider these reviews and look to see if there is a better way of achieving the desired outcomes. By way of information, Councillor T. Higgins said at Kent County Council, all councillors submit annual reports outlining the work and achievements within their respective wards. Councillor Offen said the scoping report within the agenda, coupled with the portfolio holder responsibilities provided members with the information needed to focus in on questions to the portfolio holder. It was agreed that the Chairman and Group Spokespersons should consider these reviews in more detail at the end of the year.

RESOLVED that the Panel thanked Councillor Smith for attending the meeting and responding to the Panel's questions.

29. Work Programme

The Panel noted an unchanged Work Programme.