

STRATEGIC OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL 8 SEPTEMBER 2008

Present :- Councillor Christopher Arnold (Chairman)
Councillors Pauline Hazell, Peter Higgins, Mike Hogg,
Margaret Kimberley, Kim Naish, Gaye Pyman,
Nick Taylor and Julie Young

Substitute Members :- Councillor Nick Gamble for Councillor Nick Barlow
Councillor Mark Offen for Councillor Mark Cory

13. Minutes

The minute of the reconvened meeting held on 15 July (adjourned from 10 June 2008) was confirmed as a correct record. The minute of the meeting held on the 15 July was confirmed as a correct record.

14. Have Your Say!

Mrs Paula Whitney attended the meeting asking questions concerning the September review of the Bradwell New Build Nuclear Power Station to be undertaken at West Mersea. Mrs Whitney enquired about the invited speakers, who had invited them, suggesting their attendance would not give the meeting and debate a balanced view. Mrs Whitney also said that at a recent meeting of the East Essex Forum a similar debate had also lacked a balance, with the only presentation coming from British Energy. Mrs Whitney concluded by saying there were issues about the suitability of the site that needed to be addressed e.g. earthquake fault-lines.

Mr. Robert Judd, Scrutiny Officer addressed the panel explaining that invitations to all expert witnesses, public bodies and private companies had been sent by himself. The witnesses had been invited on the basis of that at each stage of discussion, their expertise would be called upon to provide knowledge and understanding to members. Experts would not be asked to give presentations, but ask questions from the panel. This review would be an open debate that may require additional meetings in order to finalise any proposals. Mr. Judd said he hoped all those present on the evening would collectively give balance to the overall debate.

Mrs. Pam Donnelly, Executive Producer confirmed that the Executive had been a part of the overseeing of the process in regards to the final report and the invitation of expert witnesses.

Councillor Arnold confirmed that this review was not linked to any planning application and in regards to the review there would be no recommendation given, which would be beyond the powers of the scrutiny panel.

15. To evaluate requests by other members of the Council

Councillor Chapman addressed the panel saying that Firstsite Newsite was at the heart of the Council's Corporate Strategy and town centre regeneration. Councillor Chapman believed all members should know what is happening with this project and asked the panel to consider a review of Firstsite Newsite.

Councillor Offen confirmed that the Financial Arrangements for Firstsite Newsite would be reviewed by the Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel (FASP) in October 2008. Councillor Arnold confirmed that the Council's partnership arrangements with Firstsite would be reviewed by the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Panel in November 2008.

RESOLVED that the panel agreed for the Scrutiny Officer to consult with officers to determine the terms of reference of the FASP review. The potential for a review of Firstsite Newsite by SOSP would be discussed at the next meeting.

16. Work Programme

Councillor Arnold requested a review of the 2009-10 Budget with the newly drafted Strategic Plan at the meeting of 16 December 2008, in line with the review undertaken in 2007-08 for the 2008-09 Budget.

RESOLVED that the panel noted the rolling Work Programme and agreed to the additional item on the 2009-10 Budget / Strategic Plan to be added for review on 16 December 2008.

Councillor Mike Hogg (in respect of being the Chairman and Trustee of the St Anne's Community Trsut Association) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)

17. 2009-10 Budget Strategy and Timetable

Mrs Paula Whitney addressed the panel. Mrs Whitney enquired as to what work was being conducted with Braintree District Council. Mrs Whitney also enquired as to whether the sums of money set aside for the provision of recycling sacks, waste and street cleaning could not be used to contribute to the expansion of the kerbside collection fleet and food waste trials.

Councillor Smith responded to Mrs Whitney saying that Colchester and Braintree District Council were involved in partnership working, looking at a number of service areas where services could be unified, services such as Parking. It was envisaged that partnership working would through economies of scale provide greater efficiencies and savings.

Councillor Young responded to Mrs Whitney saying a waste collection review that included food waste trials was ongoing. The review was due for completion in October and would be reflected in the future Budget and Strategic Plan.

Mr. Sean Plummer, Finance Manager introduced the 2009/10 Budget Strategy and Timetable report to the panel.

Councillor Chapman addressed the panel, requesting further information on Local Authority Carbon Management (LACM), a capital programme deferred until there is more certainty over the future capital programme.

Councillor Chapman said he would like to know more about how the project is being put together, and given that Colchester was currently on course to meet its reduction in carbon emissions target by 2020, whether the fund was sustainable and the timetable for setting up and managing the project.

Councillor Smith, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Business addressed the panel explaining that the Cabinet was fully committed to ensuring it met its carbon emissions reduction target by 2020. Councillor Smith said there is current uncertainty and a severe financial strain on the Capital Programme due to the outstanding liability of Firstsite Newsite, and this made it difficult to extend spending to other areas such as LACM.

Given the assurances of Councillor Smith, Councillor Arnold requested that paragraph 12.5 of the Budget report was phrased differently to give more assurance and greater clarification to the LACM programme.

In response to Councillor Hogg, Mr. Plummer said the general fund balances remained £200,000 higher than the current assessed prudent level of £1,700,000 as illustrated in the General Fund Balances in the 9 July 2008 Cabinet report.

In response to Councillor Taylor question on Zero Based Budgeting, Councillor Smith said at the beginning of this municipal year Service Managers were asked to discuss how a 10% reduction could be made to their service budgets and the Cabinet and Senior Officers considered the effect of this reduction. Whilst this was not a Zero Based Budget approach this was considered the best approach given the limited amount of time allowed.

In response to Councillors Taylor and Arnold, Councillor Smith said the Budget Strategy would include Major Service Reviews such as the Braintree Work, Accommodation Project and WWW ICT Strategy. These reviews would have agreed outputs and links to the Strategy, and would form future decisions to be taken by the Cabinet or Portfolio Holder(s), subject to openness and transparency through the call-in process.

In response to Councillor Taylor, Councillor Smith said, given the current economic conditions, there was a risk that the inbuilt budget inflationary figure of 2.9% might not

be sufficient, that there was a risk that inflation could be higher.

In response to Councillor Kimberley, Councillor Smith said the local pay settlement was ongoing and every effort was being made to bring this to a conclusion, though the impact of the settlement was included within the Budget. Councillor Smith confirmed that the two new Street Wardens are to be employed in the Highwoods Area.

Members debated at some length projects, funded and unfunded, to be removed from the Capital Programme as illustrated in Appendix F of the report. Members spoke of their concerns over the removal of these projects and whether, for example local parishes, affected by these cuts, had been consulted on this proposed decision. Councillor Arnold said the impact of removing these projects from the Capital Programme should be considered and detailed in the report before a final decision is taken.

Given Councillor Smith's comment that these projects were only to be suspended at present, Councillor Smith agreed to the Panel's request that the term 'Amount to remove' should be replaced by 'Projects put on hold'

In response to Councillor Higgins, Councillor Smith said that in reference to the Braintree project, it was anticipated that services such as Parking Services would work more efficiently by merging and would through the economies of scale, provide revenue savings. With regard to the sale of the Layer Road site, Councillor Smith said had there been an earlier agreement on the sale of the site at a fixed price the sale price would have been considerably more and a better deal for the Council.

Councillor J Young left the meeting at this point.

In response to Councillor Naish, Councillor Smith said a decision to give free swimming to the over 60s age group had been taken and was currently within the call in period. Councillor Smith said this scheme would attract a grant of £10,000 for the next two years, which would offset the loss of income.

RESOLVED that the panel:

- i) Noted the 2009-10 Budget Strategy and Timetable.
- ii) Requested the Cabinet to rephrase the Capital Programme item on Local Authority Carbon Management (LACM) to give more assurance and greater clarification to the programme, as agreed with the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Business.
- iii) Requested the Cabinet to rephrase the Heading of Appendix F showing the list of capital projects and amounts to be removed, with 'Projects put on hold', as agreed with the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Business.
- iv) Requested that when Cabinet proposes to withdraw or suspend funding for an item for which funding has previously been agreed, as shown in Appendix F, a description of the impact of the change(s) should be published simultaneously.

v) Noted the offer from Councillor Smith to make the findings of internal reviews available to shadow portfolio holders on the same conditions under which shadow portfolio holders had access to such information in the past.