

Minutes

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

2nd December 2009



Councillors	Present	Councillors	Present
J. Baugh	Yes	A. M. Meyer	Yes
G. Cohen	Yes	R. Ramage	Yes
M. Dunn	Apologies	D. E. A. Rice	Yes
Dr. R. L. Evans	Apologies	A. F. Shelton	Yes
M. Gage (Chairman)	Yes	Mrs. J. Smith	Yes
J. E. B. Gyford	Yes	F. Swallow	Yes

The following Members and Officers were also in attendance for item 5 of the Agenda concerning Budget Scrutiny.

Cllr. G. Butland, Leader of the Council
Cllr. Mrs. W. Schmitt, Portfolio Holder for Communities
Cllr. Mrs. J. Beavis, Portfolio Holder for Customers and Communication
Cllr. R. Mitchell, Deputy Cabinet Member for Environment and Sustainability (deputising for Cllr. R. Walters)

Mr. A. Reid, Chief Executive
Mr. C. Fleetham, Corporate Director
Mr. T. Wilson, Head of Finance
Mrs. S. Lowe, Assistant Chief Executive
Mrs. C. Thwaites, Marketing and Campaigns Manager

Apologies were received from Cllr. M. Lager and Cllr. R. Walters.

43. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

(i) Councillor J. Gyford declared a personal and prejudicial interest in item 5 of the Agenda regarding Budget Scrutiny as he was Treasurer of the Witham Constituency Labour Party which runs a commuter car park at the Witham Labour Hall.

As there was no discussion concerning off street car parking charges he remained in the meeting.

(ii) Councillor R. Mitchell declared a personal interest in item 5 of the Agenda regarding Budget Scrutiny (re: Parish Support Grant) as he was a member of Feering Parish Council. He remained in the meeting.

(iii) Councillor F. Swallow declared a personal interest in item 5 of the Agenda regarding Budget Scrutiny (re: Parish Support Grant) as he was a member of Sible Hedingham Parish Council. He remained in the meeting.

(iv) Councillor D. Rice declared a personal interest in item 5 of the Agenda regarding Budget Scrutiny as he was a member of Braintree Community Centre. He remained in the meeting.

(v) Councillor Mrs. J. Beavis declared a personal interest in item 5 of the Agenda regarding Budget Scrutiny (re: Parish Support Grant and car parking issues) as she was Chairman of Sible Hedingham Parish Council. She remained in the meeting.

44. MINUTES

DECISION: That the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 28th October 2009 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman subject to:-

(i) the attendance table on page 1 being amended to indicate that Cllr. A. M. Meyer was present at the meeting;

(ii) the heading on page 42 "C. Assumptions" being amended to "C. Priorities".

45. QUESTION TIME

INFORMATION: There were no questions asked or statements made.

46. BUDGET SCRUTINY

Cllr. Gage the Chairman welcomed Members and Officers to the meeting for this second scrutiny session on the Cabinet's proposed budget for 2010/11. He welcomed also those members in the public gallery who had attended for this item.

Cllr. Gage explained that this session would be conducted in two parts. Part 1 would consist of a presentation by Claire Thwaites the Council's Marketing and Campaigns Manager, setting out the feedback received to date from the public in response to the extensive public consultation exercise that had been undertaken concerning budget options for 2010/11.

This would then be followed by a presentation from the Leader of the Council Cllr. G. Butland setting out further information on the Cabinet's proposed budget.

Part 2 would consist of a question and answer session (based on a series of pre-set questions) with Cllr. Mrs. Schmitt, Portfolio Holder for Communities, Cllr. Mrs. J. Beavis, Portfolio Holder for Customers and Communications, and Cllr. R. Mitchell, Deputy Cabinet Member for Environment and Sustainability concerning their respective budgets.

Members had before them a copy of a report that was due to be considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 7th December 2009, entitled Medium Term Financial Strategy Update and a series of accompanying appendices as follows:-

Appendix A – General Fund Revenue Profile 2009/10 to 2013/14 – base position before Service and Budget Savings;

Appendix B – Service and Budget Proposals for 2010/11 and 2011/12;

Appendix C – Efficiencies Proposed by Management for 2010/11 and 2011/12;

Appendix D – Savings/Increased Income identified during 2009/10 Budget Process;

Appendix E – Reductions to Budgets proposed by Management;
Appendix F - Leader's report concerning the Parish Support Grant;
Appendix G - Savings considered, but rejected or changed;
Appendix H – Requests for revenue funding;
Appendix I – General Fund Revenue Profile 2009/10 to 2013/14 – Position including Proposed Service and Budget Savings;
Appendix J – Movement on balances – 2009/10 to 2013/14;
Appendix K – Capital Programme – Summary 2009/10 to 2013/14;
Appendix L – Proposed Capital Projects for inclusion in Capital Programme 2010/11.

Part 1

Claire Thwaites made a slide presentation setting out the early findings from the:

Place Survey;
Value for Money Survey;
People's Panel Survey;
Residents Online Survey;
Contact Magazine;
Media Coverage/Interviews;
'Cutting out Cloth' campaign;
Mailing to Partners.

A copy of the slide presentation is included in Appendix 1 attached.

Members then asked questions of Claire as follows:-

Question by Cllr. J. Gyford

What was the response rate on the residents Online Survey?

Answer by Claire Thwaites

The responses are still being received, but to date the response rate is approximately 5% to 6% of the e-mails sent out. There were 5000 e-mails sent out originally, but the list was an old one and a portion of the e-mail addresses were out of date and returned electronically as undelivered. However, approximately 3500 to 4000 were sent out to 'live' e-mail addresses.

Question by Cllr. A. Shelton

In respect of parks and open spaces, did you differentiate between those provided by the District Council and those provided by the Parish/Town Council?

Answer by Claire Thwaites

No. In the place surveys people were asked about their satisfaction with their parks and open spaces. In the People's Panel, they were asked if they were prepared to accept a saving of £50,000 if the grass was cut less frequently, and if we planted shrubs rather than flowers.

Question by Cllr. A. Shelton

Do we know the level of responses across the various parts of the District or is it all a generalised response?

Answer by Claire Thwaites

We need to carry out further analysis to determine the level of responses on a location basis.

Question by Cllr. M. Gage

You said that about 1300 people were surveyed first of all and 47% replied – so approximately 600 people of the total population of the District have replied – is that the case?

Answer by Claire Thwaites

No. We have had 1350 replies which was a 47% response rate in relation to the number of people surveyed.

Question by Cllr. J. Baugh

Can you clarify an item in the Resident's Online Survey where residents were asked to make choices between services and options where you indicate: 'Tourist Information – close, but enhance www'?

Answer by Claire Thwaites

This related to the proposal to cease the Council's Tourist Information Services in Braintree and Witham, but to enhance the provision of tourist information via the internet, and for tourism literature to be provided from Council buildings in the District.

Question by Cllr. D. Rice

Are the Council's staff being asked for their comments and feedback?

Answer by Claire Thwaites

There has been a programme of keeping staff informed concerning the budget proposals, and staff have been encouraged to speak to their respective Heads of Service, and to speak to their HR Officers as necessary. We have received some feedback from staff although this is separate to that received from the public.

Cllr. Gage thanked Claire for her presentation and for answering Members' questions.

He then invited Cllr. Butland to make his presentation.

Cllr. Butland advised the Committee that the public consultation exercise highlighted in Claire's presentation was the most comprehensive one that the Council had ever undertaken in respect of its budget proposals, and was ongoing. The feedback from the public would continue to be taken into account in compiling the proposed budget.

He then made a slide presentation to the Committee updating the Medium -Term Financial Strategy. To address the funding gap, a number of proposals were being proposed comprising a mix of efficiencies and service level reductions. These will address the funding gap for 2010/11 and also a significant proportion of the funding gap for 2011/12.

A copy of the slide presentation is included in Appendix 2 attached.

Cllr. Gage then invited Members and those visiting Members in the public gallery to ask questions of the Leader.

Question by Cllr. J. Gyford

As regards the timetable, you indicated that we are ahead in the timetable compared with previous years. We seem to be moving into a situation where some of the proposals in Appendix B which are clearly budget proposals, are going to be handled outside the normal budget meeting in February, because they are going to the December Council meeting. I can accept that it may be seen from the point of view of the administration and management that there are arguments of convenience or advantage in doing that, but it seems to me potentially to trespass on the right of individual Council Members and Council Members collectively to see the budget 'in the round' as a totality - to understand within the one proposal what the tradeoffs have been or what the alternative options might have been. I have never thought of a Council budget as a sort of 'moving buffet' which comes to you in a series of courses over several months. I have always thought of it as a large, comprehensive and essentially interlocking set of proposals on which the Council collectively eventually has to make a judgement. If you try to pre-empt some of that then you are in fact undermining that whole process. I raise this issue as it does concern me. Would you please comment?

Answer by Cllr. G. Butland

I understand entirely what you are saying. Traditionally, some Councils have prepared their budgets and kept them top secret until the day of the budget meeting. We are trying to do it in a different way to enable all Members of the Council to have time to reflect on some of the issues. Also, given the exceptional circumstances that we are in and the work that needs to be done to achieve significant savings, we need to give as much notice as early as possible. It will be the Council meeting in December to accept or reject the proposals put forward by the Cabinet. I think you have a good flavour from the papers and presentations tonight, of the way in which the budget is going. There are clearly issues that we will need to do more work upon, but I do think it gives all Members the opportunity to be involved much earlier in the cycle. It is a different way of doing it and it may not necessarily be the way that we would want to do it every time, but I do think there is a lot to be said for starting early, and engaging the public and Members early. At the end of the day, it has got to be the complete package. Some of the proposals are quite significant changes and to leave it to one budget meeting in February may not be the best way, and Members will have the opportunity to comment on specific issues.

Question by Cllr. F. Swallow

Is there the opportunity to have a working party set up to examine the issue of differential charging referred to in the paper on Parish Support Grant in Appendix F, because until this matter is settled and the whole Council has had a chance to look at the problems I do not think we are going to get a fair result?

Answer by Cllr. G. Butland

At this moment, I have had no representations for such a working party to be set up, but I do understand that there might be a recommendation coming from one of the Local Committees to Cabinet, and clearly that will be an issue for Cabinet to decide on how it will respond.

Question by Cllr. J. Baugh

As regards the proposal to cease the Council's Tourist Information services in Braintree and Witham, referred to in Appendix B, I am concerned about the tourist industry that it supports. Has an impact statement been made in terms of the losses from the various streams of revenue that would filter back to the Council?

On the budget proposals generally, why have we not made savings earlier?

Answer by Cllr. G. Butland

The way in which people get information concerning the areas they wish to visit has changed considerably in that people now obtain information from the internet. The public were saying in the consultation that you need to ensure that access is available via the internet. It is about delivering the service in a different way rather than a fixed point which is labour intensive and certainly has costs.

In 2008/09, we achieved savings of £336,000. In 2009/10, our business efficiency reviews achieved savings of £337,000 and changes to service provision produced £518,000 savings. In the coming year there will be significant changes as well. Over the last two years and the year coming, the changes in the way in which we have used resources and savings amounts to over £3m. It is something that we have been working on over the last two years and has enabled us to keep our Council Tax down to 2.5% which we promised to the electorate.

Question by Cllr. J. Baugh

There seems to be a large risk inherent in ceasing the Tourist Information services. It is quite possible to make assumptions, but the user group with the most leisure time for the type of tourism in East Anglia are the retired – not all may use the internet. I am really not sure about the basis for making that assumption and I would prefer to see a risk assessment on the outcome of ceasing the Tourist Information services?

Answer by Cllr. G. Butland

By and large, the older generation are the greatest users of the internet – the "Silver Surfers". Even with very small guest houses, now, you make your reservation on line.

Question by Cllr. G. Cohen

Every year we spend about £2.8m in third party payments – contacts, supplies etc. I do not see any reduction in those costs so I have to assume that all this expenditure is necessary and good value. Can we be reassured that it is and that this will continue to be the case?

Answer by Cllr. G. Butland

We are very competitive in our procurement processes, and work with other local authorities to achieve lower prices from our suppliers. We are not complacent, and certainly through the Procurement Hub we seek competitive prices. Both supplies and services need to be looked at. All Councils will need to look at are those services which they currently provide themselves and whether it is appropriate for them to directly provide them or whether they should commission those services from other potential suppliers.

The figure of £2.8m includes:-

- (i) a sum of £940,000 that relates to the Leisure Contract which is due to come up for renegotiation shortly;
- (ii) a sum of £778,000 that relates to our IT contract with Serco and that is also coming up for renewal.

Question by Councillor A. Shelton

In respect of Appendix B, page 5, Locality Support – Parish Liaison, what steps have you taken in preparing your budgets to improve rural proofing on service delivery and policies given the proposed withdrawal of the Parish Liaison Officer?

Answer by Cllr. J. Beavis

In terms of rural proofing, although we do not have this in place at the moment as a formal process many of our policies would meet the rural proofing criteria that is laid out in relevant articles and documents.

We are in the process of reviewing the Braintree District Rural Strategy and the issue of rural proofing will be taken into account as part of that process.

Question by Cllr. Mrs. J. Smith

In relation to the issue of ceasing the Tourist Information Services, has any survey been done as to the footfall of people visiting the Tourist Information Centre and the reasons for their visit?

Answer by Cllr. G. Butland

The Tourist Information Centre is a cost and we are in a situation where we are looking for significant savings. We want to protect those core services that we are obliged to deliver and this means taking difficult decisions. The tourist Information service in its present form is one where we think that by taking it away the impact is likely to be pretty negligible.

Question by Cllr. R. Ramage

As regards Appendix B, page 13, Museum Services, there is a reference to discussions taking place with Colchester and Ipswich Museums with a view to a partnership arrangement for the Museum Trust and Museum Service, what are the implications regarding the Warner Textile Archive?

Answer by Cllr. G. Butland

The Warner Textile Archive and the Museum Service need to be treated separately. In respect of the Warner Archive, this has a lot of constraints in terms of lottery funding and we would not want to be in a position where (if we were to take any particular action) the Council or the Museum Trust would be left exposed and which resulted in the Council having to repay lottery funding.

There is an issue about the viability of the Museum Trust which has been mentioned in the local press, that has to be tackled. Although the Museum Service is run by a Trust it is actually funded by the Council Tax payer – over £200,000 p.a. Local residents are telling us that it is not a service they value.

If we can get a potential organisation such as the Colchester and Ipswich Museums, to run that service at a significantly lower cost then it would be a nice thing to keep. If this is not feasible, however, then Members will have to decide whether the funding of £200,000 p.a. should be spent on something else.

The Museum Service is something that we have deliberately phased because we do want to see if there are opportunities to run it in a different way which may be cost effective, but I am also very mindful about what the public are saying about museum services.

Question by Cllr. M. Gage

Do you have any view concerning potential savings of £150,000 that could be made by removing the £50,000 that is allocated to each Local Committee?

Answer by Cllr. G. Butland

You are referring to the capital funding that is given to each Local Committee. Capital funding is not an issue for the Council and I have to say that I am disappointed that some Committees are finding it difficult to utilise that resource for their local residents. If a Local Committee decides that it does not want this capital or indeed any revenue (for the 3 Local Committees the revenue allocation totals £60,000) then clearly we will take that funding back.

Question by Cllr. C. Sandbrook (visiting Councillor)

As regards the Warner Archive, has the National Heritage Lottery Fund been contacted in respect of the constraints that we are anticipating in relation to lottery funding. I am not clear on what it is that we can or cannot do. I would like to know how far we have taken this with the Lottery Fund?

Answer by Cllr. G. Butland

We have not approached the National Heritage Lottery Fund to date. When the Lottery grant was made there were conditions applying to that grant, and we will look at those conditions carefully. There is no doubt that that money was given for the purposes of acquiring the Warner Archive and for ensuring that it was accessible to the public. We are looking at the requirement for the archive 'to be accessible to the public' i.e. what length of time during the week does it have to be accessible – how does it have to be accessible etc. The whole issue is one in respect of which the Council has to tread carefully. As indicated, the Warner Archive and the Museum Service need to be treated

separately.

Question by Cllr. C. Sandbrook (visiting Councillor)

I was just raising the issue of the Warner Archive. Given the financial constraints that the Council finds itself in, is it that unreasonable for the Council to go back to the National Heritage Fund with a view to changing the conditions of the lottery grant funding?

Answer by Cllr. G. Butland

We are not the masters of our own destiny here in that there is a Trust of which we are co-signatories for the Warner Archive, and it is therefore a very complex situation. We do not want to create a risk where there is a financial 'claw-back' by the National Heritage Lottery Fund. We are seeking advice concerning the precise legal position. We will need to work our way through this.

Question by Cllr. D. Rice

How far is the Leader and the Cabinet willing to go to protect the Council's reserves when other services (albeit not core services) are being ceased or reduced. At what point would you consider using reserves?

Answer by Cllr. G. Butland

I would draw the Committee's attention to Appendix J page 50 where Members will see the considerable extent to which we are prepared to use reserves.

We recognise that as we enter a period of significant transformation of services within this authority there will be a requirement to use reserves e.g in making provision for redundancy costs.

As regards the Housing Revenue account balance where there are significant reserves, we do need to keep that Housing Revenue account open until the end of 2011/12. If we were to utilise those reserves before then we would lose government subsidy of £700,000 p.a.

At the conclusion of the session, the Chairman thanked the Leader for the full and frank answers that he had given to Members' questions.

Part 2

The Chairman welcomed Cllr. Mrs. Schmitt, Portfolio Holder for Communities, Cllr. Mrs. J. Beavis, Portfolio Holder for Customers and Communications, and Cllr. R. Mitchell, Deputy Cabinet Member for Environment and Sustainability to part 2 of the budget scrutiny session, and invited each Member in turn to answer a series of pre-set questions (set out below) concerning their proposed budgets for 2010/11.

Question 1

Can you explain how you developed your budget for 2010/11 taking into account corporate priorities and the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2008/09 to 2011/12?

Question 2

With the current climate, what efficiency savings have you put in place and what effect will they have on services, etc?

Question 3

How have you taken decisions about which services are considered priorities and which are not?

Question 4

Are there any proposed changes to the budget for service areas and, if so, what are their implications for service users, with particular emphasis on potential areas for budgetary cuts?

Summary of Answers given by Cllr. Mrs. W. Schmitt, Portfolio Holder for Communities to the set questions

- * We were very much aware of the budget restraints, and looked very closely at those parts of the Portfolio which are core - the main one being Community Safety. However, there are a number of services within the portfolio that are nice to have, but are not necessarily core services;
- * One of the proposals that has been put forward to make savings is to transfer all of the Council's Community Halls to other organisations, or to consider closure if this is unsuccessful. Unfortunately, Community Halls are a big drain on resources and the Council is losing money on them. The charging structure is somewhat inconsistent as the Fees and Charges Task and Finish Group highlighted, although charges have not been increased because of the economic situation;
- * On efficiency savings, the County Council is completely restructuring its Childrens Trust, and this has been the main driver for the District Council to propose deleting the Children and Young Peoples Manager post. The duties of this post will be covered from within the existing resources of Community Services;
- * Priorities continue to be Community Safety. Braintree District continues to be a very safe place to live, and the work carried out by the Police, the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership, the Council and other partners is paying off, and there has been a fall in all types of crime throughout the District over the last year. However, there is no room for complacency;
- * Community Transport continues to be very important. More and more people rely on it because of the economic situation, and we are very much reliant on volunteer drivers and ideally we would like to recruit more volunteers;
- * The budgetary cuts are not expected to have a detrimental impact on service users. If it is necessary to close some of the Community Halls every effort will be made to relocate those organisations that make regular bookings.

Question by Cllr. J. Gyford

I am sorry if this is a slightly unkind question, but I got the impression that the Cabinet Member had not done us the courtesy of looking at our Agenda before appearing here?

Answer by Cllr. Mrs. W. Schmitt

I had looked at the Agenda, but had just forgot to bring it with me. I brought all my Cabinet papers.

Question by Cllr. R. Ramage

As regards the proposal to transfer Community Halls to third parties, can you tell me what type of third parties you have in mind, and what are the time-spans for this to happen. Are there likely to be any redundancies involved?

Answer by Cllr. Mrs. W. Schmitt

We have, for example, Spring Lodge in Witham that is run by a Community Group, and similarly a Community Group for Goldinghams Hall in Braintree. These are the types of third party that we would hope would come forward to run them. There will be some redundancies involved such as Caretakers.

Question by Cllr. J. Baugh

On what basis would Community Halls be disposed of – would the Council retain nominal ownership, would the third party own the freehold – would the third party have a fully repairing lease?

Answer by Cllr. Mrs. W. Schmitt

At present we have quite a few halls that have been run by other groups for many years. We would look at each one on a case by case basis. It depends on the offer and the organisation, but we tend to hold the freehold and carry out the external repairs.

Question by Cllr. E. Lynch (visiting Councillor)

In respect of Community Halls, would not the Caretakers and any staff to be potentially made redundant be “tupied” over to the new organisation taking over the hall?

Answer by Cllr. Mrs. W. Schmitt

The new owners are likely to be voluntary groups and these tend to have their own volunteers to carry out the caretaking duties - it will depend on each case.

Summary of Answers given by Cllr. Mrs. J. Beavis, Portfolio Holder for Customers and Communications to the set questions

After her initial address, Cllr. Beavis gave specific responses to the four questions.

- * Given the financial difficulties, the budget setting process this year has been very challenging for all Portfolio Holders;
- * There has been and continues to be a great deal of discussion on the proposals as part of the consultation process;
- * The Portfolio Holder’s responsibilities include: communications; customer services; rural affairs; locality (place shaping) development; Member issues;
- * In terms of communications, there have been discussions with officers on this issue,

and there have been a number of changes in the People and Democracy Department. These changes need time to bed-in;

* In respect of the Customer Service Centre, now that Greenfields has vacated Causeway House we need to be looking at the Customer Service Centre and the way that it works to ensure that it is giving value for money and is operating effectively. A study is currently ongoing;

* The freeze on Members Allowances is proposed to continue given the current economic climate;

* In respect of Member Development, there will continue to be some budgets and funding available in order to carry out and implement Member Development initiatives;

* As regards the proposal concerning Locality Support – Parish Liaison (Appendix B – Page 5), there have been a number of concerns expressed by both District Councillors and Parish Councils. I understand those concerns, but we are looking to refresh and streamline the Parish Liaison function and to provide advice and support to Parish Councils in a different way, including reviewing Parish Cluster meetings;

* As regards efficiency savings, one postholder on the Locality Management side has already been made redundant earlier in the year. A review has been undertaken of People and Democracy and we now have one Head of Service for a larger area. There are not expected to be any adverse effects on the Parishes as a result of the proposed changes in the parish liaison function;

* We are proposing to reorganise and restructure complaints, scrutiny and Freedom of Information functions, which will result in the reduction in staffing by one post in 2011/12.

Question by Cllr. A. Shelton

In your proposals for refreshing and streamlining the parish liaison function are you going to consult the Parishes to ascertain what they want?

Answer by Cllr. Mrs. J. Beavis

We have notified the Parishes of the proposed changes, but it has been agreed to reopen a dialogue with the Parishes on the proposals.

Summary of Answers given by Cllr. R. Mitchell, Deputy Cabinet Member for Environment and Sustainability

* With regard to the budget being developed in respect of the Environment and Sustainability Portfolio, the main priorities are to ensure high quality services for waste services, and to continue to develop and improve parks and open spaces, and allotments. We are also continuing to reduce carbon emissions;

* There has been a major re-routing this autumn of all the waste collection routes, and it is anticipated that this will provide significant savings;

* As a result of the downturn in the economy, there has been a reduction in the amount of waste produced by households (this has a negative impact in percentage terms in relation to recycling);

* The Business Efficiency Review process has been seeking a 5% reduction in the controllable budget over this year and next year. We have had to look closely at Street Scene (Horticultural Services) which has had to be downsized as a result of the loss of the Greenfields ground maintenance contract and the significant loss of revenue;

* The proposal to cease the Community Warden Service was considered very carefully, and the matter is to be considered further by Cabinet;

- * In respect of management and supervision of Street Scene, we are attempting to seek savings of between 8% and 10% of the controllable expenditure;
- * In respect of customer services (business support) for the operations of waste, recycling and trade waste, inspection and monitoring, we are seeking savings of between 8% and 10%;
- * There are ongoing discussions with Colchester, Chelmsford and Uttlesford Councils concerning possibilities with regard to joint depots, vehicle maintenance arrangements etc with a view to achieving savings.

Question by Cllr. J. Baugh

The Grounds Maintenance contract with Greenfields was lost by quite a substantial amount. Have you looked at fundamentally different ways in which Street Scene could operate. I know there are proposals to merge Landscape Services with Street Scene. Street Scene seems quite a large rambling organisation. Has any 'blue sky' thinking taken place on the future organisation of Street Scene?

Answer by Cllr. R. Mitchell

The bid for the Greenfields contract was in retrospect a difficult one to compile although every effort was made to ensure that the bid was a realistic one.

As regards combining Landscape Services with the Parks and Open Spaces Team, it appears to be a logical step to combine the two services.

Question by Cllr. J. Gyford

As regards the impact of the recession on waste, you indicated that the recession led to a decline in the amount of domestic waste generated and that this in turn had an impact on the percentage of waste being recycled. I am not quite clear why the decline in the percentage rate on recycling would differ from the percentage decline in the amount of waste being generated?

Answer by Cllr. R. Mitchell

If you have not got the same amount of money you buy fewer goods of the type which involve a lot of packaging. Packaging tends to be a large proportion of the recyclables so your percentage of total waste that you recycle reduces more so than the decline in the amount of domestic waste being generated.

Question by Cllr. A. Shelton

As regards the proposal concerning the withdrawal of the Community Wardens Service, one of the aims of the service when first introduced was for Wardens to make contact with and befriend elderly people. Given the proposal to reduce the number of Wardens will the records that have been compiled of older people in the District be retained and maintained so that with the reduced workforce we will still be able to offer some befriending service to older people?

Answer by Cllr. G. Butland

The recent introduction of Village Agents is about providing the very thing that Cllr. Shelton is referring to, i.e identifying vulnerable people particularly in the rural areas.

The Village Agents are operating in 30 of the Parishes in the District. If there are records of elderly people kept by the Community Wardens I am sure they will be handed over. Clearly, there is a key role for local members of both District and Parish Councils to liaise with Village Agents on that issue. The number of Agents that we have in the District is the highest of any of the Districts where they are being used at the moment, and I believe they will provide a useful service. Village Agents were introduced just over a month ago and they do need time to bed-in. The Rural Community Council of Essex is acting as the pilot project delivery partner, and the Village Agents are covering the areas where the most vulnerable are likely to be.

Question by Cllr. R. Ramage

Can you just clarify the role of a Village Agent? Also, are the main towns of Braintree, Halstead and Witham covered?

Answer by Cllr. G. Butland

A document setting out information explaining the role of Village Agents and the areas they cover was sent to every Member of the Council. Village Agents do not cover the main towns because it was identified that people in the rural areas have a higher degree of isolation than people living in towns, and have more difficulty in accessing services. Village Agents assist in providing information and helping to make access to services easier.

More information is available on the web site: www.villageagentsessex.org.uk

Question by Cllr. R. Ramage

It is being proposed that we could lose the Community Wardens, what will happen to the main towns because the Wardens currently provide a vital service particularly in dealing with vulnerable people etc. Will there be any alternative cover?

Answer by Cllr. R. Mitchell

There has been an increase in the number of Police Community Service Officers in the main towns and the Police and the PCSOs will deal with any issues that were previously dealt with by the Community Wardens.

Question by Cllr. D. Rice

Can we be assured that the Council Tax collection will be maintained in spite of the recession, and also that there is no cutback in the Revenues staff or fraud investigation Officers.

Answer by Mr. C. Fleetham, Corporate Director

There are no plans to make any cuts in the Council Tax collection staff, and currently the collection rate is similar to previous years. Also, there are no plans to reduce the number of Fraud Investigation Officers.

Question by Cllr. G. Cohen

Has there been any consultation with the Police concerning the proposal for the Police and PCSOs to deal with those areas currently dealt with by the Community Wardens?

Answer by Cllr. Mrs. W. Schmitt

I did discuss this with the District Commander Chief Inspector Gooden. He was disappointed at the proposal to withdraw the Community Warden service, but he understands the reasons for the proposal. We have 127 Police Officers and 39 PCSOs who cover the District.

At the conclusion of the session the Chairman thanked the Portfolio Holders and the Leader, and the Officers for attending tonight's meeting.

47. FORWARD PLAN – 1ST December 2009 to 31st March 2010

Members received the four month Forward Plan for the above period.

DECISION

That the contents of the Forward Plan be received and noted.

The meeting closed at 9.35pm

M. Gage
Chairman