

EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL MEETING held at 7.30 pm at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN on 17 JUNE 2002

Present:- Councillor A J Ketteridge – Chairman.
Councillors E C Abrahams, Mrs C A Bayley, W F Bowker, Mrs C A Cant, Mrs M A Caton, R P Chambers, Mrs J F Cheetham, R A E Clifford, R J Copping, Mrs D Cornell, R C Dean, Mrs C D Down, Mrs S Flack, M L Foley, M A Gayler, Mrs E J Godwin, R D Green, M A Hibbs, D M Jones, P G F Lewis, Mrs C M Little, Mrs J I Loughlin, Mrs J E Menell, R A Merrion, D J Morson, R J O'Neill, A R Row, Mrs S V Schneider, G Sell, R C Smith, R W L Stone, A C Streeter, Mrs E Tealby-Watson, R B Tyler and P A Wilcock.

Officers in attendance:- F Chandley, D Demery, J B Dickson, B D Perkins and M T Purkiss.

C19 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A Dean, Mrs C M Dean, D W Gregory, D M Miller, G W Powers and A R Thawley.

Non-pecuniary interests were declared by Councillor M A Hibbs as a planning agent; Councillor R C Dean as a life-long member of UNISON and Councillor Mrs S Flack as the County Councillor for the Great Dunmow division.

Councillors Mrs J F Cheetham and Mrs J E Menell declared their respective interests in relation to the Primary Care Trust.

C20 OFFICE ACCOMMODATION

The Director of Resources presented a comprehensive report on the principle of administrative centralisation at the Saffron Walden offices with the relocation of the planning staff. He reminded Members that a detailed report including a full financial appraisal had been made to the Council meeting on 12 February when the principle of relocating planning staff at Saffron Walden had been agreed. He emphasised that it was not intended that the Council would be withdrawing a presence from Dunmow. In fact, the proposals were to strengthen the all round provision of services through an enhanced CIC located in the current Dunmow office.

With regard to car parking, he said that the current number of 130 spaces could be increased to 150, but this would require planning consent. The visitor spaces would be moved to the front of the offices. In spite of proposed improvements there would still be insufficient car parking in the short term for all staff to use. Parking would have to be managed and access controlled with barriers and swipe cards. The management of the car park had been considered by an officer task group and details of their deliberations were summarised by the Director of Resources. He also referred to the staff consultation which had been undertaken following the task group's conclusions.

He suggested that the management of the car park should be the responsibility of the Council's Corporate Management Team. One option that would be considered would include quotas being set through the Management Team and arrangements for some staff parking at the Swan Meadow car park. He suggested that initiatives such as car sharing, home working and hot desking would also assist in alleviating any car parking problems.

The Director of Resources emphasised that the conclusion of the officer task group on office accommodation was that planning services could be satisfactorily accommodated at Saffron Walden provided all existing space was fully utilised and reorganised in a more efficient way. However, the move would have implications for many existing staff at Saffron Walden and the whole relocation process would need careful managing. Details of the general recommendations of the task group on this issue were set out in paragraph 10 of the report. One of these recommendations related to the expansion of the CIC at Dunmow to allow for a range of other services including planning, housing, revenues and environmental services to be available to residents of Dunmow and the south of the district. It was proposed to provide office facilities for use as a local surgery for all services and the existing committee room could also be retained and shared with any future tenant. As with the detailed arrangements for car parking, it was proposed that the arrangements for the precise location of staff should be the responsibility of the Corporate Management Team.

He said that whilst there was still unease amongst some of the planning section about the principle of centralisation and leaving Dunmow, there was an acknowledgement that there was a need for the development of a planning service in Saffron Walden. He emphasised that there was no concern that was so fundamental as to threaten the viability of centralising at Saffron Walden.

The Director of Resources then referred to the proposals for leasing/selling the Dunmow offices. External professional independent advice had been obtained which had confirmed that the rental level advised by the District Valuer would have long term benefits for the Council if it retained ownership of the whole site and the spare capacity was available on a rental basis. A decision on centralisation would add certainty and timescale into marketing the spare capacity at Great Dunmow.

The Director of Resources concluded by referring to the financial information. He reminded Members that a full financial appraisal had previously been submitted to Members and that after an initial four year period, through expenditure savings and rental income, it was estimated that net savings to the Council Tax payer of £100,000 per annum could be achieved. This level could not be achieved earlier as an allowance had been made for staff relocation costs such as mileage allowances and excess travel time which were payable over the first few years. He also referred to the number of current staff claims which were made for travelling between the Dunmow and Saffron Walden offices and vice-versa to attend meetings. In addition to the cost of these journeys, there was the unproductive staff time caused by travelling and a full courier service also operated between the two sites.

The Council's approved capital programme already included a sum of £145,640 to cover one-off expenditure, in relation to the relocation. However, these indicative costs had been adjusted upwards by £15,000 to take account

of improvements to car parking outlined at the meeting. Revenue costs remained as previously reported. In the Council's three year indicative financial model, a prudent further projection had been included for letting the Dunmow offices and no allowance had been made for income until 2004/05.

Councillor R P Chambers, the Leader of the Council, then presented his report on the proposal to move the Planning staff from Great Dunmow to Saffron Walden. He referred to the background to this proposal and said that it was a continuation of the Best Value process. He said that extensive consultation had taken place with the staff and representatives of UNISON and the Local Joint Committee had also been involved. He considered that any potential problems could be overcome by goodwill and good management. He said that it was Council policy to provide community information centres in the main towns in the district and he considered that the improvements to the Community Information Centre at Great Dunmow would be advantageous to Council Tax payers. He also said that UNISON had circulated a copy of a press release from him which had been embargoed until 18 June. He said that it was normal practice to issue such press releases, but he would issue a different press release if the recommendations were not agreed at the meeting tonight.

He then proposed and it was seconded by Councillor R J O'Neill that

1. Following the report by officers, the centralisation of administration at Saffron Walden is implemented
2. The approved Capital Programme budget be increased by £15,000 for extra parking facilities at the Stewards House location.
3. Enhancing services at the CIC at Great Dunmow is progressed as quickly as possible
4. The leasing of surplus accommodation at the Great Dunmow offices be vigorously pursued
5. Further progress reports are submitted to the appropriate committee as necessary

Councillor Gayler referred to the press release which had been issued by the Leader and said that to state that a decision had been made before the meeting had been held was the height of arrogance. He questioned why an Extraordinary Meeting had been called to deal with this matter on which a decision should not be rushed. He felt that the calling of the meeting had been a panic reaction relating to the circumstances of a prospective tenant. He said that the financial appraisal was still incomplete and the success of the proposal was dependent on having a tenant in place at the Dunmow offices. He suggested that staff concerns had been belittled and greater attention should be paid to these. The Best Value Review of Planning had been delayed because of the lack of staff resources and the heavy workload in planning. He said that the comment of the Leader reported in a local newspaper that there might be fewer staff in two or three years time was not good for staff morale. A presence at Great Dunmow demonstrated that the Council represented both Saffron Walden and Great Dunmow. He urged all Members to vote against the proposal.

Councillor Tyler said that it was clear that the Council must make a decision and end the uncertainty, but should seek to reassure staff that the Council does care about their circumstances. He suggested that a Member Group could be set up to deal with any staff grievances, which were not already covered by UNISON.

Councillor Morson said that a decision on this matter should have gone through the normal processes and an Extraordinary Council meeting should not have been called at a time when the Chief Executive, Assistant Chief Executive and Head of Legal Services were unable to attend. He said that neither of the reports gave well-based evidence to justify the move. He referred to staff concerns about walking to and from the Swan Meadow Car Park, particularly when it was dark, and said that the consultation with staff should have involved listening as well as talking to them. He suggested that comments that staff were enthusiastic about car sharing were overstated. He welcomed the proposal to enhance the CIC at Dunmow, but had concerns about the impact of the move on employment in the town.

Councillor Smith said that he had voted against the proposal at the previous Council meeting and would do so at this one. Staff at the Planning Offices were already overworked and overstretched and because of this the Best Value exercise had been deferred. He said that the previous Chief Executive had stated that each Councillor had a responsibility for the Council's staff and it was clear that the staff had deep concerns. Accordingly, he asked for a recorded vote. He then moved an amendment that;

“Due to the very high workload and pressures on staff at Great Dunmow offices at present, the move from Great Dunmow to Saffron Walden be put on hold for 12 months”.

The amendment was seconded by Councillor Mrs Tealby-Watson.

Councillor Hibbs said that he was not convinced about staff consultation and said that the extra car journeys were not environmentally sustainable and the proposals would have an impact on Swan Meadow car park. He considered that the benefit to any prospective lessee or purchaser of the Dunmow offices would be the High Street presence, but this would not be available. He said that whilst the Council had previously agreed to the move, in principle, this was subject to a number of issues that had still not been adequately addressed. He shared previous Members' concerns about the issue of the press release by the Leader and said that he intended to refer this matter to the Monitoring Officer.

Councillor Copping pointed out that the report made by the Director of Resources contained some points of detail which had not been covered in his written report. He said that the Resources Committee would shortly be considering a Charter for Public Services and he referred to some of the key points mentioned in this and how they compared with the way that this matter had been handled. The Charter referred to democratic accountability, but he considered that the public had expressed opposition to the move and had been ignored. The Charter also referred to the involvement of staff and again staff had been consulted and did not accept the reasons for the move. The Charter referred to having a longer-term vision and Councillor Copping said that there was no financial benefit from the proposals for at least five years. The Charter mentioned equality of access, but the proposals would move all

services to the northern part of the district. The Charter also mentioned providing fairness, but these proposals would result in some staff not having car parking availability. The Charter also mentioned consultation with employees and he did not feel that Members had a sufficiently detailed report of staff concerns.

Councillor Copping added that he was not satisfied that the truth behind the calling of this meeting was known and he asked the Leader to categorically confirm that he had not been asked by the Primary Care Trust to decide on vacating the offices so that they could decide whether to lease them.

Councillor O'Neill expressed his thanks to the Director of Resources and the Architect and Property Advisor for their detailed report and to the Leader for the rational recommendations which had been made. He said that the points which had been raised by Great Dunmow Town Council in a letter which had been circulated to Members had been taken into account. He said that those in public service should be wary of those in public office who made statements merely for political gain. He said that the issue of timing was addressed in the Best Value Review of Corporate Services and the issue of public transport had been considered by the task group. Safety in car parks was an issue and care would be given to those officers who were working late in the building. He concluded that the move would not disrupt services if it was efficiently organised and there were corporate benefits and personal benefits of having all staff under one roof.

Councillor Mrs Tealby-Watson asked whether there might be any grounds for staff claiming constructive dismissal and asked whether this had been taken into account. She also said that she was particularly sad about the allegations made by Councillor O'Neill concerning political advantage. Councillor Mrs Loughlin said that trade unions had been established to protect employees from bad management decisions. Councillor Mrs Menell asked for further details of the '900 staff movements' between Great Dunmow and Saffron Walden and also said that the Leader should address the 10 issues which had been raised by UNISON. Councillor Mrs Bayley also expressed concerns about staff with small children who needed to have a car available so that they could leave the offices at short notice.

Councillor Mrs Cant said that she understood that the Primary Care Trust's first choice for an office location was Haslers Mill, because of its current availability. She asked for an assurance that this meeting had not been brought forward to meet the aspirations of the Primary Care Trust. She also referred to the workload in Planning Services and the possibility of a public inquiry in the New Year and said that it was better to defer a decision on relocation at this time. Councillor Wilcock agreed and considered that a short delay could only improve the situation. He also asked whether the 8 week determination period had deteriorated in recent months. He said that staff were a key resource and, in relation to car parking, he suggested that the Leader and the Corporate Management Team should set an example by parking at the Swan Meadow car park.

Councillor Sell agreed with the two previous speakers and, in particular, was concerned at development pressures currently within the district and said that it was better to defer a decision on relocation.

Councillor Green said that it was not sustainable to have two large office units within a small district. He said that full consideration would be given to the concerns of staff. Councillor Mrs Cheetham said that it was necessary to make a decision to remove further uncertainty for staff.

Councillor Jones sought an assurance that the 10 points raised by UNISON would be satisfactorily addressed. He also asked for a categorical assurance from the Leader that no compulsory redundancies would occur as a result of this process.

Councillor Chambers urged Members to vote against the amendment. He said that the proposals, had been made in an effort to get things right and he hoped to allay sufficient fears to enable the process to go forward in a spirit of partnership.

Councillor Smith said that whilst everyone accepted that a move would take place, this was not the right time and it would cause severe disruption in planning services. He also stated that he took exception to the comments made by Councillor O'Neill concerning political advantage, particularly as he was an Independent Councillor.

The amendment proposed by Councillor Smith was then put to the vote, a recorded vote was taken and the voting was as follows:

For

Mrs C A Bayley
W F Bowker
Mrs C A Cant
R A E Clifford
R J Copping
M A Gayler
M A Hibbs
Mrs C M Little
Mrs J I Loughlin
D J Morson
G Sell
R C Smith
Mrs E Tealby-Watson
P A Wilcock

Against

E C Abrahams
Mrs M A Caton
R P Chambers
Mrs J F Cheetham
Mrs D Cornell
R C Dean
Mrs C D Down
Mrs S Flack
Mrs E J Godwin
R D Green
D M Jones
A J Ketteridge
P G F Lewis
Mrs J E Menell
R A Merrion
R J O'Neill
A R Row
Mrs S V Schneider
R W L Stone
A C Streeter
R B Tyler

The amendment was therefore lost with 14 votes for and 21 against.

Councillor Chambers then referred to some of the questions which had been raised during the debate. He said that the need for an Extraordinary meeting had been demonstrated by the fact that the meeting had taken over 1½ hours so far and it could not be added to a normal Council agenda. He said that an enhanced Community Information Centre would give a better service to the southern part of the district. He confirmed that the points raised by UNISON

would be addressed by the Corporate Management Team and he and the Chairman of Resources Committee would be talking to all members of staff over the next few weeks. He gave a categorical assurance that there would be no redundancies as a result of the relocation of Planning services. He added that the decision was not being rushed as this matter had been under consideration for 12 months. He said that the issue of car parking was the most contentious and would rely on the goodwill of staff to enable sufficient cars to be parked at Saffron Walden. He said that he would park at Swan Meadow car park on the morning following this meeting. He referred to the work of the two task groups which had been set up. He also mentioned the concerns about employment in Dunmow and said that employment prospects would be enhanced by the new leisure centre which was to be constructed. He agreed with the comments about Councillors' responsibility for staff and said that Councillors had and would continue to listen to staff. He said that a decision on leasing or selling was a management issue which was not relevant for the meeting tonight. In relation to the charter for public services, he said that Councillors had listened to staff and had involved them in the process. Staff were also treated equally. The administration had a five year plan for the future.

In relation to a further question from Councillor Mrs Loughlin he reiterated his comment that there would be no redundancies as a result of the relocation of staff from Great Dunmow. In answer to a further question from Councillor Copping he also said that he had not received a letter from the Primary Care Trust which had necessitated the calling of this Extraordinary meeting.

Councillor Wilcock referred to the service levels in planning and Councillor Tyler replied that staff were under great pressure and the average workload was 60 current planning applications for each planning officer. Whilst recruitment in Dunmow had been difficult, the move to Saffron Walden would not exacerbate the problem. He confirmed that the planning application determination rate had deteriorated recently, but he was more concerned with quality.

Councillor Mrs Tealby-Watson referred to the suggested 900 journeys between the offices and suggested that a comparison should be given between the cost of that and the cost of the relocation package for staff.

Councillor Bowker said that the Local Joint Committee (LJC) should be part of the consultation process. He also referred to the impact of a barrier on parking for public access and car parking for external meetings. The Leader replied that the LJC was part of the process. He confirmed that visitor parking would be available at the front of the building and would not be affected by the barriers.

The Motion proposed by the Leader was then put to the vote, a recorded vote was taken and the voting was as follows:-

For

E C Abrahams
Mrs M A Caton
R P Chambers
Mrs J F Cheetham
Mrs D Cornell
R C Dean

Against

Mrs C A Bayley
W F Bowker
Mrs C A Cant
R J Copping
M L Foley
M A Gayler

Mrs C D Down
Mrs S Flack
Mrs E J Godwin
R D Green
D M Jones
A J Ketteridge
P G F Lewis
Mrs J E Menell
R A Merrion
R J O'Neill
A R Row
Mrs S V Schneider
R W L Stone
R B Tyler

M A Hibbs
Mrs C M Little
Mrs J I Loughlin
D J Morson
G Sell
R C Smith
Mrs E Tealby-Watson
P A Wilcock

The Motion was therefore carried with 20 votes for and 14 against.

Councillor O'Neill said that he exempted Councillor Smith from his comments about political advantage. He said that it was important that the relocation was managed properly and fairly and undue delay was avoided. He said that delay was not good for staff morale.

Councillor Smith accepted his apology and suggested that he should choose his words more carefully in future.

The meeting ended at 9.15 pm.