

**FINANCE AND ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30pm on 31 JANUARY 2008**

Present:- Councillor R P Chambers – Chairman  
Councillors R Clover, K L Eden, M A Gayler, D M Jones, A J Ketteridge, H S Rolfe, G Sell, R D Sherer, A D Walters and P A Wilcock.

Also present:- Councillors R Chamberlain and J E Menell.

Officers in attendance:- A Bovaird (Chief Executive), R Auty (Head of Community Engagement), D Bradley (Acting Head of Finance), D Burrige (Director of Operations), M Cox (Committee Officer), J Mitchell (Director of Development), M Perry (Assistant Chief Executive), P Snow (Committee and Electoral Manager) and A Webb (Acting Chief Financial Officer).

**FA26 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M L Foley and R M Lemon.

Councillors Ketteridge and Eden declared a personal interest in item 9A as members of Saffron Walden Town Council.

**FA27 MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 15 November 2007 and the extraordinary meeting held on 15 January 2008 were received confirmed and signed as correct records.

**FA28 CHAIRMAN'S VERBAL REPORT**

The Chairman said that the Council was now heading towards setting a legal budget at the Council meeting on 19 February. This year had been very difficult for everyone but he stressed that next year would be even more difficult as the Council would still have to manage a deficit of £800,000. Some very difficult decisions had to be made, but this would be done in the next few weeks and the Council would move forward. He thanked the Officers and the Leader of the Council for the tremendous amount of work that they had put into dealing with this situation.

**FA29 LEAD OFFICER'S REPORT**

The Acting Chief Financial Officer updated the Committee on matters arising from the minutes that were not otherwise on the agenda.

The replacement noise monitoring equipment had been ordered but had not yet been delivered. Councillor Wilcock asked if the Council had approached

Stansted Airport for a contribution towards the cost. Officers did not have this information but would write to him after the meeting.

In terms of the 2011 Transformation Programme, Councillor Sell was concerned that as the responsible Director had now left the authority the predicted savings from the Programme might be put in jeopardy. He was advised that there was still a commitment to make these savings but they would be achieved in a different way.

The Acting Chief Financial Officer then put forward proposed performance indicators for Finance. These had been requested at the Council meeting as part of the Corporate Plan process and would be forwarded to the Performance Select Committee for approval. Members had asked for monthly reporting on the Council's performance indicators and were informed that this process was likely to start in June.

Members asked that two of the indicators be amended. The target in relation to the percentage of professionally qualified staff should also refer to the total number of staff. Also, it would be more useful if the measure for the % of budgets not overspending was re-worded to measure the % of budgets overspending.

Councillor Rolfe said that the process of collecting and collating the information took considerable time and effort so it was important that the indicators were straightforward and relevant. It was also important that there was a clear process for responding to the information. He asked that an item for a future agenda could look at best practise for the procurement process.

Councillor Gayler asked if the Council would be looking at performance indicators for other authorities in order to compare costs and effectiveness of services. It was confirmed that this would be done but the main focus was to keep tight control on this Council's spending and performance.

RESOLVED that the proposed corporate indicators for Finance, as amended above, are approved.

FA30

## **ANTI FRAUD POLICY**

The Assistant Chief Executive presented a report that recommended amendment to the current Anti Fraud Policy for housing benefit and council tax benefit that had been approved on 1 February 2007. The current policy required amendment to take account of the changes in enforcement procedures and the emphasis being placed on dealing with offenders in ways which avoided prosecutions.

He pointed out that prosecutions took a considerable amount of resource from both within and outside the council and were not necessary proportionate to the offence. The revised policy suggested administrative penalties as the preferred option. This would make a charge of 30% on the amount of overpayment in addition to repaying that sum. This approach would mean that the offender was punished but would also release resources from preparing cases for prosecution to give officers more time to investigate other cases.

The Committee supported this approach but asked that it be monitored to ensure that the anticipated effects were being achieved.

RESOLVED that the revised Anti Fraud Policy set out in appendix A to the report be approved

#### FA31 **GENERAL FUND BUDGET 2008/09**

The Committee received details of the draft revenue budget for the Finance and Administration Committee's own budget for 2008/09 together with the revised budget for 2007/08. It was noted that the figures were based on the budget position in December and recent proposals for removing the deficit had not been included at this stage.

RESOLVED that the Committee approves and submits to the next meeting

- 1 The revised revenue budget for the Finance and Administration Committee for 2007/08 as set out in appendix 1
- 2 The draft revenue budget for the Finance and Administration Committee for 2008/09

#### FA32 **CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2007/08 – 2010/11**

The Committee received details of the revised capital budget for 2007/08 for the Finance and Administration Committee. The Chairman asked that the programme be reviewed as he thought that some of the items proposed for 2008/09 might not be necessary. In particular there was concern about the proposed refurbishment of the glazed link at the council offices. The Acting Chief Financial officer said that he would look at the capital programmes for all the committees and report to the next meeting.

RESOLVED that the officers be asked to re examine the proposed programme and submit it to the meeting of the Committee on 7 February 2008

#### FA33 **REDUNDANCY AND REDEPLOYMENT UPDATE**

The Committee was given details of the progress with the consultation on proposed redundancies and redeployment that had been agreed at the last meeting. The affected staff had been informed that they were at risk and advised of redeployment opportunities. Meetings had been held with Unison who had raised a number of issues, some of which were still ongoing.

A number of specific proposals had been looked at with a view to avoiding redundancy namely the Tourist Information Centre and the Energy Efficiency Officer and proposals for these areas were discussed later in the meeting. There was also an additional post that was at risk as the result of the formation of the generic enforcement team. Other alternatives to redundancy

continued to be explored with the Council's partners. However, at the moment there was no other option but to confirm the redundancy proposals.

The Chief Executive then referred to the report that set out the impact that the existing staff shortages and the proposals for further reductions were likely to have on the Council's services.

Councillor Wilcock asked whether a risk register had been prepared associated with the low levels of staff. He said that some of the reductions in services, in terms of the effect on the public, were unquantifiable. He was concerned about future support to the voluntary sector and the ability of the Council to engage with the business community as well as to provide community services such as sport and youth work.

Councillor Ketteridge replied that he was fully aware of the problems associated with the reduction in staff numbers but these decisions had been forced on the Council because of the drastic financial situation that it found itself in. Once the Council was in a more stable condition these areas would be looked at again.

Councillor Sell asked for details of the support being provided by Building Capacity East, and the interim arrangements that were proposed for when the Chief Executive left the authority at the end of the month. He was concerned that the senior management of the Council had been significantly reduced at a time when key decisions needed to be taken.

He was informed that the Chairman of the Committee and the Leader of the Council would be meeting with Building Capacity East the following day and hoped to get a clearer idea of the funding that was available. The Committee would be informed as soon as any firm information was available.

Councillor Rolfe said that the third column of the report went some way towards setting out the risks. He asked a number of detailed questions about the impact on services, seeking assurance that the deletion of a post would not in the long run lead to a greater cost to the Council.

Councillor Menell read a letter on behalf of the Safer and Healthier Communities Group of which she was the Council's representative. The group was concerned at the possible deletion of the Strategic Partnership Manager post. This post was key to the work of community safety and also played a pivotal role in supporting the strategic partnership. The group had been concerned that it had not been consulted about this as the partnership organisations might be able to help with funding this post on a temporary basis. Councillor Ketteridge replied that he had received representations in relation to most of the areas proposed for redundancy and that all opportunities for joint funding continued to be explored.

Councillor Gayler asked how much had been spent on the recruitment process for the Director of Central Services and was advised that the details would be forwarded to him.

RESOLVED that

1           Members note the actions described in the report

- 2 the Council proceed to selection processes where applicable and the issuing of formal redundancy notices

FA33

## **TRANSFER OF SAFFRON WALDEN TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRE TO SAFFRON WALDEN TOWN COUNCIL**

The Head of Community Engagement outlined a proposal to transfer the Saffron Walden TIC to the Saffron Walden Town Council. With the current financial position the Council had to consider whether it was able to fund non statutory services and was looking at alternative ways that these could be provided. It had entered into discussions with the Town Council and these had been very productive as the important role of the service was recognised by both parties.

It was proposed that the Town Council would take on the running of the TIC from April 1 2008, with the current level of staffing and in its current location. The Town Council would meet the staffing costs (around £80,000). The District Council would pay a grant to the Town Council over a period of three years towards administration costs:

- 2008/09 £30,000
- 2009/10 £20,000
- 2010/11 £10,000

The Committee was advised that this could be met through currently available funds. Officers would enter into negotiations for a TUPE transfer of all staff, with protected terms and conditions.

A number of members referred to an email from the former District Council Tourism Officer who was concerned that the proposal would have a detrimental effect on the provision of the tourism function on a district wide basis and the production of the visitors guide and accommodation details. The Head of Community Engagement said that the visitors guide would shortly be distributed. However, in the future it would be up to the Town Council as to how it would proceed with this work. It was expected that the services currently provided would continue and there would be no change from the public's point of view.

Councillor Walters said that he had been involved with the TIC for many years and had seen it grow to a first class organisation. He was delighted that the Town Council had agreed to take it over. Some Members expressed concern about whether the TIC would continue to be a district wide facility and embrace the opportunities afforded by the development of the Airport and the Olympic Games.

Councillor Ketteridge said that the Town Council had checked the legality of providing the service in other parts of the district and would be liaising with all parish councils as to their input into the future service. This matter had progressed very quickly and a sub group would be set up to look at the details of the transfer.

Councillor Wilcock questioned if there was sufficient time to implement the TUPE transfer before 31 March. He was advised that as long as staff were in agreement with the proposals this could be completed relatively quickly.

RESOLVED that the Committee

- 1 agrees to the grant payable to the Town Council over a three-year period.
- 2 agrees to withdraw the at risk notices issued to TIC staff following the approval of the transfer at a special meeting of the Town Council on 6 February 2008.
- 3 instructs the Head of Community Engagement, Assistant Chief Executive, Acting Chief Finance officer and Interim Head of HR to undertake the TUPE transfer process with a view to completing the transfer by March 31 2008.
- 4 delegates authority to the Assistant Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader of the Council and Chairman of the Finance and Administration Committee to ensure all necessary negotiations, legal obligations and paperwork is completed

FA34

#### **REDUNDANCY AND REDEPLOYMENT – ENERGY EFFICIENCY OFFICER**

The Director of Development informed the Committee that the post of Energy Efficiency Surveyor had been proposed for redundancy. However it was noted that there were no other staff in the organisation with the skills to carry out this work. If the post was removed the Council's carbon management programme would have to be abandoned and an external grant of £30,000 returned. Also the Climate Change Strategy could not be implemented which could expose the Council to around £1m in energy related costs over the next 5 years.

There was currently a vacant post of Planning Officer which was on the list for redeployment. No one had expressed an interest in this and recent attempts to recruit to this post had not been successful. It was suggested that given the relevance of the Energy Efficiency post to the planning service overall this post could be deleted.

Councillor Chamberlain questioned the effect that this proposal would have on the Development Control service. The Director of Development said that the service was currently getting by without the planning officer post and future need would depend on the level of planning applications received. Alternative funding for the Energy Efficiency officer post would continue to be explored and the situation would be kept under review.

RESOLVED that the post of Planning Officer be removed from the list of posts available for redeployment and the post of Energy Efficiency Surveyor be removed from the "at risk" register

FA35

#### **REQUEST FOR FUNDING**

*The Chairman agreed to the consideration of this item on the grounds of urgency as a decision was required before the next meeting of the Committee*

A request had been received from Councillor A Dean in his capacity as Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee to attend a five day course at the University of Birmingham to achieve a post graduate module in Oversight and Scrutiny. The cost of the course was £950 and funding of up to £500 had been agreed from EERA. Members considered the request but felt that the expenditure could not be justified at this time given the Council's current financial situation.

RESOLVED that a request by Councillor A Dean to attend a course to gain a postgraduate module in Oversight and Scrutiny should not be granted at this time

The meeting ended at 8.55pm