

SPECIAL POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE held at 7.30pm at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN on 10 FEBRUARY 2000

Present:- Councillor Mrs M A Caton - Chairman.
Councillors G R Brown, R P Chambers, R J Copping, A Dean, M L Foley, M A Gayler, R D Green, D W Gregory, P G F Lewis, R A Merrion, R J O'Neill, G Sell, Mrs S V Schneider and R B Tyler.

Also present at the Chairman's invitation:- Councillor G W Powers.

Officers in attendance:- Mrs E Forbes, Mrs M Cox, J B Dickson,
A Farrow and B D Perkins.

I. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Chambers declared a non-pecuniary interest in his capacity as a member of the Braintree and Uttlesford Enterprise Board. Councillor Copping declared a non-pecuniary interest in all budgetary matters as a member of the Dunmow Town Strategy Group, the Maltings Preservation Trust and Business Link (North-West Essex).

I. RE-EXAMINATION OF DRAFT POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE REVENUE ESTIMATES 2000/02

At the meeting on 11 January 1999 it had been recommended that, in the context of the severe financial constraints facing the Council after April 2001, the Sub-Committees and Committees re-examine their estimates and rank growth items in priority order. They were also asked to look seriously at any possible efficiency savings. Since that meeting, officers had re-examined the budgets and the results of this exercise were set out in the report. With regard to major efficiency savings, these could only be achieved, by reductions in service, or by a change in the way things were done. A fundamental review of services was the purpose of the various Best Value Service Reviews which would be undertaken over the next five years. Members were further advised that to cover the gap in the General Fund's finances from April 2001, savings of approximately 8% of gross expenditure would be required, without any additional revenue growth items. Members were then asked to consider the growth items identified for this Committee for 2001 and place them in order of priority. The Corporate Director Finance said that the Budget Strategy Working Group would make subsequent reports to this committee on the issues of major efficiency savings and making reductions in direct costs.

Councillor Chambers proposed the following for the 2000/01 budget:-

Delete vending machine - £7,000
Delete Personnel Training Officer - £26,000

Rank the remaining growth items in the following order:-

		Cost 2000/01	
	1	Investors in People	£5,000
2	Members Allowances	£67,000	
3	IT Hardware, software and training	£9,140	

An amendment was then proposed by Councillor Gayler and seconded by Councillor Gregory that "this matter be considered under the General Fund Estimates 2000/01 item".

On being put to the vote the amendment was lost.

RESOLVED that

- 1 the Committee's growth items be ranked as follows:-
 - 1 Investors in People - £5,000
 - 2 Members' Allowances - £67,000
 - 3 IT, software and training - £9,140
- 2 the reductions in the budget as identified by officers be agreed.

- 3 the issue of efficiency savings in terms of seeking significantly cheaper ways of providing services be considered
- 4 the priorities for making reductions in any element of direct costs on services as presented in the draft Revenue Estimates 2000/01 be considered.

I. DRAFT LEASING AND CAPITAL PROGRAMMES AND GENERAL FUND ESTIMATES 2000/01

(a) Capital and Leasing Programmes 2000/2004

The Committee was updated on the position of the draft Capital Programme following the meeting of the Committee on 11 January 2000. The programme now reflected the IT Programme, the proposed transfers from Revenue, growth items and the Housing and Leasing programmes. At the last meeting it had been agreed to investigate whether a limited number of items, currently in the leasing programme, could be transferred to capital in order to achieve revenue savings to the general fund. This had been reflected in the programme. The projection of the overall capital programme up to 2003/4, on the basis of all items being approved, showed that all proposals could be funded without breaching recommended prudential guidelines.

Councillor Copping questioned the £64,000 allocated for Members' home computing. He considered that although this might be desirable in the future, there was no justification for introducing this during the next financial year. Other Members disagreed with this point of view.

RECOMMENDED that

- 1 the Council confirms the amendments to the draft Capital Programme made since 11 January 2000,
- 2 makes no further amendments to the programme,
- 3 accepts the contents of the report as the basis upon which the final leasing and capital programme should be prepared.

(b) General Fund Revenue Estimates 2000/01

The Committee received a report which summarised the draft General Fund Revenue Budget for 2000/01. It took the recommendations of this Committee on 11 January 2000 as its starting point. At that meeting it had been recommended that the General Fund Revenue Estimates net expenditure for 2000/01 should not exceed a level equivalent to a Council Tax increase of 4.5%. The figures as now presented took into account the recommendation of the Committees and Sub-Committees who had considered their estimates since that date, and also included amendments, technical changes and adjustments that had been identified since that time. There were two changes in the table of earmarked reserves which were an adjustment to the figure shown for Year 2000 and the creation of a Reserve for Best Value.

With regard to efficiency savings, it was considered that the practical ability to identify immediately major efficiency savings was probably limited. Large savings could only realistically be achieved by a fundamental review of services to identify a radically different way of doing things.

Members received an updated list of growth items recommended from the various Committees and Sub-Committees and were asked to decide items for inclusion within the budget.

Councillor Gayler circulated an alternative indicative budget for 2000/01 to 2002/03. He proposed, and it was seconded by Councillor A Dean, that this budget be forwarded to the Special Council meeting on 15 February 2000 for approval.

The proposal was at variance with that put forward by officers in the following ways.

He proposed to build in annual savings targets of 3% in 2000/01 and an additional 2% in future years. It was also proposed to draw from the Housing New Financial Framework Reserve in 2001/02 and 2002/03.

The Corporate Director Finance said he would need to examine the detailed figures and agree the logic of the recommendations. He said that in the officer suggested budget a saving of 2½% had already been built in by

absorbing all inflation costs. For prudential reasons he had not allocated any funds from the Housing New Financial Framework Reserve until the scale of Government assistance by way of Transitional Relief was known.

Councillor A Dean supported building into the budget annual efficiency savings. He believed this would give the Council and its committees identifiable targets to work to. The Corporate Director - Finance said that since the last meeting, officers had looked in detail at the base budget and there was scope for only small savings at the present time. However, those had been input into the budget. It was hoped that greater savings would be identified in the fundamental review of services to take place as part of the Best Value process. Councillor Chambers added that the Budget Strategy Group was currently looking at various alternative ways of meeting the shortfall which would occur as a result of the elimination of the Negative Housing Subsidy transfer.

Councillor Chambers, seconded by Councillor Tyler, then put forward the following amendment.

- "1 The Council adopt the indicative budget position 2000/01 to 2002/03 as set out in Rev 1, 2 and 3 of the Chief Officers' Report.
- 2 The following growth items be deleted:
 - Vending machine - £9,140
 - Personnel Training Officer - £26,000
 - Village Appraisals Field worker - £5,000

Youth project, Stansted - £10,000, be transferred to the Capital Programme.
- 3 The £8,570 proposed for the Bridge End Gardens Gardener, together with the £5,000 allocated from the Planning and Development Committee, be put towards funding the Environmental Taskforce.
- 4 The £4,500 for the Takeley Day Centre as set out in line 4 of Rev 3, which was not now required, be allocated to fund the running of the Thaxted TIC for the next 12 months."

Councillor Chambers explained that Thaxted Parish Council had been unsuccessful in its lottery fund bid for recreational facilities and would now have to use a large amount of its precept to fund this, and it would have difficulty in maintaining the TIC. If the Council funded the TIC for the next 12 months, this would give the parish council time to come up with an acceptable scheme for developing a Community Information Centre in the town.

With regard to the proposed new facilities at Stansted, Members asked that the County Council be asked to confirm the availability of the intended location of the new centre.

The Committee then discussed the Environmental Taskforce. Members had been impressed by the initial work of the young people at Bridge End Gardens and hoped that this scheme would prove to be successful. *Councillor O'Neill declared an interest in this matter as Chairman of the Friends of Bridge End Gardens.* He believed that there was an opportunity for the Council to maximise the benefits of the scheme by appointing a supervisor who was also a professional Gardener. The Committee hoped that the Environmental Taskforce would become a district facility. Councillor Chambers agreed to alter his amendment so that on Appendix Rev 2, under the Amenities Sub-Committee, Gardener be replaced with Gardener/Environmental Taskforce.

Councillor Powers then spoke in support of the Village Appraisals Fieldworker. He explained the value of such a worker and reminded the Committee that this could be an opportunity for the Council to benefit from partnership funding with the Rural Community Council of Essex.

Following the discussion, Councillor Gayler agreed to alter his proposal to include all Councillor Chambers' amendments on growth items with the exception of the Village Appraisals Fieldworker which he would like to be included within the budget. This particular growth item was then put to the vote and it was

RECOMMENDED that the Village Appraisal Fieldworker be deleted from the estimates.

Councillor Chamber's amendment was then put to the vote and was carried.

RECOMMENDED that Page 3

- 1 the contributions to, and use of earmarked reserves in 1999/2000 and 2000/01 as detailed in Rev 3, as amended, be approved by full Council on 15 February 2000,
- 2 the General Fund Revenue revised estimates 1999/2000 be approved by the Council on 15 February 2000,
- 3 the items of additional expenditure set out in Rev 2, as amended at the meeting, be included in the 2000/01 General Fund Revenue Estimate and hence the General Fund Expenditure be determined and approved by the Council.

Councillor A Dean asked that it be recorded that he was disappointed the Committee had opted out of adopting additional efficiency savings targets.

The meeting ended at 9.30pm.