

**EXTRAORDINARY MEETING of RESOURCES COMMITTEE held at
COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30 pm on
31 AUGUST 2004**

Present:- Councillor M A Gayler – Chairman
Councillors A Dean, R T Harris, A R Row, S C Jones,
M J Savage and P A Wilcock.

Officers in attendance: A Bovaird, P O'Dell and M T Purkiss.

RE26 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R P Chambers,
M L Foley and A J Ketteridge.

RE27 STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS AND OUTTURN 2003/04

Members considered a detailed report concerning the requirements of the
Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003 and received a copy of the Statement
of Accounts and details of the overall outturn situation on the General Fund.

The Committee noted that these figures had been presented a month earlier
than last year and it was intended that they would be presented a further
month earlier in 2005. The Committee expressed their thanks to Officers for
this achievement.

Councillor Dean referred to the value of the Council's car parks and the
current return on investments. He asked Officers to look at alternative uses to
ensure that best value was being obtained. Councillor Dean also referred to
printing costs and it was noted that this activity was currently under review.
He also referred to car leasing and asked whether the pre-payment of leasing
costs was the best arrangement. The Executive Manager Finance and Asset
Strategy said that this was standard practice and enabled the leasing
company to provide the most competitive deals. He added that the car
leasing scheme would be looked at in a structured way in the near future.

Councillor Row referred to Members' allowances and suggested that the
accounts should include comparative figures with the previous year. He also
asked if a breakdown could be made between allowances and expenses.
The Executive Manager Finance and Asset Strategy confirmed that this would
be looked at in future years.

Councillor Wilcock asked if it was possible to challenge the fees charged by
external auditors and referred to the substantial increase in fees which was far
ahead of the percentage increase in the Council's income.

RESOLVED that

- 1 the Statement of Accounts for the financial year ended 31 March 2004 be approved;
- 2 representations be made to the Audit Commission and the Minister for Local and Regional Government concerning the substantial increase in the amount of fees charged by external auditors.

RE28

BALANCES AND RESERVES

Members received a report providing details of the balances and reserves at 31 March 2004.

It was noted that on 10 February 2004 the Council had been advised that a General Fund balance of £1,200,000 was adequate and this view was supported by the Audit and Annual Inspection letter. Accordingly, it was suggested that the balance be maintained at this figure as outlined in the draft 2003/04 Statement of Accounts and that this be reviewed during the forthcoming budget setting process.

RESOLVED that the Council retains the target level for balances for the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account at £1,200,000 and £500,000 respectively and that these targets be reviewed during the forthcoming budget setting process.

RE29

HILL STREET SAFFRON WALDEN REFURBISHMENT OF PUBLIC CONVENIENCES

It was noted that this item had been deferred from the meeting on 24 June to enable further information to be provided. The budget for this work was set at £40,000 against the lowest tender price of £71,000 which included a £6,000 contingency figure.

Members noted that when the required work had been forwarded to the planned maintenance section the specification had been revised as more extensive work was considered desirable in order to bring the conveniences up to the high standard as those at Thaxted and Great Dunmow. Details of the additional works were noted. It was reported that if the recommendation was agreed work could start in September and the improved conveniences could be open by Christmas.

Councillor Row said that he would have liked further details to justify the increase in costs and more information about the improvements should have been provided. He considered that the Council should not rush into a decision on this matter. Councillor Harris said that the toilets were in a prime location and asked whether they could be located elsewhere and the site used for other purposes. Officers confirmed that a suitable alternative site was not available and stressed the importance of refurbishing these conveniences as soon as possible.

Councillor Wilcock asked if Officers had attempted to negotiate with the lowest tenderer to seek a reduction in the price or to see whether additional improvements could be achieved. Councillor Harris also suggested that Officers should look at extending the opening hours of this facility.

RESOLVED that the lowest tender of £71,000 to carry out the refurbishment of the Hill Street Public Conveniences during the current financial year be approved and that Officers seek further value for money improvements before the tender is let.

RE30

DUNMOW OFFICES – ACCOMMODATION FOR THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

Members recalled that at the meeting on 24 June 2004 the following resolutions had been agreed:

- Officers investigate the practicalities of using the front office for both the voluntary sector centre and to meet the Council's own requirements for a base in Dunmow.
- If the front offices be unable to accommodate the voluntary sector along with the Council's own requirements, the rear offices should be retained and a longer term lease offered to the voluntary sector.

It was noted that Officers had considered the practicalities of consolidating accommodation within the front offices and had concluded that this was not viable as there was insufficient area available, access to the first and second floors was tortuous, the second floor required structural improvement and substantial refurbishment work would be required.

It had been intended originally that a two year lease be offered. Officers had been discussing the temporary lease arrangement with the voluntary sector who had advised that they had difficulty in signing a lease of such short duration as they were unable to offer viable sub leases. In view of this difficulty and the commitment given in the resolutions outlined above a longer period of time for a temporary lease was proposed.

Members confirmed that the Council had a long term commitment to the voluntary sector in Uttlesford.

RESOLVED that a temporary lease be negotiated with the voluntary sector for a period not beyond April 2008 for use of the Great Dunmow Council Offices not currently required by the District Council.

RE31

CREATING A FORWARD PLANNING TASK GROUP

Members considered a report which proposed the establishment of a Forward Planning Task Group of Officers to support the Member Strategic Planning Reference Group.

Members were reminded of the primary strategic issues confronting the District and were advised of the membership and terms of reference of the Strategic Planning Member Reference Group which had been set up to address these issues.

It was envisaged that the Member Reference Group would need to be supported so as to give it the competence to discuss all options of accommodating development within the District. The report proposed that the Officer Support Group would comprise the Chief Executive and Executive Managers of Housing, Development and Finance. The Lead Officer would be the Planning and Policy and Conservation Manager supported by the Housing Strategy Officer, a research officer, public relations and lobbyist and administrative assistant. Staff would remain part of their service management teams and the group would take the form of a standing committee which would come together on a regular and programmed basis. It was envisaged that the research officer and administrative assistant would be new appointments or secondments.

It was suggested that the Member group would have the control of the District Character Reserve which had an opening balance of £300,000. Staffing costs would be met from within existing budgets but a new resource would be needed for research and administrative staff.

The Chief Executive stated that further work needed to be done on the costs of additional staffing and a fully costed proposal would be brought to the meeting of the Resources Committee on 23 September along with ideas on funding possibilities for the sums involved.

Councillor Wilcock thanked the Chief Executive for the speed of response and said that it was vital that the Council was in a proactive and not a defensive mode in dealing with strategic issues.

RESOLVED that

- 1 The Committee endorse in outline the proposals in this report for the establishment of dedicated officer and member groups to deal with the strategic development issues facing Uttlesford.
- 2 The Chief Executive should make the necessary arrangements for the Strategic Development Reference Group to meet and consider the best way in which to progress those proposals.
- 3 The SDRG be asked to consult widely with members, officers and other stakeholders and bring a detailed report back either to the next meeting of the Resources Committee or to the next meeting of the Council containing detailed proposals for the implementation of the proposals in this report.

The meeting ended at 8.15 pm.