

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2 – RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT held at 7.30 pm at COUNCIL OFFICES SAFFRON WALDEN on 21 NOVEMBER 2001**

Present:: Councillor R J Copping – Chairman.  
Councillors Mrs D Cornell, R C Dean, Mrs S Flack, M A Hibbs, A J Ketteridge, Mrs J E Menell, G Sell and R W L Stone.

Also present at the Chairman's invitation: Councillors Mrs J F Cheetham, R A Merrion, A R Thawley and R B Tyler.

Officers in attendance: Mrs E C Forbes, Mrs M Cox, J B Dickson, A Forrow, J Pares and J K Mercer.

**S2.8 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mrs C A Bayley, Mrs C M Little and A R Row.

Councillors Mrs D Cornell and A J Ketteridge declared an interest in any discussion relating to The Close Gardens, Saffron Walden as they were both Town Councillors.

**S2.9 MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2001 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

**S2.10 BUSINESS ARISING**

**Minute S2.5(i) – Information on proposed expansion of Stansted Airport – Councillor A Dean**

Councillor Mrs J F Cheetham said that the progress report on the planning application for the expansion of Stansted Airport would be considered at the Development Control and Licensing Committee on 26 November. It was confirmed that there would be an extended period before the application came to the committee for decision, to enable public access to all relevant information.

**S2.11 COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chairman informed members that a suggestion that a representative from Essex County Council be invited to make a presentation to the January meeting regarding the Essex County Council Pension Fund would be considered later in the meeting.

**S2.12 BEST VALUE SERVICE REVIEWS 2002/03**

Members were asked to consider how the Best Value Service Reviews should be conducted in 2002/03. This matter had been considered by the Scrutiny 1 Committee which felt that the appropriate Overview and Scrutiny Committee should decide the Terms of Reference and scope of service reviews, after considering advice from the appropriate policy committee. The arrangements for officer review teams and the role of critical friends (and challenge events) were noted. Members were then asked to consider options for Member involvement, which was a particularly important part of the process. It was thought that this should continue as on the present basis and be reviewed after two years. A note prepared by Councillor O'Neill suggesting how this part of the process might work was considered most helpful.

Councillor Hibbs commented that the recommendations arising from the Best Value reviews appeared to be dictating Council policy. He referred to items considered at the Health and Housing Committee, in particular the future of the Warden's Service that had been presented to the committee as fully fledged reports ready for a decision. He felt that Members should have had more information and more opportunity for a full debate. Other Members replied that there had been ample opportunity to consider these issues through Member Workshops and detailed reports. Members were also advised that under the proposed methods of conducting future reviews progress reports would be submitted and the initial recommendations would be considered by this Committee.

**RECOMMENDED that**

- 1 Member involvement in service reviews be continued for the next two years as at present, with the appropriate overview and scrutiny committee appointing three of its members to oversee and steer each review and report on progress formally to the committee and informally to the political groups,
- 2 the procedures set out in paragraph 6 to 8 of the report regarding terms of reference of review bodies and challenge events be adopted, subject to the terms of reference and scope of reviews being agreed by the Scrutiny Committee after considering advice from the appropriate policy committee, and
- 3 the service review process be reviewed following completion of the 2003/04 programme.

**S2.13 MEMBERS' HOME COMPUTING PROJECT**

The Head of IT and Audit Services presented a report on the effectiveness of the Members' Home Computing Project. It set out the objectives of the project and concluded that the two major objectives had been achieved: to provide notebook PCs, printers and telephone lines and also access to IT applications, including Office 2000, the internet and intranet. The majority of Members regularly used the systems for a variety of purposes. There had, however, been a delay in restricting the number of committee papers being sent by post and this meant that the anticipated financial savings were still to

be achieved. It was also noted that the diary facilities were not yet being widely used.

Members were advised that the project had cost about £3,000 more than expected due to higher hardware costs. Also the annual revenue cost estimated to be £24,060 were approx £27,400 due to higher than expected call charges.

The facilities were now being used extensively to speed up communications between members and officers and a considerable amount of information was now available on line. However, there was evidence that some problems existed. Officers felt that best practice guidance needed to be produced to ensure that the system was used in a more appropriate way.

The system required support from both the IT Section, who provided technical support and Office Services who entered committee papers onto the system. Both sections had recently experienced staff shortages and that had affected the service provided. It had not yet been possible to address Members' additional training requirements. The report set out a number of possibilities for developing the facilities in the future.

Councillor Merrion, the Chairman of the former IT Working Party, stated that the project had been a considerable success. He commented that it had broken new ground and had been shortlisted for a national award. However, all elements of the system had not yet been implemented and there were a number of facilities that did not work very well. Some Members found the system slow and experienced problems in logging on. It was possible that Members had got into bad habits and might be working too much online. A good practice guide would be welcomed.

Councillor Thawley, whilst acknowledging that there were some teething problems, praised the success of the project. It had facilitated better communications between members and officers and had been particularly useful in keeping Members' informed during the Foot and Mouth Crisis and the recent flooding incidents,.

Members thanked IT staff for their help with the initial training and most felt that they could cope with the basics of the system, but would welcome more training. Councillor Mrs Menell suggested that Councillors Thawley and Merrion might run a workshop for those Members who were less computer literate.

Councillor Mrs Flack asked that Councillors be e-mailed notification that reports had been put on the system. She also questioned whether this Council should pay for Members' call charges.

The Head of IT and Audit Services acknowledged that there were some problems with the system that needed to be addressed. However, there were limited resources within the IT Section and choices had to be made about which application to support. It was hoped that once the section was fully staffed the problems would start to be addressed. He also hoped to look at opportunities for alternative dial-in services. He said that staff were often not aware of specific problems and asked Members to inform the IT Section of

any difficulties. It was concluded that it would be very useful for a list to be compiled of all the problems that Members were experiencing with the system.

RESOLVED that Councillors A R Thawley and R A Merrion in conjunction with the Head of IT and Audit Services identify Members' problems with the home computing system.

## S2.14 **DECISION LISTS**

### **(i) Environment and Transport Committee – 13 November 2001**

#### **Agenda item 4 – Creation of Stand-by runway**

Councillors R B Tyler, the Chairman of the Development Control and Licensing Committee and Councillor Mrs J F Cheetham, Chairman of the Environment and Transport Committee attended the meeting and the Chairman invited them to comment on the process by which the decisions on this item had been taken.

Councillor Tyler said he had been concerned about the referral of the item to the Environment and Transport Committee. He questioned whether it was a senior committee under the new constitution. He also said that the application for the standby runway was a planning application and not a policy decision and should be determined by the DC&L Committee. He commented that the Members of that Committee had attended training sessions and workshops and were therefore the most qualified members to take decisions on planning applications.

Councillor Mrs Cheetham had been a member of the Organisation Joint Working Party, when this part of the constitution had been discussed. The Working Party had felt that there should be a system for referral if the Development Control and Licensing Committee made a decision that was contrary to Council policy and the officers' recommendations. She still considered that officers needed a method of referral and hoped that the task group would be able to clarify the best way of dealing with this. The Chairman commented that planning issues had the highest public profile and it was important that clear and logical procedures were in place.

RESOLVED that the Constitution Task Group be asked to give early consideration to this matter.

#### **Agenda Item 5 – Close Gardens, Saffron Walden**

*Councillor M A Hibbs declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item.*

Councillor Cornell asked what action would be taken if a letter of intent was not received, as the Town Council had not yet made a decision about the future ownership and maintenance of the gardens. Local Members said that the current condition of the gardens did not reflect well on the District Council and the work should be done as soon as possible. Councillor Mrs Cheetham said she had taken on board the points made by local Members and there

would be an update at the next meeting of the Environment and Transport Committee.

### **Agenda Item 7 – Draft Budget**

Councillor Sell hoped that the Administration would reconsider the proposal to cut the budget for the Travel Tokens scheme.

### **(ii) Resources Committee – 15 November 2001**

### **Agenda Item 3 – Expenditure on Swan Meadow Pond**

Members asked for clarification on the type of works that were now proposed. The Director of Resources would obtain further information.

### **Agenda Item 5 – Budget Strategy 2002/03**

RESOLVED that an officer from Essex County Council be invited to attend the meeting of the Committee in January to explain the outcome of the recent actuarial re-valuation of the pension fund.

### **Agenda Item 6 – Corporate Support Services – Best Value Review**

Members discussed the recommendation to investigate the centralisation of the Council Office accommodation, including Great Dunmow. Councillor Flack asked if commitments had ever been made about the presence of a Council office in the town. The Chairman confirmed that no decision to centralise the Council Offices had yet been taken, but was in the Administration's priorities to investigate. A report was expected to be presented to the Resources Committee in January. The Chief Executive confirmed that discussions had taken place with staff at the Dunmow offices and, as was to be expected, varying views had been expressed. Councillor Hibbs said it was important that the Council explore the type of services that would remain in Dunmow.

### **Agenda Item 9 – The establishment of a Policy Officer Post**

Councillor Sell wondered whether the decision not to appoint a permanent Policy Officer was short-sighted as the Best Value process was ongoing and the Council would now have no dedicated officer. The Chief Executive explained the tasks currently being carried by the Policy Officer and said that the loss of this officer would place a considerable strain on the Council's existing staff resources.

### **Agenda Item 12 – Early Retirement – Council Officer**

It was confirmed that a final date for this officer to leave the Council had not yet been resolved. The future delivery of the service was still being considered through the Best Value Review.

**Agenda Item 14 – PFI Consultant’s costs – referred from Leisure ‘The PFI Board’**

In answer to a question, the Chairman hoped that further additional money would not be required. The project was now progressing more speedily.

**Agenda Item 16 - Tenant Rent Arrears – Write-Offs**

Officers confirmed that the relevant part of the constitution, once drafted would propose that tenant rent arrears should be written-off by the Health and Housing Committee.

S2.15 **YEARLY PERFORMANCE REPORT**

The Committee received a report by the Policy Officer on performance information for the year 2000/01. Members had a number of questions about different areas of performance indicators. Councillor Hibbs asked that the information be presented to highlight areas of under performance so that matters of concern could be referred to the appropriate Policy Committee..

The meeting ended at 9.40 pm.