

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2 – RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT held at
COUNCIL OFFICES SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30 pm on 30 JANUARY
2002**

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

Also present at the Chairman's invitation: Councillors R P Chambers and
A Dean.

Officers in attendance: D Demery, J B Dickson, A Forrow, Mrs E Forbes,
Mrs C Hughes, J Mitchell, Mrs C Roberts, Mrs V Rogacs
and R M Secker.

S2.16 PRESENTATION ON ESSEX COUNTY COUNCIL PENSION FUND

The Chairman of the Committee introduced Mr K D Neale, the County
Treasurer.

Mr Neale explained that the Essex pension fund was the standard local
government statutory scheme, within the top one hundred largest public and
private sector pension schemes. The fund assets at March 2001 totalled
£1.86b.

Increasing pressure on pension funds, due to increased longevity and
decreasing UK equity strength, required the shortfall in funding to be met by
increased employer contribution rates which would take effect from 1 April
2002.

Actuarial valuation of the fund was carried out every three years in order to
estimate the required contribution rate. The level of funding had fallen by 2%
between 1998 - 2001. The cost of this and the ongoing cost of funding
benefits for future service meant, in the case of Uttlesford DC, an increase to
179% of employee contributions (previously 171%).

In answer to questions, Mr Neale informed Members that the year 2000/01
had been disastrous for financial markets. Action by investment managers to
compensate included limiting the amount of money in any one sector.
Significant financial damage had also been done to funds in the early 1990's
when regulations had required pension funds to be not more than 75%
funded.

As regards the future he explained that most employers were reluctant to
contemplate the end of a defined benefit scheme since the pension scheme
was a substantial aid to recruitment. The last two years were the worst for
financial returns over the last twenty year period and the situation should
settle down.

S2.17 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mrs C A Bayley D W Gregory and M A Hibbs

S2.18 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 21 November 2001 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

S2.19 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Home Computer Problem

The Chairman reminded the Committee that Councillors Merrion and Thawley were available to help members resolve their home computer problems.

(ii) PFI Scheme

The Chairman confirmed that the project was moving towards the stage at which a scheme would be supported for consideration by the Council on 27 February.

S2.20 REPORT FROM THE BEST VALUE REVIEW OF CORPORATE SERVICES - OFFICE ACCOMMODATION,

At the request of the Chairman it was agreed to consider next item 14 on the decision list of the Resources Committee Meeting held on 24 January 2002, which concerned the report from the Best Value Review of Corporate Services-Office Accommodation the key points of which were outlined by the Architect and Property Advisor.

The Head of Planning and Building Surveying and the Chairperson of Unison informed the meeting of some of the concerns raised by staff which included (from Planning staff), fear of disruption for those with homes in Dunmow and also for part time workers some of whom might not continue their jobs. Concerns raised by staff generally included the risk of a deterioration in service delivery; the loss of the community voice in Dunmow; loss of storage space in the offices; increased travelling time which might make part-time jobs in some cases unacceptable, and car parking which would be a major issue. In addition there were safety issues for staff if they were forced to use the Swan Meadow Car Park and housing implications since housing in Saffron Walden was more expensive, as well as the loss of e.g. interview rooms. However, there were some positive comments from staff including putting "faces to names" doing away with "them and us" attitudes, improved IT and general communications and additional corporate benefits.

The Chairman asked that Mrs Rogacs comments be taken into account in future reports.

In answer to a question from Councillor G Sell, the Head of Planning and Building Surveying explained that staff at the Dunmow offices, of whom there were 38, were concerned about the general uncertainty. It was not possible for him to assess any potential consequential downturn in performance. The Chairperson of Unison reported that two staff had already left, the threat of a move to Saffron Walden having had a bearing on their departure.

The Architect and Property Adviser added that the uncertainty was compounded by staff feeling excluded from any part in the processes being contemplated and wishing to be involved.

In answer to a question from Councillor A Dean, the Head of Planning and Building Surveying explained that officers were affected both by location and by quality of management.

The Chief Executive said that the authority needed to work as a single organisation to get to grips with what people wanted and access to local services was also important.

In answer to a further question from Councillor A Dean, Councillors R P Chambers and R Stone confirmed that the shape and size of the Planning Department could change after the Best Value review.

The Head of Personnel and Office Services added that 20 or more staff were unhappy with the proposed change, but as with any change this was sometimes inevitable. Staff morale should improve, however, when they became involved in the processes. Councillor Mrs D Cornell stressed that Mrs Rogacs' comments should not be ignored.

Councillor R P Chambers explained that the member reference group had tried to look at all possible needs of staff for office accommodation over a long period of time and were concerned that staff numbers should not rise. It would be possible to expand the building at Saffron Walden if necessary. He added that since the Architect and Property Adviser believed that the move was possible, once the principle of it had been agreed, it would be time to have detailed discussions with staff. Councillor A Row proposed that there was no need for further action by this Committee until all the necessary information (including that on the market for leasing/selling accommodation) was provided.

RESOLVED that the Committee take no further action at this time.

S2.21

CIVIC AMENITY SITES IN UTTLESFORD

The Committee considered a report by the Head of Environmental Services on the provision of Civic Amenity Sites in Uttlesford.

The Chairman of the Committee informed members that a meeting had taken place with Kay Twitchen at which details had been given of matters referred to in para 12 of the report. The Committee considered whether these matters

should be discussed in Part II, but concluded that it was appropriate to take them in open session.

The Head of Environmental Services explained that whilst a planning application had been received, this was not the only possible site for the civic amenity site. It was clear however that although there would be a delay of a year, infrastructure had been put in place which the Council could use. A mandate for compulsory purchase had been established, should this be necessary.

S2.22 **MEMBER REFERENCE GROUPS FOR BEST VALUE REVIEWS**

The Assistant Chief Executive explained that nomination of three members by Group Leaders was necessary for each of the three best value reviews within the remit of this Committee to be undertaken in 2002/03 (legal and monitoring services, planning services and street cleansing).

S2.23 **IDeA FOLLOW UP REPORT AND BEST VALUE INSPECTION REPORT ON COMMITTEE MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION**

Councillor Sell referred to the Audit Commission's comments in the Best Value Inspection Report, which were lukewarm about the Council.

In answer to a question from Councillor Stone, the Chief Executive confirmed that the IDeA follow up report was the result of one day's inspection.

Councillor Stone suggested that the IDeA officers must therefore have had pre-determined views. As regards communication he had great praise for the communications work produced in 10 hours a week by one officer "on a shoestring" at Uttlesford. This work had been recognised nationally.

Councillor A J Ketteridge commented that the document did not put forward a programme of improvement.

Councillor R P Chambers thanked the Chairman of Committee for inviting him to attend and said that he accepted that there was always room for improvement. He wished to ensure that Uttlesford remained a rural district having a major international airport within it.

Councillor Dean suggested that this would amount to keeping all things the same and working within existing resources so that there would be insufficient money for training of staff.

Councillor Sell suggested that vision was necessary for the future going beyond the next year.

Councillor Chambers said that the Administration was looking to the future and would be trying possible partnerships for release of resources to enable the achievements required. There would be no further cut backs on staff training. It was important to proceed in the direction the Council required, not

the direction the Government wanted. The vision was to maintain the District as a rural one with all the accompanying advantages although Stansted Airport was in the centre of it.

The Chairman of the Committee directed the attention of the meeting to Para 12 of the IdeA follow up report and the references to morale.

Councillor Chambers said that there had been an opportunity for staff to comment on the proposals for the Dunmow Offices but that he agreed it was important to establish better communications with staff. At the next Local Joint Council meeting a charter was to be received which would encourage better staff/member relations.

S2.24 **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MEETING OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE HELD ON 22 JANUARY 2002**

Members asked questions about the London to South Midland multi modal study.

Councillor Ketteridge requested a visit to the plastic/cardboard recycling unit and the Head of Environmental Services explained these recycling processes and the reason for the current pamphlet encouraging tidiness in storage of plastic and cardboard.

S2.25 **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MEETING OF THE RESOURCES COMMITTEE HELD ON 24 JANUARY 2002**

Councillor Mrs J E Menell referred to the partnership with the Primary Care Trust. The Trust was on excellent terms with the Uttlesford District Council and she said this was largely attributable to the efforts of the Chief Executive in this regard.

Councillor Mrs Little enquired about the national non-domestic rates write-offs and the Director of Resources explained that these were made up of different amounts. The level of this Council's write-offs was very low and the collection rate was the best in the County. Councillor A Row asked that the write-offs be presented as a percentage of what was being collected.

The meeting ended at 9.45 pm.