

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2 – RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT held at 7.30 pm at COUNCIL OFFICES SAFFRON WALDEN on 3 DECEMBER 2003**

Present: - Councillor S Flack – Chairman.  
Councillors H D Baker, C A Bayley, M A Hibbs, R M Lemon,  
J P Murphy, V Pedder, S V Schneider, G Sell and F E Silver.

Officers in attendance: - M Brean, J B Dickson, J K Mercer, J R Mitchell,  
I Orton, R Kirmani and R M Secker.

**S2.24 STATEMENT BY MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC**

Before the meeting Mr Groom, from the Uttlesford Hackney Carriage Drivers' Association (UHCDA) made a statement regarding recent increases in taxi fees. Mr Freeman and Mr Leeder, residents from Thaxted, made statements relating to car park charges at Thaxted. A summary of their comments is attached to these minutes.

**S2.25 TAXI LICENSING – FEES AND CHARGES PROCEDURE**

The Chairman certified the above item as urgent as a representative from the UHCDA had requested to make a statement and the Licensing Committee on 10 September 2003 had referred this item to the Committee to 'examine the process and if required recommend improvements to the existing policy and practice.'

The Head of Environmental Services informed the Committee why the Taxi Licensing fees increase was required and that the Uttlesford fees were still below the average in Essex. There was no statutory requirement for consultation and the Licensing fees were like any other charge/fees applied by the Council. The fees increase was advertised in the local papers and 'Taxi Chat (the newsletter to the trade)'.

The Chairman said that there was need to improve the process and suggested that there should be improved liaison with the Taxi Drivers' Association.

Councillor Hibbs agreed that there was a need to look at the process to include comments from taxi drivers association in future reports to the Licensing Committee when considering fees increases.

**SC2.26 LICENSING ARRANGEMENTS**

The Head of Environmental Services introduced the report regarding the procedures and policies used or proposed in respect of taxi and liquor licensing activities respectively. He informed the Committee that with the transfer of power to issue liquor licences to the Council, initially temporary

additional staff would be required to deal with the additional workload anticipated.

Members suggested that all departments should look at methods by which inspections by all departments could be carried out by one officer or at the same time by different officers wherever possible.

RESOLVED that the draft liquor licensing policy be noted.

S2.27 **MATTERS ARISING FROM ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE – 4 NOVEMBER 2003**

(i) **Item 6 – Policy Priorities & Budgets 2004/05**

**Car Parking – review of charges**

The Chairman agreed to bring forward the above item as a response to the statements made by the local residents from Thaxted.

The Chairman informed the Committee that at the Environment and Transport Committee two suggestions put forward by a Member of the Committee had been considered.

Councillor Hibbs informed the Committee that the Environment and Transport Committee had not resolved to increase the Car Parking fees but had asked officers to look at various options and to report back to the next meeting.

The Officers were asked to write a letter to the Chairman of the Environment and Transport Committee expressing this Committees concerns regarding charging for car parking at Thaxted.

S2.28 **APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

An apology for absence was received from Councillor D Morson. Councillor M Hibbs declared an interest in items S2.35 and S2.38 as an architect and left the meeting during the discussion of these items.

S2.29 **MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 1 October 2003 were received, confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

S2.30 **BUSINESS ARISING**

(i) **Minute S2.15 - Members Home Computing**

Councillor Murphy said that there were many inadequacies with the Members Home Computing set up and requested that a report be submitted to the next meeting explaining how to improve these.

The Director of Resources explained that a new firm of Consultants from Saffron Walden had been engaged to deal with the problems and these would be solved soon

S2.31

## **WORK PROGRAMME – BEST VALUE PROGRAMME**

The Performance Manager introduced a comprehensive report which provided the details of the existing policy to deliver the requirements of the Best Value process. The Council had produced guidelines for carrying out the Best Value reviews in the spring of 2000. An Officers and Members team led these reviews, oversaw the process and ensured that the Service Improvement Plans delivered continuous improvement. The ethos of the Best Value process is the checklist built around the 4 C's of Challenge, Compare, Consultant and Compete.

During the four years of Best Value the Council had carried out 16 reviews of which 4 had been reviewed by the Best Value Inspectorate.

Councillor Bayley suggested that fewer Best Value Reviews should be submitted to each meeting so that Members could have detailed input into what was required and review these thoroughly.

The Performance Manager reported that in future reviews would have different time scale and Members could have more opportunity to consider these and comment on them. In response to a Members query he informed the Members that a 2% savings in terms of efficiency was still the target of the Best Value process.

The Chairman said that as a result of these reviews the Council knew where it was going wrong and she suggested that In future more thematic reviews could be undertaken by Internal Audit.

Councillor Murphy suggested that a review should be carried out so that the enforcement aspects of the Council could be made more effective.

Future reviews could be carried out highlighting the needs of young people/elderly or reduction of crime.

RESOLVED that

- 1 the Year 5 Reviews be examined at the 5 February 2004 meeting;
- 2 the progress of the Service Improvements Plans be reviewed twice a year;
- 3 reviews to include a partnership element
- 4 two reviews of a thematic nature should be carried out each year;

- 5 reviews be coordinated by the Performance Manager to ensure neutrality in areas like Challenge.

## S2.32 **GOLDS NURSERIES BUSINESS PARK – INTERNAL AUDIT**

Members considered the report which provided the review following their instructions that management arrangements at Golds Nurseries Business Park be reviewed by the Internal Audit. The full Audit Report and the completed management plan were discussed in detail. The Audit report concluded that the management of the Business Park had greatly improved. In response to a Members query the Internal Audit Manager reported that the likelihood of error or mismanagement had been reduced. Effective local systems and procedures had been set up and this was a positive step. Progress would continue to be monitored.

Councillor Hibbs expressed concern that this matter was not brought to the Members attention earlier and why Internal Audit did not pick it up sooner. There were weaknesses in the infrastructure and a report should be submitted so these problems would not arise in future.

The Chairman suggested that if there was lack of resources within the department the officers should be delegated authority to buy in expertise from outside so that work could be carried out on time and the Council did not incur unnecessary expenditure.

RESOLVED that

- 1 the Internal Audit report and management action plan be noted.
- 2 a report be submitted to the meeting of this Committee in March on the level of occupancy and the effects of rebranding and installations of CCTV's at the site.

## S2.33 **WORK PROGRAMME – SERVICE AND FINANCIAL PLANNING PROCESS**

This item was deferred to the next meeting for more financial information.

## S2.34 **WORK PROGRAMME – CPA PROCESS**

The Performance Manager reported details of existing policy to deliver the requirements of the Corporate Self Assessment (CPA) process. The Council would need to produce the assessment for the CPA process by 5 January 2004. The Council was subjected to a Peer Challenge Review during the 24 to 26 November 2003 and the on site CPA Review would be carried out the week 23 February 2004.

Members noted the timescale for delivery dates for the various stages of the CPA process. Recommendations from the Peer Challenge Group were noted

and it was also noted that these would be incorporated in the final documents in early January 2004.

RESOLVED that Members note the policies in place to implement the CPA process within the Council.

## S2.35 **BEST VALUE REVIEW - PLANNING SERVICES**

The Head of Planning and Building Surveying explained the Improvement Plan for Planning Services and pointed out that all departmental services had greatly improved. The department had targeted and achieved five Critical Success Areas (CSA)

- Focussing on what matters to local people,
- assuring the quality of development,
- enhancing customer care,
- reducing delay in development control,
- reinforcing management systems to assure quality.

The Policy and Customer Care needs were developed to be in context of the Council's overall and evolving approach. There were 35 outcome measures and 153 action measures, all SMART and cross-referenced to the Draft of Quality of Life Corporate Plan.

Members were pleased at the improved services in the Planning department.

The Chairman raised the issue of lack of communications with the Parish Councils and that any draft consultation document sent to them should state the date on the front page by which comments were required by the District Council.

The Head of Planning Services informed the Members that meetings had been arranged with the Parish Councils on regular basis to discuss various issues.

RESOLVED that

- 1 the report on the Service Improvement Plan be noted and this be referred to Environment and Transport Committee and Development Control Committee for consultation;
- 2 reports be submitted twice a year to future meetings of this Committee.

## S2.36 **BEST VALUE REVIEW OF REVENUE SERVICES**

Councillor Bayley introduced the details of the Best Value Review of Revenues Services and Anti - Fraud Team. The Committee considered the Service Improvement Plan and the Best Value review process. The Cost implications of the Service Improvement Plans were discussed.

Councillor Murphy expressed concern regarding cost implications of the item 1.2 'increased office-opening hours.' The report suggested that if the pilot scheme was accepted then at least 3 members of staff would be required to work for 4 hours on Saturday mornings for 1 year.

The Performance Manager informed the Committee that if this pilot scheme was approved then this could not be done in isolation, a range of services would have to be provided on Saturday mornings.

The Chairman suggested that one off incentives should be offered to new residents if they signed Direct Debit forms for paying their Council Tax.

In response to the Members comments that this option would involve additional costs the Performance Manager suggested that if this option was approved then it would help improve Customer Care.

RESOLVED that

- 1 the Revenue Services Best Value Service Improvement Plan be approved;
- 2 the Resources Committee on 22 January to be asked to adopt the Service Improvement Plan.
- 3 reports be submitted twice a year to this Committee.

S2.37

## **BEST VALUE REVIEW – REFUSE AND RECYCLING**

Councillor Pedder informed the Committee of the details of the Best Value Review that had been carried out of Refuse Collection and Recycling Services. The review had highlighted that 90% of Customers were satisfied with the service. She pointed out there was still a need to educate the public to recycle material.

The Head of Environmental Services informed the Committee that the department had achieved excellent customer service responses from all users.

The improvement plans would involve partnerships possibilities with the County Council, all districts, unitary authorities, joint bids with DEFRA and possible joint public/private partnership for future contracts.

Councillor Hibbs was concerned regarding the collection and recycling of used batteries and abandoned vehicles. The Head of Environmental Services informed the Committee that new regulations would be introduced from next year regarding the disposal of electrical goods and used batteries could be dealt with at that time. At present the Council removed the Uttlesford residents vehicles free of costs and this avoided the District suffering from roadside problems seen elsewhere.

Councillor Pedder further informed the Committee that the Essex County Council had an annual campaign to discourage the disposal of disposable nappies. The Council could get more involved in this scheme in future years.

The Chairman suggested that some individuals could be encouraged to help recycling of residential waste. For instance milkmen who could be offered some incentive to collect all glass bottles and recycle these.

The final improvement plan as agreed by the Member Reference Group (MRG) was noted.

RESOLVED that

- 1 the Refuse Collection and Recycling Services Best Value Review Improvement Plan be approved,
- 2 the Environment and Transport Committee be asked to adopt the Best Value Review - Service improvement plan and review this twice a year.

#### SC2.38 **WORK PROGRAMME – SECTION 106 AGREEMENTS**

Members considered the report, which explained the function and use of planning obligations, and planning conditions. Planning obligations were a means of securing contributions towards, or the actual works to implement, social, amenity and infrastructure requirements arising from new developments, and normally were applied to secure off-site works. Conditions were imposed on planning permissions and applied to the site itself.

The Best Value Review outlined how Members could be involved in the planning process, particularly the content of legal agreements. One of the recommendations in the draft service plan was to set up a Protocol that would enable the involvement of the Ward Councillor without compromising probity. This policy was still a draft but suggested a way forward.

The Chairman stressed that in future the needs of Parish and Town Councils and residents should also be included in these proposals.

RESOLVED that

- 1 the report be noted;
- 2 the progress made in producing a protocol to enable Members to have an input into legal agreements be noted.

#### S2.39 **MATTERS ARISING FROM RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

The Committee noted the decision list from the Resources Committee held on 20 November 2003.

**(i) Item 9 Council Tax – Charges for second Homes & Long Term Empty Homes**

The Chairman noted that at the Resources Committee a decision was taken that subject to the agreement by the Director of Resources (in consultation with the Chairman of Resources Committee) and the County Council that at least 50% of the County Council's raised income should be returned to the District Council through increased contributions to Local Service Agreements. It was resolved that 'the existing discounts for unfurnished long term empty homes be removed'.

It was also agreed that a letter be sent to the Minister for Local Government requesting that the additional income received should be allowed to be kept locally.

The Chairman informed the Committee that the income raised from this discount would be refunded by Central Government. The Council would incur additional expenditure and officers time to enforce the above decision. The Government should give a positive response and allow the Council to keep the additional income.

RESOLVED that this item be noted.

**(ii) Dunmow Offices & Depot**

Members expressed concern that the decision taken at the Resources Committee 'that officers to consult on the possibility of two-year lease & not beyond April 2006 with the voluntary sector for use of the Great Dunmow Offices'.

The Members commented that no voluntary sector group would lease accommodation for only two years. They also expressed concern that the Committee had agreed to appoint Consultants to undertake a comprehensive options appraisal, this would involve additional expenditure. The local groups and the residents should be consulted.

RESOLVED that

- 1 this decision be referred back to the Resources Committee for reconsideration;
- 2 the decision to 'consult on the possibility of a two year lease & not beyond April 2006, with the voluntary sector for the use of the Great Dunmow offices' be reconsidered;
- 3 the decision to appoint Consultants 'to undertake a comprehensive options appraisal' be reconsidered;
- 4 a Ward Councillor from Dunmow be appointed to the Member /Officer Working Group.



**STATEMENT BY MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AGAINST PROPOSED INCREASE IN CAR PARKING CHARGES**

Mr J Freeman and Mr P Leeder, residents of Thaxted, expressed concern at the decision of the Environment and Transport Committee meeting held on 4 November 2003. At that meeting a decision was taken to review the car parking charges at Thaxted car park.

The residents pointed out that Thaxted was a tourist centre and all publicity material had been sent out informing tourists that the town provided free car parking.

Car parking charges will have to be paid by residents. Parents picking up and dropping off children to schools will have to pay twice. All students attending courses would have to pay.

The residents pointed out that monitoring of the car parks would involve additional costs. They requested that this Committee recommends the Environment and Transport Committee to reconsider its decision.

## STATEMENT BY MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AGAINST INCREASE IN TAXI LICENSING FEES

We the only Elected Hackney Carriage Drivers Association, formerly request Scrutiny 2 Committee to reconsider the process which resulted in the high increase, some as much as 150%, in our taxi fees.

We list below some concerns for members of the Committee which we feel relevant.

- 1 The rise in our charges were agreed at an Extraordinary meeting of the then Development Control and Licensing on the 31 July 2003 where only 5 members were present and why was the question not asked as to see costings then. The proposed increase in charges was proposed by one of your officers and the committee was told this was due to the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) and by the fact of a £15,000 deficit.
- 2 Although your report states that there is no statutory requirement to consult with the trade surely it is policy to enable users to have a say. After all, All Taxi Drivers are the main stakeholders in this issue. The increase was not placed in the Taxi Chat circular until the end of August where it was stated that the rise in charges was proposed and then in the next paragraph effective from September 1 2003.
- 3 We understand that meetings of the old Uttlesford Taxi Drivers Association, who are in breach of any Constitution due to no AGM for a couple of years and meetings early this year with the Liaison committee were cancelled, and therefore no consultation had taken place with users regarding this very high increase in fees.
- 4 The CRB check is required three yearly so then at the end of three years you would then apply again but Uttlesford District Council are charging us every year – surely this cannot be right. If an operator requests a person to work for him on a school contract as an escort for school children and has a CRB check done by ECC of WHOM do not charge for at present and then decides to apply to UDC for a Hackney Badge/Private Hire badge would then the fee be dropped?
- 5 With regards to vehicles over 5 years old of which UDC Licence many, an inspection fee is payable twice a year therefore the fee increase has gone up from £46.00 per year to £70.00
- 6 Drivers Badge fees which we are told now includes the CRB have risen from £70.00 to £100.00 per year for a Dual Licence and a Private Hire one from £50.00 to £80.00 per year. We state again that CRB is only every THREE WHOLE YEARS and many drivers who renewed in September 2003 have not need a CRB check. So why are we being charged for it.
- 7 Transfer fees are when an operator or owner driver wishes to change his/her vehicle and a new plate has to be issued. This has risen from £20.50 to £50.00.

We ask again for a full and concise individual costing of the whole Licensing for Hackney Carriage/Private hire costings of this not for profit service listing figures for everything.

What is the actual cost to the Licensing Department because to us UDC must be making a profit on the CRB issue let alone the other issues mentioned.

We ask for a suspension on all these increases in fees and again ask, which we have been trying to get since September 1 2003, to show us the full concise individual breakdown of each item and lets talk, but to date we are still being given the run around hoping we will go away. Scrutiny 2 we the Uttlesford Hackney Carriage Drivers Association will not go away so this cannot be brushed under the carpet and we hope now you will not pass the buck as to speak, like we felt the Licensing Committee did after assuring us it would be looked at by Scrutiny 2 within 3-4 weeks at their first meeting by their Chairman, BUT FOR SOME REASON THIS DID NOT HAPPEN AND IT WAS FORGOTTEN TO BE PUT BEFORE YOU ALL AND SO IT IS HERE NOW.

I like to thank you for your time in reading this statement and hope we can move positively forward together and look forward to welcoming the new Chief Executive in January of who some of our members of the Association have already met.

Alan Groom  
For and on behalf of  
Uttlesford Hackney Carriage Drivers Association