

MINUTES OF A JOINT MEETING OF
 SCRUTINY COMMITTEES HELD IN
 THE WAYTEMORE ROOM, BISHOP'S
 STORTFORD, ON TUESDAY,
1 DECEMBER 2009 AT 7.30 PM

PRESENT: Councillor D Andrews (Chairman).
 Councillors W Ashley, A L Burlton, S A Bull
 (substitute for Councillor C B Woodward),
 Mrs R F Cheswright, D Clark, N P Clark,
 R N Copping, A D Dodd, R Gilbert, P Grethe,
 Mrs M H Goldspink, J Hedley, Mrs D L E
 Hollebon, G E Lawrence (substitute for Councillor
 G McAndrew), J Mayes, D A A Peek,
 N C Poulton, P A Ruffles (substitute for Councillor
 R H Beeching), V Shaw, J J Taylor, J P Warren,
 M Wood.

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillor M J Tindale.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Anne Freimanis	- Chief Executive
Cliff Cardoza	- Head of Environmental Services
Dave Cooper	- Performance Officer
Simon Drinkwater	- Director of Neighbourhood Services
Philip Hamberger	- Programme Director of Change
Marian Langley	- Scrutiny Officer
Alan Madin	- Director of Internal Services
Peter Mannings	- Democratic Services Assistant
Will O'Neill	- Head of Community and Cultural Services
George A Robertson	- Director of Customer and Community Services

Neil Sloper - Head of Customer Services

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Nick Taylor - Grant Thornton – External Auditor

406 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN

It was proposed by Councillor D L E Hollebon and seconded by Councillor W Ashley that Councillor D Andrews be appointed Chairman for the meeting.

RESOLVED - that Councillor D Andrews be appointed Chairman for the meeting.

407 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors P R Ballam, R H Beeching, D Hone, G McAndrew, J O Ranger and C Woodward. It was noted that Councillors S A Bull, G E Lawrence and P A Ruffles were in attendance as substitutes for Councillors C Woodward, G McAndrew and R H Beeching respectively.

408 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman stated that this was the first of three meetings to consider budget options and service plans going forward. He emphasised that this meeting was to consider budget options for 2010/11 and the medium term financial plan to 2013/14.

The Chairman reminded Members that the purpose of the meeting was to inform the Executive of any views and comments as part of a wider consultation process. The Executive would then develop specific proposals for Council to consider in February 2010.

Members were reminded that the scrutiny process allowed for minority and majority views to be conveyed to the Executive. More specific proposals would be put before Members in January and February 2010 and formal recommendations would be made to the Executive at that time.

409 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor N C Poulton declared a personal and prejudicial interest in respect of the option to reduce funding for museum services with Hertfordshire County Council and partnership funding on the grounds that he was the Vice Chairman at Hertford Museum. He stated that he would leave the room prior to any debate on this issue.

Councillor P A Ruffles declared a personal and prejudicial interest in respect of the option to reduce funding for museum services with Hertfordshire County Council and partnership funding on the grounds that he was a trustee of Hertford Museum. He stated that he would leave the room prior to any debate on this issue.

RESOLVED ITEMS

ACTION

410 BUDGET 2010/11 AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN TO 2013/14

The Director of Internal Services gave a presentation inviting Scrutiny Committee Members to consider budget options for 2010/11 and the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) to 2013/14. He referred to the suggested outcomes for the meeting, which would be useful to the Executive in further considering the budget. The Director set the context for the report and the budget options now detailed.

The Director set out assumptions that Officers had made when setting out budget options. He emphasised that there was scope for Members to make some difficult

choices when advising the Executive on setting the budget for 2010/11 and also in relation to the MTFP.

Members were advised that although over 100 options had been detailed in the report, setting the budget for 2010/11 was the main priority. The Director stated that Members should also focus on the need to be prepared for future budget pressures. He stressed that public spending constraint could potentially continue for a generation.

The Director reminded members that in the financial strategy adopted in the Summer 2009, the Council would seek to avoid unspecified future savings as a means of balancing the medium term financial plan.

The Director referred to uncertainty relating to the outcomes of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR). He commented that the national budget shortfall equated to 20% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). He stated that evidence from Sweden had suggested that the most successful approach to budget pressures was spending restraint as opposed to tax increases.

He stressed that guidance from central government had indicated that rises in Council Tax were expected to be the lowest for 16 years and should average less than 3%. Members were reminded that savings from Hertfordshire Pathfinder had not been quantified so had not been factored into the report.

The Director suggested that Members consider where savings could be brought forward and also where items could be deferred to make savings. He concluded that Members should consider income raising options.

The Executive Member for Resources and Internal Support emphasised that the Executive would welcome any feedback that Scrutiny wished to make on any of the options detailed in the report. He commented that bringing savings options forward could prevent less painful

decisions having to be made in future years.

The Director reported that the Local Joint Panel (LJP) had highlighted 4 issues for Members to consider. The Staff Side had commented that the budget prospects were unduly pessimistic and that the savings relied too much on staffing reductions. The Staff Side had also stressed that a voluntary redundancy policy should be applied. The Director emphasised that the LJP had endorsed the fullest use of options to reduce staffing costs by agreement and which did not entail redundancies.

Councillor Mrs M H Goldspink expressed concern on how Members could make decisions on budget options with so little information. She stated that there should be separate scrutiny committee meetings to consider budget options within the remit of individual scrutiny committees.

The Executive Member reminded Members that last year the process had been carried out in three separate sessions. He emphasised that there had been criticism from Members who had commented that this had not given them a good grasp of the whole picture. He stated that this year the information had been drawn together to address that point.

Councillor J Mayes expressed concerns over making any cuts linked to health and safety and used the example of moving to weekly play area inspections for lower priority sites. In response to a query from Councillor R Gilbert on the process for considering budget options, the Chairman referred to the suggested advice by the Director of Internal Services.

Councillor A D Dodd commented on whether Officers could update Members on the situation on grant funding. The Director commented that Officers had a firm figure for 2010/11. Officers' assumptions on the likely levels of grant income going forward were based on limited information pending the outcome of the CSR next Autumn.

In response to a query from Councillor R Gilbert, the Director confirmed that the general reserve above the level anticipated by the MTFP was £615,000.

Councillor N P Clark requested that a more comprehensive list of savings be reported to the next joint meeting. He stated that a number of savings detailed in this report under the general heading of efficiency savings had been broadly outlined in the MTFP last year but had never been through detailed scrutiny.

The Director advised that the return on investments the Council had benefited from towards the second half of last year would not be repeated this year. He also stated that last year's savings relating to the delayed implementation of ARC would not be repeated.

In response to a further query from Councillor Gilbert, the Director stated that Officers had made an assumption on the numbers of empty properties and the likely impact on the council tax base. The Director suggested that the number of band D equivalent properties used to calculate the council tax was unlikely to increase and this had been set out in a report being submitted to the next meeting of Council.

The Chairman stressed that every % decrease in council tax would result in the Authority having to find more savings. In response to a query from Councillor N P Clark, the Director advised that a 1% reduction in council tax below the 3.8% baseline assumption would result in Members having to identify an additional £90,000 in savings in the 2010/11 year.

The Director commented that Officers had taken into account a worst case scenario for when the Authority might vacate the Causeway site but this should not be interpreted as a plan to prolong occupancy of the building. Officers had also considered the income that would be lost from the Causeway car park and the costs associated with

Charringtons House.

Councillor D Clark referred to the contingency figures Officers had factored into the budget proposals. The Director stressed that the Authority could not anticipate every eventuality and it was prudent to have contingencies in the budget to address unforeseen spending pressures, particularly in later years.

Councillor P A Ruffles emphasised the importance of this Council carrying out its statutory duties well. The Local Strategic Partnership was a partnership that the Authority should contribute to and support in the most appropriate way. However, this did not mean the Authority should be providing services that were the statutory function of other Authorities.

Councillor Mrs M H Goldspink expressed concern over the loss of the East Herts animal warden. She also referred to the proposed deletion of administrative posts as a cause for concern as she felt there was not enough information in the report on the impact this might have on service delivery or performance.

In response to a query from Councillor Mrs M H Goldspink on the deletion of the post of Community Administration Manager in Customer and Community Services, the Director of Customer and Community Services undertook to provide a written response.

Councillor R N Copping stated that the clearance of leaves from the public highway should be a savings option for the Executive to consider. He emphasised that stopping the control of weeds could be a false economy.

Councillor N P Clark commented on whether the cost implications of deleted posts resulting in a redundancy had been factored into the MTFP. The Director commented that a contingency sum had been included and that revised assumptions built into pay estimates provided some scope to absorb the costs that might arise in 2010/11. The

Executive Member for Resources and Internal Support emphasised that a deleted post did not always equate to a redundancy.

Councillor M Wood expressed a concern that some significant complaints could be forthcoming from residents in relation to some of the proposed savings options. He commented that he had some significant concerns and felt that Members could not have a fair debate in this meeting.

In relation to the removal of recycling banks, Councillor D Clark emphasised that it was important that residents in flats still had access to appropriate facilities as they did not receive the kerbside service available to other residents.

Councillor Mrs M H Goldspink expressed concern relating to any loss of funding for the Papworth Energy Efficiency Advisory Service. Members felt that the shaping Bishop's Stortford fund should be stopped.

Councillor Mrs M H Goldspink stressed that it was difficult to judge the impact of some of the suggested reductions as they were presented as a monetary figure with no indication of the percentage reduction represented by this figure.

Councillor M Wood commented on whether the role of Community, Youth and Sports Development Officer was being covered. The Director of Customer and Community Services commented that some of the functions of that post had been absorbed within a wider team. He stated that Members faced some difficult choices around which services the Authority should provide.

Councillor Mrs M H Goldspink emphasised that the provision of residents parking permits should not be reduced. She also had concerns that the proposed advertising in car parks might be unsightly and could spoil the appearance of the area. Councillor N C Poulton expressed concerns relating to the impact of the budget options on rural areas, particularly of any reduction in

PCSOs.

Councillor Mrs M H Goldspink stated that she could not support the deletion of vacant funded hours in Planning and Building Control. Councillor N P Clark commented on the origins of the proposal for new income from street naming and numbering. The Director of Internal Services responded that this was a suggestion that had come out of the Management Development Programme training and reflected practice elsewhere.

Councillor N P Clark was concerned that the East Herts policy on street naming and numbering did not allow developers to dictate the choice of names but required consultation with town and parish councils on locally appropriate options. He stressed that developers were now going to be charged and was concerned they would expect to have the final say.

Councillor D Clark expressed concern over the reduction of Officer numbers in the fraud team. The Director commented that this equated to deleting a vacancy and maintaining the status quo in terms of Officer numbers.

The Chairman summarised the discussions and got general agreement that Members wanted to avoid cutting the services which were known to bring in a high number of complaints such as weed control and second swathe cutting. He reiterated Members' concerns in relation to not cutting back in areas that could impact on health and safety. He also felt the mood of the meeting was to ensure enough savings were made to balance the books and keep any rise in council tax firmly below 3%.

Councillors Mrs M H Goldspink, D Clark, N P Clark and M Wood expressed their dissent with the process being used to consider the budget options.

The Scrutiny Committee Members received the report.

RESOLVED - that the Executive be informed of the comments of Scrutiny Committee Members as now detailed.

The meeting closed at 9.30 pm

Chairman
Date

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