



Minutes

Cabinet

7th December 2009

86 DELIVERING THE MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

The Leader of the Council introduced the item and advised that the Budget consultation process had produced early public feedback, including a petition to proposed changes on welfare rights provision from the Braintree Pensioners Action Group; and another petition, received at the meeting, from users of the Glebe Hall in Braintree – this would be received at Braintree Local Committee on 26th January 2010.

Cabinet received a presentation on 'Initial Public Feedback' from Claire Thwaites, Marketing & Communications Manager. This displayed the various methods used by the Council in gathering feedback on priorities for local people, with the collected data used as part of the budget proposals. These consultations included the Place Survey, Value For Money research, the People's Panel, the residents online survey, and through 'Contact' magazine, media coverage, the website, and with partners. The 'Main Findings' of this process was reported, including an enhanced survey questioning the public on their service options if the Council had to find £1.1m in savings, or the lesser amount of £0.8m.

The Leader of the Council stated the comprehensive consultation had identified some key issues on budget proposals with regard to

- Community Wardens
- Welfare Rights
- The Parish Support Grant, and
- Landscape Services.

Community Wardens – the Council was looking to cease this service, as there had been significant increase in Police Officers and PCSO's since the introduction of the Warden system; the Village Agent scheme had been launched in rural areas, and through enforcement measures, including partner agencies. It is now proposed to reduce the number of Community Wardens with a view to refocusing services with other agencies to combat enforcement, litter and graffiti issues. The new proposal was for a 50% reduction in the cost of the warden system, with different ways of working being explored on enforcement. A report would be received at Cabinet in February 2010.

Welfare Rights – the Council was originally proposing to cease this service from March 2010. This is now revised to 31st March 2011 and will allow consultation with other organisations and agencies.

Parish Support Grant (PSG) – the initial proposal for the Council to abolish the PSG had been reviewed, and the PSG will remain at its current level for the next three years. There is an 8% reduction across the whole Council budget, and an 8% reduction in

staffing over departments – therefore the Council does not intend to include any clause on Parish Council’s keeping their own precept increase to 2.5% - as offered in 2008/09.

Landscape Services – due to the representations received from voluntary groups and schools to the proposals, this proposal for a reduction in service will also be reviewed.

The Leader of the Council proposed the following amendments to Appendix B of the report – Service and Budget Proposals for 2010/11 and 2011/12:

- (i) Review management structure/reduction overall of two Heads of Service – to recommend approval to Council
- (ii) Parish Support arrangements – consultation to continue, with a report to Cabinet in February 2010
- (iii) Restructuring Economic Development function – to recommend approval to Council
- (iv) Museum Service/Town Hall staffing – further discussion with the Museum Trust, with a report to Cabinet in February 2010
- (v) Town Hall Centre reorganisation of facilities – consultation to continue, with a report to Cabinet in February 2010
- (vi) Tourism Service – consultation to continue, with a report to Cabinet in February 2010
- (vii) Landscape Services management and structure – further consultation – report to Cabinet in February 2010
- (viii) Welfare Rights Service to cease on 31st March 2011 (as indicated above), to recommend approval to Council
- (ix) Parish Support Grant – amount frozen at current level (as indicated above) to recommend approval to Council
- (x) Community Halls – to transfer to other organisations who have expressed an interest, with discussions ongoing – to recommend approval to Council
- (xi) Concessionary Travel Tokens Scheme – to issue to specific target area (as identified in report)
- (xii) To cease the Environmental Health ‘out of hours service’ during the week, and only provide at weekends – to recommend approval to Council
- (xiii) To partly fund SEAMS, the Community Mediation Service – consultation to continue, with report to Cabinet in February 2010
- (xiv) Community Wardens Service – consultation to continue (as indicated above), with a report to Cabinet in February 2010.

It was noted that within Appendix H of the report there is £40,000 provision for advisory services to business through Braintree Development Services (BDS) and the Braintree Enterprise Acorn Units (BEAU).

Councillor Bolton, Chairman of Halstead Local Committee, presented the recommendation from their meeting on 11th November 2009 regarding the Parish Support Grant and considered the issue suitable for future work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Leader requested that the revised PSG proposals be taken to the next Halstead Local Committee on 20th January 2010, to gain their views. It was agreed that Appendix F of the report, the Parish Support Grant paper by the Leader of the Council, will also be taken for discussion.

Cabinet Members welcomed the proposals, and found reassurance from the public consultation process. However, caution was raised to future risks, specifically to the uncertainties on government grants, and future schemes for the Council, e.g. the

building of Witham pool, and the provision of suitable accommodation for the Council. During the discussion the following issues were raised:

- that the reduction of Community Wardens could result with an increase in crime
- that the services of the four Community Wardens are 'spread equally' across the district
- that any representation to the replacement floodlights at the Braintree Leisure Centre, can be advised through the consultation process
- that forms used in the welfare rights system are made more informative and easier to understand
- that any proposals from the District Council influencing the Town or Parish Councils should be notified earlier - to ensure they do not effect the setting of their precept budgets

The Leader of the Council agreed to write to Town and Parish Councils on the outcome of the budget proposals at the Cabinet meeting. **Cllr Butland**

DECISION:

- (1) That efficiencies and budget reductions proposed by management as detailed in Appendices C and E of the report be noted.
- (2) That the schedule of new demands for revenue funding in 2010/11, as detailed in Appendix H of the report be agreed.
- (3) That an additional £500,000 of the General Fund balance be set aside to meet the potential costs of redundancy and retirement resulting from the agreed savings.
- (4) That a submission be made to the Secretary of State seeking approval to the capitalisation of the costs of redundancy and retirement resulting from the agreed savings (if successful this will enable the return of the balances set aside to the General Fund balance).
- (5) That consultation be undertaken to the schedule of projects to be included in the Capital Programme, as provided at Appendix L of the report and are reported to the Cabinet meeting in February 2010.

- (6) That it be **RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL:-**

That the following Items of Appendix B (as indicated above) be approved:-

- (i) Review management structure
- (iii) Restructuring the Economic Development function
- (viii) Welfare Rights Service to cease on 31st March 2011
- (ix) Parish Support Grant to be frozen at its current level
- (x) Community Halls – to transfer to other organisations, and
- (xii) To cease the Environmental Health 'out of hours service' during the week and only provide at weekends.

APPENDIX

CABINET MEETING

7TH DECEMBER 2009

QUESTION TIME (Extract)

Summary of Questions Asked / Statements Made During Public Question Time

1. John Bendall, Chairman of Earls Colne Parish Council
Agenda Item 6c Medium Term Financial Strategy – Parish Support Grant.

Mr Bendall stated that it was pleasing to note that the Parish Support Grant (PSG) had now been frozen, and not scrapped as originally proposed. The PSG is a long standing situation and compensates for an unfair additional rate to precepted parished areas, whereas the burden should be spread among all ratepayers. The issue had also been recognised by Alan Haslehurst, MP who represents the north of the district, that is most affected. The discussion paper by the Leader of the Council at Appendix F in the reports was referred to, and that if the PSG was totally effective the precept put in by towns and parishes would have a precept close to zero.

Mr Bendall advised that he had obtained reliable information for Parish Tax Band D that if the average parish rate was applied to unparished areas it would accrue over £500,000 for the district and provide the extra revenue to retain services, e.g community wardens. To apply an average to the unparished areas was considered as a fairer method, with no complicated procedures and if any changes happen to the PSG – whether frozen or decreased – all ratepayers would be treated equally.