

Minute Extract

Cabinet



7th December 2009

85 **QUESTION TIME**

INFORMATION: There were six statements made the details of which are appended to these minutes.

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.

Councillor Lager, Cabinet Member for Efficiency and Resources, presented the five options in the report and advised that Essex County Council had continued to express an interest in sharing accommodation with the District Council. The opportunities and risks were set out in the report, including the financial breakdown. It was advised that local residents will access Council 'face to face' service through a 'Front Office Service' sited in Braintree, Halstead and Witham and there is opportunity for the District Council to share these facilities with Essex County Council and other agencies. If the Council were to move to Mayland House, Witham this would be as back office accommodation and not as a 'civic building'. It is proposed that Council meetings take place around the district bring democracy closer to the people.

Councillor Abbott asked four questions

- For full individual consultation to take place with staff
- On the increase in the Council's carbon balance by additional travel to Witham
- for Accessibility for the public and Members, and
- of no convincing evidence that Causeway House is 'not fit for purpose'.

The Leader of the Council stated that full consultation is required regarding Options 1, 2 and 3 in the report. A key issue is whether the District Council can find suitable partners to accommodate the remainder of Mayland House – and if this is not secure the Council may need to reconsider its options. The Council could look to other authorities across Essex to deliver services, e.g. Council Tax, that would result with less duplication of services, and reduce staffing and accommodation costs. With regard to travel it is proposed that staff predominantly travel by public transport to Witham and enhance the Council's Green Travel Plan.

On accessibility issues, the public will use the 'Front Office Service' and Members can use IT services for contact. The Causeway House building does require significant investment to bring it up to date and Mayland House has been maintained to a much higher standard.

Councillor Dr Evans stated that it is not only staff who require consultation, but reassurance to the wider community that Council service will not be diluted or minimised.

The Leader of the Council also clarified that although discussion had taken place at high level between the District and County Council, there will be a commitment required in writing before any plans go forward between the authorities.

With regard to carbon issues it was noted that the Climate Change Strategy will be updated on an annual basis to revise any change in the Council's accommodation.

DECISION:

- (1) That the Council continues to develop options 1, 2, and 3 as detailed in the report, with an updated position reported back to Cabinet as early in the New Year as possible.

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

That the Council accepts the surrender of the lease for Mayland House, Witham with Marsh McLennan subject to Heads of Terms being agreed as detailed on Appendix B of the report, with the final terms to be agreed by the Cabinet Member for Efficiency and Resources.

94 **REFERENCE FROM THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 28TH OCTOBER 2009**
Scrutinising LAA Improvement Targets – Local Authorities (Overview and Scrutiny Committee)

Cabinet received recommendations on new regulations introduced by Government to widen the role of the District's Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor R L Evans made reference to the People's Panel and Braintree District Local Strategic Partnership's questionnaire, and the response received from partners and consultation on the scrutiny process. The Leader of the Council advised that no responses had been received to his letter of 5th November 2009 to discuss these issues, although the opportunity for comment/discussion is still open to partners.

DECISION:

- (1) That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee develops a protocol on working practices with the Braintree District Local Strategic Partnership to ensure that the scrutiny process for the scrutiny of LAA improvement targets is effective and efficient;

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

That the functions and terms of reference of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in relation to the scrutiny of LAAs improvement targets be incorporated in the Council's constitution.

95 **REFERENCE FROM THE LICENSING COMMITTEE – 7TH OCTOBER 2009**
Gambling Act 2005 – Revised Statement of Licensing Policy

Cabinet gave consideration to the recommendation following review of the Statement of Licensing Policy. The full report on the re-publication of the revised Statement of Licensing Policy had been circulated to all Council Members for information. With regard to the amendments put forward by the British Beer and Pub Association it was noted that the Council already complies with these, or it is not applicable to the authority.

DECISION: That it be **RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL:-**

That the Gambling Act 2005 – Revised Statement of Licensing Policy be published.

APPENDIX

CABINET MEETING

7TH DECEMBER 2009

QUESTION TIME

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.

2. John Bendall, on behalf of Richard van Dulken, Vice Chairman of Earls Colne Parish Council
Agenda Item 6c Medium Term Financial Strategy – Community Warden Scheme

Mr Bendall read from a prepared statement on the proposed cessation of the Community Warden Service in the district. Sarah Brady, the Community Warden for the Earls Colne area had, from inception, been remarkable, gaining trust, and providing support to the Police and the Parish Council. It was reported that Police officers or PCSO's are rarely seen in Earls Colne and the Parish Council are reluctant to lose the Community Warden. The level of anti social behaviour had reduced in Earls Colne and youth services have currently been removed and discussion ongoing for a new Youth Club location. Mr Bendall requested that cuts are not made on public protection issues.

3. Mrs Joan Gibson, 9 Knowles Close, Halstead
Agenda Item 6c Medium Term Financial Strategy – Community Warden Scheme
(Mrs Gibson's statement was read by Eileen Self, Member Services)

Mrs Gibson advised her statement was on a personal level, and also as a representative of the Halstead Chamber of Trade and Halstead in Bloom members. There is strong feeling against the proposed axing of the Community Wardens – particularly in Halstead. Richard Winter and the previous Community Warden had produced a marked decrease in petty vandalism, graffiti and nuisance behaviour.

The Community Warden has a good relationship with all ages, including the local

youth, and is able to detect any problems before they become out of hand. This results with Halstead being a less threatening place and a much more pleasant place to live in. The benefits of less crime and anti social behaviour must surely outweigh the cost of employing a Community Warden; and withdrawing that service will mean extra expense in the removal of graffiti and repairing damage in the streets and parks.

The PCSO's do not establish such a close relationship as the Community Warden, and are not so visible on the streets of Halstead. The local press had reported that Community Wardens could be re-deployed – perhaps on litter picking – which was considered a waste of the wardens training and experience.

To axe the Community Warden was considered a retrograde step, and will be missed by the towns people on aspects of safety but also in moulding local youth in behaving responsibly. It will also break the link between the public and authorities and could leave the elderly and vulnerable not knowing where to turn for help and assurance when they need it.

4. Vernon Rolls, representing Braintree Community Centre
Agenda Item 6c Medium Term Financial Strategy – Community Halls

Mr Rolls read from a prepared statement and reminded Cabinet of the 'Vision for the Three Towns' proposal to build a new community centre behind the Town Hall and that this was abandoned and the Community Association offered the former Essex County Council building at 19-21 Bocking End. This had progressed to the Heads of Agreement and Business Plan stage, with the Association also indicating they were willing to consider a request from the Council to take over the running of The Institute. In November 2009, the Council advised that financial constraints resulted with the conversion of the former ECC building not going ahead, and the Association was offered relocation at The Institute. This combination is not feasible as The Institute provides community and cultural activities; with the Hall and adjacent rooms not available to use at certain periods, i.e. theatre productions.

The Association understands the financial situation of the Council, and despite the likely substantial reduction in facilities for the community, and the restraints of The Institute being a Listed Building, there is a way it can be used as a Community Centre.

Unfortunately the Association has not had opportunity to explore this option, prior to the Cabinet meeting; and it is noted that within Appendix B of the budget report the 'Potential transfer to the Community Association' is quoted beside The Institute item.

Therefore, the Community Association wishes it placed on record the current inconclusive position of discussion between the Association and the Council and strongly requests that no decisions are made by Cabinet at this stage that would jeopardise the long term future of a suitable community centre for Braintree.

5. David Webb, 54 Peel Crescent, Braintree
Agenda Item 6c Medium Term Financial Strategy – Potential Cutbacks

Mr Webb spoke on various issues including how Council employees were advised of a potential move from Causeway House and that proper consultation was required.

Reference was made to government spending and the financial situation with the big banks and that money would be appreciated in the Braintree District. For the Council to move to Witham would decimate services, and could not the Council direct money towards new housing, instead of making cuts.

6. Mrs Brenda Baker, Chairman of Braintree Chamber of Trade & Commerce
Agenda Item 6c Medium Term Financial Strategy – Potential Cutbacks

Mrs Baker stated that the Chamber of Trade does not support the loss of the community warden service or the community centre. With regard to the value of these services it was queried what mechanism the Council has used to find alternatives to the proposed service cuts. It was noted that the Chamber of Trade are willing to talk with the Council to minimise the effect of any cuts, and their impact to local business.

7. Mrs Celia Burne, former Halstead Town Councillor and resident of Braintree
Agenda Item 6b Mayland House, Witham

Mrs Burne expressed her dismay on the Council's potential move to Witham. It was considered that an alternative place within Braintree must exist, and if the move goes ahead Braintree residents will lose a tremendous facility. Braintree town is the centre of the district and, as a Braintree resident, Mrs Burne felt 'let down' by the Council if they were to move away. It was queried if the Council had looked at smaller buildings and as Braintree is a large, constantly expanding town, the proposal would mean the democratic process may suffer in some way and local people would not get to their Councillors. Residents in the north would need to travel further; and the Council needs to look at alternatives and, if the bus park regeneration project is not to go ahead the Council should rent Mayland House to another user, and keep the revenue. In conclusion, Mrs Burne considered that Braintree District Council should be in Braintree, the centre of the district for residents and Council staff.