

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNTY HALL, CHELMSFORD AT 13:30 ON 24 JUNE 2014

Present

M Mackrory (Chairman)	J Huntman (Vice-Chairman)
W Archibald	J Lodge
S Barker	M Maddocks
M Buckley (Vice-Chairman)	M Page
T Cutmore	C Seagers
T Higgins	

Councillor John Spence was present for item 5

The following officers were also present in support of the meeting:

Robert Fox	Scrutiny Officer
Fiona Lancaster	Committee Officer
Nicole Wood	Director for Financial Services (for item 5)
Cathy Cunningham-Elliott	Senior Commissioning Support Officer, Social Services (for item 6)
James Cliff	Project Manager (for item 6)

1. Apologies and Substitution Notices

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors John Aldridge (substituted by Cllr Terry Cutmore), Graham Butland, Jude Deakin (substituted by Cllr Theresa Higgins), John Knapman, Joe Pike (substituted by Cllr Mick Page), and Julie Young.

2. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Theresa Higgins declared a personal interest with Colchester YMCA. Councillor Terry Cutmore was participating in item 6, as Cllr Anne Brown's Deputy Cabinet Member. Councillors Barker, Cutmore, Higgins, Maddocks, Page and Seagers declared an interest as District/Borough Council members. Councillor Buckley declared a personal interest as the owner of a property with a tenant in receipt of housing benefit.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 May 2014 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

In response to a question raised at the last meeting, the Chairman reported that the all-party group which agreed the arrangements for questions from the public had agreed that the item should follow the normal business of Council meetings, with questions from the public to follow Apologies and Substitution Notices, Declarations of Interest and the Minutes of the previous meeting.

There were no other matters arising.

4. Questions from the Public

There were no questions from the public.

5. Review of Capital Programme

The Committee received an update from Councillor John Spence on the work he has been undertaking on the 2014/15 capital programme, and he was joined by Nicole Wood, Director for Financial Services, for this item.

The following areas were highlighted and/or discussed:

- (i) In the past, there had been a capital process rather than a capital programme;
- (ii) The review was undertaken in 2013/14 in light of increasing slippage. There had been a 52% slippage of the total allocation in 2013/14, due to over-optimism of capacity, external dependencies, capabilities, and the need to be challenged;
- (iii) To resolve the slippage issue, officers now need to justify how and when their budgets will be spent, and show the external and internal dependencies;
- (iv) Quarterly reviews have been introduced with a focus on deliverability and capacity, and the July Cabinet Capital Programme report 2014/15 will show the pace of spend. The aggregation process had shown that the spend planned in the second half of the year was prone to slippage;
- (v) A new Highways Design Scheme had been established in 2014;
- (vi) The profiling of trends would continue to be reviewed, and any re-scheduling tightly managed. A Reserve list had been created to allow for slippage and to ensure spending was fulfilled. The Reserve list of projects comprised those which were being developed, but which could not be delivered straightaway;
- (vii) Beyond 2014, the aspiration is to create a long-term capital programme for at least three years;
- (viii) ECC was one of the less-gearred County Councils in the country.

In response to questions/comments, the Committee noted that:

- Cllr Spence would continue to work on the Capital Programme, on behalf of the Leader of the Council.
- Not all Section 106 agreements were included if they had not been fully scoped. All fully defined projects, which included delivery timescales, would be included in the programme.
- More inter-officer challenge was being built into the Capital Programme project management and delivery, and the Transformation Unit would test the strength of that.
- Any bid forces the question for an officer to involve local engagement at the beginning of a project.
- Cllr John Spence offered to attend a future meeting to update the Committee on the challenges in the year ahead, and the likely demand for infrastructure changes.

Following discussion it was agreed that a Task and Finish Group would be set up on the Capital Programme and would start work in the late summer/early autumn. The Chairman reported that Councillors Buckley, Butland and Young (tbc) had expressed an interest to be involved. Any other members who wanted to be involved were asked to contact the Chairman of the Committee.

Councillor John Spence and Nicole Wood were thanked for their attendance and input, and they left the meeting at this point.

6. Welfare Reform

The Committee considered report CSC/15/14 providing a briefing on welfare reform. Cllr Cutmore, deputising as Cllr Anne Brown's Deputy Cabinet Member, was joined by Cathy Cunningham-Elliott, Senior Commissioning Support Officer, Social Services, and James Cliff, Project Manager, for this item.

The following areas were highlighted and/or discussed:

- (i) The Welfare Reform Act 2012 was implemented in April 2013, although some reforms were incremental;
- (ii) A summary of changes since April 2013 included: Housing Benefit, the localisation of Council Tax Benefit and introduction of Council Tax Support schemes across all of Essex, the Introduction of Personal Independence Payment (PIP) as the replacement of Disability Living Allowance (DLA), the Introduction of Universal Credit and the Social Fund Replacement;
- (iii) The PIP and Universal Credit reforms had not yet started in Essex;
- (iv) The estimated loss of income to ECC through care contributions ending in 2013;
- (v) The current activity of the project group set up in November 2012 to raise awareness of the whole range of reforms, to focus on the likely impacts, and to understand the risks to the ECC;
- (vi) The set-up of the Essential Living Fund, in partnership with Southend Borough Council, had proved successful at linking advice to people in need. The project sponsor was Margaret Lee, Executive Director, Corporate Services and Customer Services, and funding of the scheme would continue until April 2015. There were no plans in place on what will happen after then for the most vulnerable residents.

In response to questions/comments, the Committee noted that:

- The Essential Living Fund scheme was set up to feed back into the local community by providing local charities/third party suppliers with an income stream, rather than cash.
- The percentage of furniture and white goods provided was high due to the fact that the majority of white goods were not often donated.
- Training was being provided to front line people on how to understand the new schemes and on how vulnerable residents could apply for assistance.
- The impact of the introduction of Universal Credit was not yet certain, or the level of readiness within the districts to deal with individuals coming into the district from other areas.

- Some vulnerable adults were unable to use online services.
- Applicants for food awards had to complete an in-depth telephone assessment, and if successful, the food banks were sent a referral, by email, from the team based in Southend to provide two weeks of emergency food. The food banks had a stringent list of what food they should provide and checks were undertaken to ensure compliance with these. Recipe cards were now provided to help people make meals from the food given.
- There was an increasing demand for food awards in the short term.

Following discussion, it was agreed that:

- (a) The scenario 'Mr X' would be revised to include a diagram to show the impact on income if he was successful in being awarded PIP. Additional scenarios would be provided to help members understand the impact of changes.
- (b) Further details would be provided on the pricing of white good items and on the break-down of the prices paid for second hand items.
- (c) Cathy Cunningham-Elliott would provide members of the Committee with a brief on EU migrants and benefits.

It was resolved that further scenarios and details would be provided to members related to discussion points (a) and (b); and that members would be provided with a brief on EU migrants and benefits related to point (c).

It was proposed, seconded and agreed that a presentation on Welfare Reform be provided to all members as part of the Member Development Programme. It was agreed that an officer be invited from Rochford District Council as part of the presentation.

Cathy Cunningham-Elliott and James Cliff were thanked for their attendance and input, and they left the meeting at this point.

7. Work Programme and Tracker

The Committee considered and noted a report (CSC/19/14) by the Scrutiny Officer with an update on the planning of the Committee's business and on future meeting dates.

The Committee noted that the Chairman had spoken to the Leader of Council regarding attendance on Scrutiny Committees. It had been agreed that Cabinet members would be encouraged to attend for their portfolio areas, or that the Leader would attend in place of a Cabinet member whenever possible.

8. Date of Next Meeting

The Committee noted that the next meeting would take place on Tuesday 29 July 2014 at 10:00, in Committee Room 1, County Hall.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 15:00.

Chairman
29 July 2014