
**COMMERCIAL & HUMAN RESOURCES
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

24 June 2003
(4.30 – 7.00pm)

PRESENT: Councillors White (Chair), Adigun-Harris, Boyce, Bradnack, Dryden, Ellis-Miller, Howell, Liddle and Stebbings.

ALSO PRESENT (for minute numbers 03/CHR/23 to 03/CHR/32): Councillor Amanda Taylor, Executive Councillor for Commercial and Human Resources

FOR THE INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL

03/CHR/23 **MINUTES**

The minutes of 11 March and 22 May 2003, were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

03/CHR/24 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Downham.

03/CHR/25 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillors Dryden and Stebbings declared personal interests in minute number 03/CHR/30 as their mothers were pensioners.

03/CHR/26 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

No members of the public wished to address the Scrutiny Committee.

03/CHR/27 **GENERAL FUND REVENUE AND CAPITAL FINAL OUTTURN FOR
2002/03 AND BUDGET CARRY FORWARD REQUESTS** (*see also
Record of Decision 03/CHR/13*)

The Accountant introduced the report highlighting that the budget had a net surplus of £250,000. He specified those items which were new since the March report - an overspend of £114,000 on benefits, offset by additional interest on balances and the fact that there had been an underspend on the Grand Arcade project due to the Compulsory Purchase Order not being made in 2002/03. Appendix C showed the requests to carry forward General Fund budgets from 2002/03 into 2003/04.

The Committee noted the increase in income in the CCTV and Markets accounts which had made a significant contribution to the surplus and congratulated the managers involved. The Chair agreed to write a letter to both managers conveying the Committee's appreciation.

In response to questions from Councillor Bradnack, the officers clarified that the

reduced balance in the City Services External Trading account was due to an additional allocation of central costs for salary and National Insurance and that the £41,000 for the Guildhall electricity upgrade had been funded from the CCTV budget because East Cambridgeshire District Council had paid for the equipment for their scheme which had released money for other purposes.

The Committee agreed to the recommendations as stated in the report.

The Executive Councillor agreed to the recommendations.

03/CHR/28 MEDIUM TERM STRATEGY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2004/5 – 2007/8 *(see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/14)*

The Accountant explained that the Medium Term Strategy was the Council's key financial planning document for the 5-year period 2004/5 to 2008/9. It considered the implications of the Medium Term Objectives and priorities which the Council had approved. There was a provision for £500,000 to be used for policy priority provision following public consultation. It included a savings target of 3% and an increase in Council Tax of 4% year on year. The assumptions on which the budget was based were contained in Appendix B and the uncertainties in Appendix D.

Councillor Dryden asked whether the figure in the area of uncertainty to do with Bed & Breakfast Placements (no 31) was appropriate given that he understood that there had been a fall in the need for such placements.

The Committee noted that the policy of the Executive Councillor for Housing & Health to house homeless people in Bed & Breakfast accommodation had an impact on this Committee's budget for Benefit payments.

The Executive Councillor assured the Committee that she had consulted the Executive Councillor for Housing and Health and that measures were under investigation by Community Services and Revenue Services to help contain these costs in future years.

There were no specific views to put to the Leader.

The Executive Councillor agreed.

03/CHR/29 KEY DECISION BEST VALUE FUNDAMENTAL SERVICE REVIEW OF REVENUE SERVICES *(see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/15)*

The Head of Revenue Services introduced the report. He emphasised some of the good points of the service – it was in the top 25% when its performance was compared nationally, there was no backlog of outstanding work and there had been a re-accreditation of the Chartermark Award. He acknowledged that while there had been considerable improvement there was still more to achieve especially in the areas of communication with the public and the need for plain English explanations of regulations.

Councillor Bradnack acknowledged the improvements in the service and that communication with the public was a key area for further improvement. He highlighted the following and asked how the service was addressing these issues:

- Was it possible to bring down the costs of the service – for example the Benefit cost per claimant quoted in Appendix G at £90.33 seemed high?
- The performance on the percentage of overpaid benefit recovery seemed to have fallen considerably over the past 3 years.
- The various leaflets still needed improvement to make them comprehensible to the person in the street.
- For Council Tax collection the most important benchmark was an authority with a similar population such as Oxford.

The Executive Councillor responded to these points acknowledging their validity. She agreed that costs were high, especially overheads, and that more detailed information was needed in order to put measures in place to control them. Publishing understandable written communications was complicated by the constraints the government imposed on the content of letters and leaflets but significant progress had been made over the past year as part of a national project.

The Director of Finance agreed that the most appropriate authorities for comparison should be used. He also drew attention to the Action Plan recommendation to determine the best method of delivering the service. One option was to investigate whether there was a clear case for outsourcing certain service functions as suggested by one of the consultants.

The Executive Councillor said that she would want more information from the consultants before investing in a full options appraisal of outsourcing.

The Committee agreed to the recommendations for the Executive Councillor as stated in the report.

The Executive Councillor agreed to the recommendations with two qualifications - that more measurable targets be set and that more information be obtained from the consultants before taking steps towards outsourcing.

03/CHR/30 **ABOLITION OF BENEFIT PERIODS FOR PENSIONERS** (*see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/16*)

The Head of Revenue Services explained the changes involved. These would be an advantage to pensioners once they became used to the new scheme.

The Committee agreed to the recommendations for the Executive Councillor as stated in the report.

The Executive Councillor agreed to the recommendations.

03/CHR/31 PUBLICATION OF REPORT ON COMPLAINTS HANDLING PERFORMANCE *(see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/17)*

The Senior Strategy Officer said that this was the third year that a report on complaints handling had been published. He highlighted key trends and asked for any comments.

Councillor Ellis-Miller asked whether the complaints described had been received by telephone and via the website as well as by letter or the official complaints form. Councillor Bradnack agreed that this was important as the method of communication could influence what is complained about. The officer said he did not have that information to hand but would investigate.

Councillors also commented on the following:

- a number of areas where there seemed to have been an increase in complaints – this year from stall holders at the Midsummer Fair, in Central Services (Councillor Bradnack)
- it would be useful to have a general description of complaints so that it was possible to distinguish between a few complaints about serious matters and many complaints about less serious issues (Councillor Liddle).
- Clarification of the meaning of the Independent Investigator referring a complaint back to a department (Councillor Adigun-Harris).

The Director of Central Services replied that stall holders had had complaints each year and that the increase in her department was likely to be due to better procedures for receiving complaints. For example, the Corn Exchange was routinely handing out a comment card to members of the public attending events there.

The Senior Strategy Officer explained that the Independent Investigator referred complaints back to departments either to gain further information or to suggest a different approach to handling the complaint.

The Executive Councillor asked that, in future, complaints be analysed in such a way as to highlight trends.

The Committee agreed to the recommendation for the Executive Councillor as stated in the report.

The Executive Councillor agreed to the recommendation.

03/CHR/32 RESULTS OF RECRUITMENT AND WORKFORCE MONITORING FOR 2002/3 *(see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/18)*

The Head of Human Resources presented the report which had also been considered at the Joint Staff Employer Forum. She said that the Forum had recommended that the information be presented in a different format in future years and that the reasons behind the statistics be identified. She then pointed out aspects where there was cause

for concern – the number of women in the top 5% of earners, the fact that one third of the workforce was over the age of 50, that while more people were applying for jobs there were fewer being appointed and that there had been a considerable increase in advertising costs. The policy about early retirement might need to be reconsidered including any cost implications and a fresh approach to advertising using composite adverts was being implemented which should save £1000 per week.

Councillor Ellis-Miller offered her expertise as a recruitment specialist.

Councillors focused on the following:

- Were psychometric tests used for all appointments? Reservations about their use particularly in relation to potential bias of results for those applicants in minority groups (Councillors Ellis-Miller, Liddle).
- Not enough being done to target applicants from minority groups (Councillor Bradnack).
- The rate of turnover of staff was also a cause for concern (Councillor Bradnack).

Councillor Bradnack proposed and Councillor Dryden seconded an amendment to recommendation 2.2 to read “Support the actions identified in Section 11 of the report and to bring forward other proposals to meet targets for recruitment and retention of minority groups”.

The Committee agreed to recommendation 2.1 and to the amended recommendation 2.2.

The Executive Councillor agreed to recommendation 2.1 and to the amended recommendation 2.2.

03/CHR/33 NEW HUMAN RESOURCES/PAYROLL SYSTEM (*see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/19*)

The Chair ruled that under 100B(4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972 the late agenda item from the Head of Human Resources on the Human Resources/Payroll System despatched and placed on deposit on 18 June be considered despite not being made publicly available five clear days prior to the meeting. The reason was that the information was not available before agenda despatch. His view was that, despite only being available at very short notice, the report should be considered by the Committee.

The Head of Human Resources explained that matters were at a critical stage. The suppliers of the software package used in the current system would soon stop providing backup support when there were problems. In addition, the other members of the proposed consortium to jointly purchase a new system, South Cambridgeshire District Council and Fenland District Council, needed to know whether the City Council agreed to go ahead. It was hoped there would be considerable economies of scale if the consortium did a joint procurement.

The Chair said that the Executive Councillor was leaving the meeting at this point as she had a pressing appointment. He indicated that the Executive Councillor was happy to approve the recommendation as it stood.

Councillors asked questions about technical details of the systems under consideration which the Head of Human Resources replied to. She said she had to take into account costs, timescale and the range of functions which each could perform. It would be an advantage if the new system were able to undertake the recording of employment statistics which members now required in the report on Recruitment and Workforce Monitoring.

The Committee agreed to the recommendation for the Executive Councillor as stated in the report.

The Executive Councillor agreed to the recommendation on 26 June 2003.

03/CHR/34 KEY DECISION CCTV – MOBILE CAMERA PROJECT
(see also *Record of Decision 03/CHR/20*)

The Head of Property & Building Services reported that the radio signal survey was underway. The initial feedback was that 85% of the sites surveyed would be able to relay a signal back to the control room at the Guildhall. This was adequate coverage and could be improved by using a few relay aerials.

In response to a question from Councillor Liddle, the Head of Property & Building Services clarified that putting up signs to indicate to the public that CCTV cameras were in use was City Council policy. He also assured Councillor Adigun-Harris that the mobile cameras should be as safe from theft and vandalism as the permanent ones and that so far there had been few problems.

The Committee agreed to the recommendation for the Executive Councillor as stated in the report.

The Executive Councillor agreed to the recommendation on 26 June 2003.

03/CHR/35 INSTALLATION OF AUDIO CONFERENCING EQUIPMENT IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER (see also *Record of Decision 03/CHR/21*)

The Head of Property & Building Services introduced the report. The audio equipment in the Council Chamber was minimal and acoustics were poor. The Disability Discrimination Act also placed a responsibility on the Council to ensure that there were adequate facilities for members of the public attending Council meetings to follow what was going on. This equipment would enable both councillors and officers in the Chamber and members of the public in the gallery to hear the debate including those with a hearing disability. It should also make the Chamber more attractive to potential hirers.

In response to questions and comments from members, the Head of Property & Building Services said he would arrange a demonstration of the preferred system.

The Committee agreed to the recommendation for the Executive Councillor as stated in the report.

The Executive Councillor agreed to the recommendation on 26 June 2003.

03/CHR/36 APPOINTMENTS TO OUTSIDE BODIES *(see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/22)*

The Chair confirmed that the following nominations had been received:
Cambridge United Charities (2 vacancies): Ms Knowles and Councillor Reid
Local Government Information Unit: Councillor C Rosenstiel
East of England Regional Assembly Regional Employers' Pool: Councillor Smart.

There were no other nominations.

The Committee agreed to the recommendations for the Executive Councillor as stated above.

The Executive Councillor agreed to the recommendations on 26 June 2003.

03/CHR/37 KEY DECISION LAND ON THE NORTH SIDE OF KINGS HEDGES ROAD *(see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/23)*

Councillor Bradnack proposed that the matter be discussed in open forum. The Scrutiny Committee agreed and the Chair confirmed that the Executive Councillor had indicated her agreement to this before she left the meeting. He reminded the Committee that no confidential information from the report should be mentioned.

Councillor Bradnack said that it was not sensible to dispose of the sites identified in the report as sites 1 and 2 at a time when there were large strategic issues in relation to the Cambridge Northern Fringe. He also thought that the range of options being proposed at this stage made it impossible to choose the best course of action. He suggested that the matter be deferred.

After discussion, the Committee agreed to recommendations 2.1 and 2.2 but not 2.3 namely to re-affirm that sites 1 and 2 are surplus to the Council's requirements and approve in principle entering into a joint development agreement for the western part of the Cambridge Northern Fringe with the other two landowners, subject to detailed terms being reported to the Scrutiny Committee in due course prior to decision by the Executive Councillor.

The Executive Councillor agreed to the recommendations as stated above on 26 June 2003.

03/CHR/38 EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

Resolved -

To exclude members of the public from the meeting on the grounds that, if they were present, there would be disclosure to them of information defined as exempt from publication by Categories 3 and 7 as defined in the Council's Constitution part 4B (pages 153/4).

03/CHR/39 **KEY DECISION ACQUISITION OF SOUTHLANDS, VICTORIA ROAD**
(see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/24)

The Scrutiny Committee agreed to the recommendation for the Executive Councillor as stated in the report.

The Executive Councillor agreed to the recommendation on 26 June 2003.

The meeting ended at 7.00pm

CHAIR