

FINANCE ADVISORY GROUP

Minutes of the meeting of the Finance Advisory Group held on 15 June 2011 commencing at 9.30 am

Present: Cllr. B Ramsey (Chairman)

Cllr. Mrs A Firth, Cllr. M Fittock, Cllr. J Grint, Cllr. P McGarvey and
Cllr. J Scholey

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

2. NOTES OF MEETING OF THE GROUP HELD ON 23 MARCH 2011

The notes of the meeting of 23 March 2011 were agreed as a correct record.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr McGarvey declared a personal interest in minute No.11 as his wife was a manager for the Primary Care Trust.

4. MATTERS ARISING INCLUDING ACTIONS FROM LAST MEETING

The responses to the actions were noted.

5. DEVELOPMENT SERVICES FINANCE

The Head of Development Services advised that the report provided the Group with trends in finance and related performance in Development Services. It focused on Development Control and Planning Appeals as these were areas noted as needing improvement. To address concerns, a planning partnership had been entered into with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council in late 2008 and there had been a Development Services Review which was agreed by Council in July 2009. Since the Review there had been a number of improvements to the Service including improvements to customer service by way of reductions in the time it took to complete planning applications as measured by National Performance Indicator NI 157.

The Head of Development Services noted that the report analysed progress in terms of NI 157 and Value for Money. The percentage of planning applications determined within 8 to 13 weeks had risen to 92% for major applications and 86% for minor. When compared to the national NI 157 figures, the Council's Development Services were now within the top quartile. Performance against the indicator was also being achieved despite the number of applications having risen. The Council's total net spend on Development Services had also reduced from £2,023,122 in 2008/09 to 1,675,093 in 2010/11.

The Head of Development Services noted the possible implications of the Localism Bill, in particular Neighbourhood Plans and the prospect of being able to set application fees locally. He drew Members' attention to the steps taken to achieve improvements as outlined in the report. He also stated that overall, the Service had managed to improve performance whilst reducing expenditure.

In response to a query, the Head of Development Services explained that a major application was defined as ten or more dwellings, a minor application was one to nine dwellings and 'other' included extensions to properties. He felt that application fees were in proportion to the size of application and the amount of work required by Officers.

It was noted that the prospect of Neighbourhood Plans was not considered to be a significant issue for the Council, unless all parishes within the District were interested in creating one. A Member questioned whether it would be useful for the Council to set a template for Neighbourhood Plans in order to reduce the possible amount of work following implementation of the Localism Bill.

In response to a query, the Development Services Manager explained that the Validation Team had been created following the first stages of the Development Services Review in July 2007. The Team were considered to be very efficient and more cost effective than Planning Officer carrying out their own validation.

Following questions, the Head of Development Services advised that planning training for Parish and Town Council's was undertaken annually. He felt that there were a number of factors that contributed to the improvements in Development Services including Officers receiving almost instant updates on progress against NI 157, better use of technology, the reduction in use of consultants, training, promotion and motivation of staff so that work could be undertaken in-house and the planning partnership.

The Head of Development Services informed Members that the saving in relation to Conservation had been made by training current staff to undertake work following the retirement of two full-time members of staff and assured them that this did not reduce the emphasis on the importance of the service. Members congratulated Development Services on their achievements.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

6. PROVISIONAL OUTTURN 2010/11 AND CARRY FORWARD REQUESTS

The Head of Finance and Human Resources explained that the report set out requests by Heads of Service to carry forward unspent budgets into 2011/12 for Revenue and Asset Maintenance items.

In response to Members queries, the Head of Finance and Human Resources defined valid carry forward requests as those where activities or projects were planned to take place before the end of the financial year but for good reasons were not able to. Members were keen to keep within this definition

when making their recommendations and as such, made the following comments:

Request A1 – Supporting Paralympics Cycling Event

Members did not feel that this item could be classed as a carry forward request. They noted that they were in favour of supporting this event, but wished to recommend that Cabinet request Officers to propose this item as a new project through the normal procedure.

Request A3 – Licensing – Delayed Partnership Expansion

Members requested more information on this item, in particular whether the cost was split between the three Partnership Authorities and what aspects of infrastructure the funds were required for.

Request A4 – Environmental Health – Healthy Eating

Members did not feel this item could be classed as a carry forward request.

Request A6 – Civic Expenses

Members did not feel this item could be classed as a carry forward request. They felt that if the budget for Civic Expenses was inadequate, the issue should be addressed through the normal budget process.

Request A12 – Health and Safety

The Head of Finance and Human Resources explained that this item was due to the Health and Safety Officer post being deleted. There had been a gap between this time and the time it had taken to train staff to undertake this work.

The Group requested that this item be carried forward.

Request A13 – Virtual Agent

Following questions, the Head of Finance and Human Resources explained that this item had been intended to extend the ability for customers to make automatic payments to the Council. The automatic payment agent had been obtained but the process to extend its capabilities had not been completed. The Group requested that this item be carried forward.

Request A15 – Document Management Equipment Maintenance

Members were unsure whether this item had been intended to take place in the previous financial year. They requested Officers provide Cabinet with additional information.

B7 – IT

Members requested Officers provide Cabinet with more information.

C3 – Disabled Facilities Grant

Members requested clarification on the last sentence on page 34 of the agenda.

C4 – IT Development

Members felt there was not enough explanation of the item. They requested Officers provide Cabinet with more information.

Resolved: That it be recommended to Cabinet that the above comments be taken into account when considering the Carry Forward requests for this year.

7. FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE INDICATORS 2010/11 - TO THE END OF MARCH 2011

The Finance Manager advised that the report outlined the Financial Performance Indicators to the end of the 2010/11 financial year. He noted some debts had altered slightly and that there had been some staff changes. In response to a query, the Finance Manager explained that the VAT refund originated from a claim relating to leisure services that the Council had made in the 1980's and 90's.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

8. FINANCIAL RESULTS 2011/12 - TO THE END OF MAY 2011

For the benefit of new Members on the Group, the Finance Manager explained in detail what information was included in the financial results and noted that they were distributed to Members on the 15th of every month.

Members expressed concerns regarding partnership working savings being delayed and noted that the financial aspects of this were due to be discussed at a future meeting of the Group.

In response to concern, the Head of Finance and Human Resources explained that the benefits of the Public Health partnership were not likely to be realised until the next financial year.

The Chairman suggested that relevant Committees might want to monitor and/or review processes related to partnership working. The Head of Finance and Human Resources explained that managers proposing savings from partnership working were required to have alternative plans for achieving their saving if a partnership could not be set up, as it was recognised that achieving savings through partnership working relied on there being a willing partner with which to work. The Chairman stated that partnership working had been highlighted as a way to maintain the quality of services whilst reducing costs. He noted that Cabinet were mindful of the issues associated with partnerships and were monitoring them closely.

Members were concerned about the income figures related to Building Control and it was noted that this item was due to be discussed at their next meeting. The Group discussed the Council's finances in general, how they were monitored by Officers and Members and the difficulties in achieving this year's budget plan given the current economic climate. However, Members were pleased to note the planned appropriation of £722,000 to the Council's reserves.

Resolved: That the Financial Results 2011/12 to the end of May 2011 be noted.

9. **FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE INDICATORS 2011/12 - TO THE END OF MAY 2011**

The Finance Manager noted the reductions in staff since the previous financial year.

Resolved: That the Financial Performance Indicators 2011/12 to the end of May 2011 be noted.

10. **FORWARD PROGRAMME**

The Group discussed the work programme for the coming year and made the following comments:

- The Chairman was concerned with the number of items on the agenda for July 2011 and suggested the Building Control Budget item be moved to October 2011.
- For the benefit of new Members the Head of Finance and Human Resources outlined the process with regard to agreeing the Council's budget and noted that the Budget 2012/13 Risks and Assumptions would be reported to the Group in January 2012 before the Cabinet made its final recommendation on the budget to Council.

11. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

Action 1: The Finance Manager undertook to provide the Group with information on how the Council's level of Council Tax compared to other local authorities.

In response to a Members' query,

Action 2: The Head of Finance and Human Resources undertook to investigate how Section 106 moneys were distributed and accounted for.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 12.11 pm

Chairman