

Runnymede Borough CouncilCORPORATE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE29 June 2004 at 7.30 p.m.

Members of the Committee present: Councillors R.K. Habgood (Chairman), N. Thewlis (Vice-Chairman), A. Alderson, Mrs F.M. Angell, J.R. Furey, P.A. Greenwood, C.J. Norman, P.B. Tuley, and P.J. Waddell

Member of the Committee absent: Councillor Ms C.M. Simmons

(In the temporary absence of the Chairman, Councillor N. Thewlis took the Chair from the start of the meeting up to and including consideration of the item entitled 'Best Value Performance Plan 2004/05')

42. NOTIFICATION OF CHANGES TO COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

The Groups mentioned below had notified the Chief Executive Officer of their wish that the changes listed be made to the membership of the Committee. The changes were for a fixed period ending on the day after the meeting and thereafter the Councillors removed would be re-appointed.

Group Requesting Change	Remove from Membership	Appoint Instead
Conservative	Councillor G.B. Woodger	Councillor Mrs F.M. Angell
Independent	Councillor Mrs L.M. Gillham	Councillor A. Alderson

The Chief Executive Officer had given effect to these requests in accordance with Section 16(2) of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989.

43. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 3 June 2004 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

44. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Ms C.M. Simmons.

45. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following interests were declared under the Runnymede Code of Conduct for Members. Councillors Alderson, Furey and Norman withdrew from the meeting when the respective items were considered.

<u>Councillor</u>	<u>Item</u>	<u>Nature of Interest</u>
A. Alderson	Association for the Improvement of Runnymede - Funding	Personal and prejudicial – Director of AIR
J.R. Furey	Watering of hanging baskets in Addlestone	Personal and prejudicial - Station Road retailer and member of Chamber of Commerce
C.J. Norman	Association for the Improvement of Runnymede - Funding	Personal and prejudicial - Director of AIR.
P.B. Tuley	Offices for the Voluntary Sector	Personal - Council appointee to Runnymede Association for Voluntary Services.

46. PRORITY INDICATORS OF PERFORMANCE – 2003/04 OUTTURN REPORT
(Ref: Minutes of Corporate Management Committee, March 2004, page 1375, para.740)

The Committee received details of the 2003/04 outturn performance in respect of the Council's 10 priority indicators. The overall picture was positive with sustained improvements in performance which compared favourably with the challenging targets the Council had set itself. Members were pleased to note that the new recycling scheme had exceeded expectations, with some 15% of household waste being recycled, against an initial objective of 10%. Efforts were being made to improve this figure still further as the Government continued to increase its recycling targets. It was recognised that the refuse collection arrangements would need to be flexible enough to accommodate new recycling initiatives in the medium term. Other achievements included a 20% reduction in the number of properties which failed to meet the Decent Homes Standard, a reduction in the time taken to re-let void housing stock and an improvement in the proportion of invoices paid within 30 days of receipt. Targets for the collection of Council Tax and Non Domestic Rates had also been surpassed.

Members noted that there remained some areas of underperformance, including the proportion of telephone calls answered and minor planning applications determined within target times. In each case, however, corrective measures had either already been implemented or were in hand.

RESOLVED that –

satisfaction be expressed with the progress and where appropriate, the proposed corrective action in respect of the Council's priority indicators of performance.

47. SERVICE PLAN 2003/04 – OUTTURN PERFORMANCE

Members received details of the outturn performance in respect of the Corporate Management Service Plan for 2003/04. The Plan served as a basis for monitoring and review of the Committee's objectives as drawn from a variety of sources and set out details of timescales, potential barriers and additional resource requirements as well as corrective action where it was required to improve performance. It was noted that pleasing progress had been made across a range of targets and service areas. Notable achievements included the award of an 'Excellent' rating in the Council's Comprehensive Performance Assessment, the continuing development of the Community Strategy, the successful lobbying against the Central Railway proposal and a substantial increase in the usage of the Council's website. A decline in general customer satisfaction ratings, addressed in more detail later in the meeting, reflected national trends and was considered to be attributable more to rising public expectations than any deterioration in standards of specific services.

48. BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE PLAN 2004/05

The Committee gave consideration to the Council's Best Value Performance Plan for 2004/05. It was noted that whereas the Authority had previously been obliged to produce and distribute widely a very detailed Plan, the Council's 'Excellent' rating in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment meant that it was now required only to outline its performance against the Best Value Performance Indicators, set targets against the Indicators for the next three years and confirm that the Code of Practice in respect of work force matters and contracting had been adopted. The Plan would now be circulated electronically with the Leaders Position Statement, saving some £7,500.

Members were pleased to note that the outturn results for 2003/04 contained in the Plan revealed significant improvement across a wide range of service areas. The overall level of performance had been very good and was expected to compare favourably with other Authorities when the Audit Commission published the comparative data. Some concern was, however, expressed in a decline in the number of people satisfied with the standards of cleanliness in the area. It was noted that a review of the street cleansing service was currently being undertaken in order to identify new and more effective working methods. Efforts were also being made to foster partnership working with other agencies, such as Network Rail, to improve the appearance of land and facilities which were outside the Council's control, and to encourage more responsible behaviour on the part of the public. Members emphasised that there was a general

need across service areas for effective liaison with Surrey County Council. To this end, it was agreed that the Local Government Act Member Working Group should examine and report back on mechanisms for the monitoring of those issues raised with the County Council.

RECOMMEND that -

the Best Value Performance Plan for 2004/05, attached at Appendix 'A', be adopted.

49. BEST VALUE GENERAL SATISFACTION SURVEY RESULTS

(Ref: Minutes of Business Management Review Board, March 2001, page 152, para. 769)

The Committee received the initial findings of a general satisfaction survey of local residents, undertaken in the Autumn of 2003 in accordance with the requirements of the Best Value regime.

A total of 2,500 questionnaires, based on a template devised by the Audit Commission, had been sent to a random sample of residents across the borough. The response rate of 38% (961) appeared to indicate a reasonably encouraging degree of public engagement with the Council. High levels of satisfaction had been recorded across a wide range of service areas, most notably waste collection, recycling facilities and parks and open spaces.

Members noted that some of the satisfaction ratings were, however, slightly lower than those recorded in the last such exercise, carried out in 2000/01. On that occasion, 88% of Runnymede residents had expressed their overall satisfaction with the Authority's services, the second highest figure in England and Wales. This had now fallen to around 70%, reflecting a general national trend towards lower levels of satisfaction with local authorities. Research had been commissioned at a national level in order to establish the reasons for the decline. Members felt that it was likely to be attributable more to rising public expectations and the adverse publicity surrounding increases in Council Tax than any actual deterioration in standards of service. Experience elsewhere suggested that reductions in satisfaction ratings were not necessarily accompanied by any corresponding increase in complaints. Runnymede's figures were likely to compare very favourably with those of other authorities when the comparative data was published by the Audit Commission later in the year.

The Committee noted that the survey had revealed a number of apparent inconsistencies in public attitudes and highlighted some misconceptions – crime levels, for example, were perceived to be high whereas they were actually amongst the lowest in the country. It was important to ensure that the results were not skewed by poor communication on the part of the various agencies involved. Nevertheless, the exercise had provided a great deal of important information with regards to residents views. Detailed analysis would be undertaken on a service specific basis over the coming months in order to establish underlying trends. The results would ultimately influence changes in service levels and the standards required from contracted functions.

50. STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2003/04

(Ref: Minutes of Corporate Management Committee, June 2003, page 27, para. 52)

Members received the Statement of Accounts for the 2003/04 financial year, together with an abbreviated schedule of assets. The Statement largely replicated, in the form required by statute and recommended accounting practice, the full accounts presented to the Committee at its meeting on 3 June 2004. Differences with the General Fund summary were the result of the methods the Council had traditionally adopted in setting and managing its budgets and the formal requirements of preparing consolidated final accounts.

The Committee noted that the Code of Practice for Local Authority Accounting had introduced a number of new features to the Statement, most notably in respect of pension fund disclosures and a Statement of Internal Control. The Accounts contained the full set of disclosures required by FRS 17, an accounting standard which set out the principles of accounting for retirement benefits. FRS 17 was based on the principle that an organisation should account for retirement benefits when it was committed to give them, even if the actual giving would be many years in the future. This was intended to ensure that financial statements set out at fair value the assets and liabilities of the organisation relating to retirement.

The FRS 17 provisions did not affect the Council's tax or rent setting decisions. The net charges in respect of pensions to be borne by taxpayers and tenants were still those set by the Surrey pension fund actuary in his triennial review. The actuary's assessment that the annual charge to services in 2003/04, based on FRS 17 principles, was £1,010,000 (compared with an amount actually paid to the fund of £869,000) was therefore for accounting purposes only. Nevertheless, while recognising the limitations of these figures, they did suggest that the Council's current contribution to the fund was likely to increase following the forthcoming formal valuation. The financial forecast had allowed for an additional employers contribution of £100,000 from 2005/06 and this provision would probably be required.

Members noted that the Runnymede element of the Surrey pension fund showed a deficit of £6.6m at 31 March 2004, largely due to the significant falls in stock markets since the previous valuation in April 2001. This represented a considerable improvement on the deficit of £12.2m in 2003, prompted by a partial recovery in the markets. It was recognised, however, that the Accounts, in accordance with the FRS 17 standard, did nothing more than disclose the position of the fund at a fixed point in time, whereas pensions were, by their very nature, long term assets and liabilities.

The Statement of Internal Control, meanwhile, had been broadened in scope to meet the requirements of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003. The Statement now extended beyond financial controls to include all aspects of the conduct of the Council's business and took the form of a review of the effectiveness of the internal control systems. In future years this annual review would be presented to the Standards and Audit Committee prior to the approval of the Accounts. Recently issued guidance required the Statement to be signed by the Chief Executive Officer and the most senior Member of the Council (The Leader).

For the first time, the Accounts were also accompanied by a statement of the Council's contingent liabilities, these being obligations arising from past events whose existence would only be confirmed by the occurrence of one or more uncertain future events. As the liability was not certain to occur it could only be referenced by way of a note to the accounts. A number of the items identified arose from planning appeals where it was possible that costs might be awarded against the Council. Members emphasised that the Planning Committee should not be unduly influenced in its deliberations by the prospects of an award of costs on appeal, and acknowledged that it would, in any case, be difficult to place anything more than an entirely speculative order of costs on each individual application. It was agreed, however, that, in the interests of performance review, there would be merit in the submission of an annual report to the Planning Committee detailing costs awarded against the Council in the previous 12 months.

Members were informed that a full revaluation of the Councils' housing assets, originally scheduled for March 2005, was to be brought forward by 12 months, to a valuation date of 31 March 2004, in view of its significance to the asset base. In the meantime, the 2003/04 valuation had been based on the application of relevant property price indexes to the original April 2000 figures in accordance with agreed methodology.

In approving the accounts prior to 30 June the Council had met the new statutory deadline two years early. It was noted that the advanced production schedule necessary to achieve this, together with the substantially increased number of additional disclosures and explanations required to support the Accounts, had considerably concentrated the workload of the Accountancy section. As the statutory arrangements for the external audit of local authorities accounts had not been aligned with the new timetable, no audit opinion on the accounts would be available until September.

RESOLVED that –

the Statement of Accounts for the financial year 2003/04 be approved and the Chairman sign the Statement as required by regulation 10(3) of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003.

51. POOLEY GREEN LEVEL CROSSING

(Ref: Minutes of Planning Committee, 20 March 2002, page 952, para. 646)

At the request of Councillor A. Alderson, the Committee received a detailed report on the operation of the Pooley Green level crossing following the replacement of automatic half barriers

with full width barriers controlled from a signal box at Feltham through the use of CCTV. The Chairmen of both the Planning and Economic Development Committees had agreed that the matter could be considered at the meeting in order to avoid undue delay.

Members recalled that the new barriers had been installed in August 2002 on safety grounds in order to prevent vehicles from driving onto the crossing without being able to exit the other side. A major incident had been narrowly averted in October 2000 when a train had collided with a bus trapped on the crossing in such circumstances. Whereas the crossing had previously been closed to road traffic for 10 minutes per hour, it had been expected that this figure would increase to 40-45 minutes due to the associated operating and signalling systems. The change had therefore been opposed by the Borough Council, County Council, emergency services and traders and residents associations because of the effect the extra barrier 'down time' would have on traffic, pedestrians and businesses in the Egham area. A Highways Agency study had concluded that the new barriers would be potentially detrimental to the safe and efficient operation of the local trunk road network. As a result of these representations the HM Inspector of Railways had instructed Railtrack (now Network Rail) to raise the barriers automatically rather than manually in order to minimise the periods of closure. Equipment had also been installed to monitor the 'down time' of the barrier and its impact on traffic congestion.

The Committee noted that the barrier 'down time' information had subsequently proved to be difficult to obtain owing to the reorganisation of the management structure of the railways. Figures released from a seven day period in June 2003 indicated, however, that the average 'down time' was between 16.5 and 21.5 minutes per hour. Whilst this was less than anticipated it still represented a considerable increase in the time during which the road was closed to vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Monitoring by the County Council over a 12 day period suggested that the queues which had always occurred at the crossing at peak times had now further increased, albeit by less than predicted in some cases.

The Committee felt that neither the barrier 'down time' or traffic flow surveys could be wholly relied upon to be representative because the data for both was collected over an unsatisfactorily short period of time. Moreover, the County Council's figures appeared to indicate that the traffic queues generally cleared at each opening of the barriers, whereas anecdotal evidence from Members suggested that this was not always the case. Nevertheless, it was clear that drivers and pedestrians were having to wait considerably longer at the crossing than they did before the barriers were changed. This was considered to be adversely affecting the quality of life of residents and the commercial viability of local traders. Some drivers were now thought to be avoiding the Egham area altogether. Firm evidence of the detrimental effect of the barriers on the road network and/or the local economy would, however, need to be assembled if the Order giving effect to the arrangements was to be varied or revoked. This information was not presently available as it was difficult to obtain traders balance sheets and relatively little feedback on the operation of the barrier had been received from those organisations and agencies which had previously made representations.

Members were therefore of the view that the County Council should be asked to undertake a further traffic monitoring exercise over a more extended period than the original, excluding school holidays, and to reserve the right to seek the revocation of the Level Crossing Order. The County Council was also to be asked to remind Network Rail of its obligations under the Order to demonstrate that signallers were being instructed to avoid delays to road users, and to advise the local authorities of any significant increase in the level of train services that might be planned. In the meantime, Officers were to attempt to establish whether Network Rail was complying with the other principal condition attached to the Order, regarding the automatic operation of the barrier. The findings would be reported to Members, at which time a view would be taken on a formal approach to the Local Area Committee. Officers would also seek the views of the various organisations that had originally objected to the proposal, particularly the emergency services in respect of the impact of the barrier on response times.

RESOLVED that –

- i) Surrey County Council be requested, as Transport Authority, to require Network Rail to periodically demonstrate that they are continuing to instruct signallers on minimising delays to road users in accordance with the Level Crossing Order;**

- ii) **Surrey County Council be asked to remind Network Rail that they are required to advise relevant local authorities if there are significant increases to the current levels of train services planned;**
- iii) **the Director of Technical Services be instructed to establish whether Network Rail is complying with the requirements of the Level Crossings Order in respect of the automatic operation of the barrier and report the findings to the Committee with a view to make strong representations to Network Rail if not; and**
- iv) **Surrey County Council be asked to undertake a further traffic monitoring exercise over a period longer than 12 days, excluding school holidays, and to reserve the right to seek the revocation of the Order**

52. MEMBERS' COMPUTER SUPPORT

(Ref: Minutes of Corporate Management Committee, December 2002, page 811, para. 467)

The Committee gave consideration to the future arrangements for Members' IT Support following an 18 month trial with a dedicated in-house post.

The Council offered every Member a desktop computer, a broadband link to their homes (where possible) and a training programme covering all aspects of computer use. A member of staff had been engaged on a fixed term contract in 2003 to support and develop the usage of computers by Councillors. The aims of the scheme were to enable Councillors to benefit from the investment in technology made by the Council, to provide Members with the information and facilities they required to undertake their role most effectively and to meet Government targets for the use of information technology by Councillors. These objectives had now been fulfilled. By the end of the 2003/04 Municipal Year all Councillors had the facilities for electronic communication and the opportunity to attend evening training sessions in the usage of IT.

Members noted that a number of issues had been identified during the trial period. Difficulties had been experienced where Councillors used their own hardware for Council purposes because it blurred the distinction between support for the Council's benefit and support for private usage. Similarly, integrating a Council computer into another network used by a Councillor could be time consuming and expensive. The use of desktop PC's, although cost effective, also posed problems. The unit was bulky, consumed space in the home and could not easily be brought into the Civic Office if a hardware problem arose. Experience elsewhere suggested that the use of lap top computers could present a solution to these issues.

The Committee was of the view that a dedicated support resource was essential. The support needs of Councillors were significantly different from the requirements of staff because they were all remotely based, did not use a standard pc on the Council's local area network, received different training and had different priorities. Research into the arrangements of the other Surrey Districts revealed that most provided support through their IT help desk. This was not, however, considered to be satisfactory since it was restricted to telephone advice, with no provision for supporting Councillors in their homes. There were also prioritisation issues as the failure of a core office system would be classified as more urgent than that of a single PC. A neighbouring authority had externalised its support but it was noted that the contract did not provide for a comprehensive range of services. Runnymede's dedicated post co-ordinating both suppliers and in-house resources appeared to best match Councillors needs. The present arrangements were considered to form the basis for future cost effective delivery of the services.

Members therefore agreed that the fixed term post of Councillor Support Officer should be made permanent. The postholder would combine the existing duties with project management support for the Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) programme. The salary for the project management part of the job was to be on one scale higher than the Councillor support element in order to reflect the more specialist skills required. The IEG role could be funded by Government grant. One third of the present cost of Councillor support provision would therefore no longer fall on the General Fund, effectively saving £10,000 over the 18 month period until the completion of the IEG programme. The job description and the need for a full time post would be reviewed at the end of that period. It was noted that in the longer term there might be the potential for some

form of joint working with neighbouring authorities. Surrey Heath had already been approached with a view to a shared resource. However, as the Authority was undertaking an extensive internal reorganisation, it would not be possible to pursue the negotiations in the near future.

RECOMMEND that –

- i) the post of Councillor Support Officer be made permanent using the job description attached at Appendix 'B';**
- ii) the IEG project management elements of the job be funded from the IEG grant at a cost of £4,000 in 2004/05 and £8,000 in 2005/06; and**
- iii) upon completion of the IEG work at 31 March 2006, the duties of the post be reviewed.**

53. INFORMATION STRATEGY MEMBER WORKING GROUP - MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Information Strategy Member Working Group held on 3 June 2004, attached at Appendix 'C', were received and noted.

54. TELEPHONE SYSTEM – HARDWARE REPLACEMENT

The Committee was informed that the rectifier and battery pack which provided a back-up power supply to the Council's telephone system had both failed and were in urgent need of replacement. It was noted that the provision, installation and testing of a new unit would have to be undertaken by the supplier of the existing equipment, at a cost of £5,654, because of the need for familiarity with the configuration of the system. This necessitated the waiver of the requirements in Contract Standing Orders to seek competitive tenders or quotations.

RESOLVED that –

- i) a replacement rectifier and battery pack be purchased from, and installed and tested by, Nextiraone, the funding of £5,654 to be met from the capital provision for the 2004/05 hardware replacement programme; and**
- ii) Contract Standing Order C2.1 be waived in view of the need to use the supplier of the existing equipment.**

55. ASSOCIATION FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF RUNNYMEDE (AIR) – FUNDING

(Ref: Minutes of Executive Committee, 2 August 2000, page 361, para. 209; and Housing and Community Services Committee, September 2001, page 290, para. 225)

Members considered a request from the Association for the Improvement of Runnymede, a body which sought to attract landfill tax credit funding to local environmental projects, for a repayable advance of £5,000 in order to support its administrative costs pending the receipt of contributions from environmental trusts.

The Committee noted that AIR's administrative expenses were met by a combination of a £5,000 Council grant and contributions from environmental trusts based on a proportion of the cost of each scheme supported. Contributions totalling £12,607 were due from various trusts in 2004/05 but, following delays with the respective projects, the earliest payment was not expected until September. Although AIR had sufficient funds to cover its budget for the first half of the year, any further delays in the completion of the schemes, and therefore receipt of the financial contribution, was liable to precipitate a cash flow problem. Members, mindful of AIR's pivotal role in obtaining funding for local community projects, agreed that the additional assistance should be made available in the event that short term difficulties of this nature were encountered. If a payment proved to be necessary, it could be financed from the provision for Position Statement Initiatives, on the basis that it would be repaid within 12 months.

RESOLVED that –

- i) a payment of up to £5,000 to AIR be authorised, to be refunded when AIR receives funding for environmental schemes from the environmental trusts; and**
- ii) this be funded from the provision for Position Statement Initiatives.**

56. COUNCIL TAX DISCOUNTS FOR PENSIONERS

The Committee gave consideration to a request from a Council Tax Payer in Row Town for the recent 6% increase in Council Tax bills (equivalent to £64.80 on a Band D property) to be reduced to the rate of inflation for Senior Citizens.

Members noted that the Local Government Act 2003 gave billing authorities the power to reduce the Council Tax liability for particular individuals or classes of individuals. No detailed figures were available but it was estimated that approximately 7,000 households in the borough were occupied solely by pensioners. Assuming that their properties were, on average, in Band D, the cost of restricting the increase to 2.8%, the rate of inflation in December 2003, would amount to £243,000 in 2004/05. This entire sum would have to be borne by the Council's General Fund.

The Committee recognised that there were pensioners on fixed incomes who found it difficult to meet above inflationary increases in their bills. Equally, however, many Senior Citizens enjoyed a better standard of living than other members of the community. It was therefore felt that there was no justification for treating pensioners more advantageously than any other class of taxpayer. All households with someone aged 70 or over were to receive a £100 payment from the Government specifically to help with the 2004/05 Council Tax bill and pensioners with low incomes were, in any event, eligible for Council Tax benefit if their savings did not exceed £16,000. Difficulties generally arose when Senior Citizens were unaware of the support available to them. Officers went to considerable lengths to assist pensioners in claiming the benefits to which they were entitled and some 18.5% of the boroughs Senior Citizens were already in receipt of a reduction in their Council Tax bill. It was agreed that further efforts should be made to encourage the take up of benefits amongst the rest of the older population.

RECOMMEND that –

- i) the Council Tax liability of pensioners not be reduced; and**
- ii) efforts be made to encourage pensioners to take up those benefits for which they are eligible.**

57. LOCAL GOVERNMENT PENSION SCHEME – NEW INTERNAL DISPUTE RESOLUTION PROCEDURE

The Committee gave consideration to the appointment of a 'specified person' to be responsible for the internal resolution of disputes in connection with the Local Government Pension Scheme.

The Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment) Regulations 2004 required employers to introduce procedures for the internal determination of pensions appeals by a specific individual. Given the complexity of the scheme and its associated Regulations, Members agreed that the Pensions Manager of the County Council, the administering Authority for the Surrey Scheme, should be authorised to hear such appeals on behalf of the Borough Council. The Committee felt that this would bring a level of consistency and expertise to the process which could not be achieved by individual scheme employers. The Pensions Manager would also be able to hear appeals in respect of discretionary compensation benefits and, in the event that the Secretary of State relinquished responsibility for such matters, injury allowance claims.

RESOLVED that –

the Pensions Manager at Surrey County Council be appointed as a "specified person" for hearing and resolving internal disputes in this

Authority in connection with the Local Government Pension Scheme, the Local Government (Early Termination of Employment) (Discretionary Compensation) (England and Wales) Regulations 2000 and the Local Government (Discretionary Payments) Regulations 1996.

58. MORTGAGE SUBSIDY SCHEME

(Ref: Minutes of Corporate Management Committee, November 2003, page 923, para. 439)

The Committee gave consideration to the introduction of a Mortgage Subsidy Scheme as part of the staff recruitment incentive package.

Members noted that the high cost of housing in the local area continued to deter many potential job applicants from other parts of the country. Recruitment was consequently largely limited to applicants who already lived within commuting distance of the borough. Although the Council's rental equalisation scheme had proved to be popular with new recruits moving into leased accommodation, few staff had taken advantage of the longstanding equity share scheme in which they could purchase part of a property in conjunction with the Council. The prospect of being only a part owner of a property was not attractive to applicants who were already in the housing market. The meeting of the Committee in November 2003 had therefore instructed Officers to investigate the possible replacement of the staff equity share scheme with a simple mortgage subsidy arrangement.

The draft scheme now presented to the Committee provided for a mortgage subsidy to be paid on a gradually reducing basis over a period of up to four years. Staff in receipt of such assistance would be required to reimburse the payments if they left the Council's service during the course of the agreement. Mindful of the experience in other Surrey authorities, Members felt that the scheme would increase the availability of suitable applicants for vacant posts. This would be particularly useful in areas of skills shortages where there were only a limited number of potential candidates. Officers were, however, asked to review the wording of the scheme to ensure that assistance was provided on the basis of the cost of a move to a comparable property. The Runnymede branch of UNISON welcomed the initiative, but was of the opinion that its value would be limited if the benefits were not extended to existing staff.

The cost of the scheme to the Council would be dependent upon demand but, at current mortgage interest rates, was expected to amount to between £6,500 and £17,500 over a typical four year agreement. This expenditure would be partly off-set by reduced costs of re-advertisements and greater effectiveness arising from higher quality appointments. An update on take-up and costs would be provided to Members in each Annual Personnel Report. The operation of the scheme would be reviewed if any of the Council's staff became eligible for the Government's key worker accommodation programmes.

RESOLVED that –

- i) the Mortgage Subsidy Scheme detailed at Appendix 'D' be introduced subject to a review of the wording of paragraph 4 to ensure that assistance is on the basis of the cost of comparable properties; and**
- ii) a report on usage and costs of the Scheme, and the requirement for any supplementary budgetary provision, be submitted on an annual basis in the Annual Personnel Report.**

59. PERSONNEL SERVICES MEMBER WORKING GROUP – MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Personnel Services Member Working Group held on 25 May 2004, attached at Appendix 'E', were received and noted.

60. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT MEMBER WORKING GROUP – MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Local Government Act Member Working Group held on 5 May 2004, attached at Appendix 'F', were received and noted.

61. HANGING BASKETS IN ADDLESTONE - WATERING OF
(Ref: Minutes of Corporate Management Committee, June 2003, page 23, para. 47)

Members gave consideration to a request from the Addlestone Chamber of Commerce for assistance with the cost of watering hanging baskets. The Chairman of the Economic Development Committee had consented to the matter being determined without prior reference to that Committee in order that the request be determined as early in the summer season as possible.

The Committee noted that the Chamber of Commerce provided small moss lined hanging baskets, placed at first floor level above shop units throughout Addlestone. The display supplemented the floral troughs and bedding supplied by the Council. Unlike those elsewhere in the borough, the baskets did not incorporate a water reservoir and were therefore expensive to maintain, requiring watering at least once, and sometimes twice, a day. Parks Officers had advised against their use. The Council had met the costs of watering in 2003 by way of a supplementary estimate. This support had been supplied in the expectation that the Chamber would devise some form of alternative arrangements in future years which did not rely on public funding. It had been suggested at the time that the Chamber might consider combining its floral displays with those of the Council to avoid the need for two separate planting and maintenance regimes.

Members noted, however, that the Chamber had not subsequently approached the Council with a view either to a combined display or the provision of more appropriate baskets in 2004. The Committee, mindful also of the programme of net revenue reductions and the precedent that might be set in respect of the funding of similar initiatives elsewhere in the borough, therefore agreed that the request should be declined. It was emphasised once more that a joint working arrangement between the Chamber and the Council would be the best means of maintaining and enhancing the respective displays in future years.

RESOLVED that –

the request from the Addlestone Chamber of Commerce for financial assistance with the cost of watering its hanging basket floral displays be refused.

62. OFFICES FOR THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR – APPLICATION TO THE FUTURE BUILDERS FUND

By resolution of the Committee, the press and public were excluded from the meeting during the consideration of this matter under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that the discussions would be likely to involve the disclosure of exempt information of the description specified in paragraph 7 of Schedule 12A to Part 1 of the Act.

The Committee received details of a proposed bid by a consortium of community groups for funding to provide purpose built offices for the use of local voluntary organisations. The matter would normally have been dealt with by the Housing and Community Services Committee but its Chairman had agreed to the consideration of the report at this meeting in order to help promote an early application.

Members noted that many of the voluntary organisations in Runnymede, including the CAB, Age Concern and the Runnymede Association of Voluntary Services, were located in premises that were either inadequate for their needs or only of a temporary nature. This restricted both the provision of services and the ability to attract and retain volunteers. However, the Government's new Future Builders Fund had a total of £125m available to invest in approximately 250 voluntary and community organisations operating in the fields of health and social care, crime reduction, community cohesion, education and learning and support for children and young people. The funds objectives were to overcome obstacles to efficient voluntary and community sector delivery, to modernise service delivery organisation for the long term and to increase the scale and scope of voluntary community sector delivery. Assistance in the form of grants, loans and guarantees of between £30,000 and £10m would be provided for the purchase of physical assets, intangible assets (such as research) and development funding. No project would receive

all its support by way of a grant and applicants were expected to have raised a proportion of the scheme costs themselves.

The Runnymede voluntary sector intended to bid to the fund for assistance with the cost of providing a dedicated office facility which could be shared by local groups. In welcoming the application, Members noted that a successful outcome could lead to a major improvement in the delivery of local voluntary services. New premises would potentially provide organisations with larger and more flexible accommodation to allow for the development of their services, as well as greater security of tenure. The clustering of voluntary services in one location would also offer the opportunity to share administrative and IT support, improve communication and information sharing and enhance the support to lone outreach workers occupying the building. A central town location with Disability Discrimination Act compliant offices would improve accessibility and the co-location of all the key advice giving organisations would effectively create a one-stop shop facility for residents.

The Committee noted that a property in Chertsey had been identified which might be suitable for the project. The funding requirements were not yet known although it was anticipated that rental income from an existing tenant would help finance any loan element that may be forthcoming. No financial contribution was required from the Council at this stage. However, as the Council already supported the accommodation requirements of many of the local voluntary organisations, either directly or indirectly, it was possible that the release of those resources would enable some form of financial support to be granted from within existing provision. A business case was being prepared by the voluntary organisations and would be presented to the Housing and Community Services Committee before any commitment to purchase. As the intention was to submit the application early in the first funding round in order to maximise the chances of success, it was, however, possible that there might not be time to report the detail of the bid and the Business Plan to Committee beforehand. In order to avoid delay, the Director of Housing and Community Services was authorised to approve the business case and confirm the support of the Council for the proposal in consultation with the Director of Finance and the Chairman. Members recognised that the bid process would be resource intensive both for the voluntary sector and Council Officers, with no guarantee of a successful outcome. The Committee cautioned against the development of unrealistic expectations on the part of the local voluntary community.

RESOLVED that –

- i) the Council support in principle the bid by Runnymede voluntary organisations to the Future Builders Fund for office accommodation;**
- ii) a further report be submitted to the Housing and Community Services Committee with the detailed business case and financial implications; and**
- iii) in the event that it is not possible to present the bid to the Committee for consideration prior to its submission to the Future Builders Fund, the Director of Housing and Community Services be authorised to approve the Business Plan and confirm the support of the Council, in consultation with the Director of Finance and the Chairman of the Committee.**

63. SICK PAY – MEMBER OF STAFF

By resolution of the Committee, the press and public were excluded from the meeting during the consideration of this matter under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that the discussions would be likely to involve the disclosure of exempt information of the description specified in paragraph 1 of Schedule 12A to Part 1 of the Act.

The Committee considered extending the period of entitlement to full sick pay for a long serving Officer who would otherwise be due to drop to half pay following a prolonged illness and noted the special circumstances of the case. Members agreed that the circumstances warranted the

exceptional exercise of the Council's discretion to continue the full pay for such time as the Officer remained on sick leave until his retirement later in the year.

RESOLVED that –

the Council extends the period of entitlement to full sick pay for the Officer in question for so much of the time as he remains unwell until his retirement.

64. NON DOMESTIC RATES – APPLICATION FOR HARDSHIP RELIEF

By resolution of the Committee, the press and public were excluded from the meeting during the consideration of this matter under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that the discussions would be likely to involve the disclosure of exempt information of the description specified in paragraphs 5 and 7 of Schedule 12A to Part 1 of the Act.

The Committee considered an application from a trader in Addlestone for the remission of payment of National Non Domestic Rates on the grounds of financial hardship. Having regard for the facts of the case, Members were of the view that it would be inappropriate to grant relief.

RESOLVED that –

the application for rate relief on the grounds of hardship be refused.

65. WRITE OFFS

By resolution of the Committee, the press and public were excluded from the meeting during the consideration of this matter under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that the discussion would be likely to involve the disclosure of exempt information of the description specified in paragraph 7 of Schedule 12A to Part 1 of the Act.

The Committee agreed that a number of debts should be written off as irrecoverable.

RESOLVED that -

- i) the Council Tax arrears, totalling £3,951.47, be written off as irrecoverable; and**
- ii) the non-domestic rate arrears, totalling £1,932.60, be written off as irrecoverable.**

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 10.26 p.m.)