

Runnymede Borough Council

BUSINESS REVIEW BOARD

10 October 2001 at 7.30 p.m.

Members of the Review Board Present: Councillors G.J. Thomas (Vice Chairman), J.E. Haas, F.J. Tourlmain and Mr B C Stacey (Co-opted Member)

Members of the Review Board absent: Councillors H.W.V. Meares and P.J. Waddell

Councillors P.J. Poole and G.B. Woodger also attended.

(Councillor Thomas in the Chair)

298. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 11 July 2001 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

299. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from the Chairman, Councillor P.J. Waddell.

300. LEADER'S STATEMENT - POSITION PAPER 2001/2002

The Review Board was advised that under the new structure, it would receive the Leader's Statement in order to comment upon it, and contribute towards policy development. The Statement had received preliminary consideration at the Corporate Management Committee on 4 October 2001, and had been approved subject to any comments the two Review Boards would wish to make.

The Review Board approved the Statement, but wished to make the following observations:-

Corporate Management Committee - Item 1 - Lowest Taxing District Authority in Surrey
Members recognised that the Council Tax would be increased during the years to come, but that it should still be possible to maintain the lowest in the County since the other 10 District Councils already charged a much higher band D figure than Runnymede. In addition, it was anticipated that these Councils would also have to increase their Council Tax levels in the years ahead. If this did not prove to be the case, then obviously this statement would be re-examined.

Corporate Management Committee - Item 2 - Increase Savings Through Net Reduction in Expenditure

It was recognised that the Council had already saved almost £300,000 as part of the savings package approved last year and would continue to work towards its target over the next 18 months. It was anticipated that the programme of reductions totalling £800,000 would be implemented within target.

Economic Development Committee - Item 13 - Barrsbrook Farm Site

The Board considered that a possible use of this site would be to develop a small amount of key worker housing (possibly 10 small houses) which would assist the local economy. The Board hoped the Council would maintain the agricultural use by leasing the land for grazing or hay production, but recognised that the Council would need to find a tenant or partner who would maintain the land and work to improve it.

RESOLVED that -

the recommendations of the Corporate Management Committee be supported as follows :-

- i) the Position Paper for 2001/2002 be approved as Council policy;**
- ii) the contents of the paper be reflected in the Best Value Performance Plan for 2002/03 and**
- iii) Officers be instructed to take the Position Paper into account in developing service targets.**

301. REVENUE FORECAST AND TARGET BUDGET

The Board considered the revenue forecast covering the period up to the 2004/05 financial year and the target budget for 2002/03.

The Review Board noted that the Council had agreed policies which would enable it to maintain present Council Tax levels until 2003/04. However, the Council's spending aspirations would require large withdrawals of balances and a large Council Tax increase would then be required in 2004/05 when the diminished balances would no longer be sufficient to support the present tax level. Furthermore, levels of Government grant were unlikely to increase. The implications of the forecast in its present form were continued high spending on services, large withdrawals from balances to support current tax levels until 2004/05, followed by significant increases in Council Tax when revenue reserves had been exhausted. The Corporate Management Committee had therefore considered whether it was content with this position or whether it wished to examine an alternative strategy. The following three alternatives had been considered by that Committee;

- i) limiting the increase in the Council Tax to inflation for as long as possible;
- ii) a stepped increase in Council Tax;
- iii) a sustained reduction in net expenditure plus a stepped increase in Council Tax.

The Corporate Management Committee had decided that it wished to recommend the third of these alternatives.

The Review Board concurred with the strategy of adopting the third option outlined above which would entail a gradual increase in Council Tax and the use of a significant amount of reserves, and assumed a reduction in net expenditure of £1 million by 2004/05. The Board noted that increasing the Council Tax by more than an amount which the Government considered reasonable could attract penalties through benefit subsidy limitation. It was recognised that the Board, as part of its scrutiny role, would explore ways of achieving greater net savings over this period in an attempt to avoid using up reserves at the rate currently forecasted and to seek to avoid a large increase in Council Tax in 2006/07. It was agreed that the Board would need to set the political framework and identify and ring-fence those service areas where reductions would not be acceptable on the basis that they formed a statutory requirement or were considered to be of great value to the residents. The second step would be to list those services where acceptable savings might be made e.g. those which were both the least utilised and those which incurred the largest amounts of expenditure.

RESOLVED that -

the recommendations of the Corporate Management Committee be supported as follows:-

- i) the preferred strategy be a sustained reduction in net expenditure plus a stepped increase in Council Tax;**
- ii) the revenue forecast for the three year period to 2004/05 be approved; and**

iii) the forecast form the basis for drawing up detailed service budgets for 2002/03.

302. FUNCTIONS AND WORK PROGRAMME OF THE BOARD

In the absence of the Chairman, the Vice-Chairman updated the Review Board on the current position. It had been agreed at the last meeting to undertake a review of local Policing, and several useful meetings had been held between some of the Members, the Officers (including Safer Runnymede) and the Police. The atmosphere had been constructive and cordial, and it was anticipated that once the research phase had been completed, the data collected would be studied and evaluated. When this study phase had been completed, questions would be prepared in order to proceed to the scrutiny stage, where the Police would be invited to attend a meeting and answer specific questions put to them by the Board. At the same time, the Board wished to undertake further citizen research, to obtain the views of the local population on the service the Police currently provided. Once these investigations and the scrutiny phase had been completed, it was proposed to prepare a final report for consideration by the full Council.

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 9.30 p.m.)