

Runnymede Borough CouncilREVIEW BOARD9 October 2003 at 7.30 p.m.

Members of the Board present: Councillors P.J. Poole (Chairman), D.P. Easton (Vice-Chairman), A. Alderson, Mrs P.I. Broadhead, Ms. D.V. Clarke, P.A. Greenwood, A.P. Tollett and P.B. Tuley.

Members of the Board absent: Councillor J.E. Haas

Councillors J.R. Furey and G.B. Woodger also attended.

385. NOTIFICATION OF CHANGES TO BOARD MEMBERSHIP

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

<u>Remove From Membership</u>	<u>Appoint Instead</u>
Councillor J. Broadhead	Councillor Mrs P. I. Broadhead
Councillor Mrs V.A. Smallman	Councillor A.P. Tollett

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

386. MINUTES

The Minutes of the Board meeting held on 2 September 2003 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

In connection with the Minutes, it was noted that Dunelm Soft Furnishings had now decided not to occupy the former Safeway site from October. Any further developments would be reported to the Economic Development Committee.

387. LEADER'S POSITION STATEMENT

The Board received the draft Leader's Position Statement. The Board agreed with the proposed amendments and additions to the document made by the Corporate Management Committee at its meeting on 2 October, attached at Appendix 'A', apart from

- i) the suggestion that Strategic Objectives on page 7 should include maintenance of current objectives as well as striving for further improvement, as the Board considered the five Strategic Objectives were appropriate as currently drafted;
- ii) page 15, paragraph 3.1.4.1 – although the item in italics should state that it is the Government's definition of key workers, "fire staff" should be deleted, as it does not form part of the Government's definition; and
- iii) the item to be added regarding Airtrack should state that Council support would be conditional on infrastructure improvements, including changes to the Borough's level crossings.

The Board also made the following additional suggestions on the Statement:-

- i) Page 2 - Delete "Politically" from the last line.
- ii) Page 5, First paragraph – Progress with recycling in the last 12 months should be added.
- iii) Page 5 – Although the graphs showed that Runnymede had the lowest Council Tax and the highest spend per capita, the text should state this as well.
- iv) Page 7 – Aim 1 – second line – delete "to" and substitute with "we".
- v) Page 8 – The print on the graph was not very clear. This might be rectified by removing the shading.
- vi) Page 14, paragraph 3.1.1.3 – Add "working with outside agencies", after the word "by".
- vii) Page 19 – Heading of paragraph 4.4 needed to be changed as the text did not relate to economic prosperity.

The Board also considered some suggested additions from the Director of Finance and put forward the following proposed extra items for consideration by the Leader:-

HOUSING & COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Key Roles

- (iv) **To provide an efficient, effective and secure service that helps Runnymede residents statutorily entitled to benefits to maintain payment of their rents and/or council tax.**

3.3 Benefits

3.3.1 Achieve Quality Services

- 3.3.1.1 We will aim to provide effective and secure Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit services that are recipient-focussed, confidential and efficient.

3.3.2 Achieve value for money

- 3.3.2.1 We will endeavour to process all benefits claims speedily and to ensure that all recipients receive their correct benefit entitlement.
- 3.3.2.2 We will aim to reduce the level of fraud and error.
- 3.3.2.3 We will seek to recover overpayments of benefits effectively with due regard to how they arose, the circumstances of the recipients affected and the policies of the Council.

3.3.3 Improve the Quality of Life

- 3.3.3.1 The benefits service will play an important role in helping people secure their benefit entitlement.

3.3.4 Achieve Economic Prosperity

- 3.3.4.1 Through the recipients' access to Benefits we will help people entitled to Benefits to achieve social inclusion by alleviating poverty, preventing homelessness and reducing barriers to work.

3.3.5 Continuously Improve

- 3.3.5.1 We will seek to maintain the upper quartile position now achieved in the national performance standards for the administration of Benefits.

388. FINANCIAL FORECAST

The Board considered the Financial Forecast covering the period up to the 2008/09 financial year and the target budget for 2004/05 and noted an estimated breakdown of the 2003/04 budget between statutory and discretionary spending.

The Board noted that at its meeting on 2 October 2003, the Corporate Management Committee had recommended that the strategy summarised at Appendix 'B' be pursued, that the Financial Forecast for the five-year period to 2008/09 be approved, that savings be made in the General Fund budget with effect from the 2004/05 financial year as set out in Appendix 'C', that further savings of £155,000 be made in the General Fund to offset the cost of new initiatives and that the Forecast form the basis for drawing up detailed service budgets for 2004/05. The Board supported these recommendations.

The Forecast was in a similar format to last year and contained an overview of the current financial year. Members who wished to look more closely at items of detail were advised to consult the Budget Book, which included estimated costs associated with Comprehensive Performance Assessment, Best Value and the Community Strategy, as well as other initiatives that the Council had been required to progress over the last few years. The Board noted that Runnymede had the lowest level of Council Tax and the highest level of per capita spending, amongst Surrey districts. Council Tax would have to pay for an increasing share of the Council's expenditure over the period covered by the Forecast. Investment income and levels of reserves were forecast to reduce by 2009. The Local Government Bill required the cost of Rent Rebates awarded to Council House tenants to be transferred from the Housing Revenue Account to the General Fund with effect from 1 April 2004. This would add £5.4 million to General Fund expenditure. The Government had not yet announced how it proposed to fund this. The indications were that, at least for the first year, the Government would pay a 100% subsidy to offset this expenditure. No cost implications had therefore been factored into the Forecast. The concern was that at some stage rent rebates would be treated in the same way as Government support for Rent Allowances, with 95% paid as a direct subsidy and 5% added to the Council's Formula Grant. If this happened, there could be a net cost to the General Fund if Formula Grant did not keep pace with rent rebates, and this had been built in to the risk analysis on page 14 of the Forecast. Representations had been made on this when the Bill had passed through Parliament.

Although general inflation in the UK was now at historically low levels, it still had a significant cumulative impact on the cost of services. The Council's savings targets were substantial, and the draft legislation currently being debated in Parliament would require the Council to invest in additional resources, for which compensatory savings would need to be found.

The Forecast Housing Revenue Account had been set out in a way which was consistent with the Housing Business Plan and Housing Strategy. The capital programme delivery depended on the use of capital receipts and was large for an authority of Runnymede's size. The summary position on the General Fund and the Forecast revenue reserves and capital receipts were noted.

The Board noted that £50,000 per annum had been allocated to potential net costs of decriminalised parking, whereby district councils would take over administration of on street parking. The latest developments on this matter indicated that Surrey County Council may fund all expenditure on this for the first two years, as a minimum requirement to launch the scheme. A further report and presentation on this matter would be made to the Council's Economic Development Committee.

389. PROGRESS ON NET REVENUE REDUCTION TARGETS

The Board considered the Council's progress in achieving its net revenue reduction targets as set out on page 14 of the Financial Forecast. In 2004/05, £650,000 of savings had been found which amounted to £350,000 less than the £1 million target. £155,000 of additional savings were also needed to compensate for new initiatives required by the Government. These targets meant that difficult decisions would have to be made.

The Board discussed how further net reductions could be achieved. It was suggested that there may not be much scope for efficiency savings and that service reductions in discretionary spend may be appropriate, perhaps through combining existing services, e.g. it may be possible to combine Health Centre, Community Centre and Day Centre functions in the same building in some cases. Discretionary spending accounted for 48% of total spend – a large proportion. Reducing the discretionary spend would, however, impact particularly upon the elderly. Statutory spending could

be curtailed, but could not be dispensed with altogether. There was a possibility that the Government might introduce capping of Council Tax in the future and people on fixed incomes in particular may find increases in Council Tax difficult to pay.

Other potential courses of action to make up the shortfall included disposing of more capital assets, or increasing the Council's various charges, and it was noted that parking charges had already been increased. The Board suggested that the possibility of further hiring out of buildings in the evenings should be explored. This already formed part of Council policy as the draft Leader's Position Statement at paragraph 3.4.2.2 of the Housing and Community Services section stated that at the Day Centres, the Council would try to reduce net costs by increasing usage for other revenue generating activities at times of low demand. Another area that might be looked at was decreasing the levels of various provisions made in the budget. The Board agreed that the timing and need for the Civic Offices reprovision should be re-assessed in view of its significant impact on the Financial Forecast. The Board recommended that a Task Group be set up to consider possible further net reductions.

RESOLVED that -

the Corporate Management Committee be requested to set up a Task Group under the direction of the Leader of the Council to look at ways of achieving savings and in particular

(a) to consider whether:-

- i) some existing services can be combined;**
- ii) discretionary spending can be reduced and, if so, in what areas of spend;**
- iii) spending on statutory services can be reduced, and, if so, in what areas of spend; and**

(b) to review the provision of the new Civic Offices and to consider whether any savings can be made on this project.

390. PROGRESS REPORT ON ENFORCEMENT OF PLANNING CONTROL

The Board noted the progress report on enforcement of planning control as at 26 September 2003. Enforcement action was a discretionary function which had always been given a high priority in Runnymede and a full complement of staff was now in place in Technical Services to deal with cases. When compared to the amount of complaints which the Council received, the list of sites in which enforcement action had been taken was not particularly extensive. The Committee discussed the following cases in particular:-

85 Woodham Park Road, Woodham - The site was likely to be vacated shortly as another building was being erected in Woking.

Crockford Bridge Farm, Addlestone - Discussions were continuing regarding a pergola and a water system, in an attempt to reach a satisfactory conclusion.

52 Abbey Road, Chertsey - This property had been the subject of a wasteland notice which was an area of legislation which was utilised where properties were particularly untidy and were visible to the general public. The Council was likely to be successful in this case at the Magistrates Court.

Thorpe Water Ski, Chertsey - Enforcement action had been necessary against Thorpe Water Ski, because the company had not responded to Council concerns.

The Board noted that a recent feature had been late withdrawals (less than 4 weeks from start of public inquiries) of grounds of appeal in respect of enforcement appeals. There had been three of these, for which the Council was applying for costs. Having lost only three planning appeal cases dealt with by public inquiry in the last fifteen years the Council had recently lost two cases in quick

succession. The Council also had a successful record in its High Court applications and injunctions. The budget for enforcement proceedings, including the use of Counsel, amounted to £30,000 a year. Members had to be mindful that the Planning Code of Conduct stated that if there were no planning grounds to defend in refusing planning applications, then substantial costs could be awarded against the Council.

It was agreed that a Member be informed whether the owners of 130 Warwick Avenue, Egham had complied with an enforcement notice requiring the removal of a wall and another Member be informed about the Council's intentions regarding a property in Station Road, Addlestone, near to the level crossing.

391. REVIEW BOARD WORK PROGRAMME - REMAINING ITEMS

The Board noted the following work programme for the rest of this Municipal Year and early cycles in 2004/05:

5 year financial forecast 2004/05 to 2008/09
Leader's Position Statement
Progress on Net Revenue Reduction Targets
Rail Transport in the borough (particular regard to stations as gateways)
Benefit Fraud
Annual Personnel Report 2003
Anti-social behaviour
Parks and Open Spaces

The first three items were being considered elsewhere on the Agenda. It was agreed that Benefit Fraud should be looked at after the Best Value review process in this area had been concluded. It was also suggested that the Council's Communications Strategy should be discussed at a future Board meeting.

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 10.20 p.m.)