

Runnymede Borough CouncilSERVICES REVIEW BOARD11 October 2001 at 7.30 p.m.

Members of the Review Board present : Councillors P. J. Poole (Chairman), Mrs.L.M. Gillham, J.E. Haas, Mrs.C.Y. Jones, and E.C. Pattington

Members of the Review Board absent: None

Councillors K.J. Clark, C.J. Norman and G.B. Woodger also attended.

303. NOTIFICATION OF CHANGES TO COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

The Conservative Group had notified the Chief Executive Officer of their wish that the changes listed below be made to the membership of the Board for a fixed period ending on the day after the meeting and that thereafter the Councillors removed should be reappointed.

<u>Group Requesting Change</u>	<u>Remove from Membership</u>	<u>Appoint Instead</u>
Conservative	Councillor P.B. Tuley	Councillor Mrs.C.Y. Jones
Conservative	Councillor K.J.T. Walmsley	Councillor J.E. Haas

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

304. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meetings held on 12 and 26 July 2001 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

305. LEADER'S STATEMENT - POSITION PAPER 2001/02

The Board considered the Leader's Statement - Position Paper 2001/02 and concurred with the recommendations of the Corporate Management Committee of 4 October 2001.

The Board also made the following observations:-

i) Housing Priority 14 - Partial Redevelopment of Roakes Avenue and Wapshott Road Estates

It was noted that a regular dialogue was maintained with residents on this issue.

ii) Housing Priority 16 - Community Transport

Residents groups had been notified by the Council's Community Services section of the existence of the Peterbus which was run by St. Peter's Hospital.

iii) Leisure and Environment Committee - Priority 6 - Traveller Incursions

It was noted that it would not be consistent with the Council's obligations in dealing with the social, educational and welfare needs of travellers for the phrase "the Council will aim for zero tolerance in conjunction with Surrey Police" to be included within this priority. It was therefore agreed that the existing wording of the priority was appropriate.

Furthermore, with regard to the Leisure and Environment Committee priorities, the Board highlighted the importance of closed circuit television (CCTV) coverage and also noted that a Cultural Strategy was being prepared, as required by the Government.

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.**

306. 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 Corporate Management Committee at its meeting on 4 October 2001 had noted that the financial challenges facing the Council in this year's forecast were similar to last year, which had shown that the Council's low tax policy would only be able to survive until 2004/05 through making large withdrawals from balances. Since then the Council had adopted three courses of action in order to increase its financial flexibility:-

- i) boosting the level of General Fund balances by increasing the discretionary transfer from the Housing Revenue Account in 2000/01 and capitalising special housing works, effectively turning capital receipts into revenue reserves;
- ii) initiating a programme of revenue savings that were forecast to reduce General Fund expenditure by £966,000 by 2003/04; and
- iii) increasing the Council Tax from £28.26 to £49.95.

The position revealed by this year's forecast showed that these measures could enable the Council to maintain present tax levels until 2003/04. However, it still showed that the Council's spending aspirations would require large withdrawals of balances and a large tax increase would be required by 2004/05 when balances would no longer be available 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, and 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 Committee had therefore considered whether it was content with this position or whether it wished to examine an alternative strategy. Three alternatives were summarised in the forecast which considered the implications of:-

- 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 Committee had decided that it wished to recommend the third of these alternatives.

The 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. While this would be undesirable, the Board did not consider these to be prohibitive. Members of the Board would be discussing with Officers ways of achieving the net savings over this period in an attempt to avoid using up reserves at the rate currently forecasted and to seek to obviate the need to levy such a large increase in Council Tax in 2006/07. It was suggested that the way in which this exercise might be conducted would

be firstly for Members to decide upon those service areas where reductions could not be made. The second step would be to identify those services which were both the least utilised and also incurred the largest amounts of expenditure in a priority order to allow rationalisations to be considered. Ways of generating extra income would also be an important area of scrutiny. It was agreed that these issues should be explored by way of informal meetings between Members and Officers.

With reference to the Environmental Services revenue account forecast summary, the Board discussed recycling. No assumption had been made that the bid to Association for the Improvement of Runnymede (AIR) for income for kerbside recycling would be successful. The first interim recycling target which the Council aimed to achieve was an 18% target for paper. The Council was also seeking recovery of costs from the County Council as a result of increased expenditure incurred through being required by the County Council to use the Charlton Lane, Shepperton waste tip. The Council had also been handicapped by the unwillingness of UK manufacturers to find effective usages for recycled materials. Consideration of any expansion of the Safer Runnymede Centre premises would have to be delayed until the issue of potential alternative Civic Offices provision for the Council had been resolved.

With reference to the Highways and Infrastructure revenue account forecast summary, the total for Borough Highways functions showed an increase from a £398,000 probable outturn for 2001/02 to a forecast of £670,000 for 2002/03. The Board were informed that this was because net expenditure on Highways Agency activities had been transferred to the Borough Highways budget after the agency agreement terminated on 31 March 2002. From this expenditure had been deducted the savings approved by the Executive Committee on 16 May 2001 and the Corporate Management Committee on 4 October 2001.

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.**

307. ENFORCEMENT OF PLANNING CONTROL - PROGRESS REPORT

Members were informed of complaints received regarding alleged breaches of planning control and progress in resolving outstanding breaches. At the last meeting of the Review Board, Members had expressed interest in receiving further details about the numbers of complaints received and those resolved without resorting to formal action, as well as progress on those matters on which enforcement action had been authorised. The detailed progress report on individual cases where formal action had been authorised was noted. Practical difficulties in assessing whether breaches had occurred and in obtaining evidence and the extra Officer time needed, partly because of delaying tactics by applicants, were also noted.

632 enforcement cases had now been recorded during 2001. Of these, 34 cases occurred where progress on planning applications was checked on site as part of proactive enforcement. Only 14 of the complaints received had resulted in formal enforcement action. The majority of cases (311) had been resolved. The remainder were subject to ongoing investigation and negotiation. There had been a steady rise in enforcement complaints received over the last five years. Whilst the total for this year was a projection, it represented a 70% increase over the number of complaints received in 1996. Staff levels, at three enforcement officers, had remained constant. Planning applications received had increased by 30% over that time period.

The Board considered the reasons for the increase in complaints and workload in this area of the Council's activity. It was noted that enforcement was a discretionary activity, whereas dealing with planning applications was a statutory requirement. Many Authorities therefore did not place

as high a priority on enforcement as Runnymede. It may be that because the public knew that their complaints would be investigated that the numbers received had increased. It was difficult to prioritise these kind of complaints until investigation had been undertaken. The size of a planning site was not always an indicator of the amount of Officer time which would be needed to deal with any appeals which might result. Another possible factor was that Runnymede had become more urbanised over the last few years which led to the public encroaching upon each other to a greater extent.

The Board were concerned about the increased pressure on Officers in this area of work and agreed that this was an important part of the Council's activity. The Board therefore agreed that the Annual Personnel Report in 2002 should include a section considering whether further legal or planning enforcement posts should be added to the Council's staff for this function. It was, however, noted that the Council would have to consider this in the context of the overall resource position within Technical Services and Borough Secretary's Departments and throughout the Council's establishment as a whole, along with the overall priority which the Council wished to give to planning enforcement. The Board also noted, as they had observed at their meeting on 12 July 2001, that employment of further Officers might not particularly assist in despatching more complex cases, but would help with more routine areas of this work.

308. FUNCTIONS AND WORK PROGRAMME OF THE BOARD

The Chairman reported verbally that it was now envisaged that the joint Board reviewing policing in the Borough would take place in December. It was, however, suggested that this might be deferred until after the police organisational changes had been implemented at the end of January 2002. Other issues previously identified by the Board for scrutiny were the Housing Strategy and Business Plan and leisure provision in the south of the borough.

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 9.23 p.m.)