

RUNNYMEDE BOROUGH COUNCIL

SUPPLEMENTARY COUNCIL SUMMONS

15 JULY 2004

7(ii) RECOMMENDATIONS OF COMMITTEES

Planning Committee - 28 June 2004

a) Runnymede Borough Local Development Framework - Programme, Key Issues and Options

The Committee was informed of progress made on the introduction of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act and on the preparation of the Local Development Framework; and considered approval of the Local Development Scheme (LDS); and the next stages of consultation on the Core Strategy and the Statement of Community involvement.

The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act had received Royal Assent on 13 May 2004 and a programme for commencement was expected shortly. This would formally introduce the new development plan system of Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) and Local Development Frameworks (LDF).

The Local Development Scheme (LDS) was the programme for the preparation of the LDF. It covered a three year period and set out what LDDs the Council proposed to produce and identified the resources available for their production.

Members were informed that the draft LDS now contained a number of timetabling changes to reflect various factors. There were no changes to the Local Development Documents that it was proposed to produce.

The timetabling changes meant that instead of having two main phases of LDD production over the three years of the programme all the proposed LDDs would be incorporated into a single phase. This was advantageous as it better reflected the timescales required by the Planning Inspectorate to programme examinations and it would reduce the number of separate consultations that needed to be carried out over the programme period.

The LDS would be submitted to the Secretary of State (via the Regional Government Office) for approval. Once it took effect a copy would be made available for inspection at the Council Offices and published on the Council Website.

The Core Strategy was a key Local Development Document (LDD) that would guide the other LDDs in the development framework. The next stage in the preparation of the Core Strategy and the other first phase LDDs (on Housing and Development Control Policies) would be to carry out a much wider consultation on the relevant issues and options, including public consultation. For this first main consultation stage it was proposed to use a background document which included a brief explanation of the new planning system and the role of the Local Development Framework. It also described the need for a long-term vision and six possible general approaches to future development based on the material considered by the Community Strategy Task Group. A questionnaire would also be used to provide an opportunity for stakeholders to give their views on the key issues and options and to identify any other important matters that had not been included.

The Council was also required to produce a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), which set out how the Authority intended to achieve continuous community involvement in the preparation of the Local Development Framework. It would be particularly important to involve those groups who had

not previously been involved in the preparation of the Local Development Plan. The new framework would provide the opportunity for local groups and organisations to be involved in the preparation of specific LDDs, fostering meaningful consultation on issues of their particular interest.

The SCI was a key LDD itself, which would involve public consultation on key issues and options (current stage), consultation on preferred options and proposals, submission to the Secretary of State, and independent examination. The intention was to run this process in tandem with the production of the Core Strategy. The first consultation stage, identifying key issues for the production of the SCI, was incorporated in the combined questionnaire referred to above. There may be some changes required to the questionnaire before the formal consultations and the Committee agreed that the Director of Technical Services be authorised to make these changes in consultation with the Chairman.

It was proposed that the Issues and Options consultation be carried out over a six-week period commencing on 6 September 2004. The results of the consultation would be reported to a future meeting of the Planning Committee and would inform the next stage of the process which would be the selection of preferred options and formulation of proposals.

The Committee considered that an informal working group of six Members of the Committee nominated by Group Leaders would be useful to undertake detailed scrutiny of issues and policies. The Group would meet during the day-time to enable wide-ranging technical support to be provided.

RECOMMEND that -

- i) the Local Development Scheme at Appendix 'A' be submitted to the Secretary of State for approval following commencement of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004;**
- ii) the background paper (Appendix 'B') and questionnaire (Appendix 'C') be approved for the purposes of consultation on the issues and options for the Core Strategy, Housing and Development Control Policies LDDs and the Statement of Community Involvement, subject to any changes that may be required to accord with any changes to the Act;**
- iii) an informal Local Development Framework Working Group comprising six Members of the Planning Committee (4 Conservative, 1 Independent (Councillor Relph) and 1 Labour (Councillor Pate)), be formed to meet during the day; and**
- iv) any changes to the consultation material be undertaken by the Director of Technical Services in consultation with the Chairman of the Committee.**

Corporate Management Committee - 29 June 2004

- b) 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 'D', be adopted.

- c) 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 house 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 'E';**
 - 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.**
- d) 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.**