

Minutes of Policy & Finance Committee

Meeting Date: Tuesday, 25 September 2012 starting at 6.30pm
Present: Councillor E M H Ranson (Chairman)

Councillors:

R Elms	K Horkin
J Hill	J Rogerson (7.30)
K Hind (6.38)	R E Sherras
S Hirst	N Walsh
S Hore	A Yearling

In attendance: Chief Executive, Director of Resources, Director of Community Services, Head of Revenues and Benefits and Head of Regeneration and Housing.

339 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors T Hill, A Knox, D Smith and R Thompson.

340 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 August 2012 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

341 MATTERS ARISING

Minute 213(c) – Compulsory Purchase Order – 2 Barnacre Road, Longridge

The Head of Regeneration and Housing gave Committee an update in relation to this matter.

342 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor E M H Ranson declared an interest in the final item on the agenda – Clitheroe Food Festival.

343 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

344 ECONOMIC STRATEGY

The Head of Regeneration and Housing presented an update on the Council's Economic Strategy.

The report reminded Committee that this Committee had started a review of the current Economic Strategy 2009-2014 at its March meeting. The Strategy contained a significant number of references to various structures and

programmes which were either in the process of transition or would no longer exist in the future.

Members' attention was drawn to the action plans which identified specific areas of activity to support the economic aims and objectives as well as the principle economic vision to sustain a strong and prosperous Ribble Valley as specified within the Council's Corporate Strategy. The report identified a number of key thematic areas:

- Regeneration and economic development
- Business support and development
- Infrastructure and communications
- Image marketing and promotion
- Employment skills

Members discussed the role of the newly formed Economic Working Group in relation to this strategy and also the broader aims of the document.

RESOLVED: That Committee

1. defer the draft strategy for consideration by the Economic Working Group with the report being taken back to this Committee to its next meeting in November 2012; and
2. agree the terms of reference for the Economic Working Group set up to support and monitor activities that contribute towards a successful Ribble Valley economy, subject to a review of the Working Group objectives relating to housing.

345 LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESOURCE REVIEW – PROPOSALS FOR BUSINESS RATE RETENTION

The Director of Resources submitted a report informing Members of the proposals for business rate retention and confirming the response submitted on behalf of the Council to the consultation regarding those reforms.

She reminded Members that the government had consulted all councils last year on the outline of business rate retention schemes. Further proposals from the government had been issued in the form of two statements of intent and other documentation in May 2012.

The government had promised a stable transition to the new system with baseline funding being largely based upon the 2012/2013 formula grant but adjusted for overall reductions in spending control totals for 2013/2014 and 2014/2015 in line with the government's deficit reduction programme. The main changes proposed were:

- Concessionary travel – changes to use modelled boarding data
- Rural services – increasing the waiting for super sparsity from 2.1 to 3.1
- Rural services – increasing the sparsity top ups

- Relative needs and relative resources – proposals to restore the level of relative resource amount in 2013-2014 to that for 2010/2011
- Rolling in to the business rates system a number of previously separated grants including Council Tax freeze grant, Council Tax support grant and homeless prevention grant
- New homes bonus – 2 billion pounds will be removed from the start up funding allocation to fund the new homes bonus in each of seven years
- Population data – use of the interim 2011 based sub national population projections in calculations start up funding allocations

She further commented that based on the exemplifications, Ribble Valley would benefit from these changes substantially. This Council stood to gain around £469,000 free damping the change which benefited the Council most being the increases in sparsity waiting and top ups. However, post damping the potential increase to our funding would significantly reduce and instead of gaining around £469,000 we would only gain £143,000.

The Sparse Group would be writing to all MPs in rural constituencies setting out the position for their area together with some urban comparators. It was felt we should support this campaign as strongly as we possibly could.

The government's calculations at national level would ultimately be used in determining individual authority business rate baselines. The national gross yield would be adjusted to take account of a variety of issues that would otherwise not be reflected in the estimate such as cost of and losses in collection.

The local share (50%) of the estimated business rates aggregate is then shared between all billing authorities in England on the basis of each authority's proportional share. A 50% local share would be distributed as follows:

- 40% to lower tier authorities ie districts
- 9% to upper tier authorities ie county councils
- 1% for fire authorities with the police being excluded

The report also explained how low tariffs, top ups and the safety net would operate.

Finally, the Director of Resources commented that the deadline for the consultation exercise had been Monday, 24 September and therefore a response had needed to be agreed by the Budget Working Group in order to meet this deadline.

RESOLVED: That Committee endorse the response as now outlined by the Director of Resources and agreed by the Budget Working Group.

346 VILLAGE AMENITIES GRANT FUND

The Head of Regeneration and Housing asked Committee to approve the allocation of grants totalling £98,734 to enhance village amenities throughout the Ribble Valley.

He referred to minute 82 of Committee dated 12 June where Committee had agreed the conditions, procedures and timescales for the allocation of the second round of village amenity grants. The total funding allocated was £100,000 from Council Tax income on second homes/performance reward grant monies.

The invitation to bid had been widely circulated and 49 organisations had applied for a grant before the deadline date. Corporate Management Team together with the Council's Partnership Officer and Regeneration Projects Officer had met and considered each application on the criteria approved. 19 applications were recommended to receive a grant.

Members then discussed this matter in some detail. Representations were made in relation to two applications which were not listed as grant recipients:

St John's Church upgrade of public address system - £4,990

Ribchester Playing Fields improvement to support timber spansions, safety surface and swing seats - £5,000

RESOLVED: That Committee approve the recommended grant allocations with the additional schemes at St John's Church, Read and Ribchester playing field being included within that list.

347 LOCALISATION OF COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT

The Director of Resources referred to minute 216 of Committee dated 7 August 2012 and gave an update report on this matter. She gave details of the Council's proposed scheme which had been previously agreed by this Committee.

She further reported that a consultation exercise had been launched on 1 September and would run until 31 October. The Council had utilised the services of a joint consultancy team CRACS who we support with other Pennine Lancashire authorities. An online questionnaire which could be found on the Council's website had been made available. The Council were also printing and distributing hard copy questionnaires which would be sent out to existing benefit customers and also to a cross section of Council Tax payers.

She further reported that the Council had been informed by Northgate Public Services, the Council's software supplier that a new calculation module for Council Tax reduction would be required for our revenues and benefits software system. The estimated cost was between £50,000 and £70,000 per customer. Northgate had now confirmed in writing the final cost which was £65,000. she commented that this amount could be taken out of the £84,000 which the government had allocated to meet additional costs arising from the localisation of Council Tax support.

RESOLVED: That

1. Committee endorse the approach taken to our consultation on the localisation of Council Tax support; and

2. approve the purchase of the new Northgate Council Tax reduction module for our revenues and benefits system at a cost of £65,000.

348 PERFORMANCE REWARD GRANT COMMUNITY FOOD GROWING

The Head of Regeneration and Housing sought ratification of the final allocation of funding to schemes within the Community Food Growing Project.

The Ribble Valley Community Food Growing Project would develop and share the good work started in many schools. It was felt that there was willingness to develop the sustainable living ethos as part of the curriculum.

Many of the primary schools in Ribble Valley had already embarked on achieving eco school status and were developing spare land within schools, particularly in rural villages. The total proposed allocation for this element was £6,120. Senior schools food growing sites had been identified at the following schools:

St Augustine's
St Cecilia's
Longridge High School
Bowland High School
Clitheroe Grammar School

and a total proposed allocation for this element was £17,000.

It was noted that there was a perceived shortage of allotments in the Ribble Valley and many of the parishes had received an expression of interest from local residents. A plan to produce four new sites had been identified in Gisburn, Sabden, Whalley and Calderstones. Unfortunately, the offer of sites at Gisburn, Sabden and Calderstones had had to be subsequently withdrawn and the Whalley Group had still to be organised. Other groups were looking for alternative sites and Committee would be asked for ratification of any proposed schemes prior to their implementation. The total proposed for allocation was £15,000 as contingency until March 2013.

RESOLVED: That Committee agree the approach set out in the report and approve the remaining allocations concerning projects which would be in receipt of funds from the performance reward grant.

349 BUDGET FORECAST 2012/2013 TO 2015/2016

The Director of Resources asked Committee to consider the Council's latest budget forecast and decide what action needed to be considered to meet the financial challenges that lay ahead.

She reminded Committee that in July the government had begun consultation on the detail of how business rate retention scheme would work including consultation on the baseline funding for each local authority. The Council were therefore in a position where we could only speculate on the level of government funding that we could expect to receive next year. The latest budget forecast was based on a number of assumptions and several changes had been made

since the previous budget forecast had been prepared. These were set out with the following main headings.

- Public sector pay and price inflation - our budget forecast had allowed for a 2.5% for price increases each year the same as allowed for pay increases
- Local government grant funding - in addition to grant formula we currently only receive the following grants
 - New homes bonus
 - Council Tax freeze grant
 - Local service support grant homelessness
- Council Tax – an assumption that a 2.5% increase in our Council Tax each year for the next three years. Based on our current tax base of 1% increase in our Council Tax raises approximately £31,500
- Interest rates – the Council had currently allowed £30,000 interest receipts for both the current year and 2013/2014. £50,000 had been brought in for interest in 2014/2015 and £75,000 for the year after.

RESOLVED: That Committee note the budget forecast of the Director of Resources.

350 REVIEW OF COUNCIL'S COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

The Chief Executive sought approval to carry out a review of the Council's complaints procedure.

He commented that the current procedure would benefit from a review to ensure that it is still fit for purpose and to address concerns that had been identified by staff including investigating officers and staff who had been the subject of a complaint and by Members who had been involved with the second stage of the procedure.

As both Members and officers had direct experience of the procedure, it was proposed that a working group comprising three Councillors with support from the Council's Complaints Co-ordinator and the Head of Legal and Democratic Services be convened to carry out the review. The proposed terms of reference of the working group were set out as follows:

- To review the Council's complaints procedure and make recommendations to Policy and Finance Committee
- The review to encompass the procedure for lodging a complaint
- Vetting and rejecting complaints
- Investigating of complaints
- The hearing
- Notification

In addition, the working group could be asked to clarify the powers that were available to the investigating officer and to the panel, all the above to be formulated after considering best practice in other authorities and the advice of the Ombudsman.

RESOLVED: That Committee

1. approve the proposal to review the Council's complaints procedure;
2. that a working group consisting of Councillors Hirst, Hore and A Knox be formed as the working group; and
3. agree the above terms of reference.

351 NATIONAL NON DOMESTIC RATES WRITE OFFS

The Head of Revenues and Benefits sought Committee's approval to write off certain National Non Domestic Rate debts. He informed Members of the recovery action taken.

RESOLVED: That Committee the writing off of £42,083.04 of NNDR debts where it had not been possible to collect the amounts due.

352 REFERENCES FROM COMMITTEE – GARAGES AT RIDDINGS LANE, WHALLEY

Committee were asked to consider a request from Health and Housing Committee to agree to demolish Council owned garages at Riddings Lane, Whalley and also to agree a supplementary estimate to add to this year's revenue budget. Members then discussed this request in some detail.

RESOLVED: That Committee agree to the request for a supplementary estimate of £5,000 for the demolition of the Riddings Lane garages at Whalley.

353 AMENDMENTS TO THE REGULATION OF INVESTIGATORY POWERS ACT 2000 (RIPA)

The Chief Executive referred to this report which informed Committee of the amendments which were to be made to RIPA by the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Directed Surveillance and Covert Human Intelligence Sources) (Amendment) Order 2012/2015 (The Order) and the Protection of the Freedoms Act 2011 (The Act).

The Order inserted a new article 7a into the 2010 Order which restricts authorised officers from authorising direct surveillance unless it is for the purpose of preventing or detecting a criminal offence which meets the conditions set out in Article 7a(3)(a) or (b). The conditions are that the criminal offence to be prevented or detected must be punishable by a maximum term of at least six months imprisonment or constitutes an offence under Section 146, 147 or 147a of the Licensing Act 2003 (sale of alcohol to children) or Section 7 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 (sale of tobacco to children under 18 years old).

The Chief Executive commented that although the Council had rarely used its powers under RIPA, the range of offences for which they could be used for in future had been reduced. It was noted however that offences such as fly tipping for which the Council had authorised detected surveillance in the past carried a maximum punishment of two years imprisonment and so the Council would still be able to authorise directed surveillance in respect of those offences if necessary and proportionate. Should the Council wish to do so in future, it would

need to seek judicial approval from the magistrates court before commencing any surveillance which would obviously have involved additional costs and resources.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

354 RIBBLE VALLEY COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP – UPDATE

Committee considered a report on various initiatives which the Ribble Valley Community Safety Partnership was wholly or partly responsible for. These included

- Castle grounds project
- Community alcohol network
- Renewal of alcohol zone signs
- Wasted lives campaign
- Smartwater and Farmwatch
- Police and Crime Commissioner

The Chairman referred to the recent resignation of Councillor Jan Alcock as Chair of the Ribble Valley Community Safety Partnership and the need to replace her with another Borough Councillor. He also welcomed the news of the recent announcement that Ribble Valley was the joint second safest place in England and also referred to the imminent departure of Inspector Chris Saville who would be replaced by Inspector Graham Lister.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

355 REVENUES AND BENEFITS GENERAL REPORT

The Head of Revenues and Benefits presented his report to Committee. The report covered the following areas:

- NNDR
- Council Tax
- Sundry debtors
- Housing benefit performance
- Housing benefit fraud
- Housing benefit overpayments

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

356 TIMETABLE FOR BUDGET SETTING

The Director of Resources submitted a timetable for setting the 2013/2014 budget. She commented that the provisional settlement announcement would not be made until early December 2012 and would not be confirmed until early February 2013.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

357 INSURANCE RENEWALS 2012/2013

The Director of Resources informed Committee of the insurance renewals for the period 20 June 2012 to 19 June 2013. She reminded Members that the Council's current provider Zurich Municipal had been granted a two year extension which would run out in June 2013. She also commented that the cost of premiums had fallen by 2.2% on the previous year's figures and our overall claims experience continued to be very good.

RESOLVED: That the renewal of the Council's insurances for 2012/2013 be noted.

358 MINUTES OF BUDGET WORKING GROUP

Committee received the minutes of the Budget Working Groups dated 16 January 2012 and 19 June 2012.

359 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED: That by virtue of the next items of business being exempt information under Paragraphs 1 and 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be now excluded from the meeting.

360 LAND FOR INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

Members considered a detailed report on the possible purchase of land for industrial development at Barrow Brook. This was an area that had long been earmarked for industrial development but progress had been limited due to developers/landowners aspirations. It was felt that one way to ensure the site was developed for industrial use was by the Council acquiring the land. Members then discussed the land at Barrow Brook and the issues raised in the report in some detail.

RESOLVED: That Committee agree to pursue the acquisition of land at Barrow Brook for employment development and confirm that the site marked 2 on the plan at Appendix 1 to the report be the subject of that negotiation.

Having reviewed the risks set out in the report, in order to make progress the District Valuer be instructed to enter into negotiation with the owners as soon as possible.

361 NATIONAL NON DOMESTIC RATES AND COUNCIL TAX WRITE OFFS

The Head of Revenues and Benefits sought Committee's approval to write off certain Council Tax and National Non Domestic Rate debts relating to individuals or sole traders.

He answered Members' questions in relation to the process which the Council had to follow in relation to the chasing of bad debts.

RESOLVED: That Committee approve the writing off of £11,357.54 Council Tax and £6,784.79 of NNDR debts where it had not been possible to collect the amounts due.

CLITHEROE FOOD FESTIVAL

The Chief Executive asked Committee to consider a number of issues relating to the Clitheroe Food Festival. These included the success of the event, the financial performance, the future of the event and the extent to which Ribble Valley Borough Council should be involved in support of any future staging of the event. Members then discussed the report in some detail.

RESOLVED: That

1. Committee agree to fund the shortfall on this year's food festival from performance reward grant;
2. agree to the continued support and involvement of the Council in the food festival;
3. endorse the application for RDPE grant funding to enable the Council to ultimately pass to the Clitheroe Food Festival Company full responsibility for the operation of the food festival;
4. agree that officers meet with the company to clarify management arrangements and the RDPE grant conditions for the forthcoming festivals if the grant bid is successful; and
5. report to this Committee plans for staging the 2013/2014 food festival if the grant application fails.

The meeting closed at 9.09pm.

If you have any queries on these minutes please contact Jane Pearson (414430).