

STRATEGY & POLICY COMMITTEE

6 JANUARY 1999

Present: Councillor Bettison (Chairman)
Councillors Mrs Ballin, Bayle, Birch, Good, Jones,
Mrs Keene, McCormack, Mills, North, Sargeant,
Mrs Shillcock, Wade, Ward, Wheaton and Worrall

Also Present: Councillor Mrs Hayes

352. Exclusion of Public and Press

With the consent of the Committee the public and press were **not** excluded from the meeting for the presentation from PricewaterhouseCoopers.

353. Information Items Containing Exempt Information

The Committee received and noted the following items containing exempt information:

- Annexe to Item 1 – Review of IT and Financial Services
- Annexe to Item 4 – Information and Communication – Smart Card

In support of Agenda item 1, the Committee received a presentation from Jan Forrest and Gary Levett of PricewaterhouseCoopers on the review of IT and Financial Services. The review had identified the various options for ongoing delivery of services within the context of Best Value and with particular reference to service sustainability, costs and quality. The findings of the review and recommendations for further action were presented. The representatives of PricewaterhouseCoopers were thanked for their attendance and withdrew from the meeting at this point.

354. Review of IT and Financial Services (Item 1)

Further to the presentation from PricewaterhouseCoopers, the Committee considered a report from the Director of Corporate Services summarising the key issues identified in the review of the Council's IT, Revenues and Benefits Services.

The overall conclusion of the "health check" had been that these services were performing very well. However, the review had identified particular problems within the IT services concerning the ability to develop some essential elements of the service. The review had concluded that selective outsourcing of aspects of the IT service would be the most appropriate option to pursue.

In respect of the Revenues and Benefits services it had been concluded that they were unlikely to add critical mass to an outsourcing package. However, the study had identified potential advantages in merging the Council's Revenues and Housing Benefits Sections and further work was required to evaluate this option.

RESOLVED that

- (i) the Committee notes the proposals contained in the PricewaterhouseCoopers' report and that detailed preparations be made to obtain competitive tenders for:
 - a) The provision of voice and data communications and elements of mini-server operations and production; and
 - b) project work related to new project and development services;
- (ii) tenderers be required to acknowledge that TUPE applies to the potential contracts;
- (iii) work to evaluate the scope for merging the Council's Revenues and Housing Benefits Sections be undertaken and reported to this committee in April;
- (iv) the Council's ICT strategy and plan be submitted to the Finance and Property Sub-Committee in March 1999, reflecting the strategic decision taken under Resolution 1 (a) and (b) above;
- (v) Service Statements and Service Level Agreements for IT Services be completed by March 1999; and
- (vi) Standing Orders 64 and 65 be waived and the Director of Corporate Services be authorised to appoint PricewaterhouseCoopers to assist with the work to tender services covered by Resolution 1 (a) and (b) above.

355. Revenue Budget 1999/2000 (Item 2)

The Committee received the report of the Director of Corporate Services summarising the implications for the Council of the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement, which had been announced on 2 December 1998. The report also considered the budget guidelines to be given to service committees as they prepared their budget recommendations for 1999/2000.

The provisional SSA for Bracknell Forest in 1999/2000 had been set at £79.771m. This represented a "raw" increase of 4.8% on the previous year's settlement. However, after adjusting for the withdrawal of Community Care Special Transitional Grant and other adjustments, the increase was reduced to 4.1%. The work undertaken on the commitment budgets of service committees, corporate pressures and an inflation estimate provided a working base budget figure of £80.71m to £80.96m for 1999/2000. This was some £1-1.25m above SSA and did not include new service developments and pressures for increased spending. It was suggested, therefore, that all committees should be asked to scrutinise their budget carefully to identify:

- essential service developments;
- opportunities to introduce budget economies, through a mixture of good housekeeping measures and service reviews, particularly where these would have a minimal impact on front-line service levels;
- scope for increasing income charges above inflation, and
- reappraisal of the scope for cash limiting running expenses budgets

RESOLVED that

- (i) the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement and the draft budget required for 1999/2000 be noted;
- (ii) Committees be requested to prepare detailed budgets within the framework set out in paragraph 4.31; and
- (iii) Officers examine the detailed data and methodology used in the settlement and, in consultation with the Chairman, make appropriate representations to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

356. Probation Service Funding (Item 3)

In a report from the Director of Corporate of Services the Committee was advised of the arrangements for funding the Probation Services in Berkshire.

During the reorganisation of Local Government in Berkshire, the Home Office had insisted that the Probation Service be co-ordinated by one authority within the County. West Berkshire Council had agreed to act as lead authority on the basis that it should be managed under a joint agreement similar to that agreed for other services. The Committee's agreement was sought, therefore, for the Borough Solicitor to complete a formal joint agreement for the funding of the service.

RESOLVED that the Borough Solicitor be authorised to conclude an agreement between the Berkshire Unitary Authorities providing for West Berkshire District Council to undertake the co-ordination of funding for the Berkshire Probation Service and for the Local Authority liability to defray the expenses of the Berkshire Probation Committee to be apportioned between the Unitary Authorities according to Council Tax base.

357. Information and Communication – Smartcard (Item 4)

The Committee received a report from the Head of Policy Development on the need to investigate the potential uses of Smartcard technology as part of a medium to long-term strategy for information and communication with the public.

The report identified that a number of potential applications for Smartcard technology could be developed in both the short and longer term. It proposed that work be undertaken with retailers to identify the feasibility of introducing a loyalty card scheme to encourage residents to shop locally. It was stressed that as this technology was still under development, considerable work would be needed to assess its feasibility for use in the provision of a range of Council services.

RESOLVED that

- (i) investigations into the feasibility of a Borough Council Smartcard initiative be approved;
- (ii) work be commissioned on a loyalty card to promote and support local businesses throughout the Borough;

- (iii) a Smartcard feasibility study be undertaken on the new Borough Council library system;
- (iv) further feasibility studies be undertaken to identify other applications for Smartcard developments; and
- (v) an allocation be made from General Revenue Contingency to fund the proposed studies, as outlined in exempt Annexe A..

358. Local Government (Capping and Best Value) Bill – Key Issues (Item 5)

The Committee considered a report from the Head of Policy Development highlighting the key issues and provisions of the Local Government (Capping and Best Value) Bill. The Bill imposed requirements on Local Authorities to conduct Best Value reviews and prepare a Best Value Plan to secure continuous improvement in services in terms of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. It also made provision for the regulation of Council Tax and precepts.

Under the Bill, the legislation requiring Compulsory Competitive Tendering of council work and services would be repealed with effect from 2 January 2000.

RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the report be noted; and
- (ii) the Audit and Performance Review Committee be requested to ensure that the implications of this Bill are taken into account in the development of its future work on Best Value.

359. Focus Group –Sandhurst School Site and Surrounds

The Director of Leisure Services presented a report which proposed the establishment of a Focus Group of Members and Officers to consider issues associated with the Sandhurst School site and the potential for a co-ordinated response. The Focus Group would prepare an action plan to improve the services and facilities on site and to involve potential partners and agencies for the benefit of the surrounding area.

RESOLVED that a Focus Group consisting of five Members and appropriate Officers be established to consider issues relating to the Sandhurst School site and surrounding area.

The meeting commenced at 7.30pm
and concluded at 9.55pm

CHAIRMAN