

## **SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 12<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2005**

### **MINUTES (18.00 – 19.40)**

**PRESENT** Councillor Mrs Driver (in the Chair), Councillors Allen, Forbes, Mrs Hale, Mrs Holliday, Nicholson and Mrs Regan  
Messrs Howard, Sygerycz and Mrs Kitchin

**RELEVANT DEPUTIES IN ATTENDANCE:**  
Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community)

**APOLOGIES :** Councillor Mrs Ledoux and Wheeler

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

At the start of the meeting Councillor Mrs Driver (Chairman) referred to the recent death of former Councillor John Todman. She wished to convey on behalf of the Committee condolences to his widow Helen Todman and family. Sympathies were also extended to Councillor Simon Wheeler who was unable to attend the meeting following the death of his mother.

### **2. DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

Councillor Mrs Driver (Chairman) declared an interest in agenda item 8 Annual Review of the Council's Conditional Offers of Grant 2004/05. Councillor Mrs Regan declared an interest in agenda item 7 A Review of the Workings of the Town's Community Forums.

### **3. MINUTES**

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting held on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2004 be approved as a correct record.

### **4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

No public questions or petitions had been received.

### **5. MATTERS REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE**

(a) **By Council** – None

(b) **By Cabinet** – None

(c) **By other Committee** – Councillor Mrs Driver (Chairman) briefly introduced an additional item referred from Economy and Business Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee which had been circulated separately from the agenda. The

Assistant Director (Built Environment) outlined the background to the referral and asked the Committee to nominate a member to the Section 106 working group and comment on the Terms of Reference for the review.

Councillor Allen expressed an interest in representing the Committee on the working group, but pointed out that he would be limited to attending evening meetings as he was not available during the daytime.

In response to questions the Assistant Director (Built Environment) indicated that it was likely that members of the Section 106 working group would be asked to attend 3 to 4 meetings during the course of the review and the dates and times of the meetings would be set in due course around the availability of the members nominated

The Chairman asked that consideration be given in future to avoiding daytime meetings in order to increase the number of members able to serve on working groups.

**RESOLVED** that Councillor Mrs Regan be nominated as the committee's representative on the Section 106 working group

## **6. BRIEFING FROM CABINET DEPUTIES (Agenda item 6)**

The Chairman explained that the Deputy (Green Environment and Licensing) had indicated that she had nothing new to report to the Committee at this stage. Under the circumstances and as she had another meeting to attend the Chairman had agreed that if Members had any particular questions relating to this portfolio, they would be noted and fed back to the Deputy for a response at the next meeting.

The Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) referred to the question raised by the Chairman at the previous meeting regarding the disparity between charges in respect of the 'Lifeline' service depending on the tenure. The Assistant Director (Community Services) read out the following response:-

The payment of Lifeline subsidy became tenure specific due to the requirements of the transition to Supporting People funding. Subsidy payment had to be extricated from housing benefit payments. For this element to qualify for transitional housing benefit and eventual Supporting People subsidy –

- for local authority and housing association (RSL) tenants a 'deed of variation' to their tenancy agreement was required, undertaken by the landlord. This was fairly straight forward
- for residents in the private sector an Income support and/or Care Package assessment was required to qualify for transitional housing benefit. Many found the system too onerous or failed to meet the deadline and, therefore, failed to get the subsidy.

The system is about to be overtaken by events. As part of the government requirement to find major savings within Supporting People (for Gloucestershire this is estimated to be around £9 million) subsidy is likely to be withdrawn from the majority of this service, the exception may be where the lifeline is hard wired into sheltered schemes. In this event all individual Lifeline customers will be expected to pay the full cost of the service which in Cheltenham is currently £2.62 plus vat per week.

The Chairman expressed her concern that the projected savings would impact on the most vulnerable people.

The Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) reported on the following:-

- Benefit Take-Up Strategy – adopted by the Cabinet at its meeting held on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2004. The Strategy identifies exactly what the Council needs to do to ensure that residents of Cheltenham who are entitled to benefits are informed, encouraged and assisted in maximising their available income through the increased take-up of benefits. He indicated that all the main benefits were funded by Central Government and not local council tax, therefore it was vital that people claimed the benefits to which they were entitled. A report on progress would be brought back to the Cabinet in a year's time.
- Housing Revenue Account – rent levels. The Deputy explained that the HRA is ring-fenced and no council tax at all subsidises council tenants. As Cheltenham has had relatively high rents in the past, it means that the national rent formula to equalise rents throughout the country has resulted in increases for the next 6 years starting at 1.6% for 2005/06 declining to 1.2% for 2011/12. He pointed out that rent increases in the next 6 years will therefore be less than the likely rate of inflation. At the same time council homes are to be improved with a 5 year investment scheme totalling £63 million.

The Chairman thanked the Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) for his briefing.

## **7. ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S CONDITIONAL OFFERS OF GRANT 2004/05 (Agenda item 8)**

The Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) outlined the findings and recommendations of this report which had been circulated with the agenda and was due to be considered by Cabinet on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2005. He drew particular attention to the following key issues:-

- the council has conditional offers of grant with 10 voluntary and community organisations covered by the Social and Community portfolio for amounts exceeding £10,000 per annum (9 under the remit of the Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) and 1 under the Deputy (Health, Wellbeing and Economy) )
- the funding reviews were conducted during November 2004 by the newly established Corporate Funding Review Group consisting of officers representing the Community Services and the Business Support divisions, representatives from the Social and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the relevant Cabinet Deputy.
- overall the performance of these organisations was excellent and the council received a brilliant service. The Deputy indicated that the detail was in the report, however highlighted some salient points relating to each of the voluntary sector partners reviewed.
- the aim was to establish an annual system of review and monitoring, with a major review when the grant comes up for renewal every three years. Annual reviews were to be carried out by officers based on the standard procedures outlined in appendix A and B of the report with findings back to Cabinet/Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) explained that as he was the council's representative on Cheltenham Community and Voluntary Action (CCAVA) management committee (observer status only) he had declared an interest and took no part in writing this part of the report, although he attended the review. At the request of the Chairman, the Community Development Manager provided a summary of the main points relating to this particular review.

The Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) commented that the Voluntary Sector in Cheltenham was excellent and if more funding was available he would be arguing to extend it to other deserving organisations. In his opinion, priority had to be given to the Council's key Voluntary Sector Partners over the small grants round as their impact in Cheltenham was immense.

The Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) provided the following responses to Member's questions:-

- the conditional offer of Grant for 2004/05 in respect of each organisation was outlined in Appendix C. Whilst there was agreement in principle to award three year grants, this would always be subject to the budget round and satisfactory performance. He hoped that future levels would be subject to inflationary increases but this would be up to the Cabinet to decide as part of the Council's annual budget setting process.
- the question as to why some of the directors/trustees of the organisations were not insured would be raised as part of the legal review and supplementary report back to Cabinet (recommendation 1.3.5)

Councillor Mrs Regan raised her objections to the proposal to only involve members in the review every three years. She felt that elected members should be involved in the process annually as they had a responsibility to ensure public money was spent effectively.

In response, the Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) explained that the Annual Review of the Council's Conditional Offers of Grant 2004/05 was a Cabinet responsibility and as such the Committee was not in a position to change any of the recommendations. The review process was a mammoth task and in his opinion including Members on an annual basis was a resource that could not be justified. The recommended revised review process to be followed by the Officer Review Group included a structured review template and a standard reporting mechanism to ensure that all organisations were appraised comprehensively. Findings from these interim reviews would be reported to Cabinet and Social and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee so performance could be monitored and decisions made regarding on-going funding.

The Chairman indicated that she also could not support recommendation 1.3.4 relating to the interim reviews being conducted by officers. However, she wished to extend her congratulations to the excellent work of all the voluntary sector organisations detailed in the report.

## **8. A REVIEW OF THE WORKINGS OF THE TOWN'S COMMUNITY FORUMS (Agenda item 7)**

The Community Development Manager introduced this information/discussion paper which had been circulated with the agenda and provided Members with a snapshot of the workings of the town's four community forums:-

- Cheltenham Pensioners Forum
- Cheltenham Disability Forum
- Cheltenham Minority Ethnic Forum
- MAD Young People's Council

The following issues were noted:-

- it was pointed out that the reference to Pittville ward within paragraph 1.3 should read Oakley

- concern was raised that the town's ethnic minority communities were currently not represented, since the Cheltenham Ethnic Minority Forum had ceased to operate.
- it was unfortunate that the Cheltenham Pensioners Forum was no longer affiliated to the Gloucestershire Pensioners Forum
- the development of a quarterly newsletter for members of the Cheltenham Disability forum was welcomed.

Councillor Mrs Regan acknowledged the good work of MAD Young People's Council but questioned the value of Council funding at a time when the County Council's Youth Service was under-funded. In response, the Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community) indicated that MAD had been outstandingly successful in making a difference to young people in Cheltenham and provided invaluable links between the council and the schools being represented. However, he recognised the concerns with regard to the proposed budget reduction in respect of the CCYS and hoped that political pressure at a County level might force this decision to be re-considered.

In response to further questions relating to MAD, Mr Howard confirmed that currently youth clubs were not represented, however he would take this idea back to be considered as part of future promotion and recruitment. He indicated that volunteers did not have to be fulltime but could come along to meetings to listen and voice their opinions. The work plan for 2004/05 included the creation of an induction pack for all of Cheltenham's schools, to encourage more pupils to take an active role in MAD and its projects. He explained that links to Cheltenham Borough Council were detailed on all literature produced by MAD and on the website, to confirm authenticity.

## **9. INTERIM BUDGET PROPOSALS (Agenda item 9)**

The Deputy (Exchequer) introduced this item which had been circulated with the agenda. He reminded the Committee that at its meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2004, the Cabinet had approved the interim budget proposals for consultation. He explained that the Council's medium term financial forecast had identified the need for significant savings in order to deliver a budget within a reasonable level of council tax increase and similar savings for the next three years. Following a huge amount of hard work with officers and some difficult decision making, savings of £917,000 had been identified whilst largely retaining services. He pointed out that whilst there were some reduced services there were also many positive aspects and growth bids totalling £417,000 had been supported in one of the Council's high priority areas. However, regrettably there was no growth proposed for the Social and Community Group.

The Deputy (Exchequer) outlined the justification behind some of the proposed savings relating to the Social and Community Group. He briefly referred to the Housing Revenue Account and indicated that it was a much brighter picture, but completely separate from the general fund and ring fenced. He indicated that the Cabinet was required to draw up its firm budget proposals having regard to the responses received during the consultation period, for approval by Council on 25<sup>th</sup> February 2005. He welcomed any feedback and comment on the budget proposals relating to the area under the remit of the Committee.

The following issues were noted:-

- Some members were very disappointed and concerned about the proposed deletion of the small grants programme as £200 made a big difference to some of the smaller organisations.

- It was suggested that holiday play schemes across the town should mirror term time school hours to provide a convenient service to parents as well as benefits to the children.
- Some concern was expressed at the proposed deletion of the Council's Clarion newspaper as it was felt that this would reduce community participation and public awareness of Council business. However, it was also recognised that the Clarion did not particularly have a very good reputation. The Deputy (Exchequer) pointed out that communication and marketing in respect of the Council was not the same as in the commercial sector and other more cost-effective methods were to be investigated. It was suggested that a regular slot in the local free paper or the Echo could help to raise the profile of the Council.

Representing the views of the MAD Youth Council, Mr Howard provided the following comments:-

- Disappointment had been expressed concerning the proposed deletion of the Massive programme for young people as opportunities for young people to learn, develop and enjoy new experiences would be taken away. It was pointed out that the good relationship which had been built up between the Council and young people would also be severely damaged as they would feel let down by the Council. This in turn could be detrimental to any future relationship with the Council they might have as adults
- No consultation regarding this proposal had taken place with MAD which prospectively represented approximately 5667 pupils.
- Had the Cabinet considered sponsorship from local business to reduce costs and retain the service?
- The proposed deletion of the small grants could also potentially hit young people, for example play groups and youth organisations currently in receipt of support from the Council

The Deputy (Exchequer) thanked the Committee for some very constructive comments which would be considered by the Cabinet as part of its deliberations of the final budget proposals. In respect of the proposed deletion of the small grants programme he explained that the officer time spent assessing the applications cost more than the total amount of funding available. It was proposed that support to the voluntary sector would be moving towards more partnership arrangements based on service level agreements. Regarding Massive the Deputy (Exchequer) explained that numbers had dwindled and the service was therefore not cost effective. He indicated that this Council spends a high proportion of its budget on cultural activities in comparison to other local authorities and whilst the Cabinet was trying not to delete activities they were encouraging them to become more self-supporting where possible.

## **10. POSSIBLE FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS - CARERS (Agenda item 10)**

In introducing this item, the Chairman referred to the Scrutiny Topic Registration form which she had completed and which was circulated with the agenda. She indicated that through this Committee she hoped to get a discussion going to see how the Council could help (if possible) the carers of the disabled and sick people in Cheltenham.

The following points were noted:-

- it was suggested that help was available through the Primary Care Trust, however this was very often overlooked as the information was not widely promoted. Some liaison was therefore necessary with the PCT.

- it was pointed out that this area of work was within the remit of the PCT and Social Services at the County Council and not the responsibility of the Social and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Some members were concerned that expectations would be raised and the Committee would not be in a position to address any of the issues raised.

The Chairman suggested that the Committee could at least listen to the problems that carers face in every day life to raise the profile and to see whether the Council could help even if in a small way, for example reviewing disabled parking facilities across the town. The Community Development Manager offered to invite the Gloucestershire Carers Project to a future meeting for a presentation and the Committee agreed that this would be a good opportunity to learn more about the topic and decide on the way forward.

**11. DATE OF NEXT MEETING – 21<sup>st</sup> February 2005**

**COUNCILLOR MRS B DRIVER**  
Chairman