APPENDIX 14

Brighton & Hove

BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY COUNCIL

NATIONAL NON-DOMESTIC RATEPAYERS CONSULTATION MEETING

2 FEBRUARY 2010 – 5:30pm
Room 126 Kings House,
Grand Avenue, Hove

MINUTES

Present:

Brighton & Hove City Council:
Councillor Mary Mears, Leader of the Council
Councillor Jan Young, Cabinet Member for Finance

Representatives of Non-Domestic Ratepayers:
Mark Jones (Brighton & Hove Hotels Association)
Trevor Freeman (Federation of Small Businesses)
Andrew Nichols (Hove Business Association)
Gavin Stewart (Hove Town centre Manager)

Brighton & Hove City Council Officers:
Catherine Vaughan, (Director of Finance & Resources)
Paul Ross Dale (Council Tax and NNDR Billing Team)
Mark Wall (Head of Democratic Services)

Apologies:
Liz Cadman (Sussex Enterprise)
Tony Mernagh (Brighton City Centre Business Forum)
Eleanor Mooney (Brighton & Hove Economic Partnership)
Charles Pemberton (Seven Dials Traders)
Jackie Lythell (Arts Commission)
Sarah Springford (Brighton & Hove Chamber of Commerce)

1 WELCOME

1.1 Councillor Mears welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2 INTRODUCTIONS

2.1 All those present introduced themselves, including the representatives of the Non Domestic ratepayers.

3 REVENUE BUDGET/CAPITAL INVESTMENT PROGRAMME 2009/10

3.1 The Director of Finance & Resources explained that as part of the Council's Budget setting process it was required by law to consult with the Non-Domestic Ratepayers on the Budget proposals for 2010/11. The Budget papers were due to be published for the Cabinet meeting on the 11th February and Full Council on the 25th February. She outlined the key elements of the proposals and explained that any concerns and queries discussed at meeting today would be recorded and circulated with the papers for the Council meeting.

3.2 The Director of Finance & Resources stated that the council was working on the premise of a 2.5% council tax increase and was having to look at addressing pressures in Children's Services and those caused by the economic downturn e.g. a lower income from rents and charges. However, the council was also seeking to prioritise investment in new areas and the Administration had identified the seafront and transport as areas needing resources. The council was anticipating a difficult financial settlement in terms of Public Sector Funding and work was underway in preparation for that outcome as well as to encourage capital investment in the city.

3.3 In addition to the main points highlighted, the Leader of the Council also reassured those present that one of the Administration's priorities was to work towards cushioning the city's economy in face of the current economic situation. The seafront was an important element to the city being regarded as a visitor destination, and as such was the city's 'shop front'. The 7 miles of railings had been identified as needing repair and action was required to improve Hove lagoon. The Administration was looking at the provision of a new gum removal service across the city, which required investment in new machinery. She also noted that the council was intending to utilise a traffic modelling system so that the impact of future developments could be accounted for across the city and developers would be able to use it when considering plans for submission.

4. CAPITAL INVESTMENT PROGRAMME 2010/11

4.1 The Director of Finance & Resources noted that details of the capital investment programme had been circulated to the representatives prior to the meeting.

5 QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

5.1 The Non-Domestic Ratepayers representatives noted the information and welcomed the proposed traffic modelling system. One representative asked what had happened to the previous model brought in a few years ago. The representatives also welcomed the intention to provide a new gum removal service, which would have a direct benefit in terms of how people felt about the city's environment.

5.2 The representatives also welcomed the proposals for park & ride schemes and noted that the traffic modelling process would be helpful when looking at satellite sites in the East and West of the city. It was suggested that sponsorship might be a way of enabling further improvements such as the various shelters along the seafront.

5.3 The Director of Finance & Resources stated that the broader question of sponsorship was being looked at by the council, including factors such as conservation issues and the overall impact on the street scene

5.4 Councillor Mears stated that the replacement programme for the seafront railings was very expensive, however it was hoped that this could be completed. There were serious problems with regard to the maintenance of Hove Lagoon which also needed to be addressed. However, she noted the concern raised in terms of ensuring the works covered all of the seafront and not just parts and would ask officers to review the programme and ensure the seafront businesses and traders were kept informed of progress.

5.5 Mr. Freeman queried why there was a £15 charge for a copy of the council's accounts. The Director of Finance & Resources stated that the charge was made to cover the cost of printing and the accounts were available free on-line; however she was happy to ensure that Mr. Freeman received a free copy.

5.6 The representatives queried whether there were any specific proposals for increasing parking charges and the means to encourage people to make use of public transport. Concern was expressed with regard to the entry to the city via the A23 which often gave an impression of being a car park.

5.7 Councillor Mears stated that the charges were expected to increase in line with inflation generally, but there would be differences in areas with levels remaining frozen, or increasing. She accepted there was a problem in terms of gaining access into the city which needed to be addressed, as staying visitors needed to be able to drive into the city. She hoped that the traffic modelling system would help to look at how improvements could be made.

5.8 The representatives queried whether anything had been identified in terms of the LABGI funding.

5.9 The Director of Finance & Resources confirmed that as yet nothing had been set against this funding and confirmation of the level of funding was awaited.

5.10 The representatives noted that the support given to the promotion of the city as a place to visit had proved beneficial and directly helped some businesses remain afloat during the downturn. It was hoped that this support could be repeated for the forthcoming year.

5.11 Councillor Mears welcomed the information and stated that it was hoped to repeat the exercise.

5.12 The representatives referred to the economic situation and queried whether it was anticipated that there would be an impact on collection rates for the Business Rates. It was noted that the recent severe weather had led to the larger hotels dropping their prices which could not be matched by the smaller ones and therefore any help with arrangements for payments would be welcomed.

5.13 The Council Tax and NNDR Billing Manager stated that collection figures were currently up on the last two-month period with less reminders and summonses being issued last year. However, he stated that it would be helpful to get direct feedback when the new bills were issued and for businesses to be encouraged to contact the team if they were facing difficulties as there were ways of helping to meet their obligations.

5.14 The representatives welcomed the information and asked if some information on the assistance available could be provided for them to circulate to their members/associates.

5.15 The representatives noted that the Business Rates Supplement Act had come into force and queried whether this would affect Brighton and Hove.

5.16 The Council Tax & NNDR Billing Manager stated that he was unsure as to whether it could be implemented in Brighton and Hove but would be happy to respond further after the meeting.

5.17 It was noted that the council were looking at the matter and it was suggested that it was a matter that could be further discussed at the Business Forum.

5.18 The representatives queried whether it was intended to change the procurement arrangements of the council having regard to the recent article of the Chief Executive.

5.19 The Director of Finance & Resources stated that some re-organisational changes were likely and a more centralised procurement process was being investigated at this stage.

5.20 Councillor Mears stated that the council was looking at the ways in which it could work with other authorities in terms of procurement and the running of contracts. There was a need to adhere to European Law requirements but she was mindful of the need to ensure local delivery was taken into consideration when drawing up contract specifications etc.

5.21 The representatives referred to the Capital Investment information and queried whether it would be an ongoing list. It was also suggested that any

improvements to the planning process would be helpful in terms of speeding up the delivery of prospective developments, as this had a direct impact on small businesses.

5.22 The Director of Finance & Resources stated that it was a snap-shot of the planned list but not a complete list. The aim had been to provide an indication of the projects that were being taken forward.

5.23 Councillor Mears stated that some projects were well underway and ongoing, whilst due to the economic climate others may now take longer to deliver, however the council was working with those involved in these projects to find ways of enabling them to be brought into fruition. She stated that officers were reviewing the planning process and seeking to find ways to enable potential developers to get a clear understanding of what was acceptable and what would be welcomed.

5.24 The Director of Finance & Resources thanked everyone for attending and closed the meeting.

The meeting concluded at 6.40 p.m.