

POLICY AND FINANCE COMMITTEE

7 March 2024 at 6.00 pm

Present: Councillors Stanley (Chair), Nash (Vice-Chair), Cooper, Gunner, Oppler, Pendleton, McAuliffe (Substitute for Birch) and Turner (Substitute for Greenway).
Councillors Butcher, Goodheart, McDougall, O'Neill and Tandy were also in attendance for all or part of the meeting.

679. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for Absence had been received from Councillors Birch, Brooks and Greenway.

680. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of Interest made.

681. MINUTES

The minutes from the last Meeting of the committee held on 12 February 2024 were approved as a correct record and were signed by the Chair at the conclusion of the meeting.

682. ITEMS NOT ON THE AGENDA THAT THE CHAIR OF THE MEETING IS OF THE OPINION SHOULD BE CONSIDERED AS A MATTER OF URGENCY BY REASON OF SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

The Chair confirmed that there was one urgent item for the Committee to consider relating to the Swimming Pool Support Fund Phase 2 Grant. This urgent report had been uploaded to the Committee's web page earlier in the afternoon and had been emailed to Councillors.

The Chair confirmed that the special circumstances for non-compliance with Access to Information Procedure Rules as set out in Part 6, Section 1, Paragraph 5.1 of the Constitution and Section 100B (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 (items not to be considered unless open to inspection at least 5 days before the meeting) were that there were no confirmed meetings of the Policy & Finance Committee until July 2024 and bringing this report to members at that time would delay approval for the capital grant amount being added to the capital programme for the financial year 2024/2025. It was outlined that this could lead to increased risk of failure for the projects being completed due to the deadlines for delivery within the grant agreement. This was the primary reason for the item to be considered tonight as urgent business and as there was the need for this Committee to make a recommendation to Full Council on 13 March 2024.

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The Wellbeing Business Manager was then invited to present the report. He explained its urgency which was to ensure that the Council had the maximum timeframe to deliver these externally funded projects. Notification from Sport England of the successful application of the capital grant had been delayed from December 2023 to January 2024 due to the high amount of applications that had been submitted. The Council had done well to have been successful in being awarded this grant as it had been confirmed that 726 applications had been submitted. The recommendation in the report had been based on the requirement to add the grant amount of £135,470 to the Council's capital programme as it was necessary to claim the grant amount retrospectively by March 2025 following delivery of the project by the swimming pool operators. It was again explained that delaying the presentation of this report to the first cycle of meetings in the new Municipal Year would cause damaging delays for Freedom Leisure and the Arundel Lido in respect of their timeframes for procuring contractors and completing the works. Delays would also impact energy savings to both operators.

Context around the funding application was provided. Officers had been required to lead the application process and had worked with the representatives of Freedom Leisure and the Arundel Lido to complete the applications. There was a successful application for funding from the National Lottery in the sum of £90,400 for the Arundel Lido for Photo Voltaic [PV] Panels and a new main pool cover. Funding from the Exchequer in the sum of £45,070 for Littlehampton Wave for PV panels to be installed on the swimming pool roof. The Housing & Wellbeing Committee had been made aware of the applications at its meeting held on 25 January 2024 in receiving its update report from Freedom Leisure. Members were advised that a separate report would be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee on 26 March 2024 requesting approval to draw down the grant funding received and to approve distribution to both the Arundel Lido and Freedom leisure; and enter into funding agreements.

Before inviting debate, Councillor Oppler formally proposed the recommendation which was seconded by Councillor Nash.

Following short debate,

The Committee

RECOMMEND TO FULL COUNCIL – That

- (1) The amount of £135,470 from the Swimming Pool Support Fund is added to the Council's capital programme for 2024.25; and
- (2) The contents of the report and process of achieving grant funding be noted.

683. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

The Chair confirmed that no questions had been submitted for this meeting.

684. THE LITTLEHAMPTON SEAFRONT PROJECT - UPDATE REPORT

Before inviting the Principal Landscape and Project Officer to present her report, the Chair alerted the Committee to the addendum that had been published to the Committee's web page and circulated to Members earlier in the afternoon, forming part of the supplement pack.

The Principal Landscape and Project Officer started her presentation by referring to the addendum as this contained recommendations for the Committee to consider referring to funding made available to the project since the original project budget had been approved. The recommendations enabled this funding to be formally included within the budget, it was not seeking any extra funding.

Turning the Committee's attention to the main report, it was explained that this formed a further project update since the last update received on 12 February 2024. This would be the last update report that the Committee would receive before work would commence on site. There were still a few details to finalise in terms of confirming exact start dates which would be published soon. Before work would commence on site, there would be some activities for the project team to work through and complete, the team was currently planning to submit the information required to discharge the pre-commencement planning conditions. Procurement packages continued to be issued so that a price could be obtained for the full works and surveys would be carried out on site soon to accurately locate utility services and establish the depth of these. This work was planned for next week and would involve a series of trenches being dug and then backfilled to ensure that the area would remain safe for people to use. Before the main works would commence, some temporary facilities would be installed in particular locations, and that work would commence next month. In drawing up the phasing plans, the contractor had adopted the principle of keeping disruption to a minimum around the seafront and maintaining the car park during the summer period. The high level phasing had been set out in the report and the detail on this would be made available soon. It was outlined how critical communication would be and so work was underway now to coordinate with other teams to make sure this captured all audiences. Project updates would be made available to all Members of the Council as well as being placed on the Council's web site.

Before entering debate, the recommendations were proposed by Councillor Nash and seconded by Councillor Cooper.

In debating the report, the Principal Landscape and Project Officer was asked if the operators at Harbour Park had been kept updated as they had been making enquiries as to what would be happening over the summer. Similarly, The Littlehampton Bonfire Society had also raised concerns about whether they would be able to operate their event this autumn. In response, Members were advised that the Project Team would be planning to meet with Harbour Park shortly as part of the ongoing conversations. The Project Team had not met with the Bonfire Society as contact so far had been via the Council's Events Officer. A written update to the Committee was requested.

The Committee

RESOLVED

To approve the total capital project budget be increased by £81k to £7,346,501 made up of:

- a) £25k for PV panels from the Council's Climate Change budget, funded from revenue reserves offset by a correspondence underspend against the aforementioned budget; and
- b) £56k for Design Guardians, funded from the LUF Capacity and Capability grant.

685. ANGMERING SPORTS HUB PROJECT

The Principal Landscape and Projects Officer presented a report providing an update on the Angmering Sports Hub project and since the Committee's last update received in February 2023. It was highlighted that progress had not been as fast as the Council had anticipated due to Officer involvement in other major projects such as the Littlehampton Seafront Project. Moving forward, a professional team had now been appointed and once the legal agreements were in place, work would commence on site surveys; stakeholder engagement; and drawing up plans. Members were reassured that this work was imminent. The difficulties in funding the project had been explained fully within the report which would be a focus as designs and costs became clearer. The next step would be to look at the constraints of the site and commence engagement with stakeholders.

Having received the update provided, Councillor Cooper confirmed that he had a series of questions that he wished to ask on behalf of Angmering Parish Council. These have been set out below along with the responses received:

- The current facilities at the site are failing and require a significant amount of money to get them into shape with regards to health and safety – this is putting the playing of football at risk for Angmering based clubs/teams. How will officers ensure this project is delivered within the next 2 years as it has been ongoing since 2015? As a result of the proposed sports hub, Angmering Sports and Recreation Association are unable to apply for sports funding. In response, the update provided set out the next steps planned to include a high level programme. The risks for the project had been acknowledged including the shortfall in funding. The next stage of the project would provide more certainty over project delivery, including costs. A further report would be submitted to the Committee once officers were in the position to take the project to the next phase which would include addressing the risks and the shortfall in funding.

- The entrance to the sports hub is of great concern to Angmering Parish Council, and the surrounding residents. The current entrance to the pitches is off Decoy Drive – this is not suitable for the projected level of traffic. The entrance must come off Arundel Road and through the industrial part of the development. Can officers confirm that they are also in agreement with this and that it will be included in any proposals. Section 4.5 ii of the report would imply that this is the case. In response, it was confirmed that this was the preferred access route and that it was proposed that proposals would include this.
- Are we still on track with the Spring date for public consultation and will Angmering Parish Council be involved? It was confirmed that Angmering Parish Council would definitely be included in the public consultation as a key stakeholder. Consultation was likely to start in late Spring/early Summer, officers were due to discuss the programme imminently with the project management team and so an update would be provided to Members once those discussions had taken place.
- The funding for completion of this project still seems precarious. What reassurance can ADC Officers give the community of Angmering that dedicated officer time will be given to obtaining the shortfall to keep it on track. It was confirmed that once plans had been prepared, Officers would have a much better idea in terms of how much the project would cost. They would then work to establish what options were available in terms of funding and phasing the project. A report would be brought back to the Committee.

Further questions were asked by the Committee. Following on from the questions raised on behalf of Angmering Parish Council, concern was expressed over the lack of progression and the need to ensure that Angmering, which had taken a sizeable chunk of recent development, would receive this asset, not just for the Parish but also for the surrounding area. This project needed to be delivered urgently and reassurance was sought that this would be the case. Concern was expressed in terms of the funding gap identified within the report of up to £4m, as the report had confirmed that any funding gap would have to be met from borrowing which would impact the Council's revenue budget. Would the Council have to borrow the full amount of the shortfall or would some of the shortfall be reduced by grant funding. In response, The Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer outlined that although he sympathised with Members' concerns, an answer could not be provided until the business case had been developed. He reemphasised that any request for borrowing needed to prove that the Council's priorities and objectives would be achieved and would be financially viable.

A further question was asked which was whether a list of other sports bodies that the Council would communicate with could be provided and if approaches had been made to the Rugby Football Union and the England and Wales Cricket Board as the development of this facility could be a valuable local asset that they could use. It was confirmed that initial engagement with stakeholders had been undertaken as part of the early feasibility work. The proposed facility mix had been produced as a result of this engagement to include the 3G pitch, grass pitches, cricket wicket and other facilities.

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The cricket and football clubs and other stakeholders, including Sussex Cricket, were listed in that document, this included Engand Netball, Sussex FA and Cricket. Rugby would have also been approached, but as they were not listed in those who responded they possibly did not respond due to nearby location of the Worthing Rugby Club. This would be revisited as part of the next phase reengaging with all stakeholders including sporting bodies. It was highlighted that any business case supporting any grant application would need to demonstrate that the needs of the local community had been met to also include addressing the needs of unrepresented groups and activities.

It was confirmed that the MCC Foundation had no recreational hub anywhere in the district and could be a valuable partner in both facility development via grants or specialist support as well as making the most of the facility when complete. It was highlighted that their contact details were available on their web site and that they should be included as one of the sports bodies to engage with in the future. This was agreed by Officers, and it was confirmed that Officers would investigate all opportunities for funding and would approach the MCC as one of those opportunities.

The Committee then noted the contents of the report.

(During the course of the discussion on this item, Councillor Turner declared a Personal Interest as Vice-President of Ferring Cricket Club and also as a member of the MCC Foundation).

686. THE ALEXANDRA THEATRE, BOGNOR REGIS - PROGRESS REPORT

Before inviting the Interim Regeneration Officer to present his report, the Chair alerted the Committee to the addendum that had been published to the Committee's web page and circulated to Members earlier in the afternoon, forming part of the supplement pack.

The Interim Regeneration Officer provided a further update on the regeneration of the Regis Centre, Bognor Regis and outlined some key points since his last update provided to the Committee on 12 February 2024. Commencing with the addendum, it was explained that this was being presented to regularise a number of budgets that had been allocated to the project during the year from the UK Prosperity Fund and the Changing Places Toilet Fund.

In terms of project progress, the milestones achieved were outlined. The re-procurement of the contractor had confirmed the appointment of Neillcott Construction, the same contractor being used for the Littlehampton Seafront Project. A meeting was taking place tomorrow to commence discussions on the way forward in terms of the rest of the stage 4 design; how the compound would work; and where the site office would be. Work would then start with the Council's Events Team looking at what the impact would be for The Esplanade and Belmont Street going forward. A meeting had taken place with the Development Manager from Premier Inns, who would work with the Council on construction management plans to minimis impact as best as possible.

Further intrusive grounds surveys undertaken had found more asbestos. Some had already been removed and some required more specialist removal due to its location. Arun Arts had relocated to the Bognor Regis Town Hall and their equipment was in storage. The remainder of the RIBA stage 4 design would recommence now that a contractor had been appointed which would allow the project delivery price to be confirmed enabling the demolition to commence shortly.

Councillor Nash then formally proposed the recommendations which were seconded by Councillor Oppler.

Questions were asked about the location of the site office; would this be in the Regis Centre Car Park or the Place and if and how many car parking spaces might be lost as this could have an impact on car parking revenue. Although a formal response from NeilCott Construction was awaited, it was likely that the site office would be in car parking spaces in the Regis Centre car park. There were spaces allocated in the theatre section of the car park which would be used first, it was anticipated that there would be a small revenue implication due to the use of car parking spaces for this purpose.

A question was also asked about Arun Arts and whether its licensee agreement had been concluded. It was explained that this was still being progressed and a response from the legal practice dealing with this was expected. Finally, it was confirmed that work was expected to commence in May 2024.

Two Non-Committee Members were permitted to address the meeting. They expressed concern over asbestos removal and associated costs and how this might impact finances. Concern was also expressed over Arun Arts and did the Council have confidence in its long-term future in terms of it running the theatre on completion. Comments were also made about the size of the proposed café/restaurant and bar in the new scheme.

The Committee

RESOLVD – That

To approve the total capital project budget be increased by £139k to £16,161,686 made up of:

- a) £45k for solar PV panels from the Council's Climate Change budget , funded from revenue reserves offset by a corresponding underspend against the aforementioned budget; and
- b) £94k for kitchen and studio enhancements from the Council's UK Shared Prosperity Fund allocation – which has ben approved by Arun UKSPF partnership group.

687. CARBON ACTION WORK PLAN - UPDATE

The Chair confirmed that this item had been withdrawn from the agenda.

688. THE WEBCASTING OF MEETINGS - FUTURE OPTIONS

The Committee received a report from the Group Head of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer which had been compiled by a group of Officers working on exploring options for Members to consider in looking at the ongoing use and the future of webcasting and associated costs.

The Committee was advised that the Council had been webcasting its formal public meetings since 2018 as did many other local authorities and that this was now widespread practice and had become an important and easy way of opening and making more transparent decision making. It also offered an easy way for members of the public to view meetings without the need to physically attend them. This benefitted those that could not attend meetings due to varying reasons. The webcasting of meetings also supported the council's continuing engagement to reduce physical travel as part of its carbon reduction action plan work.

The Council currently webcast live all its Full Council and Committee meetings using an audio-visual system that was purchased in 2014. The age of that equipment was severely affecting its reliability and performance and was making it increasingly difficult for the current provider and manufacturer to support the ageing parts of the system.

A Member session had been held on 4 March 2024 to explain to Members the intricacies and operational/practical requirements of this complex system and to identify the parts of the audio-visual suite that now required urgent upgrade to ensure effective webcasting. The report set out the different options available and recommended to members by the Officer Group. In recommending options, Officers had balanced what was critically needed against what could be possible with a fully modernised system, bearing in mind the current financial climate. It was outlined to Members that to not update the ageing equipment would result in a system that was rapidly deteriorating suddenly reaching end of life meaning that the Council would no longer be able to webcast its meetings at some point in the future and would therefore not be able to continue supporting the public access highlighted earlier. The Group Head of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer also explained to Members the unseen amount of time that was spent by the Committee Services Team and the ICT team in setting up the equipment and testing it prior to each meeting held. Modernising the equipment would reduce this unnecessary impact, which would not change if Members chose not to pursue the options recommended.

In finalising his presentation of the report, the Group Head of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer paid particular thanks to the ICT Operations Manager and the Committee Services Manager for their work in exploring the options presented and for compiling the report to Members.

The Chair invited questions from Members. One Member confirmed that he could not support the recommendations as he could not approve spending this amount of money on technology at a time when staff redundancies were being made and internal IT budgets were being cut.

A Member expressed concern that the webcasting statistics for external viewing were not significant, meaning that Members needed to prioritise whether enhancing and sustaining public engagement in this way was a priority and at a time when the Council was making financial savings. A view was expressed that if Options 1 and 2 were agreed, more work needed to be undertaken to improve public engagement through webcasting. Councillors were concerned that the cost of options 1 and 2 would require borrowing and what the implications would be.

Members thanked the ICT Manager and the Committee Services Officer who had spent time to explain the equipment and how it functioned on 4 March 2024, as this had provided helpful understanding.

Members highlighted that it was important to consider how long any upgraded system would last and if the Council chose to dispose of the Arun Civic Centre in 2-3 years' time whether the upgraded equipment could be removed and installed elsewhere. It was confirmed that the webcasting equipment could be removed and located elsewhere.

Varying other views were made. There were Councillors who felt compelled to accept the options proposed. This was because the provision to view meetings live was seen as a vital tool that encouraged and promoted local democracy. Members agreed that it provided residents with greater access to decision making and that this level of openness was an important part of local governance. There was concern about the cost of borrowing and the Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer was asked to provide an opinion. He stated that he understood the concerns of Members and referred them to Paragraph 8.1 of the report where he had provided his advice. This was a relatively small project and so borrowing £61.5k was more manageable and could be funded through capital receipts. The ICT Manager confirmed that the upgraded equipment would last longer and potentially for up to 10 years. A five-year warranty on the hardware would be provided.

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Debate continued regarding Option 2 which was to replace and upgrade the 14 desk mounted screens in the Chamber and whether this was necessary and what would the benefits be rather than using the IT equipment provided to Members. It was explained that the replacement of these screens would improve the viewing experience for Members and Officers and would provide clearer sight lines in the Chamber. The non replacement of these screen was seen as a health and safety risk due to eye discomfort and strain, headaches and fatigue caused by blurry screens and disturbed vision. This observation was agreed by those Non-Committee Members present who were also Members of the Planning Committee, due to the length of meetings and the multiple presentations provided at meetings.

Discussion returned again to borrowing the project cost and what this would mean for the Council in terms of final cost and for how long interest may need to be paid. The Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer confirmed that he would provide a response as to what the full amount of borrowing and the term would be.

Returning to the viewing statistics, a member asked for reassurance that work would be undertaken in terms of publicising the webcasting links and making them more accessible to members of the public and easier to find to achieve wider public participation. An assurance was provided that this work would be undertaken.

Having had the recommendations proposed by Councillor Oppler and seconded by Councillor Nash,

The Committee

RESOLVED – That

- (1) Option 1 – to upgrade the current video matrix, touch screens and audio-visual distribution is approved;
- (2) Option 2 – to replace the 14 screens on the desks in the Council Chamber is approved, with a cost of £61,500 for Options 1 and 2; and
- (3) Option 6 – to procure the current webcasting and maintenance contract for another year from July 2024 is approved.

The Committee

RECOMMEND TO FULL COUNCIL

That Options 1 and 2 at a value of £61,500 be added to the Council's Capital Programme.

689. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS 2022-2026 - QUARTER 3 - PERFORMANCE REPORT FOR THE PERIOD 1 APRIL TO 31 DECEMBER 2023

The Group Head of Organisational Excellence presented the Key Performance Indicators for 2022 to 2026 covering the Quarter 3 Performance period from 1 April to 30 September 2023.

In noting the report, a range of questions were asked as summarised below:

- CP16 [Average days to re-let all properties (key to key) excluding major voids], Although it was acknowledged that this figure was reducing, this gradual improvement was too slow. Members expressed a firm desire to see a step change in terms of achieving a much greater decrease. The Interim Joint Chief Executive and Director of Environment and Communities agreed but confirmed that the issue was being addressed by changing the Council's maintenance contractor. Officers were confident that this would bring enhanced improvement.
- CP24 [Household waste sent for re-use, recycling and composting – 505 annual target] – concern was expressed that this was not being achieved and that a downward trend could be seen. What was the Council doing to address this? The retendering of the waste contract was explained, subject to the approval of Members. The introduction of Food Waste would assist. A new contract would improve the Council's collection regime and recycling rates would, as a result, improve. The Member Briefing held on 5 March 2024 had provided this detail. A request was made for the content of this briefing to be sent to Councillor McAuliffe who had not been able to attend.
- Congratulations were extended to Officers in respect of CP17 [Of homeless cases owed a prevention duty - % successfully resolved] in terms of the progress made in improving figures.
- Concern was expressed over CP4 and CP5. Looking at increases in staff sickness, what measures were being put into place to tackle this? Had there been any Policy changes to tackle this issue and to look at staff turnover? In response, the support systems in place for staff were explained such as the employee assistance programme. It was also highlighted that various issues were being addressed by the culture change officer group who were continuing to work closely with staff. As local authorities were no longer seen as attractive potential employers, human resource staff were attending employer careers fayres and were working closely with schools on the opportunities that were available. This did show that work on tackling the concerns was in progress. A written response was requested confirming what the Council was doing to mitigate the figures and to address the issue.

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690. ELECTORAL REVIEW

The Group Head of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer presented his report covering the planned electoral review for the district and following Full Council's approval back in November 2022 of a motion to invite the Local Government Boundary Commission for England to carry out a review of the number of Councillors needed in Arun, and the warding arrangements within the district.

One of the actions agreed by Council had been for Officers to carry out an assessment of the costs of conducting a local government boundary review and provide recommendations to this Committee on the resourcing implications of such a review.

From a costing perspective, it was confirmed that most of the cost would be Officer time as the review would be progressed by Officers from within existing resources. Whilst the review would be resource intensive in terms of officer time, this would be met as part of the day to day duties as the requirement to conduct an electoral review was a periodic requirement that was factored into the roles of the Group Head of Law & Governance and the Electoral Services Manager and other staff involved. It was explained that they may be a need to commit to spend on items such as public consultation and other similar elements of the review such as public notices, but this would be minimal and so would be met from existing budgets.

Finally, it was explained to Members that the recommendations set out within the report were being amended and that Members were being requested to note the report and that Officers would update the outcome of this report to the next meeting of the Corporate Support Committee.

The Committee then debated the report. It was felt that public consultation was critical and that this needed to be reflected within the report. The Group Head of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer confirmed that there would be public consultation and that this had been reflected in the project timetable attached to the report.

The Committee supported this review which would address the fact that some wards within the district were over and underrepresented. A reduction in the number of Councillors was also supported.

Following further debate, the Committee noted the contents of the report and that a further report would be taken to the next meeting of the Corporate Support Committee on 30 April 2024.

691. COUNCIL TAX - EMPTY AND SECOND HOMES

The Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer presented his report setting out options to increase council tax income collection by charging council tax on empty properties after one year of being empty, (rather than the current policy of doing so after two years), it also recommended introducing a second homes premium, both with effect from 1 April 2025. This was because the Council had to advertise and provide a year's notice of its intention. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 had granted local authorities the discretion to implement changes to the charging of council tax on empty properties and second homes. The financial advantages were then explained to Members.

It was highlighted that the delegations set out in Recommendations (b) and c) applied to not just recommendations a) but also to Recommendation (d).

The recommendations in the report were then proposed by Councillor Gunner and seconded by Councillor Cooper.

Having received questions seeking confirming explanation on the definition of a second home and how this might impact business accommodation that was only used periodically, the Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer confirmed that he would provide written responses to the Members concerned.

Following further debate and overwhelming support from the Committee,

The Committee

RESOLVED – That it

(1) Approves the minimum period before council tax is charged on empty properties be reduced from two years to one year, with effect from 1 April 2025;

(2) Delegates authority to the Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer to make implement further changes that may be prescribed by the Secretary of State.

The Committee

RECOMMENDS TO FULL COUNCIL

That a council tax premium of up to 100% in respect of second homes be introduced with effect from 1 April 2025.

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692. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received and noted its work programme up to the end of the municipal year. It was noted that the Committee's Work Programme for the new year would be brought to the its first meeting in the new municipal year.

693. ITEMS PUT FORWARD FROM SERVICE COMMITTEES

The Chair confirmed that there were no items for this meeting.

694. OUTSIDE BODIES - FEEDBACK FROM MEETINGS

The Chair confirmed that there were no items for this meeting.

(The meeting concluded at 7.47 pm).