

Decision Digest

Edition 131

Monthly summary of the decisions taken at meetings of the Council, Cabinet, Overview & Scrutiny and other Panels for the period 1st to 31st January 2013.

HOUSING BENEFIT CHANGES AND THE POTENTIAL IMPACT ON HUNTINGDONSHIRE

Both the Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) have been updated on the effect of Government changes to the Housing Benefits system arising from the Welfare Reform Act. Transitional protection arrangements ceased in December 2012 and the impact of this is not yet known. The reforms will start to effect social tenants from April 2013 onwards.

The Panel has discussed a number of matters including subsidised private sector rents for households under the threat of eviction, the use of MTP funding to assist with preventing homelessness, the process undertaken by the Council to identify claimants at risk and the awareness raising activities undertaken with Partners on the impact of the reforms.

LOCAL PLAN 2036 – PROVISION OF SOCIAL AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND IMPACT UPON HOMELESSNESS

As a result of increases in the levels of homelessness within the District and the demand for affordable housing, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has discussed with the Executive Councillor for Strategic Planning and Housing and the Head of Planning and Housing Strategy how the new Local Plan will help to address

housing and homelessness needs within the District.

The influence that developers and landowners have over the market, the exception to planning policy that exists for community plans and the incentives offered to social tenants to downsize their properties were amongst a number of matters that were discussed by the Panel.

Further updates will be given to the Panel on a 6 monthly basis.

HUNTINGDON GYM

In conjunction with the Cabinet, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) considered a financial proposal relating to Huntingdon Olympic Gymnastics Club. The Panel has agreed, in principle, to the terms of the proposal but has made a number of suggestions to alleviate some of the concerns raised by Members at the meeting.

Having been advised of the Panel's views, the Cabinet has approved terms for a loan to Huntingdon Gym to be funded by way of a supplementary capital estimate with the revenue impact being met from the loan repayments. In authorising the Head of Legal and Democratic Service to complete the necessary legal documentation, the Cabinet has requested that discussions be instigated with Huntingdon Town Council with a view to them agreeing some form of guarantee for the loan.

NOTIFICATION OF GRANT AID AWARDS FOR 2013-14 AND DETAILS OF INTERIM ARRANGEMENTS FOR ADVICE SERVICES (JANUARY-MARCH 2013)

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has been updated on decisions relating to the 2013/14 grant aid awards and the interim arrangements for advisory services during the January to March 2013 period. Matters discussed included the Rural Cambs CAB, the role of the Voluntary Sector Working Group in monitoring the performance of organisations awarded grant funding and the level of funding awarded to Rural Cambs CAB for the delivery of interim advisory services. Clarification on the actual figure has been sought in respect of the latter.

BUDGET & MTP

At the invitation of the Chairman, the Liberal Democrat Group have presented to the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) their views on next year's Budget and MTP. The Group Leader has outlined their view on future levels of Council tax and a number of suggestions for specific short and long financial savings have been made.

The Chairman and other Panel representatives will meet with the UKIP Group Leader on 22nd January.

FRAUD INVESTIGATION

A report on the activities of the Fraud Team, the potential for fraud across the Council's service and the planned response to risk particularly following the introduction of a Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS) in 2015 has been considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being). The report had previously been considered by the Corporate

Governance Panel who had agreed that the Council should take the opportunity to develop and investigate non-welfare fraud over the next two years. The information gained during this period would enable an assessment of the requirements for the fraud service post April 2015.

In considering the report, the Panel has discussed a number of issues including the potential to generate additional publicity and the role of the National Fraud Authority.

PRIVATE SECTOR RENT LEVELS

Following a request for information at a previous meeting, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has received an update on rent levels in Huntingdonshire. With the exception of 4 bedroom properties, there was currently no evidence to suggest that landlords were adjusting their rents downwards as a result of changes to the Housing Benefit System. This has reduced the number of households which the Council has been able to work proactively with to prevent homelessness.

Having recognised that the Council needed to look very closely at the issue of homelessness, the Panel discussed a number of matters including provisions in the Localism Act, the impact modelling which had been undertaken on welfare reforms and the likely reasons why rents were not falling. Members also noted that the District Council had two small discretionary budgets for homelessness prevention.

A further update will be given to the Panel in 6 months.

**CUSTOMER SERVICES
MONITORING REPORT**

The Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has considered the Customer Service Performance Report for the period July to December 2012. The report sets out the standards of service that have been achieved and the issues the service will face in the forthcoming period.

In considering the report, the Panel has discussed a range of matters including sickness absence, the impact of welfare reforms, the cost of the new Customer Relationship Management System (CRM) system and the service levels provided.

Having noted that a new Customer Services Strategy and interrelated Strategy for Channel Migration were currently being developed, the Panel agreed that it would be useful for a small group to contribute to the formulation of these documents.

A further report will be provided in 6 months.

BUSINESS PLAN - ONE LEISURE

The contents of a proposed Business Plan for One Leisure and options for restructuring the existing staffing arrangements have been considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being).

Having discussed the draft Plan, the Panel has recommended to the Cabinet that the One Leisure Business Plan should not be adopted in its present form and have made a number of suggestions on the way in which it should be developed. Nevertheless the Panel has recommended that work should proceed to identify and implement savings that do not have an impact on services at the earliest opportunity.

The Panel will give further consideration to whether to pursue its

study into the One Leisure business model at a future meeting.

In considering the Business Plan and the Panel's views, the Cabinet has acknowledged the steps being taken to improve controllable income and expenditure and agreed that this should continue. The Cabinet has asked why forecast revenue returns for One Leisure Huntingdon were significantly lower than those for One Leisure St Neots and St Ives. It was noted that the level of investment at One Leisure, Huntingdon had been considerably lower than the other centres and in response it was reported that the fitness studio, spa and pool were smaller. Furthermore, expansion of the Centre was limited partly due to ownership issues. Having been advised that information on the Plan's progress would be submitted to future meetings, the Cabinet has requested the General Manager (One Leisure), in consultation with the Head of Paid Service, to achieve a level of savings of the order of £250,000.

LANDSCAPE SENSITIVITY TO WIND TURBINE DEVELOPMENT DRAFT REVISION OF THE WIND POWER SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING DOCUMENT (SPD) 2006

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) was provided with an opportunity to comment on the draft revision of the Wind Power SPD, which was currently undergoing consultation. The Panel has expressed their concerns over a number of matters including the impact of cumulative developments upon the District, the absence of any limits set on the proximity of turbines to dwellings and the group size proposed for large scale developments. In terms of the latter, the Panel is of the view that 24 turbines on one site would not be an appropriate policy to adopt for Huntingdonshire. Additionally, the

Panel has requested that point (e) of the guidance be reconsidered in respect of the Ouse Valley area landscape as it was felt that this required further clarification. Nevertheless, the Panel is generally supportive of the draft revised SPD and asked for their comments to be forwarded to the Head of Planning and Housing Strategy.

SPEED REDUCTION INITIATIVE – HILTON

Representatives of Speedwatch and Hilton Parish Council addressed the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) on the speed reduction initiative in Hilton. It has been agreed with the Head of Operations that the use of speed reduction stickers for display on wheelie bins will be reviewed pending the outcome of a trial in the village.

The Panel was advised that strong evidence existed supporting the scheme, including that obtained from other local authorities. The Panel was asked to support the campaign by not objecting to the display of stickers on wheelie bins, by approving the format and design of the stickers and by requesting that funding be made available to provide stickers in the future.

Members agreed that a report outlining the terms of the proposal should be submitted to the Panel in the future. The Panel has also indicated their wish to discuss the matter with the Executive Councillor for Environment and the Head of Operations.

DRAINAGE

An update on drainage problems experienced in Yaxley and on recent flooding events within the District was reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being).

Having regard to the former, Members were encouraged to note the progress made by Anglian Water to resolve the various foul and surface water flooding problems experienced within the village. In terms of the latter, it was noted that river flooding from the Nene and Ouse had caused problems in the northern parts of the District and Brampton respectively and that surface water flooding had been of particular concern in Stilton. Around 2,500-3,000 sandbags had been delivered over November and December 2012 to affected areas.

The Panel has requested a further update on drainage and flooding and also asked for a report on Emergency Planning to be submitted to them at a future meeting.

CHARGING FOR A SECOND GREEN BIN – CALL IN

The Cabinet's decisions relating to the call-in for charging for second green bins was noted by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being). The Cabinet has reiterated that the proposal will continue to be considered with all the Council's options for saving measures as part of the Medium Term Plan.

FINANCIAL MONITORING

The Head of Financial Services has drawn the Cabinet's attention to spending variations in the revenue budget for the current year and modifications to the approved capital programme. It was noted that the forecast for delivery of new homes may not materialise thereby affecting the level of bonus allocated by the Government. The situation will be monitored closely and the likelihood of achieving forecast amounts included in the quarterly monitoring reports.

ALLOCATION OF COUNCIL TAX SUBSIDY GRANT

The Cabinet has endorsed the use of the District Council's Council Tax Subsidy Grant to compensate Town and Parish Council for a reduction in income. It was noted that changes to the Government's Council Tax Benefits Scheme will result in a reduction in the Parish and Town Council's taxbase from 2013/14. In approving the grant allocations, Executive Councillors have stressed that they were not able to guarantee that a similar grant will be given in future years.

USE OF CONSULTANTS WHEN DEALING WITH APPLICATIONS WHERE AGRICULTURE IS A FACTOR

On the recommendation of the Overview and Scrutiny (Environmental Well-Being) and at the request of the Cabinet, the Head of Planning and Housing Strategy has considered the procedure for dealing with planning applications which involve agriculture. Previously the District Council had only used the services of one agricultural consultant to provide expert specialist advice on applications to ensure consistency of approach and advice. It has been accepted, however, that there might be occasions when the services of other specialist agricultural consultants would be beneficial when farming practices or the needs of an enterprise are more unusual. Therefore the Development Management Panel has authorised the Head of Planning and Housing Strategy to decide whether agricultural consultant advice or special consultant advice is required to assist in the determination of applications where agriculture is a factor. Such applications will be subject to a desk top assessment by the appropriate consultant. Should site visits be requested or considered

necessary, the cost is to be borne by the applicant.

REVOCATION OF THE EAST OF ENGLAND PLAN 2008 AND 'SAVED' POLICIES FROM THE STRUCTURE PLAN 2003

The Development Management Panel has noted the consequences, for planning policy, of the Regional Strategy for the East of England (Revocation) Order 2012 which came into force on 3rd January 2013. This Order revoked the East of England Plan 2008, the revision to the Plan relating to Accommodation for Gypsy and Travellers and Travelling Showpeople in the East of England, the Regional Economic Strategy 2008 and all Directions preserving policies in the Structure Plan in the East of England including those remaining policies in the Cambridgeshire Structure Plan 2003. In practice, reference to these documents will not appear in any further reports to the Panel.

RESIDENTIAL WHEELED BINS – PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO THE SCHEME OF DELEGATED POWERS IN RESPECT OF DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT

As the Developer Contributions SPD 2011 requires new housing development to make a contribution towards the provision of residential wheeled bins, the Development Management Panel has authorised the Head of Planning and Housing Strategy to refuse an application for development where the proposal is acceptable in all other respects and there is no reason under the Scheme of Delegation to refer it to the Panel but the obligation to provide a wheeled bin has not been met.

DEVELOPMENT APPLICATIONS

Four applications were considered by the Development Management Panel in January and all were supported by the Panel including a revised application for a new foodstore, petrol filling station, nine shop units, 24 residential units, office floor space and car parking on land between St John's Street and George Street in Huntingdon.