

Dear Councillor

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ENVIRONMENTAL WELL-BEING) -
TUESDAY, 8 FEBRUARY 2011**

I am now able to enclose for consideration at the above meeting the following reports that were unavailable when the agenda was printed.

**Agenda Item
No.**

4. LOCAL TRANSPORT PLAN (Pages 1 - 16)

To Consider a report by the Head of Planning Services seeking Members comments on the draft Local Transport Plan 2011 prior to its consideration by Cabinet – to follow.

6. PLANNING CONSERVATION WORKING GROUP (Pages 17 - 28)

To consider the report of the Planning Conservation Working Group – to follow.

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**OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY
CABINET
COUNCIL**

**8th FEBRUARY
17th FEBRUARY
23rd FEBRUARY**

NEW LOCAL TRANSPORT PLAN (LTP3) (Report by Head of Planning Services)

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Local Transport Plan (LTP) is an important County-wide document which sets out transport policies and programmes for several years ahead. The current LTP is the second Cambridgeshire LTP and covers the period 2006 - 2011.
- 1.2 The County Council is required to produce a third Local Transport Plan (LTP3) for the period from April 2011. The new plan must be in place by 31st March 2011 and, as part of its formulation, the County Council is required to consult District Councils and other key stakeholders.
- 1.3 LTP3 consists of two parts:
 1. Policies and Strategy
 2. Implementation Plan

2. LTP3 POLICIES AND STRATEGY

- 2.1 As an initial stage of LTP3 development, the County Council carried out consultation between January and July 2010. This resulted in a low response rate (0.5%), but those who responded identified improvements to public transport infrastructure and improving roads as the most important transport improvements for LTP3.
- 2.2 Following public consultation, the County Council have developed the Policies and Strategy of LTP3. Appendix A contains the Executive Summary to the LTP3 Policies and Strategy document. HDC officers have been consulted as part of this process and have contributed to the final documents.

3. LTP3 IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

- 3.1 The development of the Implementation Plan has been delayed by the late announcement (13 December) of the level of transport capital grants. Although the level of maintenance funding has not been greatly reduced, the funding for new (“integrated transport”) schemes is about

half the level of the last 5 years. Appendix B contains the Executive Summary to the LTP3 Implementation Plan document.

- 3.3 Appendix C summarises the County's draft programme for 2011/12. The draft programme keeps maintenance funding at near 2010/11 levels, but the Integrated Transport Block is about half of 2010/11 allocation levels. Programme funding is likely to stay at this greatly reduced level, as set out in the following table:

Programme Area	Av. funding 2006/07 – 10/11	LTP3 funding		Indicative funding		Av. cut from LTP2
		2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	
Integrated Transport	£8.431M	£3.805 M	£4.059 M	£4.059 M	£5.707 M	-48%
Maintenance	£11.658M	£10.712 M	£10.695 M	£10.801 M	£10.104 M	-9%
Total	£20.089M	£14.517 M	£14.754 M	£14.860 M	£15.811 M	-25%

4. IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The LTP is the County Council's major source of maintenance and general transport funding. The major reductions in the Integrated Transport funding described above will impact significantly upon the County's ability to deliver improved transport infrastructure, both generally and in Huntingdonshire. These reductions follow on from the withdrawal of over £2m of funding from Cambridgeshire's Integrated Transport allocation, as part of the Government's emergency budget of June 2010.
- 4.2 The loss of Government funding for transport schemes will be compounded by HDC's financial position. Over the past 10 years, the Council has included significant capital funding for transport related projects in its Medium Term Plan. This has delivered well in excess of £2M of District Council funded transport benefits for Huntingdonshire. For LTP3, however, the Council's draft budget does not provide such financial support. The Council will thus be wholly dependent on funding from external sources, principally from the much reduced Government allocations and development related funding.
- 4.3 In responding to the proposed LTP3, it is recommended that the Council's main comment is to express concern at the greatly reduced level of Integrated Block funding. In view of this, we would encourage the County Council to pursue all possible alternative sources of funding, including from the recently announced Local Sustainable Transport Fund.
- 4.4 In addition to commenting upon the proposals, we are required to provide a Huntingdonshire District Council Statement for inclusion in

the LTP3 Appendices. A draft statement is attached, as Appendix D. This statement reflects the current funding difficulties, as well as ongoing concerns about delays in implementing schemes

5. RECOMMENDATION

5.1 It is recommended that the Cabinet recommend to Council that:

- i) The Council supports the Huntingdonshire District Statement for inclusion in LTP3, as set out in Appendix D of this report. and forwards this to the County Council
- ii) Expresses regret to the County Council about the greatly reduced overall funding for LTP3, but encourages the County Council to pursue all possible alternative sources of funding, including from the recently announced Local Sustainable Transport Fund.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

LTP 2 – 2006-2011

LTP3 Executive Summaries (Appendices A and B of this report)

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Appendix A

LTP3 Policies and Strategy Executive Summary

This is Cambridgeshire's Third Local Transport Plan (LTP3) and covers the period 2011-2026.

The Plan is split in to two main parts; this first part is the Policies and Strategy, which sets out the Plan's objectives, problems and challenges, the strategy to meet the challenges, and the indicators and targets we will use to monitor our performance. The second part is the Implementation Plan, which is essentially a business plan detailing how we will deliver the LTP3 Strategy. It details our programmes for the delivery of transport improvements to the networks managed by the County Council, and also for the day-to-day management and maintenance of the network. It sets out the schemes and measures we expect to deliver in the first year of the Plan in detail, and sets out the processes by which future years' programmes will be developed.

The LTP demonstrates how our policies and plans for transport will contribute towards the County Council's vision – Creating communities where people want to live and work: now and in the future. While we must have a vision for the future, we must also be realistic and recognise that we do not have the resources to deliver all of the measures we would wish to over the lifetime of the Plan. Indeed, given the current economic climate, our ability to implement schemes in the short-term may be particularly limited, although we will try and be innovative in the way that we use funds that are available. In this respect, it is important that the LTP sets the policy framework that leaves us well prepared to take advantage of opportunities that may occur to bring in additional or alternative funding and resources.

As a flexible and dynamic document, the LTP Strategy will be updated to reflect changes in the wider local and national policy context as and when needed, and the Implementation Plan will be updated on an annual basis.

As with our previous Plans, this LTP3 has been produced in partnership with Cambridge City Council and the district councils of East Cambridgeshire, Fenland, Huntingdonshire and South Cambridgeshire. We have had a strong working relationship for many years and have been very successful in bringing together the planning and transport responsibilities of these authorities, to ensure an integrated approach to the challenges.

LTP3 seeks to address existing transport challenges as well as setting out the policies and strategies to ensure that planned large-scale development can take place in the county in a sustainable way. In addition to working with Cambridge City and the District Councils, our Strategy and Implementation Plan have also been informed by public and stakeholder consultation, so that these documents reflect local people's views and concerns.

This LTP has been produced during a period of significant change, particularly in terms of the regional planning framework and tough financial climate. However, the County Council is committed to its overarching vision – Creating communities where people want to live and work: now and in the future - and this is reflected in this LTP by mirroring the County Council's Strategic Objectives as the core objectives of LTP3.

Objectives and challenges

The County Council's Strategic Objectives, which form the objectives of this LTP, are:

- (a) Enabling people to thrive, achieve their potential and improve quality of life
- (b) Supporting and protecting vulnerable people
- (c) Managing and delivering the growth and development of sustainable communities
- (d) Promoting improved skills levels and economic prosperity across the county, helping people into jobs and encouraging enterprise
- (e) Meeting the challenges of climate change and enhancing the natural environment

In response to Government's priorities – the economy and climate change – and the views expressed locally in our public and stakeholder consultation, relatively greater importance will be placed on Objectives 3, 4 and 5 in this LTP. We recognise that for transport to contribute to the achievement of the County Council's Strategic Objectives there is a need for input from all Council departments and partnerships. The strategy will need to strike a balance between enabling economic growth and tackling climate change.

Key among the issues affecting Cambridgeshire is the large-scale growth planned across the county, with the associated pressure on the transport network and the environment, and the risks of increased congestion and carbon emissions and worsening air quality. In parallel, many rural areas of the county continue to suffer from poor access to key services and leisure facilities and the risk of social exclusion. We have translated the issues and problems related to each of the objectives, into a set of eight challenges for transport, under which, we have set out our strategy for addressing them. The challenges and summarised strategies are:

Challenge 1: Improving the reliability of journey times by managing demand for road space and maximising the capacity and efficiency of the existing network

We will continue to investigate the potential for demand management measures using the experience we have already gained within the county where these can help to improve conditions for sustainable modes of transport and maximising the capacity of the network. Furthermore, we will support measures which encourage the transfer of more freight onto rail and continue to work with freight operators to promote the use of the most appropriate routes for road freight, particularly where that is passing through the county.

Challenge 2: Reducing the length of the commute and the need to travel by private car

Our transport strategy supports the development strategy for Cambridgeshire by aiming to reduce the need to travel and by providing sustainable travel options for new developments. We will focus on securing school, workplace and residential travel plans and support and encourage employers to adopt smarter choices measures to help reduce the need to travel. We will also support and encourage journey planning tools to improve information available for journeys by sustainable modes.

Challenge 3: Making sustainable modes of transport a viable and attractive alternative to the private car

Countywide, we will continue to push forward in making sustainable modes of transport more attractive by continuing to develop sustainable networks for walking and cycling, making it easier for people to change between modes of transport and working with bus operators to provide high quality bus services. In addition, our aim is to improve the environment and safety for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users, in accordance with our user hierarchy and focus on raising awareness of the transport choices available, including the health and environmental benefits of cycling and walking. This will include work with local planning authorities to ensure provision for sustainable modes that form an integral part of new developments.

Challenge 4: Future-proofing our maintenance strategy and new transport infrastructure to cope with the effects of climate change

To address these issues our strategy will use a risk management approach to help determine priority areas for adapting to climate change. We have developed an adaptation action plan to set out how we will meet our objectives. We will take account of the projected impacts of climate change at the scheme design stage, make use of emerging technologies as they become available and build new infrastructure to the latest standards for withstanding the impacts of climate change.

Challenge 5: Ensuring people – especially those at risk of social exclusion – can access the services they need within reasonable time, cost and effort wherever they live in the county

Our strategy focuses on access to key services for our communities to the nearest main service centre, e.g. large village or market town. We will consider the whole journey, including the interaction between different modes of transport and aiming to provide suitable transport provision for necessary journeys, whilst also recognising the importance of car borne access in many of our rural areas. We will continue to support the development and work of community transport schemes as well as investigating alternative forms of public transport where traditional bus services do not meet community needs. This will include work with service providers to be innovative in the way services are delivered locally recognising that it is not simply about providing a transport service but as much about where and how the service is provided based on need.

Challenge 6: Addressing the main causes of road accidents in Cambridgeshire

To continue to reduce casualties our strategy will focus on education, training and publicity to improve road user behaviour, particularly targeting young drivers and riders, users of rural roads and children. In addition, we will progress our programme of measures aimed at reducing casualties at accident cluster sites that will give the highest casualty reduction and work with the police and other agencies through the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Road Safety Partnership.

Challenge 7: Protecting and enhancing the natural environment by minimising the environmental impact of transport

Our strategy to protect and enhance the environment will focus on working with the district councils to reduce levels of air pollution in order to meet national objectives. This will be achieved through managing and reducing vehicle emissions and encouraging increased usage of sustainable modes of transport. Additional demand management measures will also be investigated where appropriate in order to manage car use and we will investigate the use of new technologies as they become available. Environmental issues such as protecting biodiversity and impacts on the landscape will be considered at the design stage of transport projects and we will

support the provision of green infrastructure. Furthermore, we will reduce carbon emissions through a programme of smarter choices measures, improvements to sustainable travel options and the management of car use.

Challenge 8: Influencing national and local decisions on land-use and transport planning that impact on routes through Cambridgeshire

We will reflect national policies in our local plans, policies and strategies and continue to lobby for rail improvements as well as improvements to the trunk road network, including the A14.

While aiming to address all the challenges we have identified, the main focus of our strategy will be on measures and initiatives that maintain and enhance the economy and also those that tackle climate change. This reflects both the outcomes from public and stakeholder consultation as well as the direction of national transport policy. The strategy recognises the tensions between enabling economic growth and tackling climate change, and will aim to balance the two objectives.

Monitoring and performance

Monitoring the effectiveness of our Strategy and Implementation Plan is a key part of our LTP. We want to ensure that the delivery of our Plan is as effective as possible and is providing value for money, and therefore have a robust monitoring framework of indicators and targets to check our progress towards delivering our strategy and achieving our objectives. The indicators we have chosen reflect the issues which are most important to Cambridgeshire while at the same time enabling us to compare our progress against other local authorities in the country.

Conclusion

Our LTP3 Strategy and Implementation Plan set out how we will help to address existing transport related problems and meet the transport needs of the large-scale development planned for the county. It is important that our strategy provides the right balance between being aspirational, and outlining what we want to achieve against a backdrop, in the shorter term at least, of significantly less funding than during previous LTP periods whilst still being able to respond to the changing environment as and when needed .

As such, our LTP3 is a flexible and dynamic suite of documents which will respond to the changing environment, as and when needed. This LTP aims to provide maximum value for money through close partnership working, by closely integrating our Strategy and Implementation Plan and by monitoring our performance against indicators relevant to local communities.

Appendix B

LTP3 Implementation Plan Executive Summary

This Implementation Plan is the second of the two core documents in the suite of documents that make up the Third Cambridgeshire Local Transport Plan (LTP3). It shows how the Implementation Plan fits in with and draws from the LTP Policies and Strategy, and from policy guidance, key objectives and more detailed local strategies.

As the mechanism for managing our delivery of the whole LTP, the Implementation Plan is essentially a business plan detailing how we will deliver the LTP Strategy. It details our programmes for the delivery of transport improvements to the networks managed by the County Council, and also for the day-to-day management and maintenance of the network. It sets out the schemes and measures we expect to deliver over the first year of the plan in detail, and sets out the processes by which future years' programmes will be developed.

The Transport Capital Programme for 2011/12 focuses on the delivery of improvements to the transport network in Cambridgeshire, and the undertaking of major maintenance schemes. The types of measures that are funded from this programme include:

- Traffic calming schemes
- Pedestrian crossings
- Major road maintenance and structural maintenance schemes
- Cycleway schemes
- Junction improvements
- Major schemes (e.g. Guided Busway, Papworth Everard Bypass)

The Transport Revenue Programme for 2011/12 focuses on the day-to-day management and maintenance of the local transport network in Cambridgeshire. The types of measures that are funded from this programme include:

- Routine ongoing minor maintenance (e.g. pothole filling, gully emptying, grass cutting)
- Road safety education
- Winter maintenance
- Travel planning with schools and businesses
- Supported bus services / concessionary bus fares
- School crossing patrols

Funding levels for at least the first four years of this plan will be extremely challenging, with cuts to core funding of around 25% from levels seen over the period of the second Cambridgeshire Local Transport Plan (LTP2). There are new opportunities such as the Regional Growth Fund and the Sustainable Transport Fund, but these are bidding funds, and cannot be relied upon to supplement our reduced core budgets.

The significant challenges that the current funding environment brings therefore requires the County Council and its partners to review not only the scope of the programmes that can be delivered, but also the organisational structures that deliver them.

We have therefore set out the process which we will undertake through 2011 to develop the detailed programme for 2012/13 onwards. A detailed programme looking a year ahead will be maintained, along with a less detailed programme setting out the expected expenditure in programme areas of the following 3-4 years. Both will be

updated on an annual basis, to ensure that the Implementation Plan remains aligned with our District Councils' Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) and the needs of partner delivery agencies, local stakeholders and the public.

The 2011/12 programme addresses the views of stakeholders and communities by reflecting their views on our LTP objectives and priority areas. For future years, work will be undertaken in 2011 to consider areas or programmes where decision making on priorities and schemes can be devolved to a more local level, but also to identify those areas where it will remain critical to maintain the strategic overview needed to ensure the safe and effective operation of the transport network.

Effective programme management and monitoring of performance is essential if the best possible outcomes are to be achieved from available resources, particularly in times when funding and resources are reducing. Cambridgeshire County Council seeks to ensure that the management of its transport programmes is effective and appropriate, and is accountable to Members of the Council, the Council's partners and the wider community in Cambridgeshire.

Appendix C

Draft LTP3 Programme, 2011/12

Integrated Transport Block Programme Area	LTP3 funding (£000's)
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Countywide programmes	
Accessibility Works	31
Air Quality Monitoring	15
Civil Parking Enforcement	200
Cycleway Improvements (countywide)	120
Jointly Funded Minor Improvements	200
Major Roadworks	90
Major Scheme Development	100
New Footpaths / Rural Pedestrian Improvements	50
Safety Schemes (Small and Medium size)	250
Speed Management	76
Strategy Development	100
Cambridge and the Market Towns	
Cambridge Access Strategy	180
Market Town Transport Strategy schemes	500
Major Project - St Neots Cycle Bridge	500
Bus Infrastructure - Huntingdon	50
Smarter Travel Management	
HCV Routing	40
Personalised Travel Plan	55
Travel for Work	40
Safer Routes to School	100
Traveline development	15
Guided Busway Contribution	1,000
Integrated Transport Block Total	3,712

Maintenance Block Programme Area	LTP3 funding (£000's)
Carriageway / Footway Maintenance	
Carriageway maintenance – Non Principal	
Carriageway maintenance – Principal	7,161
Footway Maintenance and Cycle Paths	
Rights of Way	140
Street Lighting	140
Structural Maintenance	
Strengthening of Bridges to carry 40 tonne loading	2,448
Structural Maintenance of existing highway structures	
Traffic Management	
Traffic Signal Replacement	600
Integrated Highways Management Centre	179
Real Time Passenger Information	137
Maintenance Block Total	10,805

LTP3 – Huntingdonshire District Council Statement

Introduction

Transport remains a key issue for this Council. Huntingdonshire, as part of the Cambridge Sub-Region, is an area that continues to experience major housing and economic growth. This places demands on transport infrastructure and several major developments require major transport infrastructure improvements to proceed. This is particularly the case in the A14 and A428 corridors

This Council has been an active partner in the delivery of previous LTPs and in the preparation of the new LTP. We intend to remain as active a partner as possible in delivering the policies and action plans of the new LTP across Huntingdonshire. However, our ability to do this will be severely constrained by ongoing local government funding issues. Despite this, we will continue to support the provision of travel choice and the reduction of social exclusion, together with transport related improvements to the environment and local economy.

We will continue to work with a range of partners, including Cambridgeshire County Council, to deliver benefits throughout Huntingdonshire, subject to available resources. We will also continue to participate in the Huntingdonshire Strategic Partnership and to pursue the Community Plan transport objectives, which are:

- Comprehensive, affordable, safe public transport services
- Improved road safety
- Reduced congestion
- Improved access

Key Issues

Funding

We have included significant capital funding for transport related projects in this Council's Medium Term Plan over the past 10 years. This has been in addition to funding from County and other partners and, for the period 2006-2011, has delivered in excess of £2M of District Council funded transport related expenditure for the benefit of Huntingdonshire. For this new LTP, however, we will not be able to deliver a similar programme to support the aims and objectives of the Plan. We will thus be wholly dependent on funding from external sources, principally Government and development related funding.

Prioritisation

In view of the severe funding constraints, there needs to be clear prioritisation of how LTP3 funding will be allocated. We would advocate the following approach:

- Priority should be given to distributing LTP funding throughout Cambridgeshire, according to need. Spending should be spread across the County, particularly in and around market towns which are experiencing significant growth, rather than just concentrating expenditure in growth areas around Cambridge.

- The application of a modal hierarchy, which gives priority to sustainable modes, in line with *Manual for Streets* and *Cambridgeshire Design Guide* principles. This should include prioritising revenue expenditure, particularly for maintenance, – e.g by giving priority to bus stop, footway and cycleway maintenance, including winter maintenance.
- Balancing the amount allocated for revenue expenditure (e.g. road maintenance, public transport subsidy) with commitments to major capital expenditure. Although capital investment is necessary, this should not starve revenue funding, particularly for highway maintenance.

In setting priorities, there should be full consideration of the area specific transport needs of Huntingdonshire, including:

- Access to strategic centres such as Cambridge, Peterborough and Bedford, particularly along on the A14 and A428 corridors.
- Sustainable transport within, to, and between market towns.
- Rural transport improvements to improve the accessibility of specific areas - a different approach (and priority) may be needed for more and less prosperous areas of the District.

Sustainable Development

A key role for the LTP is to address the transport needs of major development areas in Huntingdonshire and elsewhere. There is currently uncertainty about the future shape of strategic land-use planning, but we will base our strategic land use plans on our Local Development Framework Core Strategy, which was adopted in 2009. A central theme of the Core Strategy is the pursuit of sustainable development (Policy CS1), which includes linking land-use and transport planning and the need to improve access and modal choice for all.

The Core Strategy emphasises the need for contributions to transport (and other) infrastructure requirements (Policy CS10). With reducing Government funding, future transport funding may need to increasingly come from development. We will thus work in conjunction with the County Council and continue to secure as high a level of developer contributions as possible through initiatives such as Market Town Transport Strategies and other approved transport related initiatives where there is development-related impact. In support of this, we intend to pursue the introduction of the Community Infrastructure Levy as a basis for contributions, as well as considering wider application of area transport plans to outside Cambridge in order to give extra weight to these processes.

At a more detailed level, we welcome the support within LTP3 to *Manual for Streets* principles, including support for a modal hierarchy. With support from the County, we will require developers to design around *Manual for Streets* principles and will judge proposed designs on the basis of those principles. In support of this we will continue to make travel planning (encouraging walking, cycling and public transport use) a requirement of major development.

A14 Corridor

We are extremely disappointed that the proposed A14 Ellington to Fen Ditton highway improvement scheme was deleted from the National Roads Programme in the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review. This scheme remains crucial to Huntingdonshire as well as the wider region and the rest of the country given its national and European strategic importance.

We are working closely with partners, including the County Council, other District Councils and the emerging Local Enterprise Partnership, to encourage the Department for Transport to initiate a study focussed on finding an affordable solution. As partners to this process the Council will need to look to have a much stronger statement of what will be done to promote improvements, including investigating alternative means of funding and delivery. There also needs to be urgent consideration of the impact on the corridor between Huntingdon and Cambridge and, particularly within Huntingdon and St. Ives (and elsewhere) if the scheme does not go ahead, including the future of the Huntingdon viaduct, the loss of development potential and air quality implications.

Huntingdon to Cambridge Guided Bus

It is to be hoped that the current impasse in the opening of the guided part of the route will be resolved in the near future.

We have worked with the County Council to try and get improvements on the unguided (Huntingdon to St Ives) section but, apart from the successful bus priorities and resultant improved services between Huntingdon rail and bus stations, there have been no effective improvements. The routeing and stopping difficulties within St Ives have not yet been addressed. We are 'slightly encouraged' that priority measures remain in the plan between Huntingdon and St. Ives following representations from this Council, despite the scheme being a casualty of recent budget cuts. We remain concerned that without wider routeing issues being addressed, the effectiveness of the Busway between St. Ives and Cambridge will be prejudiced and fail to attract new passengers who otherwise may have travelled along the A14.

Bus Services

Good bus services are essential to Huntingdonshire to ensure accessibility and social inclusion. We will continue to secure improvements to bus services through development, and as Local Planning Authority, will not approve major developments unless there is a high standard of bus provision. We have been committed to improving bus infrastructure, and have contributed £30K per annum to bus shelters. This increased to £100K in 2010/11. From 2011 onwards we will not be able to do this and so will look to the County and other sources for funding.

We would like to see Quality Bus Partnerships / Contracts in Huntingdonshire and continue to press the County Council on this matter. It is particularly disappointing that, despite all the assurances that much would happen as a result of LTP2, very little has actually been delivered within the District. By using these, the County can secure improvements in vehicle quality and service frequency from operators by agreeing, in return, to implement on-street bus priority and bus stop improvements measures. This seems to be supported in the new LTP, but it is not stated where this will be promoted – only "as appropriate". We wish to see a much more definite approach, which includes firm proposals for Huntingdonshire services. In particular, we wish to see real time passenger information at all our bus stops. Some stops have this facility, but the roll-out has been far too infrequent and stalled and also subject to recent budget cuts. We wish to see a programme reinstated in Huntingdonshire so that all our bus stops are provided with real time information in the near future.

We also support the use of Quality Bus Partnerships to ensure that public transport operators use increasingly 'clean' fleets. We thus welcome the proposed inclusion of Huntingdonshire in the Quality Bus Partnership to ensure minimum emission criteria for all Public Service Vehicles, as well as targets for ongoing improvements in emissions which also assists wider, joint air quality objectives.

Walking and Cycling

We have been a proactive and significant partner in working with the County to design and implement walking and cycling improvements over the past ten plus years. We value the cycling improvements that have been implemented over these years and have been pleased to provide direction and contribute £100K per annum to improvements from our Safe Cycle Route budget to support their introduction. Unfortunately, as a result of HDC budget cuts, this funding will no longer be available from 2011 onwards. Additionally, if any of the £300K currently in the cycle budget for 2010/11 that remains uncommitted this year (2010/11) will also not be carried forward.

LTP funding for walking and cycling schemes not associated with development will thus be essential in the future. We particularly need financial commitment to implementing the "Connect 2" network in St Neots, including a new cycle bridge across the Great Ouse, and to improving key routes to schools, together with key Market town and rural routes. This will support the financial commitment to the bridge, including the capital contribution to that scheme by this Council in excess of £500K in 2010/11.

Market Town Transport Strategies

The District Council has worked closely with the County Council and other partners to develop and implement market town transport strategies (MTTS) for Huntingdon and Godmanchester, St Ives, St Neots and, most recently, Ramsey.

We value highly and are proud of what has been achieved through this joint working as well as funding and would want the strategies to continue to be given a high priority in any future allocation of resources, particularly because of their contribution to improving sustainable modes. We thus welcome the County's commitment to the strategies, and their ongoing review, as an essential part of the LTP Implementation Plan.

A particular priority is the West of Town Centre Link Road in Huntingdon, that was included in the first MTTS approved in 2003, which unlocks vital town centre development and improves accessibility. This scheme is largely being funded from a combination of Housing Growth Fund and from development, although the County Council has agreed to forward fund in advance of developer funds being realised. Subsequent repayment will therefore be a joint priority from relevant developments in the area.

The Council has contributed financially, through its Capital programme, to the implementation of these strategies. We will no longer be able to do this for the foreseeable future, due to funding constraints. Additionally, the Council's Projects team have undertaken the design and contract work on a number of schemes in St. Neots and Huntingdon & Godmanchester. The Council's ability to continue to provide

that staffing commitment will be subject to available resources but we would look to do that as far as practicably possible given the high quality, cost-effective partnership service that has been achieved to date.

Rural Strategy

Huntingdonshire is a largely rural in character and we welcome the LTP commitment to developing and implementing a Rural Transport Strategy. The Council's Medium Term Objectives include reducing economic deprivation and supporting rural communities. This includes supporting the use of public transport, including taxis, to enable people who are disadvantaged by location to gain access to employment, leisure and other essential services.

We would thus be very willing to work with the County Council to develop and implement a Rural Transport Strategy which will cover all rural parts of the county whose transport needs are not covered by the market town transport strategies. If this is to supersede the LTP2 Accessibility Strategy, we are strongly of the view that there should be a clear commitment and timescale for producing the Rural Strategy. This is required in addition to the draft Rural Strategy produced by Cambridgeshire Acre, since we have serious misgivings about the deliverability and realism of this strategy and a number of its objectives that while being 'worthy' are completely unrealistic and undeliverable.

We particularly support priority to community transport, and welcome the LTP commitment to "continue the annual funding support for Community Transport Schemes". We would like this to be a ring fenced commitment, in view of the vulnerability of this budget to future cuts. Without it, a rural transport strategy is likely to be ineffective. Currently, we support four existing schemes in the form of revenue support grants in excess of £75K in total per annum that covers such matters as staff resources, professional advice and the running of core services. At the time of writing this Statement, this funding remains in place in our Draft Budget for 2011 onwards and is a vital element in the maintenance of this service but a variety of other funding sources, including via the LTP, will however remain essential.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY (ENVIRONMENTAL WELL-BEING)

8th February 2011

PLANNING CONSERVATION (Report by the Planning Conservation Working Group)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 At its meeting held on 8th June 2010, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) decided to establish a working group to evaluate the performance of the Council's Planning Conservation Team and make recommendations where appropriate. The working group comprised Councillors M G Baker, P Godley, D Harty and R West and Messrs D Hopkins and M Phillips. Councillor West was co-opted onto the working group as the Member of the Development Management Panel with special interest in conservation. The working group has met on 10 occasions in the ensuing months with Councillor Baker acting as rapporteur.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 The Panel's interest in the subject was prompted by public perception of the conservation service offered by the District Council as reported to Councillors. It quickly became apparent in the working group's investigations that planning conservation can be a very emotive subject which can generate strong feelings on the part of recipients of the service provided by the Council. The views of individuals therefore have to be tempered accordingly.

2.2 In addition to the relevant legislation, the work of the Planning Conservation Team is guided by Planning Policy Statement 5: Planning for the Historic Environment which sets out the Government's overarching aim of ensuring that the historic environment and its heritage assets should be conserved and enjoyed for the quality of life they bring to this and future generations.

2.3 In embarking on its study, the working group decided that the review of the service should consider and evaluate the role of the Council's Planning Conservation Team in the preservation of Huntingdonshire's built heritage with particular reference to conservation areas and listed buildings.

3. EVIDENCE AND INVESTIGATIONS

3.1 The working group carried out extensive consultation to ensure that any recommendations that it made would be evidence based as opposed to personal anecdotes or the views of parties aggrieved by a decision.

The following investigations and enquiries were therefore made:-

- A questionnaire to town and parish councils, the results of which are summarised at Appendix A.
- An interview with the Heritage and Conservation Team Leader on the work undertaken by the Conservation Team.

- An interview with a local architect to gauge his views on the Council's heritage and conservation service.
 - An interview with representatives of two local listed schools to obtain their perspective of the heritage and conservation service.
 - A visit to various listed building sites in Huntingdon town centre which was led by the Heritage and Conservation Team Leader and the Head of Planning Services.
 - An interview with the local Historic Areas Adviser from English Heritage to discuss the work of English Heritage.
 - Interviews with three individuals who own listed buildings or buildings in conservation areas as to their personal experience of dealing with the Council's Planning Services Team.
 - An interview with the Planning Services Manager (Policy) to discuss the working group's provisional findings.
- 3.2 The working group has found that the Council's conservation service compares favourably with those of other authorities and that there is no significant cause for concern in terms of performance. However, the decisions of the conservation team can have very far reaching consequences for the individuals and organisations affected by them, which can colour their perception of the process and the decisions themselves. The results can be detrimental to the Council's profile and can potentially lead to a distrust and suspicion of the process and those involved.

4. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 4.1 Huntingdonshire contains 2198 listed buildings, 59 of which are grade I, 126 are grade II* and the remainder are grade II. There are 61 conservation areas. In 2009 the Conservation Team dealt with 122 listed building applications, which was more than any other District Council in Cambridgeshire.
- 4.2 The planning team responsible for those listed buildings and conservation areas is relatively small, consisting of 2 full time and 3 part time officers. As well as planning applications and enquiries, conservation officers deal with issues and enquiries relating to the contribution that the District's heritage makes to tourism and economic regeneration. The team compiles the conservation area character statements, Buildings at Risk register, advises on new listings and is involved with urban design issues, as well as promoting good practice and offering training and advice.
- 4.3 In view of the breadth of the subject, the working group had some difficulty in focusing on those aspects which were particularly salient to the study. Moreover, the working group was not in a position to question the professional competence of the members of the Planning Conservation Team, nor would it wish to do so. Instead, the working group concentrated on the public perception of the service and the impact on the owners of buildings that are listed or situated in conservation areas.

5. ROLE OF THE PLANNING CONSERVATION TEAM

- 5.1 It was clear, from the interviews undertaken, that the officers in the team are very committed and care passionately about the conservation of the District's heritage. They are well qualified and very experienced officers in conservation whose work is appreciated and applauded by English Heritage.

- 5.2 It was also apparent that the officers' role is not easy. They see their responsibility as the protection of the District's built heritage as once unauthorised work has gone ahead to a listed structure, a part of that heritage can be lost forever. Such instances are not uncommon, a high profile case recently at Ramsey Almshouses having resulted in a substantial fine for the developers. In other cases that were drawn to the working group's attention, it was demonstrated that some owners of listed buildings refuse or ignore any attempts at help or assistance and permit buildings to deteriorate to the stage where they become dangerous or dilapidated.
- 5.3 The Panel also learnt that the Council's powers are fairly limited in terms of the action that can be taken to encourage or force owners to prevent buildings from neglect or falling into disrepair, even though evidence of deliberate neglect or damage to a heritage asset in the hope of obtaining consent should not be taken into account in any decision. In reality, the Council is able to step in only when a building is judged to be dangerous or is no longer weather-tight and, even then, the action is restricted to making the building safe or to protect it from the elements. The only other option is purchase, either by agreement or by compulsory purchase, with the aim of selling the property on, either before or after renovations have been undertaken. Such courses of action are extremely time consuming and expensive with no guarantee of the Council recovering its costs and are only likely to be embarked upon in the most extreme cases.
- 5.4 Against that background, it is easy to see why officers could be tempted to adopt a cautious approach when dealing with the owners of listed buildings or structures in conservation areas.

6. INTERVIEWS WITH OWNERS AND AGENTS

- 6.1 The working group interviewed a local architect, the bursar/property manager of two of the large listed buildings in the District used as educational establishments and three owners of individual listed buildings or buildings in conservation areas. Members also met a representative of English Heritage who provided very helpful information on the role of the local authority.
- 6.2 The perceptions of the interviewees varied greatly but it was possible to detect a common theme which can be summarised as disillusionment with the process. Other interviewees had become sufficiently frustrated by their experience that they had submitted official complaints to the Council, although these were not subsequently upheld by the investigating officers.
- 6.3 While the number of interviews that the working group could undertake was of necessity limited, a picture emerged whereby the reaction of the interviewees could be effectively divided into three elements - those with a detailed knowledge of the system, the owners of listed educational establishments in Huntingdonshire and individual owners who had little previous knowledge of the system. It would have been useful to interview other owners or agents and to receive further evidence but time was limited after 10 meetings of the working group and there was a lack of response to a press release inviting owners and agents to submit their views and comments on the Council's planning conservation service. The limited depth of the evidence available therefore may not be truly

representative of public perception but the working group felt that sufficient information was available to extrapolate its findings.

Those with Conservation Knowledge

- 6.4 Those interviewed were the local Historic Areas Adviser of English Heritage, a local architect and the owner of several listed buildings and buildings in conservation areas in Huntingdonshire and elsewhere. Their general view was that the service offered by the Council in terms of planning conservation compared favourably with other authorities and that officers were helpful and co-operative.
- 6.5 The English Heritage officer offered a very useful insight into planning conservation which was independent of the District Council and much of what he said was reinforced in subsequent interviews. He drew attention to the fine balance between preserving the heritage of an area and allowing change, especially as the stock of listed buildings is finite and each building is unique. Change has to be judged against the harmful impact or the loss of significance of a heritage asset with the presumption being that consent should be refused unless it can be demonstrated that there are mitigating factors such as public benefit, no viable use of the asset can be found, conservation through grant funding or public ownership is not possible or the harm or loss of the asset is outweighed by the benefits of bringing a site back into use. The cost and the ability of an owner to fund such works is not a material consideration but it was suggested to the working group that there are usually alternatives that can be investigated and that problems are most often found when owners have preconceived ideas or ignore the advice of conservation officers, having purchased a listed building to renovate without having first undertaken sufficient research as to what this can entail.
- 6.6 However, the Historic Areas Adviser also made the point that listed buildings should not be preserved 'in aspic' and that part of the special interest for which structures have been listed is their special character and the story that they can tell. Change therefore is possible, provided the character of the listed building or impact on a conservation area is not harmed. Thus enhancements could be allowed to fund repairs that could not otherwise be achieved, with good design adding to a building's story. In the case of buildings of greater significance such as grade I and grade II* particularly, owners had to have regard to their responsibilities as the custodians of heritage assets and were well advised to prepare a forward plan of future repairs and maintenance to allow sufficient time for discussions with conservation officers, arrange funding and determine timescales.
- 6.7 One particular explanation that the working group found useful was the difference between alteration and maintenance to listed buildings. Maintenance in the way of like for like repair does not require planning permission but is subject to VAT. Conversely alterations do require planning permission but don't attract VAT. It was suggested to the working group that a reversal of the liability for VAT would reduce the financial impact on owners and could be of great benefit in enabling owners to maintain an asset satisfactorily.
- 6.8 The local architect was complimentary in terms of his dealings with the Council's Planning Conservation Team and while it was accepted that

differences of opinion could occur from time to time, he indicated that these were resolved in an amicable and satisfactory manner.

- 6.9 Similarly the owner of several listed buildings in the District and elsewhere spoke in very fulsome terms of his dealings with planning conservation team officers in Huntingdonshire with whom good working relationships had been established. It was clear that the owner had the relative luxury of being able to take a long term view of the maintenance of the properties that he owned and to discuss and bring forward plans in a structured and timely way. It was also apparent, if not mentioned explicitly, that affordability was not a particular concern.

Owners of Educational Establishments

- 6.10 The working group interviewed the Bursar from Kimbolton School and Property Manager from Hinchingsbrooke School. Both schools are situated in grade I listed buildings which, in many ways, are two of the most important heritage assets in Huntingdonshire. In interviewing representatives of the schools, the working group was aware of a number of recent applications made by both establishments for listed building consent and they were chosen in comparison to Abbey College at Ramsey even though that is another equally important listed building.
- 6.11 Both of the officers interviewed (who the working group met together rather than separately) expressed some apprehension that their comments might affect their working relationship with the Council's conservation officers and their views are therefore couched in general terms. Both officers mentioned the difficulty in maintaining such important and large listed structures on limited budgets, one publicly funded and the other privately financed from fees. In both cases, their primary function is the education of the pupils in their care and the cost of maintaining listed buildings has to compete against the expense of offering high quality education in a competitive environment. The use of the establishments for education also means that they are subject to more wear and tear than if the buildings had continued in private occupation which had been their original purpose. With the dynamics of schools subject to constant change and the time when certain works could be carried out being limited to school vacations, both stressed the necessity for timely decisions and advice to enable work to be scheduled and achieved successfully. While they accepted their position as custodians of important heritage assets, both made the point that they were effectively doing so for the benefit of the community as a whole as opposed to any specific benefit that they derived from an educational or aesthetic perspective.
- 6.12 It was apparent from the information presented to the working group, that both establishments felt that the Council could be more supportive and helpful in its approach. They felt that there was little recognition of the practical and financial difficulties which are faced by working schools in grade I listed buildings and that conservation officers tended to be reactive rather than positive, thereby sometimes resulting in abortive costs and delays in having to redraw and resubmit amended plans. Similarly, there was a feeling that conservation officers were reluctant to offer advice and preferred to respond to the submission of detailed schemes or formal applications for permission which, if refused, again resulted in costs and delays in resubmissions.

6.13 Whatever the merits or otherwise of the comments of the schools' representatives, it was clear to the working group that there was a need for an improvement in communication between the schools and the conservation officers. The schools hoped for greater flexibility, co-operation and support and a greater appreciation of the practicalities of maintaining valuable listed buildings against a background of financial constraint and a need to enable the structures to continue to evolve with time. There was an appreciation that conservation officers at both the District Council and English Heritage would prefer a planned maintenance schedule of future works but the schools felt that the cost of professional help in producing such plans could not be afforded.

Owners of Individual Properties

6.14 In addition to the owner mentioned in paragraph 6.9, the working group interviewed the owners of two properties, one of which was listed and the other situated in the heart of a conservation area. One had recently renovated a listed building and the other was in the process of seeking pre-planning advice on the renovation of a semi-derelict building in a conservation area. Both owners had come to the attention of the working group as a result of approaches to ward councillors about their experience with planning and conservation officers which had resulted in the submission of formal complaints to the Council. Because their frustration had resulted in formal complaints, both owners were extremely frank with the working group about their experiences and opinions.

6.15 Both owners had purchased buildings in need of substantial repair and which in one case was described as derelict; in the case of the listed building this had been included in the Council's buildings at risk register and the other was virtually uninhabitable. Both claimed to have been aware of the challenges of renovating old buildings that they intended to subsequently live in and both had been enthusiastic at the outset of the process. Both were operating on budgets that they had estimated would be sufficient for the work and had anticipated the support of conservation officers in rescuing buildings that were in a poor state of repair and restoring them to a habitable condition.

6.16 The experience of both owners was very similar. Both spoke to the working group about the problems that they had encountered in dealing with planning and conservation officers throughout the process which they had found to be extremely time consuming and expensive with implications for the budgets that they had set aside for the work. They complained of a lack of help and advice, inconsistencies, inflexibility and an adversarial attitude. In both cases, the owners had become disillusioned at an early stage and the situation had deteriorated rapidly thereafter to feelings of frustration and suspicion which had culminated in formal complaints to the Council. One aspect of the complaint related to an allegation that unauthorised access had been gained to the interior of a property that was being refurbished which, if true, the working group found to be wholly unacceptable. As an aside and as mentioned earlier, those complaints had not been upheld by the investigating officers.

7. INTERVIEWS WITH PLANNING AND CONSERVATION OFFICERS

7.1 The working group held a number of meetings with officers from the Planning Division. At the outset of the working group's investigations, the Heritage and Conservation Team Leader provided a very helpful insight

into the work of the section that she manages, the legislative background and Government guidance. She drew attention to some of the many success stories that the team could point to in working with owners to restore and improve buildings at risk and protect the built heritage of the District. Conversely, she also provided examples of the disastrous effects of some unauthorised works which had severely affected the merit of some of the listed buildings in the District.

- 7.2 The Team Leader kindly arranged for a tour of Huntingdon town centre by the working group at which Members were also accompanied by the Head of Planning Services. Attention was drawn to several examples of listed buildings or structures where owners had allowed the buildings to deteriorate to the stage where they had become dangerous and others where owners had undertaken work without permission or had ignored advice that had been given. Other examples were pointed out where development had taken place in sympathy with the historic surroundings and where imaginative design had allowed new build to blend in with listed buildings.
- 7.3 It was clear to the working group that the conservation team have a difficult role to play. Owners often have preconceived ideas and limited budgets and while enthusiastic, may lack sufficient knowledge and experience to fully appreciate what is involved in owning, maintaining or restoring listed buildings or important buildings in conservation areas. In other cases, conservation officers may be met with intransigence and resistance on the part of owners and builders which can lead to protracted negotiations and investigations to try to encourage necessary maintenance to be carried out or to ensure that renovations do not affect the character and heritage of individual buildings and structures.
- 7.3 Finally, the working group met the Planning Services Manager to discuss some of its preliminary findings and was encouraged by his receptive and positive response to the suggestions made.

8. PUBLIC AND PARISH COUNCIL PERSPECTIVE

- 8.1 The working group issued a press release explaining the extent of the study that was being undertaken and inviting members of the public to come forward with any information that they felt would be useful. On this occasion no responses were received.
- 8.2 The working group also wrote to town and parish councils with a questionnaire to ascertain the extent of their knowledge of the situation locally in terms of the buildings that were listed, those that may be at risk and their relationship with the conservation team. The results are analysed in the following paragraphs.
- 8.3 The results demonstrate that although 83% of councils are aware of the conservation area boundaries within their parish, only 61% are aware of the conservation area character statements that the District Council publishes and updates from time to time. The statements are a source of valuable information about the special characteristics of the buildings and environment that comprise each conservation area which can assist local councils in formulating their comments on individual applications for planning permission and help those councils to alert the District Council where unauthorised works are taking place. An improved awareness on

the part of local councils of the conservation area character statements was thought by the working group to be useful.

- 8.4 The District Council's website represents a readily available source of information and advice but 59% of local councils that responded to the questionnaire have never used the website. Of those councils that have used it, 71% found the information to be fairly or very useful. In light of this, the working group suggests that the District Council should explore ways of raising the Conservation Team's profile on the website.
- 8.5 Having regard to training, only 22% of the questionnaire respondents felt that the District Council offers sufficient training on heritage and conservation issues which suggests that there is a need for the District Council to explore the value and feasibility of offering town and parish councils more training in heritage and conservation issues. In addition, 72% of questionnaire respondents consider that a visit from an officer from the Conservation Team would be of value to their council.
- 8.6 With the current Government's emphasis on localism and the financial pressures on public bodies, the District Council being no exception, the working party was conscious of the increasingly important role that town and parish councils can play locally in supporting the work of the conservation team. The Localism Bill was published towards the end of the working group's study and there was therefore insufficient time to investigate its planning proposals and the impact on local communities. However, the working group is of the opinion that improved communication between the Conservation Team and town and parish councils would be beneficial for both parties in terms of helping local councils in their own communities and assisting the team in their role.

9. BUILDINGS AT RISK

- 9.1 An important function for the Conservation Team is the compilation of a 'buildings at risk' register that contains information on those listed buildings that are considered to be in danger or in need of repair. The list is currently in the process of being revised but the list approved in 2007 contains 276 buildings regarded as being at risk within 6 categories of severity. Although this was an improvement on the 318 included in 2004, it does illustrate the scale of the problem faced by the conservation team in trying to protect the District's heritage assets. An example of a structure that had been successfully removed from the register as a result of the interventions of the conservation team was pointed out during the working group's visit to Huntingdon town centre, as was an example of a grade II listed building in a prominent location on the High Street dating from the 18th Century which has been on the at risk register since 1998 and, despite numerous efforts by conservation officers to engage with the owners, has deteriorated to the extent where a dangerous structures notice has had to be served in respect of the property. The working group has been made aware of the options now open to the Council in circumstances such as this and has been left in little doubt as to the time consuming nature of both the abortive approaches to the owners and the possible solutions and the potentially high cost to the Council of the latter.
- 9.2 In view of the size of the at risk register, the time available to the conservation team to try to tackle individual properties and owners must, of necessity, be limited but it seemed likely to the working group that properties would continue to deteriorate unless solutions could be found

or owners addressed their responsibilities to upkeep buildings satisfactorily. In that regard, the working group considered that it might be helpful if problems could be brought to the attention of the team at an early stage where early interventions could prevent more costly repairs at a later date and it was suggested that there might be a role here for ward councillors and town and parish councils to help by acting as the 'eyes and ears' in their localities.

- 9.3 In a similar vein, the questionnaire responses highlighted that although only a small proportion of parish councils (18% of respondents) have a local conservation group or civic society, where they do exist 33% of respondents find them fairly effective and 67% of respondents find them to be very effective. The working group felt that occasional meetings between these groups and the conservation team would be beneficial and that it would be helpful for the conservation team to consider how town and parish councils might encourage the formation of conservation groups or civic societies where they don't currently exist.

10. LISTED BUILDING GRANTS

- 10.1 The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 enables the District Council to make discretionary grants towards the cost of repairs to historic buildings which, by the very nature of the need to use traditional methods and materials, will usually result in greater costs than more modern buildings. The working group has been informed that the current grants budget of £30,000 per annum, although small in the context of the money spent on listed buildings repairs and renovation in Huntingdonshire in any year, is a valuable resource which helps the conservation team to offer some financial support to owners to encourage them to carry out important repairs, especially where this involves buildings at risk. Individual grants can vary between 20% of the cost of repair up to £2,000 to a maximum of 40% of the cost of repair up to £10,000.

- 10.2 Grant aid can be made available through English Heritage to charities and churches to offset up to 80% of the cost of works but the body has limited funds available which means that requests for assistance are assessed on a needs basis. Due to the number of requests received, funding is always directed towards buildings which are grade I or grade II* listed. With public funding under pressure at the District Council and elsewhere, the working group has concerns that one of few tools available to the conservation team may be under pressure which could affect their ability to encourage owners to undertake necessary repairs.

- 10.3 The Historic Areas Adviser of English Heritage informed the working group that alterations to listed buildings are zero rated for VAT purposes whereas expenditure on maintenance incurs the full VAT rating. English Heritage have campaigned for some time for this to be reversed to encourage expenditure on maintenance and it seems to the working group that this should be the desired approach.

- 10.4 The responses to the parish councils questionnaire indicate that a significant number of those authorities are unaware of the grants that are available to assist the owners of listed buildings on the 'buildings at risk' register to help with the cost of repairs. Depending upon any final decision on the allocation of funding for grant purposes, the working group considers that the District Council makes more information available on the funding available to the owners of listed buildings.

11. TERMINOLOGY

11.1 The working group saw a number of examples of the correspondence from the authority concerning conservation issues which members of the public claim to have difficulty in understanding. The terminology involved in planning and conservation can be complicated and there will no doubt be occasions when formal language will be required. However members of the working group did find that the terminology used in some of the correspondence that they saw was not easy for a lay person to understand. An example is attached at Appendix B to one of the private owners that the working party met which, without exception, the members of the working group found difficult to interpret. When communicating on complex issues such as conservation, the working group felt that it would be helpful for all concerned if 'plain English' could be used to help explain the position of the authority and what is required.

12. CONCLUSION

12.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Panel embarked upon the review of the planning conservation service as a consequence of approaches to ward councillors by their constituents about the performance of the service, in a similar vein to the recent study on the development control service. The working group encountered similar experiences in investigating heritage and conservation when compared with development control. Although the contrast between 'winners and losers' is less marked in conservation terms than between development control applicants and objectors, the working group still encountered strong feelings and emotions on the part of recipients of the service. Perhaps this is an inevitable consequence of the Council's regulatory function and the controls that are exercised to protect the District's heritage but the working group did find that improvements could be made in terms of communication and the image of the service.

12.2 It became apparent to the working group that views were polarised by the knowledge and experience of the recipients of the service. While the view is necessarily a generalisation because of the limited number of interviews that were carried out, those with prior knowledge or those working in planning conservation had a good working relationship and appreciative opinion of the Council's conservation service and the individuals involved in it. They spoke highly of the officers and the service they provided. Conversely, others that the working group interviewed had a different perspective, where the twin pressures of the cost of maintaining or altering listed buildings and the time required for consultation and dialogue had led to frustration and a feeling that the service was being overly prescriptive and unsympathetic to the practical and financial problems faced by the owners of such structures.

12.3 The working group was also conscious of the perspective offered by the English Heritage representative who was interviewed. There is a case for listed buildings and conservation areas to change and age over time which has to be balanced against the criteria set out in PPS 5. Where buildings have deteriorated or there is no viable alternative use, the working group's view is that a more sympathetic approach could be adopted by the Council and that owners should be offered assistance and support as to what may be acceptable and achievable.

12.3 The working group concluded that in general terms the planning conservation service works well and that conservation officers are dedicated individuals who are to be commended for the service that they provide in an often pressurised and difficult environment. Nevertheless there are improvements that the working group suggests should be implemented as a result of its investigations which have been highlighted in the report and are listed in the recommendations below. Primarily these concentrate on the area of communication, proactive support and, with the advent of the localism agenda, the potential roles that Members themselves and town and parish councils can play in mediation and alerting the District Council as to what is happening in their wards and parishes. The preliminary findings have already been discussed with the Planning Services Manager who appears receptive to the suggestions that have been made.

12.4 Members of the working group wish to extend their appreciation to all those who were interviewed and responded to the questionnaire. They were particularly grateful for the help and assistance provided to them by the Heritage and Conservation Team Leader, Planning Services Manager (Policy), and Head of Planning Services.

13. RECOMMENDATIONS

13.1 The working group therefore

RECOMMENDS

- (a) that, because of the particular importance of the listed buildings and the practicalities of their use as educational establishments, the Planning Division hold regular meetings with a representative of Hinchingsbrooke and Kimbolton Schools (and Ramsey Abbey College if similar experiences are found there) with the aim of developing a good working relationship on conservation issues and planning future maintenance requirements and that a Member of the Council be nominated as an intermediary between the Division and each of the schools to attend (and potentially) chair those meetings;
- (b) that the Council offers specific training to town and parish councils in heritage and conservation issues to raise awareness locally on the subject and on the value of conservation character statements, buildings at risk register, etc.;
- (c) that town and parish councils be encouraged to work with the District Council on heritage and conservation issues by alerting the Council of any deterioration in the condition of listed buildings and unauthorised works to listed buildings or in conservation areas in their parishes;
- (d) that consideration be given to regular meetings between conservation officers and parish councils with a view to refreshing the training provided and in pursuance of recommendation (c) above;
- (e) that the District Council encourages town and parish councils where conservation groups or civic societies

currently do not exist to seek the establishment of such bodies to promote an interest in the local heritage;

- (f) that the District Council explores ways of improving its website to provide additional information on conservation issues and procedures;
- (g) that the Conservation Team publicise the availability of grants from potential sources to help owners of listed buildings fund the cost of maintenance and repairs;
- (h) that representations be made through the Local Government Association to alter the present arrangements for value added tax so that repairs and maintenance of listed buildings become zero rated, thereby reducing the cost of maintaining heritage assets; and
- (i) that officers be encouraged to use 'plain English' in their communications with the public to help in an understanding of complex conservation issues and explain what is required.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Notes of the Planning Conservation Working Group

www.huntingdonshire.gov.uk

Making the Most of Your Local Heritage: A Guide for Overview and Scrutiny Committees

Planning Policy Statement 5: Planning for the Historic Environment