A meeting of the **CORPORATE GOVERNANCE PANEL** will be held in **MEETING ROOM 1, PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON, PE29 3TN** on **WEDNESDAY, 12TH DECEMBER 2007** at **6:00 PM** and you are requested to attend for the transaction of the following business:-

**Contact
(01480)**

APOLOGIES

1. **MINUTES** (Pages 1 - 4)

    To approve as a correct record the Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 25th September 2007.

    **A Roberts
    388009**

2. **MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

    To receive from Members declarations as to personal and/or prejudicial interests and the nature of those interests in relation to any Agenda Item. Please see Notes 1 and 2 below.

3. **CALCULATION OF COUNCIL TAX BASE 2008/09** (Pages 5 - 8)

    To consider a report by the Head of Revenue Services recommending the Council Tax Base for 2008/2009.

    **J Barber
    388105**

4. **INTERNAL AUDIT SERVICE CHANGING REPORTING PERIODS** (Pages 9 - 12)

    To consider a report by the Audit and Risk Manager recommending change to the audit year.

    **D Harwood
    388115**

5. **REVIEW OF THE ANTI FRAUD AND CORRUPTION STRATEGY** (Pages 13 - 18)

    To note the outcome of the review of the Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy.

    **D Harwood
    388115**

6. **THE USE OF ONLINE MEDIA PROCEDURAL IMPLICATIONS** (Pages 19 - 26)

    To consider a report by the Head of Administration on the outcome of a study by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Support) on the use of online media.
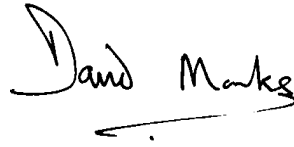
    **R Reeves
    388009**

7. **REVIEW OF CONSTITUTION** (Pages 27 - 34)

    To consider a report by the Head of Administration on progress of matters referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) during the review of the Council's Constitution.

    **A Roberts
    388009**

Dated this 3rd day of December 2007

Chief Executive

If you would like a translation of Agenda/Minutes/Reports or would like a large text version or an audio version please contact the Democratic Services Manager and we will try to accommodate your needs.

Emergency Procedure

In the event of the fire alarm being sounded and on the instruction of the Meeting Administrator, all attendees are requested to vacate the building via the closest emergency exit and to make their way to the car park adjacent to the Methodist Church on the High Street (opposite Prima's Italian Restaurant).

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HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the CORPORATE GOVERNANCE PANEL held in Meeting Room 1, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon, PE29 3TN on Tuesday, 25th September 2007.

PRESENT:	Councillor C J Stephens – Chairman.
	Councillors K J Churchill, T V Rogers, L M Simpson and G S E Thorpe.
APOLOGY:	An apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor J A Gray.
IN ATTENDANCE:	Miss L Sandford of Grant Thornton, the Council's External Auditors.

12. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 26th June 2007 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

13. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

14. INTERNAL AUDIT SERVICE ANNUAL AUDIT REPORT

The Panel received and noted a report by the Internal Audit Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which contained his opinion on the Council's systems of internal control and which summarised the progress made against the 2006/07 Annual Audit Plan and the performance standards achieved.

Members noted the Internal Audit Manager's conclusions in relation to the level of assurance provided by the Council's internal control environment in terms of the effective exercise of its functions. In response to a question by a Member, the Internal Audit Manager informed the Panel that he understood the rate at which agreed actions were implemented generally matched that of other district councils. Having discussed the methodology used to monitor the audit service's performance, it was

RESOLVED

that the report and annual opinion statement be noted.

15. RISK MANAGEMENT UPDATE

With the aid of a report by the Internal Audit and Risk Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel was acquainted with progress made to embed risk management within the Council. Members noted the requirements to improve the Council's

current rating to level 3 against the risk management standard, one of which was to require all Members of the Panel to receive training on risk management awareness. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report be noted.

16. **CODE OF GOVERNANCE**

The Panel considered a report by the Head of Policy and Strategic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) to which was appended a revised Code of Governance. Having noted that the Code complied with the new Good Governance in Local Government Framework published by CIPFA/SOLACE and represented current good practice, it was

RESOLVED

that the revised Code of Governance be adopted.

17. **GOVERNANCE STATEMENT**

Consideration was given to a report by the Head of Policy and Strategic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) on the outcome of the annual review of the Council's governance arrangements. Members were acquainted with the Council's current position with regard to the Code of Governance referred to at Minute No. 06/16 *ante*. Having discussed the Annual Statement on Governance, which summarised the corporate governance work carried out in 2006/07 and identified matters to be addressed during 2007/08, it was

RESOLVED

(a)   that the Statement of Assurance on Corporate Governance for 2005/06 be approved; and

(b)   that the Chairman of the Panel, the Leader of the Council, the Chief of Executive and the Director of Commerce and Technology be authorised to sign the Statement on behalf of the Council.

18. **APPROVAL FOR PUBLICATION OF THE 2006/07 ACCOUNTS**

The Panel considered the draft accounts for the year 2006/07 (a copy of which are appended in the Minute Book). Having endorsed the Council's letter of representation, Members were informed by Miss Sandford, that an unqualified opinion would be provided on the accounts.

Members were advised of the matters contained in the Action Plan, including those where Officers had taken a different view to that of the auditor. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

(a)   that the letter of representation attached at Annex A to

the report now submitted be approved and the Director of Commerce and Technology authorised to sign it on behalf of the Council;

(b)   that the Auditor's report be received and the appended Action Plan for dealing with the matters highlighted noted; and

(c)   that the revised accounts at Annex B to the report now submitted be approved for publication.

Chairman

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CORPORATE GOVERNANCE PANEL   12 DECEMBER 2007

CALCULATION OF COUNCIL TAX BASE 2008/2009
(Report by the Head of Revenue Services)

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Local Government Finance Act 1992 requires a Billing Authority (Huntingdonshire District Council) to calculate and approve a tax base for Council Tax purposes by 31 January in respect of the following financial year. The Local Authorities (Calculation of Tax Base) Regulations 1992 (as amended) contain the rules for making the necessary calculations.

1.2 The tax base calculation is designed to convert all existing properties and those due for completion before the end of the period into a Band D Equivalent. This is achieved by applying a prescribed weighting to the properties in each of the respective valuation bands.

1.3 The resulting figure, after taking into account relevant allowances, is called the Net Tax Base. Once agreed, this figure is divided into the Council's Net Expenditure due to be raised from Council Tax and the actual Council Tax Charge for a Band D property is then derived.

2 GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF THE CALCULATION

2.1 A tax base calculation for the whole of the District Council's area has been undertaken, using information held as at 15 November 2007. Added to this information are details of new properties likely to be completed and banded for Council Tax purposes during the period November 2007 to March 2009. Estimates have been made regarding the possible level of occupation of these new properties and the likely discounts that they may attract, and in particular it assumes that the discount awarded to both "second homes" and "long term empty properties" will be at the minimum level (i.e. 10% and 0% respectively). The resulting calculation shows a Band D equivalent tax base of 58,222 properties.

2.2 When undertaking a tax base calculation, the resulting figure has to be reduced by a percentage which, in the District Council's opinion, represents the likely losses on collection during the financial year. A provision of 0.75% is required. When applying this 0.75% reduction to this calculation, a net tax base figure of 57,785 is achieved.

2.3 This compares with the current tax base of 57,434 and the growth is therefore 0.61%.

2.4 The legislation requires that the actual Tax Base Calculation is undertaken as at the 30 November. A revised calculation will have to be undertaken on that date and, if necessary, an amended report will be tabled at the Meeting.

3   RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1   It is recommended that the Corporate Governance Panel resolves as follows:-

(a)   that the report by the Head of Revenue Services regarding the calculation of the District Council's tax base for the year 2008/2009 be approved; and

(b)   that pursuant to the Head of Revenue Services' report and in accordance with the Local Authorities (Calculation of Tax Base) Regulations 1992 (as amended), the amounts calculated by the Huntingdonshire District Council as their net tax base for the whole District for the year 2008/2009 be 57,785 and shall be as listed below for each Parish of the District.

Abbotsley	188
Abbots Ripton	134
Alconbury	563
Alconbury Weston	283
Alwalton	125
Barham & Woolley	26
Bluntisham	727
Brampton	1795
Brington & Molesworth	112
Broughton	87
Buckden	1145
Buckworth	50
Bury	590
Bythorn & Keyston	145
Catworth	137
Chesterton	60
Colne	335
Conington	74
Covington	42
Denton & Caldecote	24
Diddington	30
Earith	580
Easton	75
Ellington	234
Elton	290
Eynesbury Hardwicke	780
Farcet	580
Fenstanton	1200
Folksworth & Washingley	350
Glatton	132
Godmanchester	2258
Grafham	238
Great & Little Gidding	127
Great Gransden	457
Great Paxton	375
Great Staughton	310
Haddon	21
Hail Weston	238
Hamerton	42
Hemingford Abbots	325

Hemingford Grey	1154
Hilton	445
Holme	243
Holywell-cum-Needingworth	980
Houghton & Wyton	1215
Huntingdon	6774
Kings Ripton	73
Kimbolton & Stonely	590
Leighton Bromswold	80
Little Paxton	1145
Morborne	11
Offord Cluny	200
Offord d'Arcy	295
Old Hurst	95
Old Weston	88
Perry	265
Pidley-cum-Fenton	155
Ramsey	2880
St Ives	5650
St Neots	9120
St Neots Rural	40
Sawtry	1737
Sibson-cum-Stibbington	205
Somersham	1365
Southoe & Midloe	155
Spaldwick	225
Steeple Gidding	12
Stilton	785
Stow Longa	60
Tetworth	20
The Stukeleys	760
Tilbrook	105
Toseland	38
Upton & Coppingford	85
Upwood & The Raveleys	412
Warboys	1358
Waresley	128
Water Newton	42
Winwick	41
Wistow	220
Woodhurst	155
Woodwalton	85
Yaxley	2872
Yelling	<u>138</u>
	<u>57785</u>

Contact Officer: *Julia Barber - Head of Revenue Services*
                          ☎ *01480-388105*

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CORPORATE GOVERNANCE PANEL   **12 DECEMBER 2007**

**INTERNAL AUDIT SERVICE
CHANGING REPORTING PERIODS**

(Report by the Audit & Risk Manager)

1.   INTRODUCTION

1.1   Internal Audit annual plans have historically been prepared around the financial year (April to March). This report proposes that the audit year is changed to August/July, so that the reporting of the delivery of the audit plan and associated reports fits more closely to the governance reporting timetable.

2.   REPORTING PERIODS

2.1   A core set of reports are required to be presented to the Panel over a twelve month period. In particular the annual internal report and opinion is reported to the September meeting in order to coincide with the Corporate Governance Statement. This report considers the audits that have taken place in the 12 months to the end of July. It therefore seems illogical to continue with two separate audit plan years – April to March for administrative purposes and August to July for corporate governance purposes. It is therefore proposed that the audit plan year is changed so that it covers the period August to July.

2.2   Thus the September report will report on audit achievement for the year and an interim report on progress will be reported to the March meeting covering the half year from August to January.

2.3   Annex A outlines an amended reporting timetable. If the proposals are agreed, minor changes will be required to the audit strategy to reflect these amended timings.

2.4   The external auditor has been consulted over the proposed changes and has raised no objections.

3.   EXTENDING THE 2007/08 AUDIT PLAN

3.1   If it is agreed that the audit plan should cover the period August to July, then it is proposed that the current 2007/08 audit plan be 'extended' by four months to run to July 2008. The additional audits will be reported to the Panel's March meeting and then the audit year proposals for August 2008 to July 2009 will be reported to the June meeting.

4.   DELIVERY OF THE 2007/08 AUDIT PLAN

4.1   Progress in delivering the 2007/08 plan up to the end of July was included in the September report. Since then progress has been good and the March meeting will receive the first half-year monitoring report based on the "new" year – August 2007 to January 2008.

4.2   Electronic copies of all completed reports are available to Members on the Internal Audit intranet home page.

5. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that:

- the audit plan year be based on August to July.
- an audit plan for the 4 months ending July 2008 be presented to the March meeting of the Panel
- the Internal Audit Strategy should be amended to reflect this change

BACKGROUND INFORMATION
Internal audit strategy
Internal audit & assurance plan 2007/08

Contact Officer: David Harwood, Audit & Risk Manager ☎ **01480 388115**

Audit & Risk Reports to the Corporate Governance Panel

Report to be submitted	Reporting period to be covered	2008				2009				2010
		March	June	Sept	Dec	March	June	Sept	Dec	March
AUDIT PLAN										
2007/08										
Audit Plan extension	April 2008 to July 2008	✓								
½ year audit progress report	August 2007 to January 2008	✓								
Annual audit report & opinion	August 2007 to July 2008			✓						
2008/09										
Annual Audit Plan 2008/09	August 2008 to July 2009		✓							
½ year audit progress report	August 2008 to January 2009					✓				
Annual audit report and opinion	August 2008 to July 2009							✓		
2009/10										
Annual Audit Plan 2009/10	August 2009 to July 2010						✓			
½ year audit progress report	August 2009 to January 2010									✓
ANNUAL REVIEWS										
Review of internal audit's terms of reference			✓				✓			
Annual Review of the effectiveness of Internal Audit			✓				✓			
Anti-fraud & corruption policy review					✓				✓	
Whistleblowing policy review					✓				✓	
UPDATES										
Risk Management update		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓
		March	June	Sept	Dec	March	June	Sept	Dec	March

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CORPORATE GOVERNANCE PANEL   **12 DECEMBER 2007**

REVIEW OF THE ANTI FRAUD & CORRUPTION STRATEGY
(Report by the Audit & Risk Manager)

1.   INTRODUCTION

1.1   This report details the outcome of the review of the Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy, which was first approved in January 2004.

2.   THE FRAUD ACT 2006

2.1   Until the introduction of the Fraud Act in January this year, no legal definition of fraud existed. It was generally used to describe such acts as deception, bribery, forgery, extortion, corruption, theft, conspiracy, embezzlement, misappropriation, false representation, concealment of material facts and collusion.

2.2   The Fraud Act introduced a new general offence of fraud which can be committed in three ways
   - Fraud by false representation
   - Fraud by failing to disclose information
   - Fraud by abuse of position

3.   THE STRATEGY

3.1   A number of changes are being proposed which are summarised below and highlighted in full in the Strategy itself (see Annex A).

   - Definitions of fraud and corruption are included for the first time.
   - The Council's recruitment processes (which include reference and qualification and criminal record bureau checks, immigration and right to work controls) have been added to the list of key financial, administrative and organisational procedures so acknowledging the importance that rigorous pre-employment checks can have in reducing fraud.
   - Reinforcing the zero tolerance attitude to fraud by including a statement that explains that disciplinary action will always be taken against staff who have been involved in wrongdoing and that attempts shall be made to recover all losses from them.
   - A review of the causes of the losses will be undertaken with a view to improving internal control systems and a positive decision shall be made as to whether or not to publicise the case.

4.   RECOMMENDATION

4.1   It is recommended that the revised Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy be approved.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION
None.

Contact Office: David Harwood, Audit & Risk Manager ☎ **01480 388115**

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HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy

1.   Introduction

1.1   Huntingdonshire District Council is determined that a culture of honesty, openness and accountability will always be promoted, and as such is wholly opposed to all forms of fraud, corruption or theft. The Council is committed to making sure that the risk of fraud, corruption and theft is reduced to a level that is proportionate to the resources required to achieve that reduction. The Council also recognises that all dishonest acts undermine the high standards of public service that it is aiming to achieve.

1.2   This Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy provides details of our approach to tackling fraud, corruption and theft. It gathers together, under the heading of one overall document, all of the Authority's policies and guidance that deal with this area.

2.   Anti-Fraud and Corruption Statement

2.1   The Council is committed to the highest possible standards of honesty, openness and accountability. The Council will not tolerate any fraud, corruption or theft by Members, employees, consultants, contractors or service users. It will ensure that internal procedures are in place to deter and prevent the risk of fraud, corruption or theft, maintain clear and well publicised arrangements for receiving and investigating complaints.

2.2   The Council is committed to the highest possible standards of honesty, and will pursue appropriate action in all instances where fraud, corruption and theft are found.

3   Definitions

3.1   The Council defines fraud and corruption in the following way.

Fraud is defined as conduct where a person makes a false representation, deliberately fails to disclose information or abuses a position of trust, with the intention to make gain or cause a loss or the risk of a loss to another

Corruption covers the offering, giving, soliciting or acceptance of an inducement or rewards, which may influence the action of any person.

4   The Principles of Conduct

4.1   Each individual Member and employee is responsible for playing a part in ensuring that public confidence in the services provided by the Council is maintained. They will lead by example in ensuring compliance with all legal requirements, rules, procedures and practices, and conduct themselves in accordance with both the spirit and letter of their respective Codes of Conduct.

**HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy**

5 **Reducing the risk of fraud, corruption and theft**

5.1 The Council has a number of procedures and rules to make sure that financial, administrative and organisational procedures are properly controlled. The most important of these procedures and rules are the:
- Code of Financial Management
- Code of Procurement
- Code of Conduct for Members
- Code of Conduct for Employees
- Members' Planning Code of Good Practice
- Members' Licensing Code of Good Practice
- Staff Recruitment & Selection Process

5.2 The Code of Financial Management makes it clear that Directors and Heads of Service are responsible for the prevention of fraud and corruption within the services and functions under their control. They are required to establish, maintain and document the systems of internal control and ensure that relevant employees or Members are familiar with such systems.

6. **Disclosure, investigation and prosecution policies**

6.1 The Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy shall be supported by specific policies or procedures that deal with the issues of disclosure, investigation and prosecution. These polices and procedures are:
- The Whistle-blowing Policy
- The Whistle-blowing Guidance
- Money Laundering Avoidance Policy
- The Housing & Council Tax Benefit Anti-Fraud Strategy
- The Housing & Council Tax Benefit Prosecution Policy
- The Disciplinary Procedures

In addition to the above, detailed guidance notes have been written to assist staff who are required to undertake specific investigations.

6.2 The policies and procedures aim to ensure that the Council's commitment to the prevention of fraud, corruption and theft:
- is clearly defined
- actively encourages and promotes the prevention and detection of fraud, corruption and theft
- identifies clear reporting lines for those having knowledge or suspicion of irregularity
- establishes uniform procedures for handling allegations, ensuring consistent treatment
- ensures fair treatment for those against whom allegations are made
- encourages individuals and organisations who come into contact with the Council in the course of their business to recognise the Council's Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy.

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy

6.3   Irrespective of who is involved, all matters of significant fraud and corruption identified against the Council, where its investigation is not covered by another policy or procedure, will be referred to the Police. Irrespective of the decision reached as to any criminal prosecution the Council shall, in the case of an employee or employees, apply the disciplinary procedure and where the allegation of an offence is proven, take appropriate disciplinary action against the employee(s) involved.

6.4   The Council will aim to recover from the perpetrators any losses that it sustains as a result of fraud and corruption.

7.   **Corrective Action**

7.1   The Director of Commerce & Technology will be responsible for ensuring that lessons learnt from the investigation are evaluated and result in the strengthening of the systems involved. He/she shall also consider whether it would be of benefit to the Council to publicise the outcome of the investigation as a deterrent to other potential perpetrators.

8.   **Publicising the Strategy**

8.1   The Council will make suitable arrangements to publicise the Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy and supporting polices to all Members and employees.

8.2   Action will be taken to make the public and members of outside bodies aware of the Council's Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy.

8.3   Members and employees can obtain copies of the Codes and policies noted in this strategy from the Head of HR & Payroll Services, the Head of Revenue Services or the Audit & Risk Manager.

9.   **Conclusion**

9.1   The Council is committed to tackling fraud, corruption and theft whenever it happens and any allegations received will be responded to in an effective and organised manner, following the principles and procedures within this document.

9.2   The S151 Officer and the Monitoring Officer will jointly review the Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy on an annual basis to ensure it remains effective. Any changes that are required to the Strategy will be reported to the Corporate Governance Panel.

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CORPORATE GOVERNANCE PANEL   12TH DECEMBER 2007
CABINET   13TH DECEMBER 2007

THE USE OF ONLINE MEDIA
PROCEDURAL IMPLICATIONS

(Report by Head of Administration)

1. Introduction

1.1 A working group led by Councillor A N Gilbert submitted a report to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Support) in September following an investigation into ways of promoting and communicating the work of the Council's scrutiny panels and the use of information and communications technology generally to highlight the work of the Council. As support was expressed by the Panel for the use of on-line petitions, a further report was requested on the potential constitutional implications and this was considered by the Panel in November.

1.2 The purpose of this report is to bring the Panel's conclusions to the attention of the Corporate Governance Panel and the Cabinet.

2. E-Forums Working Group

2.1 A copy of the group's report prepared by Councillor Gilbert is attached. The Overview and Scrutiny Panel concluded that –

- councillors should try and make use of the personal website facility on the Council's website as a means of communicating with ward residents, although the decision whether to maintain a 'blog' should remain a matter for each individual councillor;

- the Council should not host on-line forums because of the substantial resource implications involved but that officers should look for cost effective ways of increasing opportunities for meaningful interaction through the Council's website;

- an on-line petition facility should be added to the Council's website in the most cost-effective way possible; and

- Scrutiny Panel members and Chairmen should be more pro-active in using in-house methods of communication and engaging with external media.

The Modern.Gov software system used for the publication of agenda and minutes on-line enables Members to host their own web pages and 'blogs' and both training and day-to-day assistance is available from the Democratic Services Section to help Members who wish to avail themselves of this opportunity. An upgrade to the system is anticipated in December which will enable petitions to be undertaken on-line.

3. Petitions

3.1 An avenue exists currently for a petition on matters of relevance and

containing a minimum of 50 signatories to be presented at a meeting of the Council. A similar mechanism applies to meetings of the Huntingdonshire Traffic Management Area Joint Committee.

3.2 Having considered whether an on-line petition should be treated any differently to one organised in a traditional manner, the Panel were of the opinion that, provided it contained the names and addresses or places of work of the signatories as opposed to e-mail addresses and someone being prepared to present it at a Council meeting, an on-line petition should be dealt with in accordance with the existing provisions of the constitution. There is a presumption that on-line petitions may be easier to organise and thus will be used more frequently. However subject to existing rules being complied with, this could stimulate interest in local democracy and attract more publicity for Council meetings. In order to prevent the possibility of a succession of petitions slowing down the business of the Council, the Panel suggest that an upper limit could be imposed of three per meeting.

3.3 The Panel were conscious that the Council has had to introduce a vexatious complainants procedure to prevent officers and Members from being bombarded with e-mails by individuals. On-line petitions, because of their immediacy, could provide a similar mechanism to generate excessive submissions to the Council. If this occurs, it may be necessary to re-visit the petitions and vexatious complainants procedures to prevent the process from being abused.

3.4 In the event of an on-line petition not generating the 50 signatures required to trigger its presentation to Council, it is suggested that it be dealt with by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Panel, as long as it contains a minimum of 10 signatures. If an individual member of the public wishes to raise an issue with the Council, this will be dealt with under the 'community call to action' provisions of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the Police and Justice Act 2006. Regulations and guidance on the implementation of those provisions will be issued in the New Year and will be brought to the attention of Members when they become available.

4. Conclusion

4.1 The experience of those authorities that have introduced the facility of on-line petitions is that this is a successful way of engaging with the community and enhancing the democratic process. The Modern.Gov software upgrade will enable this to be introduced at minimal cost other than staff time in moderating the process and, while there is no evidence that this will result in a large influx of petitions, a limit on the number of petitions per meeting, whether submitted on-line or in a traditional format, will mean that this will be kept at manageable proportions at Council meetings.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Having regard to the investigations they have commissioned, the Panel

RECOMMEND

- that councillors make use of the personal website facility on the Council's website as a means of communicating with ward residents, although the decision whether to maintain a 'blog' should remain a matter for each individual councillor;

- that on-line forums be not hosted by the Council because of the substantial resource implications involved but that officers look for cost effective ways of increasing opportunities for meaningful interaction through the Council's website;

- that an on-line petition facility be introduced using the Modern.Gov software system when this becomes available;

- that on-line petitions be processed under the existing constitutional arrangements, subject to a maximum of 3 petitions being presented at any meeting;

- that in the event of an on-line petition not having the requisite number of signatories or the organiser not being prepared to present it to Council, the petition be submitted for consideration to the relevant overview and scrutiny panel, subject to the petition containing the names and addresses of at least 10 persons who live or work or own property in the District;

- that in the event of an excessive number of petitions being organised by any one individual, the Corporate Governance Panel be requested to consider amending the vexatious complainants procedure accordingly; and

- that the Corporate Governance Panel recommend the Council to approve the necessary constitutional changes.

Background Papers

Report by E-Forums working group submitted to Overview & Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 11th September 2007.

Contact Officer

Roy Reeves – Head of Administration
Tel: (01480) 388003

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REPORT BY WORKING GROUP TO CONSIDER THE USE OF ONLINE MEDIA TO PROMOTE THE WORK OF HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

1.   INTRODUCTION

The working group was established initially to look at ways of better promoting and communicating the work of the Council's overview and scrutiny panels. The working group's remit was subsequently expanded to consider the broader issues of using information and communications technology to promote the work of the Council generally and to foster greater citizen participation in local democracy. In carrying out its remit the group has looked particularly at the use of personal web logs (blogs), online discussion forums and online petitions. The group discovered that this path (of using such media for such purposes) was already fairly well trodden by others. Pilot studies have been carried out in some local authorities and the advice of those authorities was particularly helpful in reaching the recommendations contained in this report.

The body of the report considers four separate areas: blogs, online forums, online petitions, and other means of external communications. Some of these areas might serve to better promote the work of the scrutiny panels and the Council generally, while others are more concerned with facilitating citizen engagement in the democratic process.

2.   BACKGROUND

An initial report dated 3 November 2006 was prepared by Councillor Gilbert and presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Support) on 14 November 2006. Councillors Dew and Thorpe subsequently joined the working group. The group met on 22 February 2007 to discuss matters further. A meeting was held on 29 March 2007 between the working group, Councillor Simpson, Chris Hall, Joe Bedingfield and Christine Deller. This meeting was helpful in ascertaining the views of officers and for better understanding some of the resource implications surrounding use of online media.

A brief verbal report was presented to the scrutiny panel by Councillor Gilbert on 12 June 2007. Following that report contact has been made with Kingston Borough Council and Bristol City Council and their experiences of using online petitions have been summarised in this report.

3.   BLOGS

A blog is essentially an online journal detailing the musings of its author. Weblogs are increasingly being used by elected representatives and local government officials keen to communicate more effectively and efficiently with citizens, staff, media and other tiers of government.

The aim of blogging for civic leadership is to encourage two-way communication between councillors and local residents. Blogging councillors use their online diary to offer an insight into their day to day role as a local representative. Local issues are explored and residents are invited to give their comments and opinions.

Weblogs that work best are highly individualistic. Some blogs that encourage comments actually receive them (although there is currently no facility for doing this on the HDC member sites), but ultimately this is the personal online space of the owner. It is already possible for HDC members to use their existing personal website space (once set up) to host a blog. At present only a few members have a personal HDC website and none is currently using it to blog.

The group thought that blogs were best left to individual councillors to instigate if they had a specific desire to do so. If blogs are to be done well they require a lot of time to update. The facility already exists for members to organise a simple blog on their HDC webspace if they want to (although there is no interactivity function).

RECOMMENDATION

Councillors should try to make use of the personal website facility on the Council's website as a means of communicating with ward residents, but the decision whether to maintain a blog should remain an individual one.

4.   **ONLINE FORUMS**

An online forum is a web-based facility whereby anyone can post an idea, ask a question or otherwise enter into debate over issues. The goal of online forums is to give everyone a greater voice in local decisions and encourage more citizen participation in local public policy-making. They also provide a forum for decision-makers to receive immediate feedback from the community on issues that must be decided or voted on.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister recently provided funding to pilot online forums in Brighton & Hove and the London Borough of Newham. These forums are loosely associated with the local authorities in their respective areas, although they are not hosted or moderated by those authorities. Councillor Gilbert's report of 3 November 2006 contains further information on the operation of the Brighton forum. Initial interest in the forums was at a fairly low level. There is evidence which shows that in Newham the local authority have distanced themselves from the forum and some councillors do not consider that it makes any valuable contribution to local debate.

The working group is concerned that a dedicated forum linked to, or hosted by, the Council site is not a viable option. For legal and ethical reasons it would require full-time monitoring by an officer and would duplicate the facility provided by other privately operated local forums. This would clearly have substantial resource implications which would probably go beyond the potential benefits any such forum might offer. This view is shared by Chris Hall and Joe Bedingfield.

However, we did think that it would be useful to have on the Council website the function to post comments (after they have been checked by an officer) in response to specific news items, consultations etc. This would create a type of mini, subject-specific forum which would encourage public participation in the work of the council. Officers thought this idea would be feasible and would not involve significant resources to implement. It was also noted that the Council's website already offers a degree of interactivity. Joe Bedingfield has now brought together many of these interactive elements at www.huntsdc.gov.uk/haveyoursay.

RECOMMENDATION

Due to the substantial resource implications of hosting an online forum on the Council website, it is not recommended that the Council pursues this matter further. However, officers should continue to look for cost-effective ways of increasing the opportunities for meaningful citizen interaction through the Council's website.

5.   **ONLINE PETITIONS**

Online petitions (or e-petitions) are simply petitions which are commenced, hosted and submitted via a website. They are being used by the Scottish parliament and some local authorities, notably Bristol City and Kingston Borough councils. Bristol and Kingston have been using e-petitions for about three years and they appear to be a successful way of providing another medium through which concerned citizens can raise a petition. In fact Bristol say that it is the most successful and most self-perpetuating e-democracy tool they have. (Information from Bristol City Council has been circulated separately to Members of the Panel).

It seems that having the online petition facility does not necessarily lead to an increase in the number of petitions submitted to a local authority. The online facility does not replace traditional paper petitions, but exists alongside it. Citizens who were not able to add their name to the petition online would still be able to sign a paper version. The technology merely enables people to organise the petition online. However, the Bristol and Kingston systems also allow for the submission of supporting documents (such as plans or photos) and there is the facility to post comments so that some debate about the subject of the petition can take place online. This requires some moderation but, according to Bristol, this is not an onerous responsibility. Once submitted to the Council the petition would be dealt with in the usual way as set out in the constitution.

The evidence from both authorities is that online petitions have enhanced citizen engagement in the democratic process and even influenced decision making. This has not come without cost. For the system to run effectively an officer needs to be available to advise potential petitioners on the wording of their petition, and whether the issue can indeed be the subject of a petition. An officer would also need to moderate any comments left on the website (if such a facility were provided) and the facility would need appropriate IT support. The original software cost £7,000 (but attracted a subsidy of £3,000). However, it seems that alternative software will be available later this year at a vastly reduced cost. Overall it seems that online petitions would provide a useful additional medium through which Huntingdonshire residents can raise matters of public concern.

RECOMMENDATION

The Council adds an online petition facility to its website in the most cost-effective way possible.

6. OTHER FORMS OF EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

The group also considered how traditional forms of external communications could be used to promote the panels' activities. We thought greater use could be made of District Wide and the website to highlight the work of scrutiny. We also thought that panel chairs should look to further develop press contacts and to supply them with regular news releases.

RECOMMENDATION

Scrutiny panel members and chairmen to be more proactive in utilising in-house methods of communication and engaging with external media.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

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CORPORATE   GOVERNANCE   **12TH DECEMBER 2007**
PANEL

REVIEW OF CONSTITUTION
(Report by the Head of Administration)

1.   **INTRODUCTION**

1.1   The purpose of this report is to acquaint the Panel with the findings of Overview and Scrutiny (Service Delivery) on a suggestion made under the last review of the Constitution that the Council should establish a District youth forum.

2.   **BACKGROUND**

2.1   In the course of the review of the Constitution the Panel asked the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) to examine a proposal to establish a District youth forum, including suggestions for the way it might operate. The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) subsequently established a Member Working Group to carry out an investigation. The final report, which has been endorsed by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel, appears in an Appendix hereto.

3.   **RECOMMENDATION**

The Panel is

RECOMMENDED

to note the recommendations of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) on the suggestion that the Council should establish a District youth forum.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Reports of the meetings of the Youth Forum Working Group

Minutes of the meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) on 2nd October and 6th November 2007.

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REVIEW OF CONSTITUTION - YOUTH FORUM SUGGESTION
(Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery))

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery), at its meeting on 5th June 2007, established a Working Group to consider a proposal to establish a District Youth Forum. Councillors E R Butler, Mrs K E Cooper, P J Downes, Mrs P A Jordan and J S Watt were appointed to the Working Group. This report contains the Panel's recommendations on the proposal and on a number of related matters.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 During the last review of the Constitution Councillor P J Downes suggested the Council should establish a District youth forum. The Corporate Governance Panel, as the body responsible for overseeing the Council's constitutional arrangements and advising the Council of any changes, decided to request the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) to investigate the practical and financial implications of proposal and to report back.

2.2 The Working Group has held two meetings. Councillors Mrs K E Cooper, P J Downes, Mrs P A Jordan and J S Watt were present at the first meeting on 30th August 2007. The second meeting on 11th October was attended by Councillors Mrs K E Cooper, P J Downes, Mrs P A Jordan.

3. STUDY REMIT

3.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Panel, following discussion at it June meeting, gave the Working Group the task of considering and making recommendations on whether the Council should establish a district youth forum. Its purpose would be to bring together representatives of youth councils and youth forums created locally by Town and Parish councils and other youth organisations. It also would encourage Town and Parish Councils to establish their own youth forums to assist young people in becoming involved in civic life. The District Youth Forum would be attended by representatives of Town and Parish forums who would share information and best practice. The Panel further suggested that the youth forum could act as a consultative mechanism on scrutiny issues and might be invited to report quarterly to the Panel, which would give young people a voice within the Council and encourage an interest in local democracy.

2. YOUTH FORUM PURPOSES

2.1 On the basis of the study remit, the Working Group established the following potential purposes for a Youth Forum:

1. To ensure the views of young people inform the Council's corporate plans and priorities;
2. To ensure the views of young people are incorporated into the Council's service planning process;

3.   To encourage in young people an interest in and to provide experience of local democracy, and

4.   To stimulate Town and Parish Councils to establish youth forums and to spread good practice.

3.   STUDY WORK

3.1   Having established potential purposes of a youth forum the Working Group decided to discuss with representatives of organisations involved in youth work the extent to which these purposes are already being met. The Working Group agreed on the importance of the purposes but wanted to avoid duplicating existing arrangements in this area. Members, therefore, decided to speak to the District Council's Head of Policy and Strategic Services, Ian Leatherbarrow, and Senior Policy Officer (Young People), Gill Hanby, in the first instance.

4.   FINDINGS

4.1   The Working Group has discussed with Mr Leatherbarrow and Ms Hanby existing arrangements for involving children and young people in decision-making in Huntingdonshire. The District Council previously has undertaken a three year Young People's Active Involvement project, the outcome of which was reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery and Resources) at its meeting on 4th April 2006. This project, since then, has been rolled out to partner organisations through joint funding from the District and County Councils and Huntingdonshire Regional College.

4.2   A Countywide model has been developed for involving children and young people in decisions. A pilot exercise has been carried out using the model as part of the review of the Sustainable Community Strategy. The Working Group has heard evidence that the model has successfully been used to achieve purposes 1 and 2 in section 2 of this report above. Furthermore, efforts are being made to try to encourage partnerships/groups at locality/ward level to develop actions based on work emerging from the Sustainable Community Strategy. The Working Group is of the view that the model for involving children and young people in decisions should be promoted to create greater awareness of it.

4.3   A bid is to be made to the national volunteering charity "V" which, If successful, will bring in £300k to the County and of that £100k over three years will be for Huntingdonshire specifically to work with 16-24 year olds. The Working Group has expressed its support for the bid and its intended use.

4.4   Investigations are being undertaken into developing a Countywide application to the Local Public Service Agreement Reward Money for funding in the region of £100k over three years for developing strategic work, including how the involvement of children and young people can be embedded into the work of organisations and coordinating/promoting partnership working. The Working Group also has supported this bid. In addition, officers are working with County colleagues to identify sources of funding to help support other areas of work such as that involving other age groups or specific settings.

4.5   With regard to the third purpose, the Working Group has been informed that the PARC toolkit is a good starting point for Town and Parish Councils who are considering engaging with young people. A "bite sized" session on this will be held in the New Year. While the toolkit has been demonstrated to be effective in achieving its aims, the Working Group has been made aware that it requires adult input and effort to ensure a succession of young people are involved. The Working Group is of the view that resources should be made available to support Town and Parish Councils' in engaging young people. Members have suggested that application is made to the Local Public Service Agreement Board for funding for this purpose and that it should be used to provide training for members of Town and Parish Councils on involving young people and to provide "session" workers to support Town and Parish Councils.

4.6   Both of the initiatives that are the subject of funding bids could support the development of work with Town and Parish Councils but they are not solely aimed at developing work with them as the PARC project was. Another initiative available to Town and Parish Councils provides training on 'involving young people', which includes modular training and suitable for Councilors at all levels.

4.7   Funding for this area of work is crucial if the initiatives referred to above are to be developed. Work is being done to attract external funding but this cannot be guaranteed and tends to be time-limited. As a result consideration is being given to the possibility of including young people's involvement in costings of work plans/action plans as they are developed. This would mean work was more sustainable and ensure it is embedded rather than bolted on.

4.8   The Working Group has noted that most schools in the District have school councils although no evidence was presented to indicate how effective these are. Members are satisfied that by this means and through that outlined in the previous paragraph the fourth purpose can be achieved.

4.9   In discussing the suggestions that a youth forum could act as a consultative mechanism on scrutiny issues and might be invited to report quarterly to the Panel for Service Delivery, the Working Group has recognised the value of having such input into the Scrutiny process. Members recommend that feedback is provided on the arrangements outlined above on the suggested frequency. Owing to the work that is still required it will not be possible to commence this reporting until 2008.

4.10   Given a general lack of awareness of the work that is going on in this field, the Working Group recommends that measures are taken address this situation. Members suggest that articles are placed in Districtwide, Team News and other Council publications on work with children and young people.

5.   **CONCLUSION**

5.1   The Working Group has considered a proposal to introduce a District Youth Forum. In order to do this a number of criteria have been identified that such a forum might fulfil, which have been set out. On the evidence presented, the Panel notes the arrangements currently

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in place and recognises that they might have the potential to meet the criteria in 2.1. Members consider that the level of participation by young people at Town and Parish Council level is not yet sufficiently developed to justify the creation of a District Youth Forum in the format originally envisaged. However, this should remain an aspiration and a long-term target for those engaged in developing youth participation.

5.2   The Working Group is, however, of the view that the current arrangements need to be developed and put on a sustainable footing before they can be said adequately to meet the four purposes identified in paragraph 2.1 above. For the justifications given in the preceding paragraphs the Working Group has made a series of recommendations, which are intended to achieve this.

6.   RECOMMENDATION

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) has endorsed the Working Group's findings and therefore

RECOMMEND

- ♦ that the Corporate Governance Panel should note the work being undertaken by the Council to involve young people and be recommended not to introduce a Youth Forum at this time but to remain open to re-considering this as and when circumstances permit;
- ♦ that the promotion of the Countywide model for involving children and young people in decision-making should be supported;
- ♦ that the submission of a bid for funding to the National Volunteering Charity "V" for work with 16-24 year olds should be supported;
- ♦ that the bid to the Local Public Service Agreement Board Reward Money for funding for developing strategic work, including how the involvement of children and young people can be embedded into the work of organisations and coordinating/promoting partnership working, should be supported;
- ♦ that application is made to the Local Public Service Agreement Board for funding to provide training for members of Town and Parish Councils on involving young people and to provide "session" workers to support Town and Parish Councils;
- ♦ that quarterly reports are submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) on the outcomes of the Council's engagement work with children and young people;
- ♦ that measures are introduced to raise awareness of current work in this field; and
- ♦ that a progress report is submitted to the Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) in 12 months time.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Notes of meetings of the Youth Forum Working Group.

Reports and Minutes of the Meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) held on 2nd October and 6th November 2007.

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