

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SERVICE SUPPORT) held in the Council Chamber, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon, PE29 3TN on Tuesday, 11 November 2008.

PRESENT: Councillor J A Gray – Chairman.

Councillors M G Baker, K M Baker, J T Bell, J W Davies, P J Downes, P M D Godfrey, D Harty, Ms S Kemp, L W McGuire, M F Newman, R G Tuplin and R J West.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors P H Dakers and A N Gilbert.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors P L E Bucknell

Councillors Mrs M Banerjee, E R Butler, S J Criswell, P G Mitchell and J S Watt (Overview & Scrutiny Panel, Service Delivery for Minute 48 only)

45. SUPPORTING LOCAL RETAILERS

The Chairman reported that in accordance with Article 16 of the Access to Information Rules contained in the Council's Constitution, he had given consent for an item relating to a proposal to introduce a car parking voucher scheme in long-stay car parks on Saturdays to be submitted as an item of urgency to the meeting of the Cabinet held on 6th November 2008. Members were reminded that Article 16 required the Chairman to report upon his actions to the next ensuing meeting of the Panel.

46. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 14th October 2008 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

47. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

48. GREAT FEN PROJECT

(Councillor P L E Bucknell, Executive Councillor for Planning Strategy and Transportation, was in attendance for this item.)

(Councillors Mrs M Banerjee, E R Butler, S J Criswell, P G Mitchell

and J S Watt, Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) were also in attendance for this item).

The Panel received a presentation by Mr C Gerrard, Project Manager of the Great Fen Project (copies of the slides are appended in the Minute Book) outlining the scope of the project, its background, management arrangements and recent developments. A copy of a report to be submitted to the Cabinet meeting on 20th November 2008 outlining a proposal for future governance arrangements was also circulated for comment.

In considering the content of the presentation and the Cabinet report, Members expressed some reservations about the way in which the project was progressing. Specifically comments were made in relation to the perceived acceleration of the development of the project which, while welcome in itself, might have adverse short term implications for some of the local people most directly affected. Comments were also made about the loss of arable land in the current climate of global food shortages and the need for improved communication with local communities in close proximity to the project.

The Panel also discussed the proposed future creation of a Visitors Centre for the project and in doing so commented on the need to improve accessibility to Woodwalton and Holme Fen, especially car parking at an early opportunity. However it was accepted by Members that accessibility, together with the proposed location of the Visitors' Centre were likely to form part of the Great Fen Masterplan which was expected to be published in Spring 2009. Following questions about the financial viability of the Centre, the longer term management of the project and the source of any subsidy potentially required, Members were informed that financial contributions would be obtained from a number of sources. Members also were informed by the Project Manager that the success of the project should not be perceived purely in economic terms and that the environmental and social benefits to the District also needed to be taken into consideration.

In response to a specific question concerning proposals to convert land used for arable crops into grazing which would generate methane production, the Project Manager explained that it was anticipated that the Great Fen Project would reduce CO² gas emissions and would become a future net sequester for green house gases.

Members also emphasised the important role that the District Council played in the Great Fen Partnership as the only democratically elected body of the various partners who could represent local people and the local economy. A need was highlighted to improve communication with all Members concerning the project as a whole given its significance and importance.

Having concluded that the District Council could best influence and guide the project in the interests of the local area and its residents by continuing involvement in the Project Steering Group, the Panel

RESOLVED

- (a) that the proposed principle of entering into a Collaborative Agreement in respect of the Great Fen Project for a five-year fixed term on a renewable basis be supported; and
- (b) that the detailed content of the agreement be the subject of a future report to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Support).

49. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2000: FORWARD PLAN

The Panel considered and noted the current Forward Plan of key decisions (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) scheduled for consideration by the Cabinet, which had been prepared by the Leader of the Council.

50. GYPSY & TRAVELLER SITES DEVELOPMENT PLAN DOCUMENT: INITIAL ISSUES CONSULTATION DOCUMENT: PRINCIPLES & PROCESSES

(Councillor P L E Bucknell, Executive Councillor for Planning Strategy and Transportation was in attendance for this Item).

With the assistance of a joint report by the Heads of Planning and Housing Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel considered the content of a proposed consultation document which had been designed to invite public views on the issues which would help guide the preparation of the Development Plan Document (DPD) for Gypsy and Traveller sites within the District.

Having been acquainted with the background to the creation of the DPD, together with the requirements for site identification in Huntingdonshire in the Regional Spatial Strategy, Members were informed that the consultation document was the first public step in the preparation of the DPD.

In discussing the process, the Panel recognised the potentially contentious nature of the issue, especially once the process moved on to site identification. Members therefore acknowledged the need for a robust basis for the site selection exercise and the importance of generating interest and comment at this stage of the process. Specific questions were raised concerning the availability of consultation responses, the method of engaging with the gypsy and traveller community, the options available for the acquisition and allocation of appropriate land and the role which District Council Members could play in the process. Concerns also were raised about the implications for Huntingdonshire residents of potential sites selected by neighbouring authorities near to the District's boundary.

Having regard to the possibility of sites being chosen in the more rural areas in the District, the Panel suggested that the proposed 6 weeks consultation period might be too short for some of the smaller parishes to respond. As the scope to extend the deadline for

comment was constrained by the need for early approval of the DPD, the Panel asked officers to alert town and parish councils and Members of the District Council to the forthcoming publication of the document and its significance. Officers also were requested to consider the possibility of convening a limited number of workshops for interested town and parish councils. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be recommended to endorse the recommendations within the report as submitted.

51. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD PANELS

By way of a joint report by the Heads of Administration, Environmental and Community Health Services and Policy & Strategic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel was updated with the latest developments on neighbourhood engagement arising from the Government's White Paper – Communities in Control: Real Power, Real People.

The Head of Administration reported that in view of the significant number of such policy initiatives and the need to ensure a co-ordinated approach in considering the implications for both the District Council and the communities of Huntingdonshire, it had been proposed that the Democratic Structure Working Party should be invited to undertake a detailed consideration of the issues as part of its review of the Council's democratic arrangements.

Attention also was drawn by a Member to the need to address the implications of the Sustainable Communities Act 2007 and it was explained that this would be incorporated into the discussions of the working party. Members also expressed concern regarding the operation of the current Safer Neighbourhood Panels and urged the working party to consider these and other related issues in a timely manner.

Having been advised of the comments of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) which also had considered the report, Members

RESOLVED

that the suggested process for the consideration and development of community engagement initiatives by the Democratic Structure Working Party be endorsed.

52. HOME WORKING - PILOT SCHEME

With the assistance of a report by the Head of Policy and Strategic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel was acquainted with the outcome of a pilot scheme under which five employees had worked full-time from home over the preceding year.

Having noted the positive benefits demonstrated by the pilot, the

potential savings in office accommodation costs and the intention to roll-out full-time home working to other employees where appropriate, the Panel

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report be welcomed and efforts to expand the pilot be encouraged.

53. WORKPLAN STUDIES

The Panel considered and noted a report by the Head of Administration (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) reviewing the Panel's programme of studies. In doing so, Councillor Ms S L Kemp reported on the investigations being undertaken by the working group reviewing the social consequences of alcohol abuse. It was reported that the Section 106 Working Group had not met since the previous meeting of the Panel.

Attention was drawn to a briefing note which had been circulated to Members of the Panel with regard to Treasury Management. Members concluded from the information provided that this would not be an appropriate study area, but suggested that the Council's future borrowing requirements might be a potential area of investigation in the new Municipal Year.

54. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SERVICE SUPPORT)

The Panel considered and noted a report by the Head of Administration (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) reviewing the Panel's progress to date on issues that had been discussed previously.

In referring to the recent study of HGV parking, the Panel were advised that a meeting of the Freight Quality Partnership had recently been held and details of their discussions would be circulated once the Minutes were available.

The Chairman reported that he had received a response from Councillor P L E Bucknell in reply to his letter concerning problems with commuter parking in the Longsands Area of St. Neots. It was reported that further information would be available in the New Year when investigations had been undertaken by the County Council.

55. SCRUTINY

The Panel considered and noted the latest edition of the Council's Decision Digest, summarising the Council's decisions since the previous meeting.

Chairman