

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SERVICE DELIVERY) held in the Council Chamber, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon, PE29 3TN on Tuesday, 4 November 2008.

PRESENT: Councillor S J Criswell – Chairman.

Councillors J D Ablewhite, Mrs M Banerjee, Mrs K E Cooper, Mrs J A Dew, J E Garner, P Godley, Mrs P A Jordan, P G Mitchell, J M Sadler, M F Shellens, Ms M J Thomas and J S Watt.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors E R Butler and P K Ursell.

44. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 7th October 2008 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

45. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

46. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2000: FORWARD PLAN

The Panel considered the current Forward Plan of Key Decisions (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which had been prepared by the Leader of the Council for the period 1st November 2008 to 28th February 2009. In so doing, Members requested that reports on the ICT Strategy and Web Strategy be circulated to Panel Members for information. In addition, Members were also apprised of background to items on Amendments to Disabled Facilities Grant Legislation and on Decent Homes Grant item.

47. HOUSING STRATEGY FOR THE CAMBRIDGE SUB-REGION

(Councillor Mrs D C Reynolds, Executive Councillor for Housing and Public Health, was in attendance for this item).

With the assistance of a report by the Head of Housing Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel were acquainted with the contents of the Housing Strategy for the Cambridge Sub-Region. By way of background, the Executive Councillor for Housing and Public Health reported that the Cambridge Sub-Region comprised seven local authority areas who worked in partnership on housing issues that extended across local authority boundaries. The Head of Housing Services, Mr S Plant, stressed that the Strategy had been received positively by the Audit Commission and that its importance lay in the fact that it enabled bids for funding

for housing purposes to be made at the regional level.

In response to a question by Councillor J M Sadler, the Head of Housing Services reported that the current economic downturn had produced positive effects in terms of the construction of social housing and that few repossessions had happened to date. However, he reported on the significant increase in enquiries regarding difficulties being experienced in making mortgage repayments and on the measures that had been put in place to meet demand for advice. Having placed on record their concerns at the implications of the declining housing market for the achievement of the Action Plan attached to the Strategy, it was

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be recommended to approve the Housing Strategy for the Cambridge Sub-Region 2008 -11.

48. OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ASSESSMENTS

(Councillor Mrs D C Reynolds, Executive Councillor for Housing and Public Health, was in attendance for this item).

Pursuant to Minute No. 35, the Head of Housing Services delivered a verbal report on the progress that had been made in reducing the length of time taken by Occupational Therapists to carry out assessments of need for home adaptations.

By way of background Mr Plant outlined the Disabled Facilities Grants process. Members were advised that the likely timescales for the completion of full applications, which included Occupational Therapy assessments and building work, was, on average, five months.

Mr Plant went on to state that a locum Occupational Therapist had been appointed to work in the Huntingdonshire area over the previous six months and that, as a result, significant reductions in waiting times had been achieved. Members were acquainted with the financial implications for the Council that expediting the process would have and with the approach that had been adopted towards the resulting increase in the number of adaptations that would be required.

49. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD PANELS

(Councillor Mrs D C Reynolds, Executive Councillor for Housing and Public Health, was in attendance for this item).

By way of a report by the Heads of Administration, Environmental and Community Health Services and Policy and Strategic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel were updated with developments in respect of local and national initiatives arising from the Government's White Paper – Communities in Control: Real Power, Real People.

The Head of Environmental and Community Health Services reported that owing to the number of announcements and policy initiatives from Central Government, details of the Council's proposals in relation to community engagement initiatives had not yet been finalised. Given

their previous interest in engaging with the community, Members received a detailed explanation by the Head of Environmental and Community Health Services of a series of models through which community engagement might be achieved together with the strengths and weaknesses of each. The models were broadly based on establishing multi-agency neighbourhood panels and they varied according to the degree of formalisation of their operating procedures. Following extensive discussions on the Panel's powers, size and training and on who should be represented on them, the Panel expressed concern over the financial and other resource implications that the proposals might have for the Council. Members formed the view that any new panels should not have executive decision making powers and they concluded that any new arrangements should be kept as simple as possible. Having considered ways in which the Council might decide on its preferred approach, Members endorsed a proposal for this matter to be referred to the Democratic Structure Working Group.

RESOLVED

- (a) that the suggestion that consideration and development of community engagement initiatives be undertaken by the Democratic Structure Working Group be endorsed; and
- (b) that the Democratic Structure Working Group be requested to take into account the Panel's views on the establishment of any new arrangements for community engagement.

50. GRANT AID

(Councillor Mrs D C Reynolds, Executive Councillor for Housing and Public Health, was in attendance for this item).

The Panel considered the final report of the Grant Aid Working Group (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). In so doing, the Panel noted the Working Group's activities, which comprised a series of meetings with various Officers to discuss the grant aid schemes offered by the Council.

Having drawn the Panel's attention to minor amendments to be made to the report, Members were acquainted with the key findings of the Group in relation to the Council's corporate priorities, the criteria for each scheme, the methods adopted to publicise the availability of grant funding, the application process, Officer / Member involvement in the approval process and the level of external funding brought into the District. In addition, Members were presented with a series of recommendations by the Working Group which were intended to streamline and promote the current grant aid process.

Having received clarification of the position with regard to the Council's service level agreements, it was agreed that the Working Group should review the half yearly reports by these organisations before their report was submitted to the Cabinet. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that subject to minor textural amendments, the report of the Grant Aid Working Group be approved for consideration by the Cabinet.

51. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SERVICE DELIVERY) - STUDIES

The Panel considered a report by the Head of Administration (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which contained details of actions taken in response to recent discussions and decisions.

Members endorsed a suggestion that Councillor J D Ablewhite should attend the Cabinet meeting on 6th November 2008 to present the Panel's report on Enhanced Cleansing Services.

52. SCRUTINY

The 88th Edition of the Decision Digest was received and noted.

Chairman