

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) held in the Corporate Training Suite, Eastfield House, 6 Latham Road, Huntingdon on Thursday, 12 November 2009.

PRESENT: Councillor J D Ablewhite – Chairman.

Councillors J D Ablewhite, J T Bell,
E R Butler, Mrs J A Dew, L W McGuire,
M F Shellens, G S E Thorpe and R G Tuplin.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors A N Gilbert and Ms M J Thomas.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor T V Rogers

45. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 15th October 2009 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

46. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillors Mrs J Dew and L M McGuire declared personal interests in Minute No. 47 by virtue of their membership of the Car Parking Working Party and Cambridgeshire County Council respectively.

47. BUDGET AND MEDIUM TERM PLAN 2010-2015 -DRAFT PROPOSALS

Councillor T V Rogers, Executive Councillor for Finance, was in attendance for this item.

With the aid of a report by the Head of Financial Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel considered the draft 2010/11 budget, the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTP) to 2014/15 and the longer term financial forecast to 2023/24, prior to their submission to Cabinet and final determination by the Council.

In introducing the report the Executive Councillor for Finance explained that the financial forecast considered by the Cabinet in September had not been altered. The current proposals had been the subject of extensive discussion by Executive Councillors. Current revenue reserves of £19m would be drawn on over the next four years until the recommended minimum level of £3m remained to cover unexpected expenditure. Income from government grant and Council Tax was likely to be substantially lower than the level assumed in the financial plan approved by the Council in February 2009. Councillor Rogers then informed Members of the initial responses to consultation with the Town Councils on proposals

relating to the District's public toilets.

The Director of Commerce and Technology advised the Panel that the forecast increase in Council Tax had been reduced from 4.99% to 2.49%. This combined with an expected reduction in the Revenue Support Grant for 2011/12 equated to an income £567k lower than the approved MTP. The figure did not include an adjustment for Concessionary Bus Fares, which were expected to be transferred to the County Council in April 2011. This was likely to reduce net expenditure by £0.9m but a corresponding reduction of £1.4m was expected in the Council's Revenue Support Grant. On the other hand substantial efficiency savings had been made in waste recycling and leisure centres and as a result of holding empty posts vacant. In addition, increases in provision for pay had also been limited with an uplift of 1% proposed for 2010/11. Finally, the Panel was advised that, following the three yearly revaluation of the Local Government Pension scheme, requirements for additional payments were forecast to be £180k in 2011/12 and £800k per year by 2014/15. As a result of these and other factors overall savings to be identified for the following three years amounted to £1m, £2.5m and £5.7m.

In response to a question by a Member the Panel was informed that with the exception of the Arts Service, the proposed budget should enable the Council to achieve its service delivery targets. While Members expressed reservations at the proposal effectively to end the Council's direct activities in the arts, it was noted that the Council would continue to promote the arts through grant funding.

Following a further question on whether the Council's Corporate Plan had been taken into account in devising the budget, assurances were provided that this had been the case. Although the point was made that the proposals relating to parking charges could conflict with the Council's objectives to promote the local economy, it was stated that this had been considered in planning the budget.

In discussing plans to transfer to Town Councils responsibility for cleaning and maintenance of the District's public conveniences, Members were informed that the current cost of this was £156k per year. The rationale was that Town Councils knew the level of local need for toilets and consequently would be better able to manage them. This was in the context of Town Councils asking the District Council for more responsibilities. The Panel discussed the effect of this proposal on tourism, though consensus was not reached on this. The significance of the proposal lay in the fact that the District Council could achieve a saving on this service but, depending on the response by Town Councils, it could also mean the District Council might not construct the new toilets proposed in MTP bid No. 302.

Members raised concerns at the proposed level of spending on Huntingdon Bus Station and requested that Cabinet review and justify the bid. It was suggested that the Cabinet might consider, instead, undertaking some refurbishment. Other matters discussed included the level of investment in the leisure centres. While the figures involved were high, the Panel felt the Council should recognise that it was likely to make a return from its investment and that many local people benefited from the service. Similarly, Members accepted that the figure for the A14 Inquiry was necessary to ensure the Council's

perspective was adequately represented during the Inquiry process and to enable to Council to address detailed aspects of the scheme.

The Panel debated the assumptions on which predictions about the effect of the Guided Bus had been made. Members also questioned the level of provision made for the Great Fen Project. However, this would be pursued separately during ongoing scrutiny of the project. Having noted that the level of Council Tax increase being proposed could change as circumstances altered, that the options available could include a higher increase and that the proposed increase represented a decrease in income of £175,000 compared with some previous forecasts, it was

RESOLVED

that, subject to review and justification of the proposed Capital expenditure on Huntingdon bus station, the Cabinet be recommended to endorse the draft Medium Term Financial Plan for submission to the Council as the basis for the production of the 2010/11 budget, the revised MTP for 2011/12 to 2014/15 and the financial plan to 2023/24.

48. CUSTOMER SERVICES MONITORING REPORT

Councillor T V Rogers, Executive Councillor for Finance, was in attendance for this item.

Consideration was given to the Customer Service Quarterly Performance report for the period July to September 2009 (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). In introducing the report the Director of Commerce and Technology reported that all customer service targets had been met and that customer excellence awards had been achieved by the Ramsey and Yaxley Customer Information Centres. Members also noted that the service continued to achieve high levels of customer satisfaction and that this was despite the effect of adverse trends in the economy.

In response to a question by a Member, the Panel was advised that although the number of telephone calls had not increased, the time taken to answer calls had risen because the calls received had become more complex. Members also noted that the services offered had continued to expand.

In answer to a further question the Panel was informed that the service continued to operate with the goodwill of staff, however, a risk had been identified that this could change. Furthermore, the existence of vacancies in the service would be monitored by the Head of Customer Services. Having noted the performance of individual services in the period covered and the availability of benefits services at the St Neots office, it was

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report be noted.

49. 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 to 28th February 2010. Members were reminded that a report on the Asset Management Plan would be submitted to the Panel's December meeting. The Treasury Management Strategy and Prudential Indicators would also be submitted to a future meeting.

Members requested that the development brief for the former Fire Station in St Neots be presented to a future meeting and that the Covert Surveillance Policy Review be circulated once it had been amended.

50. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELLBEING) PROGRESS REPORT

In considering a report by the Head of Democratic and Central Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) on the Panel's current programme of studies, it was noted that, following its consideration by the Corporate Plan Working Group, the quarterly performance monitoring report would be submitted to the Panel's meeting in December. A report on the Council's appraisal system would be prepared once the Employment Panel had completed a review of it.

51. WORKPLAN STUDIES

The Panel received and noted a report by the Head of Democratic and Central Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) containing details of studies being undertaken by the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Panels. Members were advised that information had been requested on their future study subjects and was expected shortly.

52. SCRUTINY

In receiving and noting the latest edition of the Decision Digest, Members clarified the intention of their recommendation to the Cabinet to investigate the possibility of swapping land owned by Huntingdon Town Council for Huntingdon Town Hall.

Chairman