

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) held in the CIVIC SUITE, PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON PE29 3TN on Thursday, 10 June 2010.

PRESENT: Councillor J D Ablewhite – Chairman.
Councillors J T Bell, E R Butler, S Greenall, M F Shellens, G S E Thorpe and D M Tysoe
Mr R Hall and Mrs H Roberts.

APOLOGES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors Mrs J A Dew and N J Guyatt.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor L M Simpson

7. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 3rd June 2010 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

8. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor G S E Thorpe declared a personal interest in Minute No. 16 by virtue of his membership of St Neots Town Council.

9. 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 June to 30th September 2010. Members noted that the report on the Former Fire Station and Waste Recycling Site, St Neots would be submitted to their next meeting.

10. VISITOR DEVELOPMENT AND TOWN CENTRE VIBRANCY

The Panel received a joint presentation by the Head of People, Performance and Partnerships and the Sustainable Economic Development Manager on visitor development and town centre vibrancy. By way of introduction, the Head of People, Performance and Partnerships reminded the Panel of the Cabinet's decision in 2005 to reduce the tourism service to make savings. Members were then acquainted with the ways in which the Council, in conjunction with its partners and local businesses, encouraged visits within Huntingdonshire. In doing so, the Panel noted that there were two main strands to the Council's Strategy. Firstly, it aimed to encourage visitors within a two hour radius of the District to use local accommodation by drawing attention to specialist attractions and by attracting tourists visiting Cambridge. Secondly, the Strategy

endeavoured to promote town centre vibrancy and thereby encourage Huntingdonshire residents to spend their money locally.

The Panel discussed the Cambridgeshire Vision for tourism, with its emphasis on business and conference tourism and whether there was sufficient accommodation for business visitors within the District. Concerns also were expressed at an apparent contradiction between the Cambridgeshire Vision and the work being undertaken by the District Council. In particular, questions were raised as to whether business users were likely to use bed and breakfast accommodation and market town facilities and about the absence of references to conference facilities within the District Council's Strategy. In response, Members were informed that the Cambridgeshire Vision was intended to provide a flavour of the objectives of all the Districts within the County and it recognised that conferencing facilities were lacking in Huntingdonshire. Research had indicated that there was insufficient hotel accommodation within the District, but that owing to the nature of their employment the majority of workers who stayed during the week occupied bed and breakfast accommodation, which accounted for 2,500 beds. Whilst business users might not necessarily attend local events they did utilise local restaurants and pubs, which contributed to the local economy.

Having noted that the Council's tourism initiatives operated primarily through the internet, a question was asked on whether leaflets had any value as a "what's on" guide for those residing in hotels. Members were advised that accommodation providers were able to download leaflets from the Council's website as and when required and that the Town Centre Partnerships produced events diaries in their own publications. Following a further question about the loss of the venue for the Ramsey 1940's weekend and the need to promote existing attractions, the Head of People, Partnerships and Performance stated that her department would be able to offer assistance in these matters.

The Panel then discussed the potential to stage large scale events within the District. Experience had shown that many large scale events were unlikely to use local services and that although the Inland Waterways Festival had been successful, in the current economic climate, the Council had insufficient resources to provide the necessary level of support required by such events. In response to a question concerning the annual Secret Garden Party which attracted 19,000 visitors to the District, it was explained that Officers worked closely with the event organisers on the accommodation requirements of those attending. The Head of People, Partnerships and Performance undertook to convey comments on the Cromwell Museum to County Council colleagues.

Following a question about the cost of the service currently provided by the District Council, Members were advised that the resources needed to do this work amounted to less than the equivalent of one full-time post and that this included the provision of support to the Town Centre Partnerships. In terms of measuring the performance of the service, the Panel noted that individual projects would have specific targets and outcomes, including the level of income they generated.

Having received an introduction to this area of activity, it was

RESOLVED

that a further report be submitted to a future meeting on the cost of the tourism service and the benefits it brings to both the Council and to the District.

11. TREASURY MANAGEMENT ANNUAL REPORT 2009/10

(Councillor L M Simpson was in attendance for this item)

Councillor L M Simpson introduced a report by the Head of Financial Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) containing details of the performance of Fund Managers in the investment of the Council's Capital receipts for the year ending 31st March 2010.

The Panel discussed the scheme through which town and parish councils could deposit funds with the District Council for investment. Having noted the origins of the scheme, the Panel were advised of the strict legal framework within which it operated. Members considered whether there might be any benefit in varying the scheme's current terms. While the administrative costs and low level of likely returns meant it would not be worth reducing the minimum sum that town and parish councils could invest, Members were advised that there might be an opportunity to devise individual arrangements for councils with investments that exceed £250k.

Having acknowledged that the Council had performed well with regard to the returns it had achieved on its investments in the year, comment was made concerning the accuracy of the forecast for the year. In response, Members were advised that the initial forecast had been based on an assumption that provision should be made for payment of interest in the first year when this was not the case. An adjustment would be made for 2010/11.

Members went on to discuss the value of the service provided by the Council's advisors on investments, together with the timing of the information they provided to the Council. Although the cost to the Council of this service was relatively low, Members were of the opinion that the Council should review whether it was needed in two years time, when the sums available for investment had reduced.

Having discussed the security of investments, the use of building societies and the Debt Management Office, the Panel noted that the market would be monitored for opportunities on advantageous terms to borrow to fund future capital expenditure. Following receipt of an update on the request for a loan by the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and Peterborough, it was

RESOLVED

that the Treasury Management Annual Report 2009/10 be endorsed for submission to the Cabinet.

12. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

The Panel considered a report by the Head of People, Performance and Partnerships (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) containing details of the Council's performance against the priority objectives in the Panel's remit in the quarter to 31st March 2010.

Following a request by the Corporate Plan Working Group for clarification of the objective to maximise business and income opportunities, Members were informed that the Burgess Hall was £20k up on target and £30k up on the previous year while hospitality income had dropped by £65k because the former represented events income but the latter related only to bars and catering income. Information on the role of the Bars and Catering Manager at St Ivo also was provided.

During discussion on the financial performance of the bars and catering service, reference was made to the need to ensure that monitoring of the Leisure Centres' overall financial performance was undertaken following the dissolution of the Leisure Centre Management Committees. In that context further information was requested on the measures being taken to improve the performance of the Leisure Centres bars and catering functions, how the Leisure Forum monitored the Leisure Centres' financial performance, the role of the Executive Councillor for Leisure and Law, Property and Governance in the monitoring process and the terms of employment of Leisure Centre employees.

In respect of the objective relating to the retention of employees, comment was made that the target of 10% for staff turnover was too high and that a figure in the order of 7% would be more appropriate. However, the Panel recognised that an actual figure of 2.23% represented a satisfactory level of performance. Members also requested further information on the seven bids in the current year which had not been successful in attracting external funding to establish whether there were common reasons why bids had failed.

RESOLVED

that further reports be submitted on:

- the financial performance of and future plans for the Leisure Centres Hospitality Service;
- the savings that had been achieved following the dissolution of the Leisure Centres Management Committees and individual Leisure Centre's overall financial performance and monitoring arrangements,
- and the Leisure Centres' employment structure.

13. REMIT AND WORK PROGRAMME

Consideration was given to a report by the Head of Democratic and Central Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) reviewing the Panel's programme of studies and providing an opportunity for Members to plan their work programme for the year.

Following discussion on a number of suggestions from Panel Members, it was

RESOLVED

that further investigations be undertaken into waste collection round scheduling, the promotion of the use of re-useable nappies and the use of S106 monies for transport schemes in St Neots.

14. 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.

15. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2009/10

The Panel reviewed the draft Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report for 2009/10 (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). Members were reminded that it was a constitutional requirement to produce a report each year.

Having been advised of suggestions made by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) for changes, it was agreed that the report should include details of the proposed work programme for the forthcoming year.

16. SCRUTINY

The Panel received and noted the latest edition of the Council's Decision Digest.

Chairman