

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SOCIAL WELL-BEING) held in the Civic Suite 0.1A, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon, PE29 3TN on Tuesday, 6 December 2011.

PRESENT: Councillor S J Criswell – Chairman.

Councillors S Akthar, K M Baker,
Mrs J A Dew, J J Dutton, Mrs P A Jordan,
S M Van De Kerkhove, Mrs D C Reynolds
and R J West.

Co-opted Members – Mr R Coxhead and Mrs M Nicholas.

APOLOGY: An Apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor I C Bates.

65. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 1st November 2011 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

66. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor Mrs P A Jordan declared a personal interest in Minute No. 69 by virtue of her employment with the NHS.

Councillor K M Baker declared a personal interest in Minute No. 70 by virtue of being a Trustee of Shopmobility, Huntingdon.

67. 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) which had been prepared by the Executive Leader of the Council for the period 1st December 2011 to 31st March 2012.

68. HOUSING BENEFIT CHANGES AND THE POTENTIAL IMPACT ON HUNTINGDONSHIRE

(Councillor B S Chapman, Executive Councillor for Customer Services and Councillor N J Guyatt, Executive Councillor for Strategic Planning and Housing, were in attendance for consideration of this item).

With the aid of a joint report by the Heads of Customer Services and of Housing Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel gave consideration to the impact of changes to the Housing Benefit system upon Huntingdonshire residents. The Executive Councillor for Customer Services reported that the changes

were part of the Government's Welfare Reform programme. They largely affected the Local Housing Allowance paid to households that were assessed as being eligible for help with their rent in the private sector. Members were advised that the effect of the changes to the Housing Benefits system had resulted in a reduction of £370,000 per annum, in the amount that was paid to existing benefit claimants renting in the private sector. This equated to a reduction in benefit entitlement of between £3 and £70 per week. The changes were likely to have an impact on existing claimants from January 2012, which could potentially result in households falling into rent arrears, facing the threat of eviction and/or possible homelessness.

In response to a question by a Member, the Panel was advised that a majority of claimants would lose less than £10 per week. Members were however concerned at the greater impact that the changes would have on larger households in properties with 4 or more bedrooms. These households would experience a significant reduction in their entitlement and consequently were likely to turn to the Council for assistance. Given the shortage in the availability of social rented housing, it was likely that there would be an increase in the number of households facing homelessness. This could result in more use being made of temporary accommodation with the associated additional costs being incurred by the Council. In response to a subsequent question by a Member, the Panel was informed that additional provision to meet demands on Council services as a result of an increase in the level of homelessness had been made within the budget.

The Panel discussed a number of ways in which the changes would have an impact locally. These included landlords potentially having to sell their properties, thereby reducing the number of homes available for rent in the private sector, the relocation of households into the District from other local authority areas in their search for more affordable housing, whether certain areas within the District would be affected more than others, utilising empty properties in the District to assist with meeting the shortfall in housing and other ways of increasing the stock of social rented housing.

Having been advised that other welfare benefit reforms through the introduction of the Universal Credit system contained within the Welfare Reform Bill were expected to have further impact on Huntingdonshire residents, the Panel

RESOLVED

- (a) that the report now submitted be noted; and
- (b) that a further report drawing together the wider housing policy implications for the Council arising from the Government's Welfare Reform Bill be submitted to a future meeting of the Panel.

(At this point (7.30pm) Councillor J J Dutton left the meeting).

69. NHS CONSULTATION - PROPOSED REDESIGN OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ACROSS CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND PETERBOROUGH

With the assistance of a report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel was acquainted with details of a consultation exercise being undertaken by NHS Cambridgeshire on its plans to transform mental health services in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. The purpose of the consultation was to seek views on the proposals which were designed to improve access to the service and its responsiveness, ensure that all facilities were modernised and purpose built and to establish the delivery of more effective and efficient services.

Councillor R J West reported on the work of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which had been specifically established to respond to the consultation. The Panel's attention was drawn to the Committee's concerns about the absence of medical aims from the proposals, the travel and support arrangements available to patients and their visitors, changes to admission thresholds to mental health facilities and staffing levels on acute wards. The Committee was next due to meet on 19th December 2011, when consideration would be given to a number of other matters which had been raised and its final response would be formulated.

Members of the Panel recalled their previous discussions on the proposals formally to relocate the current mental health facility in Acer Ward at Hinchingsbrooke Hospital to Peterborough. The facility had been temporarily closed earlier on in the year and the Panel expressed concerns over the adverse impact that the formalisation of this decision would continue to have on patients and visitors. Councillor R J West commented that the Hinchingsbrooke facility had been closed following an assessment by the National Clinical Advisory Team, which had concluded that the facility was not adequately staffed to cope with the level of patients admitted. He undertook to circulate to Panel Members details of a briefing note which had been prepared for the County Council's Adults, Well-Being and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

In discussing the proposals further, the Panel formed the view that there was a risk associated with the Care in the Community approach proposed by NHS Cambridgeshire as it relied on patients taking medication. Members also questioned the adequacy of the transportation system to Peterborough for relatives and friends. The latter might, moreover, deter potential patients from self admitting themselves to hospital.

Having regard to the proposals to establish a new 24/7 Advice and Brief Intervention Centre, Members concluded that, given the absence of face to face contact with patients, the Centre could make flawed diagnoses. The view was further expressed that the Centre could act as a potential barrier to acute services for those in urgent need of care.

On the grounds of the conclusions reached, the Panel expressed strong views that the mental health services previously provided at

Hinchingbrooke Hospital should not be permanently transferred to the Lucille Van Geest Centre in Peterborough. It was held that the proposals would continue to have an adverse impact on patients and visitors. Other matters that were discussed included modernising the facility at Hinchingbrooke Hospital, the ongoing trend for health services to be transferred from Huntingdonshire to Peterborough and Cambridge and whether Circle Healthcare had been consulted upon the proposals.

Having been informed of the experiences of Members' friends and families who had utilised the mental health service and in noting the consultation period would close on 16th January 2012, the Panel concurred with a suggestion that the views of service users should be sought prior to the next meeting. This would ensure that the Panel submitted a fully informed response to the consultation. In addition, the Panel requested a representative of NHS Cambridgeshire to be invited to the January 2012 meeting.

70. VOLUNTARY SECTOR WORKING GROUP

Pursuant to Minute No. 11/54, the Panel gave consideration to a report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) detailing the outcome of the Voluntary Sector Working Group's investigations into the potential impact on demand for District Council services of reductions in the services currently procured from voluntary organisations through Service Level Agreements. The report also included an outline of the functions that the Working Group believed should be undertaken by the voluntary sector in Huntingdonshire.

The Panel considered the Working Group's findings in respect of the potential future demand for District Council services. The Huntingdonshire Citizens Advice Bureau was the only organisation the Council currently commissioned that undertook functions that were also the responsibility of the Council. It was anticipated that any budgetary proposals that would impact on the future viability of the organisation would result in approximately 9,000 additional customers seeking assistance from the Council. It was stressed that this figure did not include additional services that were provided by the CAB such as debt, immigration and unemployment. Members were advised that an increase in customers could potentially require the Council to provide additional resources in the region of £60,000 which equated to an additional 2.5 (full time equivalent) employees.

The Panel was informed of potential financial liabilities that the Council might incur if the Hunts Forum for Voluntary Organisations' funding was reduced. Responsibility for the management of the Maple Centre would transfer back to the District Council, resulting in additional costs to the Council, which were estimated to be around £25,000 per annum.

The Panel endorsed the Working Group's suggestions that when deciding how the Council would engage with voluntary organisations in the future the Council should adopt the priorities listed below:-

- service providers that were able to provide evidence of financial sustainability for example by actively searching for

- external and/or match funding opportunities;
- advice services for debt, benefits and unemployment;
- activities and services that facilitated a level of independence for those people otherwise dependent on the service and support of carers and others;
- services and activities that increased the chances of young people obtaining and/or maintaining paid unemployment; and
- services that supported the growth of the voluntary and community sector in Huntingdonshire and provided support mechanisms by which that growth could be achieved, including sourcing funding by other voluntary bodies.

In addition, it was suggested that the services provided should be accessible to all residents across the District. It was further suggested that a combination of both grant aid and commissioning models should be employed by the Council to fund future voluntary activity within the District, together with a community chest through which other voluntary organisations could apply for small grants. It was noted that the views of the Working Group had been taken into account by the Executive Councillor for Healthy and Active Communities and would form the basis of the Voluntary Sector Support item due for consideration by the Panel at its next meeting.

71. NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUMS WORKING GROUP

With the aid of a report prepared by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel received an update on a recent meeting of the Neighbourhood Forums Working Group. In noting the investigations undertaken to date, Members were advised of the Shape My Place initiative. The initiative sought to promote community engagement by enabling local public bodies to establish dialogue with a sector of local residents that might not utilise the Forums. It was reported that Cambridgeshire County Council was leading on the scheme, with a pilot currently being held in Fenland. Having noted that the next meeting of the Working Group would be held on 12th December 2011, the Panel

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be recommended to adopt the Shape My Place initiative within Huntingdonshire.

72. CAMBRIDGESHIRE ADULTS WELLBEING AND HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Councillor R J West delivered an update on matters that were due to be considered by the Cambridgeshire Adults Well-Being and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee at their meeting on the 9th December 2011, which would included an update on clinical commissioning in Cambridgeshire, progress against the Adult Social Care Services Work Plan and Integrated Plan and the emerging findings of the Home Care Services Working Group.

73. WORK PLAN STUDIES

The Panel received and noted the content of a report by the Head of

Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) containing details of studies being undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Panels for Economic Well-Being and for Environmental Well-Being.

74. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SOCIAL WELL-BEING) - PROGRESS

The Panel received and noted a report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which contained details of actions taken in response to recent discussions and decisions. A brief update was delivered by Councillor R J West on the Cambridgeshire Safer and Stronger Overview and Scrutiny Committee's investigations into domestic abuse.

75. SCRUTINY

The 119th Edition of the Decision Digest was received and noted.

Chairman