

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) held in the CIVIC SUITE 0.1A, PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON, PE29 3TN on Thursday, 7 July 2011.

PRESENT: Councillor D M Tysoe – Chairman.
Councillors G J Bull, E R Butler, S Greenall, R Harrison, P G Mitchell, M F Shellens and A H Williams.

Mrs H Roberts.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors R B Howe and A J Mackender-Lawrence and Mr R Hall

17. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 9th June 2011 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

18. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

19. 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 July to 31st October 2011. Members were advised that reports on the Financial Strategy and the options for the Call Centre after 2012, would be presented to their next meeting as a matter of course.

20. CABINET FEEDBACK - ONE LEISURE FINANCE / USE OF CONSULTANTS

The Panel received and noted a report from the Cabinet (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) outlining their deliberations on the Panel's studies into the financial performance of One Leisure and the Council's use of consultants. The Panel noted that the Executive Councillor for Organisational Development had been asked to review the Council's IT costs and that their recommendations would form the basis for improvements to the Council's current arrangements for the use of consultants.

With regard to the Panel's ongoing review of the financial performance of One Leisure, Councillor M F Shellens reported that he had recently received admission figures for the Council's Leisure

Centres, which had been produced on a 12 month rolling average and that he would make these available for consideration during the review.

21. TREASURY MANAGEMENT ANNUAL REPORT 2010/11

(Councillor T V Rogers, Executive Councillor for Resources and Customer Services, was in attendance for this item).

With the assistance of a report by the Head of Financial Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel considered the Council's performance for the year ending 31st March 2011 in the investment of its reserves.

Having been acquainted with the Council's Strategies for both borrowing and investing funds in the current year, the Panel noted that the performance of the funds in a year when rates had remained very low had been good, with both the benchmark and the budgeted investment interest having been significantly exceeded.

In considering the contents of the report and having been reminded that, in December 2008, the Council borrowed £10M in advance of its need for the funds over a 50 year period, Members noted that the return from the investment of these monies had been greater than the cost of the monthly repayments. A Member inquired whether there was any scope to lend money to other authorities at a still higher rate; however, it was explained that it was unlikely that other authorities would pay more than the rates currently asked by the Public Works Loan Board.

Members were advised that the Council had needed to borrow on average £3M during the year to manage its cash flow. This reflected the fact that there were extreme fluctuations during the year, which resulted from the fact that the Council collected precepts on behalf of other local bodies and also had to pay out the levies to those authorities in addition to the payment of salaries and meeting the cost of capital expenditure on a monthly basis.

With regard to paragraph 3.1 of the report, Members queried why there had been a reduction in the average interest rates that had been paid on investments during the year. The Panel was informed that this was attributable to the fact that investments, which had been made at higher rates in previous years, had matured and only lower rates were now available.

The Panel discussed the Authority's Strategy for long-term borrowing and noted that the capital programme for the next 5 years assumed an expenditure of approximately £23M plus any slippages from individual years. The Head of Financial Services explained that provided the Council could demonstrate that it had the capacity to afford the repayments, there was no limit to the level of borrowing which could be undertaken by an individual Council. Having been advised that following the reduction of the Council's reserves over the last few years all investments were now being managed in-house, it was

RESOLVED

that the Treasury Management Annual Report 2010/11 be endorsed for submission to the Cabinet.

22. ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTER FOR RESIDENTS

(Councillor T V Rogers, Executive Councillor for Resources and Customer Services, was in attendance for this item).

The Panel received a joint presentation by the Council's Communications and Partnerships Manager and Senior Communications Officer on their proposals for future communications with residents in Huntingdonshire. Members were informed that following the public consultation on proposed budgetary savings in the previous year, a review of communication activities and their associated costs had been undertaken. As a consequence the final version of District-Wide, the Council's magazine had been published in May 2011.

The Senior Communications Officer outlined details and objectives of a proposal to produce an electronic newsletter on a quarterly basis. It was envisaged, assuming there were 5000 subscribers, that this would cost the Council £1095 per annum. Having also informed Members of the potential to prepare a limited number of printed versions twice a year, the Communications and Partnerships Manager expressed the view that the latter would not be a good use of the budget and other resources.

During discussion on the proposal, Members were advised that it would not generate advertising revenue. Councillor P G Mitchell queried whether it would be possible to reproduce the electronic version within parish magazines. Members agreed that this should be incorporated within the proposals. It was also suggested that parish council websites might be used to signpost residents to information about the District Council.

Councillor T V Rogers, Executive Councillor for Resources and Customer Services, drew attention to the forthcoming launch of the My Huntingdonshire website, which would provide a variety of information about the District. With this in mind, the Panel queried whether an electronic newsletter was necessary and suggested that, before a decision was taken to proceed, the Council should determine whether it was necessary to disseminate the information it would contain. In response the Panel was informed of the nature of the information which would be included within the newsletter and reminded that it was intended to review the proposal after 12 months. The review would have regard to the development of the My Huntingdonshire website.

The Panel discussed whether the use of e-communication would put an sections of society at a disadvantage. The Communications and Partnership Manager informed Members that data obtained in 2008 indicated that 30% of residents did not have access to email. In addition, following discussions with disadvantaged groups and the publication of articles in District-Wide, only one letter had been received in support of the retention of District-Wide. By comparison, there had been 700 requests to register an interest in receiving

Council information via the website.

Councillor G Bull enquired whether it would be possible to analyse subscribers to ensure that information was reaching more vulnerable groups. The Panel was advised that the newsletter would only be received by those who requested it; however, it would be possible to monitor use of the Council's website and the pages visited.

With regard to the production of a supplementary printed version of the newsletter twice per year, Members were generally of the opinion that this was unnecessary given the limited numbers it was intended to produce and the Communications and Partnerships Manager's view that this would not be a good use of Council resources.

In considering the use of an externally managed database to store the email addresses of residents who had registered their interest in receiving Council information, Members queried what implications this might have for data protection and for the Council if data were to go missing. They recommended that risk assessments were undertaken of the company that would be used and of the Council's equalities obligations.

Subject to the views they had expressed during the debate regarding the involvement of parish councils and risk management being taken into account, the Panel indicated their support in principle for the proposal to produce four electronic newsletters per annum over a 12 month trial period.

(Councillor M F Shellens indicated that he would not be voting on this matter).

23. CUSTOMER SERVICES QUARTERLY REPORT

(Councillor T V Rogers, Executive Councillor for Resources and Customer Services, was in attendance for this item).

The Panel gave consideration to the Customer Service Quarterly Performance Report for the period January to March 2011 (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which outlined the levels of performance and standards achieved by the Service. Attention was drawn to the significant issues, which had emerged since the last report and the issues that the service would face in the forthcoming quarter. Members were advised that changes to the opening hours at the Ramsey and Yaxley Customer Service Centres had not yet come into effect and, therefore, it would not be possible to review the impact of these changes until June 2012.

In considering the contents of the report, the Panel noted that satisfaction levels continued to be maintained despite a reduction in staffing levels. In response to a question about queue performance in 2010/11 and the measures which had been taken to reduce waiting times, Members were advised that it was difficult to predict average queue times and that it was necessary to be flexible to respond to demand as it arose. A Member suggested that it might be useful for future reports to be reorganised such that those services with the most enquiries were featured at the top of the charts.

Arising from the report, the Panel queried whether any consideration had been given to providing services for other authorities. In response, the Executive Councillor for Resources Customer Services explained that he would shortly be examining the options available for the Call Centre when the existing IT and premises contracts expired in December 2012. A report on progress would be submitted to a future meeting.

The Panel discussed the high number of benefit enquiries that were still being received as a result of the current state of the economy. Members were advised that the Council currently was receiving a subsidy from the Department for Work and Pensions to help deal with the increased workload; however, it was uncertain whether this funding would continue after April 2012.

In response to a query regarding the opening hours of the Yaxley Customer Services Centre and whether they could be linked to the weekly bus service from the surrounding villages, the Head of Customer Services reported that she had sought local views on the matter and that she would give it consideration.

Other matters which were discussed included the Call Centre's business continuity arrangements and the flexibility of the staff arrangements within the service to respond to increased demand in a particular area. It was suggested that it might be useful to display information to customers about those times during which there was a high demand for the service. Having endorsed the format of the report and the proposal to report back in June 2012 on the effect of the changes at the Ramsey and Yaxley Centres, it was

RESOLVED

- (a) that the contents of the report be noted; and
- (b) the Executive Councillor for Resources and Customer Services be requested to give further consideration to the actions which could be taken should additional funding from the Department for Work and Pensions to deal with benefits enquiries not continue after April 2012.

24. ONE LEISURE FINANCE

With the assistance of a report by the One Leisure Finance Working Group (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel received an update on the deliberations of the Working Group, which had been established to review the performance of One Leisure and make recommendations on the service's future strategic direction.

25. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2010/11

The Panel received and noted the draft Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report for 2010/11 (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book).

26. 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 that were being undertaken by the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Panels. In so doing, comment was made about the study of CCTV provision and the need to give consideration to the future of the service at the earliest opportunity. The Scrutiny and Review Manager explained that the matter would be considered by the Panel for Environmental Well-Being at their meeting the following week and all members were welcome to attend. He undertook to circulate a copy of the relevant report.

In considering potential areas for future investigation, during discussion on the viability of the A14 it was suggested that a representative of the Highways Agency should be invited to a future meeting to discuss the Agency's contingency arrangements should it not be possible to use the A14 for an extended period of time. Having regard to Members' interest in the Council's support services, a scoping report on this subject was requested for consideration at a future meeting. Reports also were requested on the likely impact on the Council of the Government's Statement on Business Rates and on the implications for the local economy of the establishment of a Local Enterprise Zone on the former Alconbury Airfield.

27. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC 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) reviewing progress on matters that had previously been discussed by the Panel.

28. SCRUTINY

The Panel received and noted the latest edition of the Council's Decision Digest (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book).

Chairman