

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SOCIAL WELL-BEING) held in Civic Suite 0.1A, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon, PE29 3TN on Tuesday, 8 January 2013.

PRESENT: Councillor S J Criswell – Chairman.

Councillors K M Baker, R C Carter, R Fuller, Mrs P A Jordan, P Kadewere, M C Oliver, J W G Pethard and R J West.

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

74. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 4th December 2012 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

75. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor K M Baker declared a non-disclosable pecuniary interest in Minute No. 12/82 as Vice-Chairman of Huntingdon Shopmobility.

76. NOTICE OF EXECUTIVE DECISIONS

The Panel considered and noted the current Notice of Executive 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 January to 30th April 2013. Members requested sight of the item entitled Home Improvement Agency Shared Service – Annual Operating Service prior to its submission to the Cabinet.

77. HOUSING BENEFIT CHANGES AND THE POTENTIAL IMPACT ON HUNTINGDONSHIRE

(Mr J Collen, Housing Needs and Resources Manager, was in attendance for consideration of this item).

Consideration was given to a report by the Head of Customer Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) outlining the effects of Government changes to the Housing Benefits system, which were contained in the Welfare Reform Act. In introducing the report, the Housing Needs and Resources Manager indicated that a report on private sector rentals would be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) at its meeting later that week. The report had been requested to enable the Panel to determine whether the changes had affected private sector rent rates. The conclusion, which had been reached, was these rates had not changed.

Members were advised that transitional protection arrangements for Housing Benefit claimants had ceased in December 2012 but that it

was not yet known what the true impact of this would be given that only a small number of claimants had made contact with the Council to date. Whether there would be an increase in demand for services in the following months was not yet known but it appeared that this was likely. Members were assured that efforts were continuing to be made to contact those who would experience a reduction in their benefit entitlement. Changes to the way Housing Benefit was calculated for adults of working age residing within social housing and the introduction of a new local Council Tax Support scheme for the District would start to affect social housing tenants from April 2013. In his concluding remarks, the Housing Needs and Resources Manager outlined the latest position with regard to housing advice and options, together with the homelessness and prevention work, which had been undertaken by the Council in the first half of the 2012/13 Municipal year.

The Panel raised a number of questions and received responses from the Housing Needs and Resources Manager on whether the Council was able to subsidise private sector rents for those households faced with the threat of eviction, the use of MTP funding to assist with homelessness, the process undertaken by the Council to identify claimants at risk and the awareness raising activities being pursued in conjunction with Partners on the impact of the reforms.

Councillor P Kadewere reported that constituents currently on the Housing Register had made contact with him over two empty properties within his Ward. He queried what the status of these properties was. The Housing Needs and Resources Manager requested Councillor Kadewere to make contact with him outside of the meeting to discuss this matter further. Other matters that were discussed included the Council's current performance in preventing households from becoming homeless and the difficulties faced by the Council because some private sector landlords were reluctant to accept tenants in receipt of housing benefit in their properties.

RESOLVED

that the content of the report now submitted be noted.

78. LOCAL PLAN 2036 - PROVISION OF SOCIAL AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND IMPACT UPON HOMELESSNESS

(Councillor N J Guyatt, Executive Member for Strategic Planning and Housing, Mr S Ingram, Head of Planning and Housing Strategy, Mr J Collen, Housing Needs and Resources Manager, and Mrs J Emmerton, Housing Strategy Manager, were in attendance for consideration of this item).

The Chairman reported that he had requested that this matter was added to the Agenda for the meeting because recent increases in the level of homelessness had placed pressures on the Housing Register. In that light he had requested the attendance of the Head of Planning and Housing Strategy at the meeting to provide an outline of how the new Local Plan would help to address housing and homelessness needs within the District.

The Executive Councillor for Strategic Planning and Housing

reminded Members that the Council previously had been successful in reducing the levels of homelessness and increasing the number of affordable homes within the District. He then outlined his vision for the future, which centred on encouraging new developments and the opportunities arising from the Local Enterprise Zone. He acknowledged that achieving more affordable homes and reducing the levels of homelessness would be difficult tasks over the next few years. He did however remain hopeful that some progress would start to be made over the next 2-3 years.

The Housing Needs and Resources Manager reported on homelessness trends in the District in recent years and indicated that homelessness was currently on the increase. The Council had a statutory duty to prevent households from becoming homeless and the Housing Needs and Resources Manager reported that currently 95 households were accommodated in Bed and Breakfast accommodation. The Housing Strategy Manager then delivered an outline of the options available to the Council to prevent homelessness, which included re-letting existing housing stock and housing individuals through the new affordable homes programme and in the private rented sector. In her concluding remarks, the Housing Strategy Manager explained how the Local Plan would help to bring forward housing and that rural housing opportunities had arisen through the National Planning Policy Framework and the community planning process.

The Head of Planning and Housing Strategy then delivered a brief outline of current developments in planning policy and the restrictions placed by the Government on the Council. Attempts would be made by the Planning Service to ensure the delivery of affordable housing over the next few years; however, this would continue to remain a challenge during the difficult financial times that presently existed. Whilst there were a number of large scale strategic sites planned for development in the District in the future, Members were mindful of the fact that these often took between 5-7 years from original concept to occupation.

A number of matters were discussed, including the influence that developers and landowners had over the market, whether or not there was demand for retirement villages, the exceptions that could be made to planning policy through community plans and the incentives offered to social tenants to encourage them to downsize.

Having thanked the Executive Member for Strategic Planning and Housing and Officers for their attendance at the meeting, the Panel requested updates on the provision of social and affordable housing every six months.

79. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED

that the press and public be excluded from the meeting because the business to be transacted contains exempt information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

80. HUNTINGDON GYM

(Councillor J D Ablewhite, Executive Leader of the Council, Councillors P G Mitchell, M F Shellens and A H Williams, Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being), and Mr C Meadowcroft, Head of Legal and Democratic Services, were in attendance for consideration of this item).

By way of a joint report by the Heads of Legal and Democratic Services and of Financial Services (a copy of which is appended in the Annex to the Minute Book) the Panel gave consideration to a financial proposal relating to Huntingdon Olympic Gymnastics Club. In introducing the report, the Executive Leader outlined the background to the proposal and provided a brief summary of the Club's current financial position together with its reasons for wishing to extend the existing gymnasium. An outline of the building's leasehold arrangements with the Town Council was also provided.

The Panel discussed a number of matters including the funding options available to the Club, the risks associated with the proposal and the British Gymnastics Association's future strategic plans. Members expressed some reservations over the proposals and made a number of suggestions to the Cabinet, which were intended to alleviate some of the concerns raised.

RESOLVED

- (a) that the proposal be supported in principle, and
- (b) that the Panel's views be conveyed to the Cabinet.

81. RE-ADMITTANCE OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED

that the press and public be re-admitted to the meeting.

82. NOTIFICATION OF GRANT AID AWARDS FOR 2013-14 AND DETAILS OF INTERIM ARRANGEMENTS FOR ADVICE SERVICES (JANUARY - MARCH 2013)

(Councillor T D Sanderson, Executive Member for Healthy and Active Communities, was in attendance for consideration of this item).

With the aid of a report by the Head of Environmental and Community Health Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel was informed of the decisions that had been taken relating to the 2013/14 grant aid awards and the interim arrangements for advisory services during the January to March 2013 period. In introducing the report, the Executive Member for Healthy and Active Communities drew Members' attention to those organisations who would receive grant aid funding for a period of three years from April 2013 onwards together with the level of funding awarded. He further reported that an agreement had been reached with Cambridgeshire County Council that Rural Cambs CAB's offices would be located within St Neots Library from April 2013 onwards. The Executive

Member for Healthy and Active Communities advised Members that the interim arrangements for advisory services to the end of March 2013 were being phased in, before the delivery of a full service commenced on 1st April 2013.

In response to a question by the Chairman, it was confirmed that during the transitional period, those seeking advice were being signposted to other service providers within the District. Questions were then raised by Councillor Mrs P A Jordan on the number of former Huntingdonshire CAB volunteers who had migrated over to Rural Cambs CAB and whether or not training opportunities would remain available to volunteers of the Rural Cambs CAB organisation. The Executive Member for Healthy and Active Communities undertook to clarify both matters outside of the meeting and to submit a response directly to Councillor Mrs Jordan.

Following discussion on the need to monitor the performance of the organisations awarded grant funding, the Panel was reminded that the Voluntary Sector Working Group would undertake this task and that the Working Group could request additional meetings if it was deemed necessary. Arising from this, Councillor R J West urged Members to contact the Working Group if they had any concerns over the new arrangements.

The Panel was reminded that all grant aid awards would be tapered and that a Community Chest of up to £30,000 would also be made available to voluntary organisations who could bid for funding for community based projects up to the value of £500. Discussion then ensued on the level of funding awarded to Rural Cambs CAB for the delivery of the interim service and whether this figure differed from the amount that would have been paid to the former Huntingdonshire CAB for the final quarter of 2012/13. The Executive Member for Healthy and Active Communities undertook to clarify this matter and to report back thereon to the Panel outside of the meeting.

Having received assurances that the delivery of outreach services provided by Rural Cambs CAB in St Ives, Ramsey and Yaxley was based on previous service level data, it was

RESOLVED

that the content of the report now submitted be noted.

83. CAMBRIDGESHIRE ADULTS, WELLBEING AND HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Councillor R J West delivered a brief update on the meeting of the Cambridgeshire Adults, Well-Being and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 13th December 2012, when consideration had been given to the Adult Social Care Business Plan 2013/14 and the Committee's Forward Work Programme.

84. WORK PLAN STUDIES

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 studies being undertaken by the

Overview and Scrutiny Panels for Economic Well-Being and for Environmental Well-Being.

85. 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. The Chairman reported that Members of the Hinchingsbrooke Hospital Working Group had been invited to attend the Cambridgeshire Adults, Well-Being and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 5th February 2013 when representatives of Hinchingsbrooke Hospital and Circle would be in attendance to deliver an update on progress. Other matters to be discussed included issues and plans in relation to service quality and the Hospital's financial performance. In that context and, pursuant to Minute No. 12/66, the Panel requested that Officers clarify with Mrs S Shuttlewood, representative of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Clinical Commissioning Groups, the reasons for the Hospital's reported financial deficit.

It was noted that meetings of the Consultation Processes and Equality Working Groups would be held on 23rd January 2013. Having also been advised that it was intended to hold a meeting of the North Huntingdonshire pilot Local Joint Committee in January/February 2013, the Panel concurred with a suggestion that the Neighbourhood Forums Working Group should meet with the Deputy Executive Leader to discuss progress of the pilot to date and the Working Group's role in the review process.

Having reminded Members that the Panel had a duty to scrutinise the Huntingdonshire Community Safety Partnership, the Chairman drew attention to some of the provisions of the draft Anti-Social Behaviour Bill. Given their wish to obtain more information on the impact of the Bill on the District, Members requested that a report on this subject was submitted to their meeting in February 2013. Clarification was also sought on whether the matter would be considered by the Cambridgeshire Police and Crime Panel and the Huntingdonshire Community Safety Partnership together with clarification of how responsibility for scrutinising crime and disorder matters would be divided between the various scrutiny bodies in Cambridgeshire.

86. SCRUTINY

The 130th Edition of the Decision Digest was received and noted.

Chairman