

## HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) held in CIVIC SUITE 0.1A, PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET. HUNTINGDON PE29 3TN on Thursday, 7 March 2013.

PRESENT: Councillor T V Rogers – Chairman.

Councillors G J Bull, Mrs L A Duffy,  
S Greenall, R B Howe, P G Mitchell,  
M F Shellens and A H Williams.

Mr R Eacott.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors E R Butler, Hall and R Harrison.

### **98. MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 7th February 2013, were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

### **99. MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

Councillor M F Shellens declared a non pecuniary interest in Minute No.102 by virtue of his membership of Brampton Parish Council.

Councillor Ms L A Duffy declared a non pecuniary interest in Minute No.102 by virtue of her membership of Ramsey Town Council.

### **100. ST NEOTS RAILWAY STATION FOOTBRIDGE**

Members were advised that this item had been included on the Agenda to comply with Section 16 of the Access to Information Rules contained within the Council's Constitution. In this respect, it was reported that the Chairman had agreed to the inclusion of an urgent item of business on the Cabinet Agenda for 14th February 2013 relating to the St Neots Railway Station Footbridge to enable the contract for the provision of the footbridge to proceed. Network Rail shortly would be arranging a briefing on this subject for St Neots Members.

### **101. 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). With regard to the forthcoming Customer Services Strategy, the Chairman reported that the Panel's Working Group looking at the development of the Strategy had met recently and an update would be provided later in the meeting.

**102. HUNTINGDONSHIRE INFRASTRUCTURE BUSINESS PLAN 2013/14**

*(During the discussion on this item (7.15pm) Councillor S Greenall took his seat at the meeting).*

With the assistance of a report by the Head of Planning Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel received an update on the implementation of the Community Infrastructure Levy in Huntingdonshire and the contents of the Huntingdonshire Infrastructure Business Plan for 2013/14. By way of introduction, the Assistant Director (Environment, Growth and Planning) reminded the Panel that the District Council was in the early stages of the implementation of the Community Infrastructure Levy. The Council was required to produce a Business Plan for 2013/14 which would act as a template for the more significant issues which were likely to arise in future years. Members' attention was then drawn to a proposed amendment to recommendation (e) that would enable the Assistant Director to approve minor amendments to the Regulation 123 List prior to public consultation.

In considering the contents of the report, a Member enquired about the cost of producing the Business Plan. The Panel was informed that the District Council operated a framework agreement with consultants which meant the Authority could keep costs to a minimum. In addition, the Council was able to recover some of the administrative costs from the CIL fund.

In terms of the list of infrastructure projects identified within the report, Members enquired why reference was made to the Grid at Eaton Socon. In response, the Panel was advised that the Business Plan identified the infrastructure requirements required to support all growth within the District. These would subsequently be prioritised. The Panel was assured that although this project had been identified as critical, it had not been put forward for CIL funding. Members noted that at this point the Huntingdon West Link Road was the only proposed recipient of CIL receipts for 2013/14. As further funding became available, work would be undertaken to identify additional projects for funding.

Comment was made that the list of infrastructure projects did not include any projects that supported the Environment Agency in addressing the potential impact of climate change and the infrastructure deficit in the District's waterways. Members were informed that the list of projects was based on suggestions by members of the Growth and Infrastructure Group, which included the Environment Agency. It was explained that the Plan was based on infrastructure needs arising from growth and was not intended to fund infrastructure deficits.

The Panel then discussed the governance structure, which had previously been approved by the District Council's Cabinet. In doing so, Members received an explanation of the process for preparing the Business Plan. The Plan would be submitted to the Cabinet on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2013 but, if it was not approved, it would be referred back to

the Growth and Infrastructure Group for further consideration.

Further on the subject of the governance structure, the Panel enquired at what point the local community would become involved and reference was made to the previous suggestion that there should be representation from parishes and the rural areas on the Growth and Infrastructure Thematic Group. In response, Members were informed that the need to engage and work with the town and parish councils had been recognised, particularly in light of recent announcements with regard to the 'meaningful proportion' that would be allocated to the area in which development was occurring. There would be a longer time-frame to prepare the next plan. This would permit engagement with local communities. It would be important to understand the requirements of individual parishes and, in this respect, Members emphasised the need to involve parishes, especially if they were expected to contribute to major projects.

In response to a question regarding the baseline data which had been used to prepare the Plan, Members were informed that CIL funding needs were based on the current charging schedule. The view was expressed that it should be made clear that the Plan was based on current values and that they would be indexed in the future. Comment was also made that elements such as targeted growth funds and the Priority Schools Building programme were missing from the Plan. It was suggested that it should be updated to include an exhaustive analysis of funding opportunities.

Having recognised that there would be an annual review of the process, concern was expressed that the Growth and Infrastructure Group, which recommended CIL expenditure, was also responsible for the monitoring arrangements. In response, the Panel was advised that monitoring would be undertaken within the District Council and an investigation currently was being undertaken into whether there were software packages available to facilitate this process. As there was a requirement that monitoring reports on progress were produced on a regular basis, it was agreed to await the monitoring proposals before making a further recommendation on this matter. Whereupon, it was

#### RESOLVED

- (a) that the Panel's comments be conveyed to the Cabinet for consideration as part of its deliberations on the Huntingdonshire Infrastructure Business Plan for 2013/14; and
- (b) that the Cabinet be recommended to –
  - (i) approve the Huntingdonshire Infrastructure Business Plan 2013/14;
  - (ii) authorise the Assistant Director, Environment, Growth and Planning after consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing Strategy to make any minor amendments necessary to the Plan prior to its publication on the Council website;

- (iii) approve the banking of CIL receipts during 2013/14 financial year with the exception of funding the Huntingdon West Link Road scheme;
- (iv) request the Assistant Director (Environment, Growth and Planning) to liaise with the Assistant Director (Finance and Resources) and the Head of Legal to agree a 'service level agreement' for utilising the release of any CIL receipts for infrastructure project delivery; and
- (v) approve the draft Regulation 123 List for public consultation as outlined above, subject to any minor amendments necessary as authorised by the Assistant Director (Environment, Growth and Planning), after consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing Strategy.

### **103. LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE ACT 2012 CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS**

With the assistance of a report by the Head of Customer Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel was informed of the need to consider amendments to the Council Tax Support and Council Tax exemption arrangements. There was, specifically, a need to introduce a Council Tax Discretionary Relief Policy and make amendments to the Council's fraud arrangements and to the Council Tax technical reforms.

In terms of the proposed Discretionary Relief Policy for Council Tax, which was now a legislative requirement, the Head of Customer Services explained that the cost of any applications granted under the scheme would need to be met in their entirety by the Council. In contrast, should she elect to use alternative powers to write-off Council Tax debts, the cost would be shared between the precepting authorities.

With regard to the terms of the Policy, it was suggested that a period should be specified in which the Council would notify taxpayers of its decisions. A period of 28 days was proposed and this was accepted by the Head of Customer Services. In response to a question regarding the appeals process for dissatisfied applicants, Members were informed that as this was a discretionary matter, there was no requirement for an independent statutory route of appeal. It would however, be possible to have a decision reviewed via the Council's complaints process.

The Panel discussed the proposal to amend the Council Tax Local Class C discounts scheme. Having noted that under the draft scheme renewal applications for Class C discount would only be considered after an occupation period of six weeks, Members were of the opinion that three months might be a more appropriate timescale.

**RESOLVED**

that the Cabinet be recommended to

- (a) adopt the Council Tax Discretionary Relief Policy with effect from 1 April 2013 and authorise the Head of Customer Services to determine claims under the policy;
- (b) adopt the Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Detection of Fraud and Enforcement) (England) Regulations 2013 to allow for the investigation, prosecution and recovery of alleged Council Tax Support fraud when these regulations become law and authorise the Head of Customer Services to investigate fraud and implement these regulations;
- (c) amend the Council Tax Local Class C discounts scheme to provide for a renewal application to require at least three months occupation before a new Class C discount is awarded; and
- (d) authorise the amendment of the Council's Scheme of Delegation accordingly.

#### **104. HOUSING BENEFIT - DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENT POLICY**

With the assistance of a report by the Customer Services Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel considered a proposal to introduce a new Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) Policy. The Head of Customer Services explained that a Discretionary Housing Payment Policy had been in place since 2001. However, in light of the recent welfare reforms and the increased level of grant awarded to each local authority by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Officers had taken the opportunity to review the Council's policy to ensure that it adhered to best practice and that the budget was spent on helping the most vulnerable eligible individuals.

In considering the contents of the report, a question was raised regarding those who 'under occupied' their homes and who were willing to move house but were unable to do so because of a shortage of smaller properties. Members were informed that the Council had been working with Registered Social Landlords; however, with the exception of encouraging property exchanges, there was little that it could do. Clarification was also provided on the position of foster children. They were not currently counted as part of a household for benefit purposes.

Having noted that the Council had been allocated £169,561 for discretionary housing payments in 2013.14, Members were informed that it was possible to pay out up to 2.5 times more than this amount, though the Council would need to meet the additional cost. Comment was made that although the annual funding from the DWP had increased year on year since 2010/11, the Council's proportion of the total national DHP budget had reduced. In response, the Head of Customer Services agreed to circulate further details of the allocation of funds directly to Members.

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be recommended to adopt the Discretionary Housing Benefit Policy with effect from April 2013.

**105. LOVES FARM COMMUNITY CENTRE - SUPPLEMENTARY CAPITAL ESTIMATE**

On the understanding that a report was expected to be submitted to the Cabinet later in the month, the Panel received an update from the Community Manager and the Projects and Assets Manager on the current position with regard to the Loves Farm Community Centre. The Panel was reminded that the Cabinet had previously agreed to transfer the management of the Community Centre to the Loves Farm Residents Association, who had agreed to help fund the shortfall in the cost of building the facility. The Association had narrowly lost out on National Lottery funding for the scheme and negotiations were now ongoing with St Neots Town Council to bridge the gap between the Section 106 funding and the final cost of the facility. In this respect the District Council had offered to provide a loan to St. Neots Town Council which could be paid back from CIL contributions from the Wintringham Park Development. However, preliminary discussions suggested that in return for the loan, the freehold for the Centre would have to be transferred to the Town Council.

In recognising the need to provide a community building for the area, the Panel discussed the options which were available to the District Council. These included the direct provision of the facility by the District Council, agreeing to the transfer of the freehold to St Neots Town Council or providing the additional capital sum through a grant or loan, which was now possible through the Treasury Management Strategy.

Should the District Council agree to provide the funding, the Panel discussed the scope that was available to recover its costs. Members were informed that the applicable interest would be in the order of £1,000 per annum. A discussion then ensued on whether this might be covered by the operators of the centre through rent. It was considered that this was unlikely given the terms on which the community association had agreed to take over the management of the centre and the difficulties experienced by operators of community facilities generally in generating sufficient funding to cover their operating costs. The other option considered was to offer a loan which would involve repayment charges of about £12,000 per annum.

With regard to the suggestion that the freehold of the facility might be transferred to St Neots Town Council, Members were of the opinion that this would not be appropriate for a sum of £180,000 when the freehold's notional value was considerably in excess of that figure. Having noted that the Chairman would be attending the Cabinet Meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2013, it was

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be informed that the Panel is not minded to support the transfer of the Loves Farm Community Centre to

**106. REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY**

Consideration was given to a report by the joint Working Group, which had been established with the Overview and Scrutiny Panels (Social Well-Being) and (Environmental Well-Being) to undertake a review of the effectiveness of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels. A copy of the report is appended in the Minute Book.

In introducing the report, the Internal Audit and Risk Manager explained that the report had already been considered by the other Panels and, following its consideration by the Economic Well-Being Panel, the Working Group would reconvene to develop an action plan to draw together the opportunities for improvement. This would be considered by the Corporate Governance Panel at its meeting in May 2013. It would then be incorporated into the Annual Governance Statement.

In welcoming the layout and format of the report, a suggestion was made about the need to quantify and measure the performance of the Panels to enable comparisons to be made year on year. In response, the Internal Audit and Risk Manager explained that it had been apparent from his own investigations that no other authorities had undertaken a review of its Member Panels in this format and consequently there were no existing metrics available which could be adopted.

In terms of the effectiveness of Overview and Scrutiny more generally, the Working Group had formed the view that this could be demonstrated by the influence the Panels exerted on the Cabinet. In this respect, it was reported that, as part of the review of the Council's Constitution, it had been proposed that the Cabinet should be required to produce a formal response to the Panels' recommendations.

In response to comments about the lack of press interest in the Panels' work programmes and the difficulties associated with generating public engagement, the Panel discussed the use of social media websites. The view was expressed that these could be used to promote meeting dates and times and to advise the public that they were able to attend Council meetings. It was suggested that further enquiries should be made to establish which Council departments were currently using Facebook and Twitter and whether there were any examples of best practice being employed by other authorities. To assist in the development of these practices, Councillor L A Duffy and S Greenall volunteered to champion the use of Twitter and Facebook respectively. The Internal Audit Manager indicated that these matters would be further investigated by the Working Group.

**RESOLVED**

- (a) that the outcome of the effectiveness review be noted;
- (b) that the opportunities for improvement identified within

Annex B to the report now submitted be endorsed for implementation; and

- (c) that, on behalf of the Working Group, the Chairmen of each of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels be requested to discuss with the Executive Leader opportunities for earlier scrutiny of and involvement in the formulation of policy.

#### **107. WORKPLAN 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) containing details of studies that were being undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Panels for Social and Environmental Well-Being. With reference to the review of the Neighbourhood Forums, Members expressed the view that the demise of the Forums was regrettable. It was held that they were necessary to promote economic and social debate. It was agreed that this message should be conveyed to the District Council's leadership.

#### **108. 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. The Chairman reported that the Working Group, which had been established to assist with the development of a new Customer Services Strategy had met and the next meeting would be held on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2013. Progress with the development of the Corporate Plan would be raised at the next meeting of the Executive Leader's Strategy Group. The Chairman reported that he would attend the Cabinet Meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2013 for the discussion on the review of the Document Centre. Councillor A H Williams indicated that he also would attend.

Having noted that the County Council was leading on scrutinising the Local Enterprise Partnership, the Scrutiny and Review Manager was asked to establish what progress had been made. Members were informed that work was being undertaken to develop Countywide arrangements to promote shared services.

With regard to the review of the Council's approach to borrowing, it was reported that the Assistant Director (Finance and Resources) would prepare a report for consideration at the Panel's next meeting. It was agreed that the report of the Borrowing Working Group should appear first on the Agenda.

Attention having been drawn to a list of suggestions for future studies, the Chairman reported that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) had agreed to undertake a review of Disabled Facilities Grants. In addition, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) had been asked to look at grounds maintenance and grass cutting. Members were informed that Electronic Document Management had been included within the Audit Plan for the forthcoming year and the Scrutiny and Review Manager was asked to



clarify the timescale for this work to be completed.

The Chairman reminded the Panel that there would be a discussion on budget priorities and savings suggestions at the next meeting. On this matter, Councillor L A Duffy asked that the Executive Leader of the Council was informed that the UK Independence party had prepared an alternative budget for the 2013/14 financial year.

**109. SCRUTINY**

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

Chairman