

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, 6 June 2013.

PRESENT: Councillor T V Rogers – Chairman.

Councillors S Akthar, P L E Bucknell,
G J Bull, S Greenall, R Harrison,
P G Mitchell, P D Reeve and M F Shellens.

Mr R Eacott and Mr R Hall.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors S Cawley and A H Williams.

5. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meetings held on 4th April and 15th May 2013 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

6. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor M F Shellens declared a non pecuniary interest in Minute No. 8 by virtue of his membership of Brampton Parish Council.

7. 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). In doing so, the Chairman reported on his attendance at the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social-Well Being) for the discussions on the Home Improvement Agency Shared Service Review and Disabled Facilities Grant Budget. Clarification was also sought by a Co-Opted Member of the meaning of the term 'Financial Strategy' and an answer was provided by the Director for Finance and Resources.

8. HUNTINGDONSHIRE REGULATION 123 AND INFRASTRUCTURE BUSINESS PLAN 2013/14 LIST

(Councillor N J Guyatt, Deputy Executive Leader and Executive Councillor for Strategic Planning and Housing, was in attendance for this item).

With the assistance of a report by the Assistant Director for Environment, Growth and Planning (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book), the Panel received an update on the outcome of the public consultation on the Draft Huntingdonshire CIL Regulation 123 List. The List defined the types of infrastructure that would be funded in whole or in part by the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)

to ensure that there was no duplication between contributions from CIL and Section 106 Agreements. A copy of the List was tabled at the meeting and it is appended in the Minute Book.

By way of introduction, Councillor N J Guyatt explained that the report set out the position for 2013/14 and that the Government was continuing to change the regulations surrounding the Levy. It was currently considering proposals to exempt self-build properties from the Levy. The Deputy Executive Leader reported that the Council had responded to the consultation on this proposal on the basis that this should not be permitted because small sites constituted a significant proportion of development within the District, and it would make delivering strategic infrastructure more difficult. Furthermore, it could create a mechanism through which CIL was not payable and affect the meaningful proportion which was allocated to town and parish councils.

The Planning Service Manager (Policy) explained that the preparation of an Infrastructure Business Plan for 2013/14 was the first stage of a longer process. Work had already started on the next iteration of the Business Plan and one of the major challenges would be to find alternative sources of funding to meet the shortfall in the resources available for strategic infrastructure. Work would also be required to develop the way in which the District Council worked with town and parish councils on how their contributions would be spent. With this in mind, a series of briefings for parish and town councils had already been held and the Planning Service Manager had also attended a number of parish council meetings to talk about the way in which shared priorities might be achieved. Members welcomed the dialogue which had been opened with town and parish councils, particularly in view of the concerns which they had previously expressed about the absence of local community representatives from the CIL governance structure.

In considering the contents of the report and having noted that the District Council would be the collecting body for CIL contributions, Members questioned whether there would be an audit trail to demonstrate how monies were distributed and spent. In response, Members were assured that partner agencies would be required to provide details of how the funds were spent. Although town and parish councils would have autonomy to spend their contributions in the way in which they saw fit, they would be required to provide an audit trail. Monies would be paid to town and parish councils in line with the phasing of developments.

Councillor M F Shellens expressed concern that infrastructure negotiated by communities through already existing Urban Design Frameworks might not now be delivered. He referred specifically to the Urban Design Framework for the former RAF Brampton site, and the Parish Council's acceptance of development, which had been predicated on the delivery of the infrastructure outlined in it. In response, Councillor N J Guyatt explained that whilst it was not possible to provide any guarantees, best endeavours would be made to meet the commitments already made.

In response to a question by a Member, it was explained that the fact that a number of responses to the consultation were made before the

announcement of proposals for the new Local Plan should not cause a problem because the Business Plan would be updated on an annual basis. It was also noted that developments of 200 dwellings or more would be liable to pay both S106 contributions and CIL. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be recommended to approve the revised Regulation 123 List incorporating the Huntingdonshire Infrastructure Business Plan 2013/14.

9. COMMUNICATIONS

Further to Minute No. 44, the Panel received a presentation by the Corporate Team Manager, Mrs H Donnellan, on the Council's communications function. The aim of the function was to achieve a cross Council, unified approach to communications and secure value for money. As part of the presentation, the Panel was provided with details of the work which was on-going with regard to external and internal communications and to develop these areas going forward. Information on the work undertaken by the Press Office was also provided, together with details of the 'Team Brief' and 'Members' Brief' newsletters which were produced on a regular basis.

The Panel was advised of the work which was being undertaken to develop an external communications strategy. Local consultants were conducting a survey with residents and Councillors for this purpose. Once this had been completed, it would be possible to adopt the most appropriate public communications mechanisms. It was suggested that local Members could provide a useful communications tool for the Council and they should be utilised to a greater extent than they currently were.

A discussion then ensued on the Council's use of 'Twitter' and 'Facebook' facilities. Members noted that the Council primarily used these facilities to communicate in an emergency. Having noted that the Corporate Team had studied the practices of those organisations which employed best practice, Members' attention was drawn to the successful use of Twitter by Coventry City Council whose approach focussed on the community and had required a change in organisational culture. Members were of the opinion that the District Council should adopt a more strategic approach towards the use of the facility. It was also suggested that it might be useful to segment twitter feeds for different groups of customers.

In considering the Council's current use of Twitter, Members were informed that tweets were 're-tweeted' in accordance with the guidelines contained in the Council's Social Media Policy by a restricted number of individuals. In response to questions about the Council's list of Twitter followers and the ways in which the Council intended to improve on the current numbers, the Corporate Team Manager undertook to respond directly to Councillor S Greenall.

Enquiries were made about the current budget for communications compared to the three previous years and the efforts which had been taken to measure the benefits of the work of the Communications

team. Whilst it was difficult to measure some areas of activity, Members noted that the Local Government Communications Group measured reputation and trust, which the Council could use. Furthermore the Council's bi-annual employee opinion survey provided an indication of the effectiveness of the Council's internal communications. The Corporate Team Manager agreed to provide details of the budget directly to Panel Members.

10. TREASURY MANAGEMENT ANNUAL REPORT 2012/13

(Councillor J A Gray, Executive Councillor for Resources, was in attendance for this item).

In accordance with the Council's Treasury Management Strategy and with the assistance of a report by the Accountancy Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel considered the Council's treasury management performance for the year ending 31st March 2013. The Accountancy Manager reported that the funds had performed well in 2012/13, significantly exceeding both the benchmark and the budgeted investment interest. He drew attention to Sections 3.2 to 3.5 of the report and Members noted that the actual net investment interest was more than three times the estimated credit budget of £11,000 for the year. Whilst it might have been expected that income from long term investments could be predicted relatively accurately, this had not been the case because some investments had ended during the year and new arrangements had to be made.

In terms of the Management of VAT, the Panel noted that the Council's liability in this respect was reviewed annually by HMRC. A question having been raised as to whether there might be a benefit for the Council from transferring the leisure centres to a trust, it was explained that the Council's VAT liability was not wholly attributable to the leisure centres as VAT was also payable on other land and property. This and other factors meant that there would not be a total saving of the VAT sum, though there was the potential that it might lower the cost.

In response to a comment about the difficulties being experienced by the Co-operative Bank, the Panel's attention was drawn to Annex B of the report which indicated that the Co-operative Bank was not one of the Council's counterparties. Members were assured that the counterparty list was reviewed on a monthly basis with the assistance of the Council's advisors.

Members were informed that the Economic Review of 2012/13 contained in Annex A had been obtained from the Council's Treasury Management Advisors. In terms of current economic trends, it was explained that the Treasury Management Advisory Group met on an ad hoc basis throughout the year and there were a number of unknown factors which might have an impact on the economy, such as the appointment of a new Governor at the Bank of England. The Accountancy Manager was asked to circulate to Panel Members further information on the estimated credit budget for the forthcoming year. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report be noted.

11. WORK PROGRAMME

Consideration was given to a report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which provided Members with an opportunity to establish their work priorities for 2013/14. Their attention was drawn to the functions and responsibilities of the Corporate Governance and Employment Panels and the service areas which had been allocated to each Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

The Panel discussed the membership of its existing working groups and noted that Councillor R Harrison had been appointed to the Corporate Plan Working Group to replace the former vice-chairman. Having thanked Councillor R B Howe for his contribution to the work of the Customer Services Working Group, it was agreed that Councillor R Harrison should be appointed as his replacement. It was also agreed to establish a small team to follow-up on the recommendations arising from the review of the Document Centre and Councillors A H Williams, S Greenall and P D Reeve were appointed for this purpose.

Whilst reviewing the existing programme of studies, the Panel received updates on the work which was being undertaken to develop a new Council Customer Services Strategy and on the discussions which were taking place as a consequence of the review of the Document Centre.

With regard to the recent review of the effectiveness of overview and scrutiny, reference was made to the fact that it had been agreed with the Executive Leader that the scrutiny of policy proposals should take place early in the policy development process. The Panel also endorsed the contents of an Overview and Scrutiny Protocol, which provided a framework for the conduct of Overview and Scrutiny by the Council.

In considering possible future studies, a number of suggestions were made including communications and marketing, shared services for treasury management, the A14 (including the impact of development at the former RAF Wyton airfield site) and Estates. It was suggested that this list should be reviewed at the next meeting. However in the interim and having received a brief update on the current position, the Chairman undertook to raise the issue of the A14 at the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Chairmen and Vice Chairmen to establish whether there was any potential for a joint study on this matter. Given that there appeared to be little enthusiasm for scrutinising the Local Enterprise Partnership on a co-ordinated Countywide basis, the Chairman also undertook to discuss with the Managing Director the Panel's engagement with the Partnership.

Other suggestions for future investigation included a review of the high cost services provided by the Council, but it was decided that this might be premature pending the publication of the Executive's budget plans. It was also suggested that consideration could be

given to the way in which the Council's objectives were translated into specific actions. However this was considered to fall within the remit of the Corporate Plan Working Group, of which the Chairman and Vice Chairman were both members.

In response to a proposal that the Panel should request a breakdown of statutory and non-statutory services, some Members expressed doubts at the practicalities of achieving this. With this in mind, it was suggested that there should be a pilot exercise on a small service area to assess the practicalities and value of establishing the extent to which it met or exceeded the minimum statutory requirements. Members were asked to think of suggestions for potential service areas for the next meeting.

In response to a question about the Council's performance in the collection of Council Tax receipts, the Panel was informed that there were plans to develop a range of performance indicators in relation to this and other the Council service areas. Members were also reminded that although changes in Housing Benefit had been allocated to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being), Members of the Economic Well-Being Panel would be invited to attend and partake in the discussion on this subject matter.

RESOLVED

- (a) that the contents of the report be noted;
- (b) that Councillor R Harrison be appointed as a Member of the Customer Services Working Group;
- (c) that Councillors A H Williams, S Greenall, P D Reeve be appointed to a Working Group for the purpose of following up the Panel's recommendations on the Document Centre; and
- (d) that the Overview and Scrutiny Protocol as appended to the report now submitted be endorsed.

12. 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.

13. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY (ECONOMIC WELLBEING) - 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 of matters that had previously been discussed.

14. SCRUTINY

The Panel considered and noted the latest edition of the Decision

Digest (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book).

Chairman