

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, 4 July 2013.

PRESENT: Councillor T V Rogers – Chairman.

Councillors P L E Bucknell, G J Bull,
E R Butler, S Cawley, S Greenall, R Harrison,
P G Mitchell, P D Reeve and A H Williams.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors S Akthar, and M F Shellens, Mr R Eacott and Mr R Hall.

15. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 6 June 2013 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

16. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

17. LOAN TO HUNTINGDONSHIRE REGIONAL COLLEGE

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 20th June 2013 regarding a proposed loan to Huntingdonshire Regional College. The Cabinet had endorsed the principle of the loan and authorised the Assistant Director, Finance and Resources, after consultation with the Executive Leader and Executive Councillor for Finance, to approve the detailed agreement.

18. 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, it was reported that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) had endorsed a proposal to establish a joint CCTV shared service with Cambridge City Council and that a report on the Loves Farm Community Centre would not be appearing on the Agenda for the Cabinet meeting on 18 July 2013. Members were reminded that reports on the Financial Strategy and the Customer Services Strategy would appear on the Agenda for their September meeting.

In response to a question regarding the financial impact of the new proposals for the A14 for the District Council, the Assistant Director (Finance and Resources) explained that this would be included within the forthcoming Financial Strategy. It was envisaged that sufficient provision had been made within the current Medium Term Plan for this purpose.

19. HUNTINGDONSHIRE ECONOMIC GROWTH PLAN 2013 - 23

(Councillor T D Sanderson, Executive Councillor for Strategic Development and Legal, was in attendance for this item).

With the assistance of a report by the Economic Development Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book), the Panel considered the contents of the draft Huntingdonshire Economic Growth Plan 2013 to 2023. The Plan set out a vision for Huntingdonshire and aimed to deliver economic growth by focusing on achieving a set of key ambitions called the '2023 Objectives'.

Members were reminded that an economic assessment had been undertaken in 2012 to provide an evidence base for the Economic Growth Plan and the new Local Plan. This was the first time that a shared evidence base had been used to prepare these documents and Members were reminded that a presentation on the outcome of the assessment had been given to their November 2012 meeting. Members' attention was then drawn to the eight action priorities which had emerged from the economic assessment, which had subsequently formed the basis of the Growth Plan. A number of challenges had also been identified through the assessment process. These were outlined in Section 2.1 of the report and included a reduction in the proportion of the people who are of working age and the polarisation of the business base in Huntingdonshire.

Members were advised that the Economic Growth Plan contained three main themes: People, Place and Business. Their attention was drawn to a number of the key actions to demonstrate the variety of ways in which work was undertaken to deliver economic growth within the District. These included a District-wide approach to careers advice and apprenticeships and the delivery of strategic development and housing. Following the approval of the Economic Growth Plan, an action plan would be prepared through which the aims identified within the Plan would be delivered.

In considering the contents of the report, Members recognised the importance of the Economic Growth Plan for the District and for the Council and commended the work which had been undertaken to prepare it. The view was expressed that the Council should make adequate resources available to ensure the actions associated with it were delivered.

In response to Members' concerns that the Plan appeared to contain few references to rural areas, the Panel was reminded that it was based upon the current assets within Huntingdonshire and that the Enterprise Zone was the best opportunity the District had to raise its profile at a national level. It was explained that the successful development of key strategic sites should produce a 'trickle down'

effect from economic activity centres to rural areas. Members were of the opinion that a more explicit explanation of this effect should be provided. With regard to specific comments relating to the Industrial Estate in Warboys and the plans for its extension, it was agreed that this should be taken up by the local Member with Planning Officers.

The Panel was of the opinion that the Growth Vision should be more ambitious. Members recommended that it should be amended to refer to Huntingdonshire as being one of the best places to live in England. It was also suggested that this should form the Vision for the entire District Council. This would necessitate a change to the Council's Leadership Direction.

Members made a number of suggestions relating to the content of the draft Plan. These included the need to avoid the repetition of the Vision on the first page, provide contact details for interested parties who wished to contact the Council, remove the picture of the Silvaco premises and improve the closing paragraph so that it was more dynamic and contained links back to the opening vision. Members also expressed the view that the wording in parts of the document could be more positive, in particular reference was made to page 7 of the document. In this respect, the Panel was reminded that marketing materials would be developed at a later date, which would address most of these suggestions.

Councillor P D Reeve questioned whether the ability to achieve economic growth through housing growth had been overemphasised, whether there was sufficient emphasis on infrastructure and the drivers of tourism and the absence of any reference to attracting a greater number small to medium sized enterprises to the area. He also suggested that there should be a stronger focus on the market towns and the Great Fen and that the Plan appeared to emulate the activities which were taking place in the surrounding areas. With regard to the latter, the Economic Development Manager explained that the opportunity had been taken to complement the innovation and research which was emerging from the Cambridge cluster.

In response to a number of questions from Panel Members, information was provided on a range of matters including the reasons for the reduction in the 'labour pool' and the ways in which university capability might be enticed into the area. An explanation was also provided of those factors which differentiated the 'Huntingdonshire offer' from those of other areas and the Panel noted that the District already had in place partnerships to deliver the key actions which had been identified within the Plan. Whilst the cost of delivering the Plan had not been calculated over its 10 year lifespan, a number of actions would be completed by accessing various independent funding streams.

Following a question by a Member, the Panel was informed that the District Council had little influence on commercial rent levels. Members were mindful that as an area became successful, rental costs would inevitably rise. Having noted that an action plan had already been drafted and that a marketing plan was expected to be completed in the Spring, it was agreed that the Economic Development Manager should be invited to provide an update on

progress to the Meeting in February 2014. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be recommended to approve the draft Huntingdonshire Economic Growth Plan 2013 – 2023.

20. USE OF CONSULTANTS, HIRED STAFF AND TEMPORARY STAFF

The Panel considered the annual report by the Assistant Director (Finance and Resources) containing details of expenditure by the Council on consultants, hired and temporary staff. Members were reminded that the Cabinet had asked the Employment Panel to review the use of consultants and agency staff as part of their deliberations on the Panel's proposals for budgetary savings. With this in mind, it was proposed that the Panel's comments on the report should be conveyed to the Employment Panel who would consider any changes to Council policy as part of their new terms of reference.

Having noted that revenue expenditure in this area had increased significantly in 2012/13 in comparison with the preceding year, Members considered a number of aspects of the report. They were advised that all staffing costs had to be met from an overall staffing budget and that the number of consultants, hired and temporary staff would fluctuate depending on the schemes or initiatives which were being pursued in a particular year or the availability of additional funding to employ such staff. The Operations Division required the flexibility that hired and temporary staff provided to meet the needs of this service. The Assistant Director (Finance and Resources) then agreed to provide Members with further details of the £77k spent on investigations in the Corporate Office.

In response to a question by a Member, the Panel was assured that it was unlikely that a consultant would become a permanent member of the establishment as they tended to be used for one off projects. Temporary staff might be employed on a short term basis to enable consideration to be given to more permanent staffing arrangements or to reflect the fact that additional Government funding had been made available to meet particular requirements, for example the Benefits caseload.

Members then enquired about the mechanisms which were in place to review the use of hired staff and were advised that there was an onus on Heads of Service to manage their staffing budgets to avoid creating financial pressures in other areas. Reference having been made to a specific instance in which a member of hired staff had been retained for a prolonged period, the Head of Customer Services assured the Panel that she had recently reviewed the position and found that the post was funded by the Government.

Having noted a suggestion that in future it might be useful to identify those instances where the appointment of temporary staff had been necessary to keep the service going, Members discussed the levels of stress related absence within the organisation and noted that the Employment Panel was monitoring this issue. The employment of

temporary staff was one of the tools used to deal with this problem.

On the understanding that any future reviews in this area would be undertaken by the Employment Panel, that Panel was requested to consider:-

- ❖ the mechanisms by which the employment of temporary, hired and agency staff were reviewed to ensure that they were cost effective;
- ❖ the impact of stress related absence on the appointment of these staff; and
- ❖ whether there was an opportunity to reduce revenue expenditure in this respect for the forthcoming year.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

- (a) that the contents of the report be noted; and
- (b) the Panel's comments be conveyed to the Employment Panel for further consideration.

21. PRIVATE SECTOR RENT LEVELS

Further to Minute Number 11/74, the Panel considered a report by the Head of Customer Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) providing an update on rent levels in Huntingdonshire. Members were informed that there was little evidence to suggest that landlords were adjusting their rents downwards in line with the reduction in Housing Benefit Local Allowance rates and in some cases rent levels were still increasing. The average rent levels for almost all property sizes in June 2013 (with the exception of 4 bedroom properties) exceeded the maximum amount of Housing Benefit payable.

In considering the contents of the report, Members received an explanation of the four broad rental market areas which covered the District. The Head of Customer Services explained that thus far the welfare reforms had not caused any significant problems within the District; however the introduction of under-occupancy changes was now starting to have an effect.

In response to a question regarding the use of temporary accommodation and the number of households that had been assisted into social rented housing, the Head of Customer Services explained that detailed figures were available in the report submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) on 2nd July 2013.

Attention having been drawn to the costs to the Council of dealing with cases of homelessness, the Panel was informed that work was ongoing with local Housing Associations to provide temporary accommodation as it was a cheaper alternative to bed and breakfast. In this regard, six units in Huntingdon had recently been made available by Stonham Housing Association. The Head of Customer

Services referred to a previous suggestion that the Council might reduce its homelessness costs by building its own accommodation and explained that officers would continue to work with Local Housing Associations to seek opportunities for funding and mutually beneficial partnership arrangements that might deliver this accommodation.

In response to a question from Councillor P D Reeve, the Head of Customer Services undertook to establish whether there was any capacity to accommodate additional tenants on an emergency basis within Luminus properties in Ramsey. Having then been reminded that the Head of Customer Services would be holding a seminar on housing and benefits in October, it was

RESOLVED

(a) that the contents of the report be noted; and

(b) that further reports be submitted if circumstances changed.

22. CUSTOMER SERVICES MONITORING REPORT

The Panel gave consideration to the Customer Services Monitoring Report for the period January to June 2013 (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which outlined the performance and standards achieved by the Service. Members' attention was drawn to the highlights and significant issues which had emerged since the last report and the forthcoming issues and risks for the next period.

In considering the contents of the report, Members referred to the service standards which had not been achieved. The Panel was informed that the standards had been in place since 2005 and the failure to meet them reflected the reduction in staff and the increase in workload at the Call Centre. Councillor P D Reeve requested details of the costs incurred as a result of the implementation of the Green Bin project and the Head of Customer Services undertook to send them directly to Members.

Members expressed concern that the average absence as a result of sickness per Full Time Employee at the Call Centre had increased to 18.6 days which was higher than the industry benchmark for the public sector. The Panel was assured by the Chairman of the Employment Panel that the Council's Sickness absence policies had been recently reviewed and he was confident that they represented best practice. Further work was required to adopt a more proactive approach to tackle potential issues before they emerged. It was reported that it was not possible to employ temporary staff to cover sickness absence because of the length of time required to train new starters.

The Chairman expressed the view that given the recent changes to their systems and procedures, further consideration should be given to co-locating the Call Centre with the Huntingdon Customer Services Centre. In response, the Head of Customer Services explained that a three year lease had been secured for the current premises, however when this expired a further review would be undertaken and the outcome presented to the Cabinet.

Having noted that performance levels were reported to employees within the Customer Services division on a quarterly basis, it was

RESOLVED

(a) that the contents of the report be noted; and

(b) that further reports continue to be submitted on a bi-annual basis.

23. 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.

24. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY (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 of matters that had previously been discussed. The Chairman reported that Customer Services monitoring reports would continue to be presented to the Panel on a bi-annual basis and the Customer Services Strategy would be submitted to the Panel's September meeting. A further meeting of the Corporate Plan Working Group would be held on 17th July 2013 and the review of consultants had now been transferred to the Employment Panel.

With regard to the Making Assets Count initiative, the Assistant Director (Finance and Resources) explained that a report seeking authority to work towards the creation of a publicly-owned joint venture to deliver the programme would be submitted to the Cabinet Meeting on 18th July 2013. However decision would be taken at this stage on whether to transfer any assets to the new organisation.

In terms of the Panel's review of the Document Centre, Members' attention was drawn to the briefing note which had been circulated on Electronic Document Management (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). It was reported that Officers were in the process of formulating a response to the Panel's other recommendations, the outcome of which would then be reported to the Working Group.

In considering the list of possible future studies it was agreed to establish two working groups to consider communications and shared services. The Chairman undertook to circulate a request for volunteers for the latter by email. Members were then informed that an update on Making Assets Count would be presented to the Meeting in September. Estates would be reviewed at a later date and it was agreed to delete the A14 and Statutory and Non Statutory services from the list.

In response to a suggestion by Councillor P G Mitchell that a review

should be undertaken of the presentation of budgetary information to Members, it was agreed that this matter should be re-considered after the Financial Strategy had been submitted to the Panel's September meeting.

RESOLVED

that Councillors P G Mitchell, P D Reeve, T V Rogers and Mr R Hall be appointed to the Communications and Marketing Working Group.

25. SCRUTINY

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

Chairman