

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the COUNCIL held in the Civic Suite, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon PE29 3TN on Wednesday, 25 September 2013.

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs B E Boddington – Chairman.

Councillors J D Ablewhite, M G Baker,
K M Baker, Mrs M Banerjee, I C Bates,
G J Bull, E R Butler, S Cawley,
B S Chapman, K J Churchill, I J Curtis,
J W Davies, D B Dew, Mrs L A Duffy,
R S Farrer, R Fuller, D A Giles, J A Gray,
S Greenall, N J Guyatt, A Hansard,
G J Harlock, R Harrison, D Harty, R B Howe,
Mrs P A Jordan, P Kadewere, Ms L Kadic,
S M Van De Kerkhove, Mrs P J Longford,
A J Mackender-Lawrence, P G Mitchell,
J P Morris, M C Oliver, J W G Pethard,
P D Reeve, Mrs D C Reynolds, T V Rogers,
T D Sanderson, M F Shellens, R G Tuplin,
D M Tysoe, R J West and A H Williams.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors S Akthar, P L E Bucknell, R C Carter, S J Criswell, C R Hyams and P K Ursell.

26. PRAYER

The Reverend A Milton, Team Rector for the Huntingdon Ministry opened the meeting with prayer.

27. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

(a) Leisure Awards

The Chairman was pleased to report that One Leisure had been nominated in three national award categories for the Members' Choice Health Club Awards 2013 in recognition of the high standard of the facilities available in the District and the quality of One Leisure staff. The Council also congratulated Ms J Sargeant, Fitness Consultant & Personal Trainer at One Leisure on being awarded a People Award.

(b) Events

During her report on the various activities she had undertaken since the last meeting in June, the Chairman highlighted, in particular, the ceremony held on 17th August 2013 to mark the granting of the Freedom of Huntingdonshire to RAF Wyton and World War 2 veterans. The Chairman conveyed to the Council the sentiments expressed in two letters received from Wing Commander M Brown, Commanding Officer, RAF Wyton and Colonel D Bristow, Deputy Lord Lieutenant for Cambridgeshire which thanked the District Council for the

support given to the Armed Forces and their endeavours to preserve traditions and to enhance partnerships between civilians and service personnel.

The Chairman also reported on her plans for the autumn referring notably to the Civic Carol Service to be held at St Mary's Church, Huntingdon on 4th December 2013.

28. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 26th June 2013 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

29. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No interests were received from the Members present.

30. STATE OF THE DISTRICT 2013

The Chairman reminded Members of the decision by the Council to suspend Council Procedure Rule 11 (Rules of Debate) to enable headline debates and 'Green Paper' proposals to be discussed by Members in an open manner. The Council, therefore,

RESOLVED

that Council Procedure Rule 11 (Rules of Debate) be suspended for the duration of the discussion under Minute No 30 during which time the common law rules of debate be observed by Members and applied by the Chairman.

The Chairman invited the Executive Leader and Deputy Executive Leader, Councillors J D Ablewhite and N J Guyatt respectively to address the Council on the State of the District 2013 and to open the debate which was scheduled to follow. A copy of the address delivered by the Executive Leader is appended in the Minute Book.

Councillor Guyatt then drew Members' attention to the other major challenges faced by the Council in terms of planning for housing and economic growth if the District was to remain prosperous and a good place to live and work. He referred to the growing population, the job opportunities available in Huntingdonshire and Cambridge and the need to provide places to live for families and young people such that they may continue to live close to their workplace and family home. He was, however, mindful of the need to balance housing growth with the impact on the environment and impressed upon the Council the importance of the new Local Plan and proposed site allocation exercise so that it was clearly the Local Planning Authority and not the Planning Inspectorate who would decide where growth would occur. Councillor Guyatt acknowledged that housing growth would require additional investment in local infrastructure and he reported that a transport plan for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough was currently in preparation to identify where new transport links and other infrastructure provision was required. He expressed confidence that, ultimately, the infrastructure improvement required across the County would be provided but suggested that this could occur over several years.

Councillor R J West opened the Council debate by referring to transport provision and by questioning the contribution made by bus companies to the growth agenda locally. In his view, the bus companies had not appeared to be proactive in meeting the needs of customers as for example in scheduling services to meet train arrival/departure times. In response, Councillor Guyatt was of the view that the bus companies had a major role to play in providing transport locally in the future and, subject to the determination of the application for development at Alconbury Weald, referred to proposals to extend both the guided bus and rail into the development. However, Councillor Guyatt confirmed that, at some stage, consideration would need to be given to alternative forms of transport given the increasing scarcity of fuel.

Whilst welcoming the new development in Huntingdon town centre, Councillor P Kadewere referred to deprivation in Huntingdon North Ward and asked the Executive Leader what steps the Council would take to assist businesses in that part of the town. The Executive Leader assured the questioner that the District Council would continue to work closely with strategic partners to support the most vulnerable in the District. Helping people move away from deprivation was not a role for the District Council alone but the authority, with partners, could provide opportunities and choices for those in such circumstances to change their lives. In terms of the closure of shops and businesses, Councillor Ablewhite commented on the impact of e-commerce but was confident that the redevelopment of Huntingdon town centre would encourage increased visitors to the town and that added footfall would generate greater opportunities for existing businesses and services to revitalise what could be offered on the traditional High Street in Huntingdon.

Councillor Mrs M Banerjee contended that the Council's policies should seek to create opportunities for elderly people to downsize to smaller properties within rural villages or should give greater encouragement to developers to build residential homes for retired people. In response, Councillor Guyatt stated that opportunities existed for such development to take place but that proposals of this nature did not arise very often, plus in many instances, retired persons were reluctant to move.

In response to a question from Councillor S M Van De Kerkhove regarding infrastructure provision and the suggestion that developers neglected to deliver the facilities which many have been promised under original planning consents, Councillor Guyatt urged Members to encourage residents to lobby developers rigorously to adhere to their agreed undertakings. He added, however, that the District Council had little authority in this respect.

In commenting on the quality of life in Huntingdonshire and commending the contribution made to this by the District Council's services and initiatives, Councillor M G Baker asked whether it would be possible to support the construction of a flood alleviation scheme for Alconbury and Alconbury Weston in the same way as that currently being installed in Godmanchester. Councillor Baker also commended the excellent contribution made by the Council's Fraud Team and his fear that the County Council's Social Care budget ultimately would strongly impact on public sector finances as a whole.

In reply, the Executive Leader thanked Councillor Baker for his complimentary remarks, explained that the flood alleviation works at Godmanchester whilst delivered by the Environment Agency and the County Council would not have progressed without a contribution from the District Council and that the District Council would respond when appropriate to proposals for tolling of the A14.

Councillor M F Shellens referred to the increase in distance covered by those living in rural areas when travelling to work and questioned whether the District Council could consider policies which would encourage development of employment in rural areas. Using proposed development at RAF Upwood as his example, the Executive Leader concurred with the comments of the questioner and explained how he would wish to see a mixed use sustainable development on the site at RAF Upwood rather than just housing. He added that the Local Government Association had recently discussed the provision of bus services in rural areas to increase the opportunity for access to employment.

In response to comments made by Councillor P D Reeve, the Executive Leader confirmed that the Cabinet had recommended that further council tax support not be granted to Town and Parish Councils in 2014/2015 and subsequent years and that it would not be in the best interests of the District to establish a greater Cambridgeshire and Peterborough authority as a way to generate additional savings as, in his view, the step would be detrimental to local residents. Councillor Ablewhite added that he could not support development in the countryside in response to the suggestion that the District Council should seek to secure other revenue streams by building hotels, social and affordable housing.

Councillor D B Dew concluded the debate by urging Member representatives of other tiers of authority to join together to support proposed infrastructure projects for the benefit of the County as a whole. This sentiment was endorsed by the Executive Leader.

31. FINANCIAL FORECAST TO 2019

With reference to a report by the Assistant Director, Finance and Resources and in conjunction with the Report of the Cabinet (Minute No. 33a Item No.16 refers) the Executive Councillor for Resources, Councillor J A Gray guided the Council through the process which would lead towards approval of the budget/MTP 2014/15 at the meeting of the Council to be held in February 2014.

Councillor Gray advised Members that the current financial forecast was the most difficult ever presented to the Council. It comprised three components, actual expenditure or outturn in 2012/13, the latest forecast for 2013/14 and the impact of the latest Government announcements on the Medium Term Plan. Having drawn attention to the elements which had affected the latest forecast for the current year, including most notably, the reduction in business rate income, Councillor Gray thanked Members and Officers for both reduced expenditure in 2012/13, which allowed £1m to be placed in the Special Reserve and for identifying a list of savings that could achieve an annual saving rising to £2.1m. Mention also was made of the low inflation rate of 1%.

Councillor Gray drew the Council's attention to three items which had emerged from the Governance Spending Review which would have a major impact on the District Council resulting in the need to achieve savings estimated at £2.8m by 2015/16 and £3.9m in 2018/19. These were Council Tax Limitation to 2%, a reduction in formula grant (RSG) and the proposal that Authorities should transfer £400m of new homes bonus to their Local Enterprise Partnership. In respect of the latter, Members were informed that the Council would continue to lobby the Government to vary their approach so that those Councils that had delivered on the Government's growth strategy would continue to be able to retain a greater proportion of the bonus or that the entitlement to bonus be tapered rather than reduced by the total amount all at once.

Councillor Gray also referred to continued uncertainty in terms of the level of formula grant after the next General Election in 2015, the Council's contribution to the A14 and when this would be required and the extent of savings that can be achieved by 2015/2016. Councillor Gray also described to the Council the reasons why the Cabinet had recommended the cessation of the award of grant or council tax support to Town and Parish Councils. Members also were alerted to the proposed involvement of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels in a process which would seek to challenge service standards and help identify further opportunities for efficiency savings. In closing, Councillor Gray invited Members of all parties to participate fully in this exercise.

In response to subsequent questions from Councillors R D Farrer, K J Churchill and M F Shellens, the Executive Councillor assured the questioners that work was ongoing to ensure both the Estates and One Leisure Service operated commercially, that the opportunity to draw a significant revenue stream from the Council's estates was being explored, that increasing Council Tax as a way to generate additional funds was a high risk strategy in terms of the timescale available, the cost of the necessary referendum and the potential additional burden of re-billing should the referendum be lost and that the issue of the Council's level of reserves had been fully debated by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being).

In terms of the intention to cease grants to Town and Parish Councils, Councillor Gray assured Councillor Mrs L A Duffy that notice of this decision, if supported by the Council, would be sent to Town and Parish Councils as soon as possible after the meeting.

Whilst acknowledging the difficult and important challenge that lay ahead, Councillor R J West recognised that a robust process had been put in place to enable the Overview and Scrutiny Panels to participate in the "Facing the Future" exercise and he urged all Members to engage. Councillor S Greenall concurred with this comment and indicated his appreciation for the consideration being given to the items of savings suggested by the Liberal Democrat Group.

In commending the considered approach which was being taken towards identifying further savings, Councillor S M Van De Kerkhove asked whether the Executive Councillor was aware of approaches

adopted by other authorities. In response, Councillor Gray replied that he only had anecdotal knowledge of some authorities and that it was difficult to compare organisations because of variations in size and character. However, he was aware of some who had spent inadvisably which had meant that they would have greater pressures to face than the District Council.

On the conclusion of discussion, it was moved by Councillor J A Gray, duly seconded and

RESOLVED

- (a) that, having acknowledged the financial uncertainty for local authorities, the content of the report now submitted be noted;
- (b) that, subject to there being no change in Government legislation, the payment of grant as council tax support to Town and Parish Councils in 2014/15 and subsequent years be discontinued;
- (c) that the financial forecast be used as the basis for the estimation of the potential level of savings required by the authority; and
- (d) that the Managing Director be requested to identify proposals for additional major savings in 2015/16.

[In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 14.5, Councillor P D Reeve requested that his decision not to support the Motion be recorded in the Minutes.]

32. MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES

Having regard to a report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) and in noting that a decision not to apply an increase of 1% to Members' allowances in accordance with the automatic index mechanism provided in the approved scheme would save £7,400, the Council

RESOLVED

that there be no increase in Members' allowances in the financial year 2013/14.

33. REPORTS OF THE CABINET, PANELS AND COMMITTEE

(a) Cabinet

Councillor J D Ablewhite, Executive Leader of the Council and Chairman of the Cabinet presented the Reports of the meetings of the Cabinet held on 18th July and 19th September 2013.

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In connection with Item No. 16, it was noted that the

recommendations had been considered previously under Minute No. 31.

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Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that, subject to the foregoing paragraphs, the Reports of the meetings of the Cabinet held on 18th July and 19th September 2013 be received and adopted.

(b) Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being)

Councillor T V Rogers presented the Report of the meetings of the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) held on 4th July and 5th September 2013.

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In connection with Item No. 10 and in response to a question from Councillor K J Churchill regarding the Customer Services monitoring report for the period January to June 2013, Councillor Rogers explained that the transfer of the Call Centre to new accommodation, sickness amongst staff, vacant posts and the high targets the service set itself may have contributed to the failure to achieve service standards in 9 out of 12 months but that the Panel would continue to monitor the service.

On the same subject and in response to a further question from Councillor Churchill, Councillor Rogers undertook to advise the questioner, in writing, whether sickness absence had risen in Customer Services over the previous six months.

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Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Report of the meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) held on 4th July and 5th September 2013 be received and adopted.

(c) Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being)

Councillor G J Bull presented the Report of the meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) held on 9th July and 10th September 2013.

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Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Report of the meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) held on 9th July and 10th September 2013 be received and adopted.

(d) Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being)

In the absence of the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Panel, Councillor J W G Pethard presented the Report of the meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) held on 2nd July and 3rd September 2013.

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Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Report of the meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) held on 2nd July and 3rd September 2013 be received and adopted.

(e) Development Management Panel

Councillor D B Dew presented the Report of the meetings of the Development Management Panel held on 15th July, 19th August and 16th September 2013.

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Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Report of the meetings of the Development Management Panel held on 15th July, 19th August and 16th September 2013 be received and adopted.

(f) Employment Panel

Councillor S Cawley presented the Report of the meeting of the Employment Panel held on 18th September 2013.

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In connection with Item No. 9, Councillor Cawley clarified that when discussing the necessity for a member of staff to have a level of fitness to undertake a specific job role on their return to work from sickness absence, the Panel also considered whether there should be a level of fitness expected of certain employees whose roles required them to be fit, as for instance for posts in leisure and operations.

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Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Report of the meeting of the Employment Panel held on 18th September 2013 be received and adopted.

(g) Standards Committee

Councillor A Hansard presented the Report of the meeting of the Standards Committee held on 27th September 2013.

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Upon being put to the vote, the recommendation contained in Item No. 1 was declared to be CARRIED.

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Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that, subject to the foregoing paragraph, the Report of the meeting of the Standards Committee held on 27th September 2013 be received and adopted.

(h) Licensing and Protection Panel

Councillor J W Davies presented the Report of the meeting of the Licensing and Protection Panel held on 25th June 2013.

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Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Report of the meeting of the Licensing and Protection Panel held on 25th June 2013 be received and adopted.

(i) Corporate Governance Panel

Councillor E R Butler presented the Report of the meeting of the Corporate Governance Panel held on 24th July 2013.

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Upon being put to the vote the recommendation contained in Item No. 6 was declared to be CARRIED.

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Upon being put to the vote, the recommendations contained in Item No. 7 were declared to be CARRIED.

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Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that subject to the foregoing paragraphs, the Report of the meeting of the Corporate Governance Panel held on 24th July 2013 be received and adopted.

34. WRITTEN QUESTION

Councillor D A Giles submitted a written question regarding St. Neots Riverside Car Park to which he received a written response from the Executive Councillor for the Environment, Councillor D M Tysoe.

The response from the Executive Councillor was tabled at the meeting and noted by the Council and a copy, together with the question is appended in the Minute Book.

Following further questions from Councillors R D Farrer and D Harty, the Executive Councillor undertook to look into the question of the liability on the part of the Environment Agency of the cost of any replacement bollards, the likelihood of the continuation of a Police presence at the car park and the effectiveness/cost benefit analysis of options to replace the bollards.

35. MOTION ON NOTICE

Councillor D A Giles moved and it was duly seconded by Councillor S M Van De Kerkhove that -

- (a) the District Council, having regard to a request from 'Local Works' (a coalition of over 100 national organisations campaigning to promote the use of the Sustainable Communities Act), urges the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to give local authorities the power to introduce a local levy of 8.5% of the rateable value on large retail outlets in their area with a rateable annual value not less than £500,000; and that the revenue received from this levy be retained by the appropriate local authority in order to be used to improve local communities in their areas by promoting local economic activity, local services and facilities, social and community well-being and environmental protection;
- (b) the District Council notes that if this power was acquired it would present the opportunity to raise further revenue for the benefit of local communities, should the Council wish to use it; and
- (c) the proposal be submitted to the Secretary of State under the Sustainable Communities Act and the District Council undertakes to work with 'Local Works' to gain support for the proposal from other Councils in the region and across the country."

After discussion and having been put to the vote, the Motion was

declared to be LOST.

[In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 14.5, Councillors D A Giles and S M Van De Kerkhove requested that it be recorded that they had voted for the Motion and Councillor S Greenall requested that it be recorded that he had abstained from voting on the Motion.]

36. ORAL QUESTIONS

Question from Councillor P D Reeve to the Executive Leader, Councillor J D Ablewhite

In response to a question which had requested the support for County Councillor P Bullen in his campaign to prevent Luminus Group from demolishing the sheltered housing scheme at Langley Court and Langley Close, St. Ives, the Executive Leader questioned the accuracy of the statements that had been made by the County Councillor on the subject, indicated his support for the provision of adult social care and for the contribution made to this by registered social landlords and suggested that he would await further information on the subject before the District Council proceeds to determine the planning application for a new extra care facility on the site.

Question from Councillor R D Farrer to the Executive Councillor for Planning and Housing Strategy, Councillor N J Guyatt

In response to a question regarding an explanation for a perceived increase in the time being taken to determine a planning application, Councillor Guyatt assured the questioner that, when necessary, additional resources would be diverted to ensure the delivery of the service. As Chairman of the Development Management Panel, Councillor D B Dew added that in a recent report on the activities of the Division, it had been reported that the service had determined 85% of all applications received during the specified period and continued to meet the performance targets set for the service.

Question from Councillor R J West to the Executive Leader, Councillor J D Ablewhite

The Executive Leader assured the questioner that he too had felt uplifted at the response to a recent Coffee Morning held to raise funds for the McMillan Charity.

Question from Councillor M F Shellens to the Executive Councillor for Customer Services, Councillor B S Chapman

Having been requested to state how many District residents had paid extra tax for an additional bedroom, whether this had had an impact on the number of people on the homeless list and how many families had moved into a vacated large property because the previous occupant had decided to downsize, Councillor Chapman undertook to respond in writing to the questioner.

Question from Councillor M F Shellens to the Executive Leader, Councillor J D Ablewhite

In connection with the challenges facing the Council in managing

future budgets, Councillor Ablewhite assured the questioner that the authority would continue to lobby the Government, through the Local Government Association, to seek improvements to its position and would seek the views of local residents in terms of the services that they would wish to retain in the future.

Question from Councillor R G Tuplin to the Executive Councillor for Healthy and Active Communities, Councillor R B Howe

The assertion having been made that Sawtry Community College could lose £80,000 from Cambridgeshire County Council from March 2014 for funding day time use of Sawtry Leisure Centre, the Executive Councillor undertook to respond to the questioner, in writing, on the attempts that have been made to secure future use of the facility once this funding had been withdrawn.

37. VARIATION TO THE MEMBERSHIP OF COMMITTEES AND PANELS, ETC

No variations to the membership of Committees and Panels etc. were reported.

The meeting ended at 10pm.

Chairman