

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (CUSTOMERS AND PARTNERSHIPS) held as a remote meeting via Zoom on Thursday, 8th October 2020

PRESENT: Councillor D M Tysoe – Chairman.

Councillors T D Alban, B S Banks, J W Davies,
Mrs A Dickinson, D A Giles, Mrs S Smith and
Mrs S R Wilson.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors S J Criswell and Mrs J Tavener.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors M L Beuttell and T D Sanderson.

13 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 10th September 2020 was approved as a correct record by the Panel.

14 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations of interest were received.

15 NOTICE OF KEY EXECUTIVE DECISIONS

The Panel received and noted the current Notice of Key Executive Decisions (a copy of which has been appended in the Minute Book) which has been prepared by the Executive Leader for the period 1st October 2020 to 31st January 2021.

16 HEALTHY OPEN SPACES STRATEGY

Consideration was given to a report by the Development Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) to which was appended the Healthy Open Spaces Strategy.

The Executive Councillor for Operations and Environment introduced the report and explained to the Panel that the Strategy set out the Council's plan for open spaces for the next 10 years. The Development Manager added that the Strategy was needed in order to protect the District's open spaces in the future, manage the environment and local ecosystems and fully utilise the open spaces within the District. Members' attention was drawn to how important open spaces were to residents, as a survey conducted during the development of the Strategy highlighted that 68% of respondents visited greenspaces on a regular basis (at least once a fortnight) and that 90% of respondents thought that greenspaces improved mental health and wellbeing. Also, respondents highlighted nature and wildlife as the most important aspect of greenspaces.

Overview and Scrutiny Members were recognised for their involvement in the development of the Strategy and Councillors Mrs A Dickinson, K P Gulson, Mrs S Smith, Mrs J Tavener and Mrs S R Wilson were thanked for their contributions.

When questions and comments were invited from the Panel, Councillor Wilson commented that she thought the enthusiasm of the team was infectious and that the community engagement undertaken was highly effective. Councillor Alban added that he regularly visits Hinchingsbrooke Country Park and was very impressed with the commitment of the staff and volunteers.

Following a question of clarification from Councillor Giles, the Panel was informed that Huntingdonshire has 87 square metres of green space per person, compared to 35 square metres per person in Great Britain and 42 square metres per person in the East of England.

Councillor Davies asked how the Strategy would help in balancing the accommodation of wildlife in green spaces within the District with their use by the public. He added that the Council should be mindful of looking after the various habitats that existed throughout the green spaces. In response, the Panel was reassured that wildlife habitats would be protected and actively managed. Councillor Alban stated that the wildflower meadows were an excellent addition to the open spaces.

Councillor Alban then questioned why Officers had not visited children from rural schools in the same way that they had visited children in larger more urban primary schools. The Development Manager explained that the schools visited had taken up the offer of a visit from the team. It was suggested that many Members were school governors or had links to schools in other ways and these avenues could be used to achieve greater coverage of communication between Council Officers and pupils.

Clarification was sought from Councillor Wilson that the Strategy would be well used and that it had buy-in from the Executive Councillors and Senior Officers. Members were reassured that there was buy-in and there was a recognition that the green open spaces were important to residents and that they needed to be well managed. The Strategy would ensure the latter occurred because it would facilitate monitoring. Councillor Dickinson asked a question about the monitoring process. In response, it was explained that the Strategy was to run for a duration of 10 years but that there would be a review on an annual basis and then a refresh in five years.

A discussion ensued about other benefits of green open spaces. Members welcomed the concept that open spaces could be used for social prescribing and could help residents with their mental health. The Strategy was welcomed by Councillor Banks and he stated that it could help community groups with their open space aims as well.

The comment was made by Councillor Alban that the open spaces could be more well used if the Council could attract visitors to the least well-known areas as well as the more high-profile ones. Members were reassured that the Strategy aimed to grow the profile of open spaces within Huntingdonshire. Following a further comment by Councillor Giles, Members noted the intention to explain

clearly how indirect charging contributed towards the upkeep of open spaces. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be recommended to approved the Healthy Open Spaces Strategy and the 10-year Action Plan.

17 DIGITAL STRATEGY DISCUSSION

Having noted that the Digital Strategy would not be ready to discuss at the meeting, the Panel

RESOLVED

that the item be deferred to the meeting in November 2020.

18 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

A report by the Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny) (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) containing the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme was received and noted.

Chairman