

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ENVIRONMENT, COMMUNITIES AND PARTNERSHIPS) held in Civic Suite, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon PE29 3TN on Thursday, 2 March 2023.

PRESENT: Councillor J E Kerr – Chair (Items 12-14 only).

Councillors T Alban, S Bywater, S J Criswell, J E Harvey, N J Hunt, M Kadewere, C Lowe, S R McAdam and D J Shaw.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors M J Burke and G J Welton.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor B Pitt.

12. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 2nd February 2023 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

13. RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Panel noted the responses which had been received to questions raised by Members at previous meetings.

14. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor J E Kerr declared Other Registerable Interests in Minute Nos. 16 and 17 by virtue of her involvement in a number of aspects of these agenda items and left the room and did not take part in the discussion on these items.

Councillor M Kadewere declared an Other Registerable Interest in Minute Number 17 as Secretary of Huntingdon Community Group and left the room and did not take part in the discussion on these items.

(At this point of the proceedings Councillor Kerr left the meeting and did not return).

Councillor N J Hunt in the Chair.

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 March 2023 to 30th June 2023.

In response to a question by Councillor Criswell as to whether the Overview and Scrutiny Panels were evenly matched in terms of the work which was being brought forward on the Council's Forward Plan, the Panel were informed that a new Corporate Plan has now been developed with a range of new initiatives and priorities which would link into the future work of the Environment, Communities and Partnerships Panel and populate future forward plans. Work was also ongoing in relation to the health agenda and it was intended to bring forward an item for discussion in due course.

16. WARM SPACES

With the assistance of a report by the Chief Delivery Officer and a power-point presentation (copies of which are appended in the Minute Book), the Panel received an update on the development of Warm Spaces in response to the cost-of-living crisis.

Following the presentation, questions were invited from the Panel:

Councillor McAdam enquired how well the message was getting across to the public that these warm spaces were available to them. Having noted the user numbers initially appeared to be positive, it was explained that it was always a challenge to get the message out to those who needed it, but one of the advantages of the devolved model is that people tended to be in contact with their local community groups who are already embedded within their communities. However, it would always be a challenge to reach those who were not connected to local community groups and other social networks. There had been a significant amount of take up of the District Council press releases and traffic on social media and Members were encouraged to continue to share and support these initiatives in the press and on social media where possible.

Following a question from Councillor Harvey on how often an organisation could apply for funding from the District Council's Community Chest for their warm space, the Panel heard that the specific detail would be sought and reported back. However, in addition to this, Members were informed that there were a set of criteria which the Council was currently reviewing with a view to establishing what could help these groups to continue to succeed going forward. A question was also asked about the training which was provided for the volunteers at the Warm Hubs and the Panel were informed that a package of training had been provided and been used flexibly depending on the level and knowledge of those that had required it.

Councillor Harvey expressed concern that more had not been done to offer mental health support within the spaces and queried whether there were any plans to improve on this. In response to which it was explained that some of the funding from the Integrated Care System for Reducing Health Inequalities initiative had been used by the 15 recognised organisations to put additional mental health support into

their localised areas. In terms of warm spaces, there was an emphasis on signposting. Members noted that the district were looking at second year funding to deliver a District wide approach

Councillor Bywater then reflected on his own experience at the Warm Spaces Hub in Sawtry which was well attended and his view that it was important not to duplicate effort but to signpost where appropriate. He provided some feedback on the insecurities that he was starting to hear regarding the affordability of being able to continue rent the hall and emphasised the need to keep the momentum and to continue to communicate how the District Council could continue to support warm spaces going forward. He also emphasised the role of Members in advertising the availability of warm spaces in their wards.

It was further observed by Councillor Bywater, that it was a struggle to get volunteers engaged within their communities and it was important for them to see a future for a project and a vision to keep them engaged. In response to which, the Executive Councillor indicated that he was sympathetic and had been in the position of wondering what happened to a project when the grant comes to an end. The challenge would now be on the District Council to find a transparent system to consider this going forward.

In concluding the discussion, the Interim Managing Director indicated that the proliferation of one-off type projects created a real challenge. He explained that the warm spaces initiative had been designed in anticipation that there was likely to be enduring need in April. Throughout Covid, efforts have been consistently made to build the resilience of community organisations to create capacity for longer term need in the future. As a result of increasing effectiveness in doing this, the district was seeing more one-off opportunities. Whilst it is harder to do, it was hoped that Members believed it was more effective to build long term solutions.

17. HEALTH INEQUALITIES PROJECT – TACKLING PREVENTION THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

(Councillor Kadewere left the meeting during the discussion on this item. See Members Interests).

With the assistance of a report by the Health Inequalities Project Manager and a power-point presentation (copies of which are appended in the Minute Book) the Panel received an update on the District's Health Inequalities Project, which was designed to address localised health inequalities, build community resilience, and prevent the escalation of health issues.

Following the presentation, the Executive Councillor for Community and Health Councillor Pitt paid tribute to all those who had been involved within the initiatives and projects and to the individual Groups themselves who had all achieved some significant successes.

In response to a question from Councillor Criswell as to how other communities could be encouraged to become involved, the Panel were informed that on this occasion the projects selected had been

driven by speed and necessity. Funding had also been provided to those groups that already had the accredited recognition process. However, it was hoped that now a pathway and working model had been developed this could be shared more widely within the district. It was also pointed out that although funding was seeded into the 15 areas, it could still be spread into neighbouring villages.

Councillor Bywater reflected on the difficulties and challenges in reaching some of the smaller parishes and commented whether there might be any potential to ask for expressions of interests from groups or organisations. He also commented on the issues being faced because of inadequate transportation in some areas of the district. To which, the Executive Councillor agreed that the availability of buses continued to be a health issue as people became isolated and couldn't get to services and social groups.

Councillor Alban welcomed the sharing of ideas and benefits between neighbouring villages; however, he sought confirmation that grants weren't being given to the same groups because they were well organised and knew the application process. He also welcomed the availability of a specialist youth worker to work with young people to address well-being and mental health issues but commented on the potential for this to duplicate the existing work of the County Council's Youth Service. Finally, Councillor Alban welcomed the increased use of signposting as a positive move – enabling individuals to take actions for themselves which brought positive outcomes.

In response to Councillor Alban's comments, Officers explained that the groups involved within the project had had to commit to significant work including consultations, surveys, pilot projects and community events. The mental health package had been put together in conjunction with the County Council, the local school, local GP surgery, local prescribers and the local youth club by a volunteer and all groups have also been urged to ensure that the right people are doing the expert's jobs.

The Executive Councillor acknowledged that whilst there were certain groups that were good at writing applications for grant funding, there was often a correlation between those groups and those that are good at delivery. In many cases there was a well-established relationship between these groups and the District Council with their capacity to deliver already being recognised. Whilst duplication is an important issue, sometimes having a breadth of offer can be helpful and in his opinion duplication in some areas was not always a terrible thing.

Officers explained that the network of capability and support which had developed from the projects had been evident at the recent celebratory event detailed within the presentation. Officers were confident that the initiative had established a network of community champions and support that was self-reliant and self-supporting. It was hoped that something similar could be achieved from the celebratory event for the Warm Hubs project in due course.

Following a question from Councillor Shaw regarding the funding for 2023/24 and specifically the resources for staffing beyond the end of June, the Panel were advised that it had been evident that the

availability of dedicated resources had made a significant difference in building up the relationships with and the resilience of the community groups. However, it was intended to consider a more active community engagement role for next year's funding.

Councillor McAdam asked how engaged and involved local GPs were with this project. The Panel were informed that work was ongoing to build further links here.

Councillor Harvey enquired whether an organisation who was already operating a scheme which might well fit into this would be able to approach the District Council regarding the forthcoming round of funding. In response, it was explained that the District Council's proposal for 2023/24 was not yet written, however it was envisaged that the Integrated Care System might wish to include more rigour into this year's proposal and with this in mind were looking to give a focus to individual Districts.

Finally, and in response to a question from Councillor Lowe as to what effort was made to encourage individuals to attend events and projects, the Panel were advised that all the Groups had undertaken substantial consultation exercises prior to the launch of their projects including in some cases pilot exercises and it was hoped that that this would pay dividends in terms of attendance.

18. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

With the aid of a report by the Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny) (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme was presented to the Panel.

Having regard to the recent discussion to incorporate 'Environment' into the Panel's name, it was suggested that it would be useful to receive an update from those organisations to which the Council either appoints members to or offers financial support. It was suggested and agreed that this should include the Great Fen Steering Group, the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Parks Partnership and the Great Ouse Valley Trust. It was suggested that the Panel might consider the environmental impact that these initiatives have had, and it was agreed that the Council's appointed representatives should also be invited to the meeting for this purpose. It was further agreed to consider holding a meeting at the Great Fen Project itself in the warmer weather.

Chair