

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY JOINT PANEL held in Civic Suite, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon PE29 3TN on Thursday, 6 July 2023.

PRESENT: Councillor J E Kerr – Chair.

Councillors T Alban, A M Blackwell, M J Burke, S Bywater, S Cawley, S J Corney, S J Criswell, I D Gardener, C M Gleadow, J E Harvey, S A Howell, N J Hunt, A R Jennings, M Kadewere, C Lowe, R Martin, S R McAdam, Dr M Pickering, D J Shaw, R A Slade and G J Welton.

APOLOGIES: An apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor N Wells.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors M A Hassall and B A Mickelburgh.

1. ELECTION OF CHAIR

RESOLVED

that Councillor J E Kerr be elected Chair of the Panel for the ensuing meeting.

Councillor J E Kerr in the Chair.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

RESOLVED

that Councillor C M Gleadow be elected Vice-Chair of the Panel for the ensuing meeting.

3. APPROVAL OF MINUTES OF THE MEETING

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting will be discussed at the September meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny (Environment, Communities and Partnerships) Panel.

4. MEMBERS INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

5. HOUSEHOLD GARDEN WASTE SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE

By means of a report by the General Manager for Operations (a copy

of which is appended in the Minute Book), the Panel discussed the Household Garden Waste Subscription Service.

Councillor Criswell expressed his anger over the report and proposed subscription, giving his reasons as due to;

- the way that the proposal had been received by members of the public;
- failure to use Overview and Scrutiny to help develop the proposal;
- introduction of a charge on an existing service;
- charging residents who are trying to do the right thing by recycling green waste;
- disproportionately affecting elderly residents who enjoy gardening but may be on a low income;
- no consultation with residents on the proposed subscription charge;
- concern that the make up of the joint administration politically is not one that residents had voted for; and
- that Executive Councillors are not owning the proposed subscription introduction and suggesting that the decision to introduce had been made by Officers.

The Panel were assured that whilst the proposed fee of £57.50 had been modelled by Officers, the proposed subscription had been proposed by the Joint Administration.

Councillor Gardener observed that the report and Executive Councillors had highlighted that the fee was being introduced for those who used the service, and enquired if that meant that residents could request refunds for those services which their Council Tax pays for but that they do not use. The Panel heard that the Joint Administration were aware that this would not be a popular decision but that it was necessary to protect the service for those residents who wished to continue to use it. The Panel heard that garden waste collection is a non statutory collection and that the Council is no longer able to deliver this service free of charge. The proposed changes would also allow local business opportunity and innovation in opening up opportunities for alternative waste collections.

Concern was expressed by Councillor Cawley that the figures within the report were scare tactics and may be working to fund a shortfall that may not happen. He also queried the quoted reduction in CO2 emissions given that many residents may choose to dispose of their garden waste at local recycling centres by private car instead of subscribing to the service.

In response to these questions, the Panel heard that;

- the shortfall figure of £8.3 million was a worst case scenario but that without action there would be a shortfall which would accumulate year on year; and
- that the predicted CO2 emissions reduction was due to a reduction of refuse vehicles on the road, due to reduced collections and also reduced waste to be reprocessed.

Councillors Cawley and Lowe enquired how it was anticipated that residents would create less green waste should they not have a green bin. The Panel were advised that analysis of other Councils who have

undergone the same process, showed that those without a garden waste receptacle generated less green waste. It was further advised that residents also had the option to compost, to use their garden waste as mulch or alternatively to dispose of it at their local recycling centre.

Following an observation from Councillor Cawley that home composting of food waste would generate more methane emissions, the Panel heard that current analysis of waste within each of the three bins currently provided by the Council showed that more food waste was disposed of between the grey and blue bins than the green bin, therefore a change in this behaviour was not anticipated.

Councillor Shaw observed that whilst he believed all Councillors were unhappy with the decision to introduce the subscription service, the reality was that it would be a viable way to address the gap in the finances. Furthermore the Panel heard that the Section 151 Officer would be unable to sign off the accounts without the introduction of the subscription and the continuation of the service.

The lack of public consultation on the proposed subscription service was queried by Councillors Alban and Lowe who observed that an ongoing consultation on Electrical Vehicle Charging had already been met with a good response from the public. The Panel heard that there is no option to continue the service free of charge therefore a consultation would be immaterial and unreasonable, however it was stressed that public consultation would be held following approval of the recommendations to gauge public opinion on other aspects of the proposed changes. Councillor Alban expressed pride over the good recycling rates achieved by residents in the district to date and shared his concerns that the poorest residents would be disproportionately affected which he claimed was at odds with the ethos of the Joint Administration. The Panel heard that by introducing the proposed subscription service on a non statutory service, the Council would be able to refocus spending on statutory services. The Panel were further appraised that the report had been brought through the democratic cycle of meetings following concerns expressed at the Council meeting in February 2023.

Following a further enquiry from Councillor Alban regarding the Saturday working detailed within the report, the Panel were advised that this had been budgeted for as overtime and that this work would assist those residents not subscribed to the scheme. The alternative options available under this part of the scheme would form part of the proposed consultation to residents.

It was observed by Councillor Pickering that this was not an easy decision to make and he empathised with those who had had to make the decision, and enquired whether there was potential to offer assistance for those who are in receipt of Council Tax Support.

Councillors Harvey and Hunt expressed concerns over the impact of the proposed subscription to poorer residents and enquired around alternative payment options aside from annual payments. The Panel heard that the proposal would be to collect the annual fee during the annual break in Council Tax payment collections but that further work would be undertaken to investigate alternative payment options.

Councillor Hunt also observed that he had seen press reports stating that the Council was in a good financial position, however the Panel heard that there were not sufficient reserves to cover the projected deficit without cuts to statutory services if this service were to continue without a subscription charge.

Councillor Hunt proposed to add an additional recommendation to the Cabinet report, this recommendation was seconded by Councillor Harvey and the Panel voted in favour of forwarding the proposed recommendation to Cabinet.

g) to agree to complete a review of the impact of the introduction of a household waste subscription service on lower income residents.

Councillor Bywater stated that he could not support the proposal and shared his comments and concerns on the proposals within the report including;

- observation that the budget deficit had been present for the past 12 years therefore was not a new issue;
- residents are struggling financially at this time, therefore unreasonable to put further strain on household budgets;
- proposed subscription service undermines the Council's commitment to protect it's residents and to support them in combating Climate Change;
- affecting residents without transport;
- encouraging fly tipping or burning of garden waste;
- encouraging vermin through food waste in garden compost;
- lack of environmental impact assessment;
- opposition from residents; and
- affecting the ability to form a sustainable and inclusive community across the district.

Councillor Bywater further stated that he would not support the proposal as there was no financial data to support the cost of this proposal and how this would affect the projected financials within the report, he also queried how Cabinet could make an informed decision on the recommendations without the full data to support them. The Panel were assured that a quality impact assessment had been developed and analysed alongside available census data to give best estimates but that until the approval of the recommendations within the report, the team were not in a position to progress, however this impact assessment would be added as a further Appendix to the report when it progressed to Cabinet. The Panel were advised that research showed few authorities offering financial support with garden waste subscriptions but that this would be fully investigated in order to prove due diligence. It was also advised that residents could share bins with their neighbours thereby sharing costs.

The Panel heard that the Council were still waiting on information and clarification from DEFRA surrounding the introduction of food waste collections. It was also stated that the Joint Administration had inherited good services from the previous administration and wanted to improve upon them, which the introduction of a garden waste subscription would support.

Following a question from Councillor Gleadow, the Panel were assured that the team were happy to update on progress of projects

and had an open door policy to discuss this.

Councillor Corney observed that the Panel had heard a lot about what other Councils were doing but that it would be advisable to focus on Huntingdonshire. He further observed that recent flooding in Ramsey had been caused by the fly tipping of garden waste and expressed concern that the removal of the free collection service would exasperate this problem. In response to Councillor Corney's concerns around fly tipping, the Panel heard that the team worked hard to manage this issue across the district with increased intelligence. It was also advised that data obtained from Fenland District Council, showed a recent reduction in fly tipping despite having a chargeable garden waste service. Councillor McAdam expressed concern that fines for fly tipping were not prohibitive and that garden waste tipping would be harder to trace back to its origin than household waste.

In response to a question from Councillor Blackwell, the Panel were advised that an alternative option of a three month suspension of the service had been considered over other time period suspensions as current data showed that due to the seasonal nature of the demand, there were three quiet months over the winter where demand for collections is low.

Following a further comment from Councillor Corney on what alternative options had been considered, the Panel heard that the alternatives considered had not made the necessary financial impacts required, therefore the proposal within the report had been put forward. The Panel were further advised that despite this being an unpopular proposal, no viable alternatives had been proposed.

Councillor Jennings stated his concerns about the proposal, including that;

- although Council Tax may be seen as regressive, nothing is more aggressive than a flat rate fee applied across the district;
- he felt the member briefing had been more to gauge reaction and how Councillors would support the proposal to their residents despite being prior to the report being available;
- the language of the report gave conflicting implications – namely that the assumed subscription fees generated would be more than the cost to run the service, therefore it was suggested that they would be subsidising other services;
- the Council Tax comparison table would benefit from the addition of which Councils current charge for their Garden Waste service;
- it is common to have a budget gap within the MTFS and that the immediate financial pressures had already been addressed, therefore a proposed delay in implementation would not affect this;
- the assumptions in Table 3 do not stand up to scrutiny due to conflicting detail;
- there was not enough rigour in the financial modelling;
- there was a query whether the impact on the grey bin collections had been considered; and
- there was worry that people would resort to hard landscaping their gardens to avoid production of garden waste.

Following which, the Panel were advised that;

- the costs to run the service within the report did not include service wide factors such as vehicle acquisition and insurance;
- the MTFS only has certainty for year 1 and that following that it would be in jeopardy;
- Table 3 has been worked from the bottom up, but that the proposed development of 12,000 new homes within the district by 2025 has not been included as they have not yet been constructed;
- the finances had been robustly tested; and
- the issue of how to protect vulnerable residents had been considered, however it was unfair to assume that those in lower Council Tax Bands used the garden waste service less than those in a higher band.

Councillors Cawley, Jennings, Martin and Lowe all expressed concern over the timing of the proposal and suggested that it be postponed to 2025 when it was hoped that the current economic crisis may be alleviated. Councillor McAdam observed that whilst the timing was of concern, postponing implementation could result in higher charges to households to compensate for the delay. Councillor Jennings proposed an additional recommendation be added to the Cabinet report;

h) to pause progress for 12 months to take time to take advantage of detailed reports and financial implications before bringing the scheme back into the democratic cycle.

However this motion was not supported by the Panel.

Assurance was sought from Councillor Gardener that should the scheme go ahead, there would be no redundancies or cuts to staff. The Panel heard that whilst it was difficult to make assurances with the unknown variables of take up, it was anticipated that a reduction in the use of agency staff and natural turnover would ensure the proposed staffing finances within the report would be met.

Councillor Martin expressed his opinion that there were compelling reasons why the report should be looked at again and again questioned whether the local recycling centres would be able to cope with the demand. He felt that the report had a lot of detail missing and that it was hard to scrutinise the detail due to its absence.

The Panel heard, in response to further questions from Councillors Gardener and Pickering, that an impact assessment had been done to cover the anticipated impact on the local recycling centres and that this would be monitored and assessed as the proposals moved forward.

Following a question from Councillor Shaw, the Panel were advised that residents would be able to keep their current green bins, however only those who subscribed to the service would have them collected.

Councillor Lowe stated that she was aware of residents who were maintaining verges and disposing of that waste in their green bins, the Panel heard that all Council mowing schedules were on time at present and that Councillors could submit details of such occurrences

to the Operations team for further investigation.

The Panel were assured that a robust contract was in place to ensure the current recycling of the waste into compost by Amey would be maintained.

Concern was expressed by Councillor Alban that there may be teething problems should the scheme go ahead and enquired about a Plan B. The Panel were assured that the team would work to optimise the route to ensure best value for money as well as the expected reduction in CO2 emissions, this would be constantly under review to ensure it best fits the needs of residents and the Council.

The Panel were further assured of the capability of the Officers in devising and delivering a scheme which would fit the needs of the Council whilst still delivering for residents and that the report contained all the information needed for Cabinet to make an informed decision.

Following the discussion, it was

RESOLVED

that Cabinet be encouraged to consider the comments from Overview and Scrutiny when making a decision upon the recommendations within the report; and;

that Cabinet be encouraged to add the proposed recommendation g to the report;

g) to agree to complete a review of the impact of the introduction of a household waste subscription service on lower income residents.

Chair