

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, 5 February 2026.

PRESENT: Councillor N J Hunt – Chair.

Councillors T Alban, S Bywater, S J Criswell, M A Hassall, M Kadewere, C Lowe, S Mokbul, B M Pitt, D J Shaw and N Wells.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors S W Ferguson, S A Howell and J E Kerr .

40. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of 22nd January 2026 were approved as a correct record and were signed by the Chair.

41. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor B Pitt declared a non-registerable interest in Minute 25/44 by virtue of being involved in organising a music festival in Priory Park, St Neots.

42. 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 and Notice of Key Decisions for the period 1st February 2026 to 31st May 2026 were presented to the Panel.

43. LETTINGS POLICY REVIEW

By means of a report by the Housing Needs and Resources Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book), the Lettings Policy Review was presented to the Panel.

Councillor Bywater expressed his gratitude for the inclusion of Care Leavers into the Policy, a sentiment which was echoed by the Panel. Following which, the Panel were advised that the number of care leavers on the Housing list was low and potential in single figures, however the Panel were assured that Officers worked with Care Leaving Team colleagues to identify care leavers who would be applying for social housing and were able to plan and accommodate for them. It was noted that the very low numbers of care leavers against the total number of households registered to the list meant that this group had a minimal impact on the list overall but that the support provided was invaluable.

The Panel were advised that victims of domestic violence were identified by Officers and case workers through investigative and liaison work and that priority was awarded accordingly.

It was observed that the report identified a future review during the next municipal year of the Policy and requested involvement of Councillors and Overview and Scrutiny within that process. This sentiment was shared by the Panel, the Chair and the Executive Councillor as an action to take forward.

It was clarified to the Panel that the minor amendments referenced in the recommendation for Officer delegation were small amends such as clarification of wording. Further concern was expressed by Councillor Hassall as to whether the term minor amendment could be defined. Following discussion, the Panel were reassured that any decisions taken under this recommendation would be between the Corporate Director Communities and the Portfolio Holder. It was further suggested that the Overview and Scrutiny Chair be apprised of these decisions so that they could report back to the Panel if deemed necessary.

Following the discussion, it was

RESOLVED

that the comments of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel be passed to Cabinet for their consideration when making a decision upon the recommendations within the report.

44. HABITAT BANKING PROGRAMME

By means of a report and presentation by the BioDiversity for All Project Manager (copies of which are appended in the Minute Book), the Habitat Banking Programme was presented to the Panel.

Councillor Criswell praised the sentiment of the project but expressed concern that the Council as custodians of the public realm were tying up parcels of land for extended periods which may be required for other purposes for the benefit of the public interest in the future. In addition Councillor Hunt queried whether legal contracts would be put in place to protect both the land and the public interest. The Panel were assured that legal agreements would be in place for this purpose and that there would be break causes to take scenarios such as natural disasters and extreme weather into consideration. It was also assured that the programme would look to enhance existing spaces rather than redefine them. An example was given of sites with recreational sports pitches where the programme would keep the pitches but look to enhance the surrounding areas working with what would be feasible and practical.

Following an enquiry in relation to the Priory Park site, the Panel heard that communications were ongoing with the Friends of Priory Park group who were open to the concept of the programme and that the team would be working closely with internal colleagues and external partners to ensure that the end result would enhance the

space and not impact recreational use and enjoyment of the space.

In response to a question relating to the inclusion of interest within the financial calculations, the Panel were advised that the figures had been developed in collaboration with Finance colleagues and that the modelling for the programme did not include the interest. The Panel were assured that a fluid case by case approach would be adopted with a further option to increase the number of credits available should the resulting habitats be of a more improved quality than anticipated.

Following an observation in relation to the management of private estates and environments, with the example of Buckden Towers being given, the team advised that the programmes focus would be on the sites identified within the report, however they were aware of further opportunities and although a balanced approach would be undertaken initially this would be reevaluated and opportunities developed in the future if scope allowed.

The Panel were reassured that support from the Council's Operations Team had been factored in to be used in the event of extreme weather and that the legal agreements would be in place to protect the scheme from the unpredictability of nature. It was also noted that the richer and more biodiverse a habitat, the more resistant it was to natural disasters.

Concern was expressed that developers may utilise the credits scheme in place of delivering on development sites thus creating more heavily urbanised environments. The Panel were assured that the team were collaborating with Planning colleagues to develop and monitor habitats and developments across the district to ensure a balanced approach.

Councillor Hunt relayed his experience working with the team in relation to Riverside Park in Huntingdon and that he was impressed with how the suggested changes would enhance the current provision without hindering its use by residents. He concluded with his belief that the scheme would allow residents to see investment in parks and green spaces for their benefit.

The Panel heard that the team would be working with community groups and residents to develop the scheme and to strengthen community bonds with the Council.

Following a query relating to the omission of Paxton Pits from the scheme, the Panel heard that the existing site was already rich in biodiversity and that the intention of the scheme was to increase the biodiversity of areas. It was noted that the forthcoming expansion of Paxton Pits may create further opportunities and could be included in the programme in the future if appropriate.

It was advised to the Panel that CIL funding would not be appropriate for the scheme due to the potential commercial nature therefore borrowing had been the better option for the programme.

Whilst in support of the scheme in general, Councillor Pitt expressed concern about the timescales within the report, noting that work was

anticipated to start in May. The Panel were advised that following the outcome of the Budget through the democratic cycle in February, it was hoped that work would begin immediately to identify and progress the identified sites.

Following the discussion, it was

RESOLVED

that the comments of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel be passed to Cabinet for their consideration when making a decision upon the recommendations within the report.

45. ONE LEISURE INDEPENDENT REVIEW UPDATE

By means of a report and presentation by One Leisure Business and Operations Manager (copies of which are appended in the Minute Book), the One Leisure Independent Review Update was presented to the Panel.

Councillor Bywater gave his thanks to the Head of Leisure and his team for the great work undertaken in the progress made by the service. The Panel heard that following the improvement works to the swimming pool at One Leisure Sawtry, an open event was planned for the community ahead of the centres reopening to the public.

Councillor Shaw praised the results shown by the service but expressed disappointment at the level of staff engagement. The Panel heard that work had been undertaken over the past twelve months and that the service was confident that this was improving significantly.

The Panel heard that following the initial review and restructure significant work had been undertaken to develop income streams as well as concessionary memberships. It was noted that marketing support would be put in place in order to communicate the positive work undertaken by the service. The increase in One Leisure's net promoter score was noted going from below to above the national average. Following a further request from Councillor Hassall, the Officer undertook to review the SWOT analysis from 2025 and to update the Panel with the results of this.

Councillor Alban welcomed the proposed marketing support for One Leisure and noted that the Council's recycling and waste teams did great work on social media. In response to a further question from Councillor Alban, the Panel heard that an increase in teenage customers within the gyms after school has been observed and that centres had ensured sufficient staffing resources over this time to ensure that this increased footfall was supported.

It was observed that many Councillors received colloquial feedback from residents on One Leisure and that this word of mouth feedback was unlikely to be fed back through official channels.

Councillor Hunt concluded with his experience on the One Leisure Shadow Board and advised that it had provided a useful insight into

the developments being made in the service and the progress on the identified actions.

Following the discussion, it was

RESOLVED

that the comments of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel be passed to Cabinet for their consideration when making a decision upon the recommendations within the report.

46. APPOINTMENT BASED FACE TO FACE SERVICES

By means of a report by the Customer Services Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book), the Appointment Based Face to Face Services Report was presented to the Panel.

The Panel heard that multiple partners were located within the reception area at Pathfinder House and that the Customer Services team triaged visitors to the appropriate location, it was advised that these agents did not need to be multiskilled.

In addressing concerns that advisors would no longer have time to support residents with complex issues, the Panel were reassured that the multiskilled team were able to flex and change to best support customers and their circumstances. It was noted that agents could support customers in identifying ways that they could self serve so that they could initiate this in the future. It was further noted that this was a planned trial which would allow the team to be reactionary and adaptable as the pilot scheme developed.

It was noted that many of the partners providing services at Pathfinder House and neighbouring authorities also operated appointment based systems.

The Panel were advised that there was not any capacity inefficiencies within the team under the current model and that it was a data driven and experienced team who would continue to make sure they were achieving KPIs and serving customer needs. It was noted that a potential reduction of 1 FTE post had been identified within the report, however it was hoped that would be achieved through staff turnover should it be necessary.

Chair