HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (PERFORMANCE AND GROWTH) held in Civic Suite, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon PE29 3TN on Wednesday, 29 July 2026.

PRESENT: Councillor A Wood – Chair.

Councillors L Ascroft, A Blackwell, I D Gardener, M A Hassall, R Ioannides, R Martin, D McIlwain, G Seeff, W Smith, H Tobias and T Tomlinson.

APOLOGY(IES): Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillor S Cawley.

15. MEMBERS INTERESTS

No interests were declared.

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No interests were declared.

16. COMBINED AUTHORITY MAYORAL CAR PARKING SUBSIDY CALL-IN

The Chair introduced the item concerning the call-in of the Combined Authority Mayoral Car Parking Subsidy decision and invited the Members who had called in the decision to present their reasons and outline the matters they wished Council to consider.

Councillor Martin, speaking on behalf of the members who called in the decision, outlined three principal concerns:

1. Evidence base: He stated that the Cabinet decision appeared inconsistent with the evidence presented and argued that the decision-making process lacked a robust evidence base, contrary to the Council's Corporate Plan commitment to evidence-based decision making. While a business case had been produced, it was not central to the Cabinet's discussion or decision.

2. Alignment with corporate priorities: He contended that the decision was not in keeping with either the previous or current Corporate Plan.

3. Potential budget implications: He referred to comments made by the Executive Councillor indicating that changes in parking behaviour could result in a financial impact on the Council. This potential cost had not been discussed at the Overview and Scrutiny Panel and he argued that, if it resulted in a variation to the approved budget, the decision may not be fully

compliant with the Budget and Policy Framework.

Councillor Martin therefore requested, under paragraph 7A of the Budget and Policy Framework Procedure Rules, that the Section 151 Officer and Monitoring Officer consider the matter and provide a report, similar to that produced in relation to a previous parking scheme. The Cabinet did not have delegated authority to vary the approved budget.

Councillor Gardner endorsed the points raised by Councillor Martin, particularly regarding whether the proposal would give rise to any additional costs for the Council.

Councillor Kerr responded that the Council's position remained unchanged: long-term parking charges should be considered through the development of the parking strategy and would continue to be addressed through that process. she emphasised that the current proposal was not a decision on future parking tariffs, but a temporary offer funded by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA). The CPCA-funded proposal contained a financial neutrality clause to ensure the scheme remained cost-neutral to the Council and therefore would not affect the budget or MTFS.

Councillor Kerr advised that financial protection had been a key consideration. She referred to a previous proposal for Council-funded free parking, which had not been supported following advice from the Section 151 Officer that the loss of income without replacement funding would be unsustainable. She contrasted this with the current CPCA-funded intervention and stated that Cabinet had declined to contribute Council funding to extend the offer as there was no budget provision to do so. The Council retained the ability to withdraw from the scheme should it result in financial or other adverse impacts. The trial would support, rather than bypass, the development of an evidence-based parking strategy by providing real-world data and insights alongside resident feedback gathered through consultation. It was further explained that Cabinet had considered delaying the decision until September but concluded that doing so risked losing access to the available funding. In concluding, she expressed the view that the financial implications had already been considered through previous scrutiny discussions and reiterated that safeguards within the funding agreement provided mitigation against potential financial consequences.

Councillor Martin stated that his concerns arose from comments made during the Cabinet meeting and were therefore distinct from the issues previously considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel. While accepting that measures were available to mitigate excessive costs or withdraw from the scheme, he argued that any such costs would represent a variation to the approved budget and therefore engage the Budget and Policy Framework. Any change to the budget was a matter for Council rather than an executive function.

In response, Councillor Kerr explained that funding for the scheme would be received from the Combined Authority on an ongoing basis and that the Council would be able to monitor any changes in income or expenditure as they arose. Should any adverse financial trend become apparent, the Council would be able to identify and address the issue at an early stage, enabling decisions to be taken before there was any material impact on the Council's budget. Therefore appropriate safeguards were in place.

Councillor L Ascroft stated that the potential financial implications arising from changes in parking behaviour had been discussed at the previous meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel. This had informed her decision to abstain during the original consideration of the matter so the issue had been taken into account. She further commented that the grounds for the call-in had not been circulated in advance of the meeting. Whilst acknowledging that the process followed was in accordance with the Council's Constitution, she suggested that the earlier sharing of supporting information could have been beneficial in assisting Members to consider the relevant evidence and context ahead of the meeting.

Councillor Ioannides sought clarification on whether the CPCA grant agreement guaranteed full funding for any loss of parking income, behavioural change impacts, implementation costs and reinstatement costs, without exposing the District Council to clawback provisions, early termination liabilities or liabilities arising from local government reorganisation.

In response, Councillor Kerr confirmed that the grant agreement provided assurance on a month-by-month income basis, enabling any emerging trends to be identified and addressed at an early stage. Early termination remained a possibility and this flexibility ensured that the scheme would not adversely affect the Council's budget.

Councillor Ioannides then sought clarification on the objective financial threshold that would trigger suspension of the scheme. He also asked whether Members would be provided with the relevant grant agreement clauses confirming the financial protections and liabilities referred to before the scheme was implemented. He also queried whether the Cabinet had committed to implementing the scheme before having full knowledge of the Council's contractual obligations and potential financial exposure.

The Panel were advised by the Corporate Director of Place, that the grant agreement had not been presented to Members, as the matter before Council concerned a strategic decision rather than the detailed contractual arrangements. He explained that it was standard practice for Members to determine the strategic direction, while responsibility for negotiating and managing the technical and contractual aspects of grant agreements rested with officers. This was consistent with other grant-funded programmes undertaken by the Council. The assurances set out in the report reflected the matters that officers would consider before entering into any agreement. He stated that the Head of Paid Service, Director, Section 151 Officer and Monitoring Officer all had statutory and professional responsibilities to ensure that any contract entered into was consistent with Members' decisions and that relevant risks were appropriately assessed and managed.

Councillor Ioannides expressed the view that Cabinet had made its decision without having full details of the Council's contractual obligations and potential financial exposure.

Councillor Hassall expressed concern that detailed points had been raised during the meeting without supporting papers having been circulated in advance, that this made scrutiny difficult and placed officers and the Executive in a challenging position. He further commented that a degree of risk was inherent in decision-making and that the proposal involved accepting grant funding to support a free parking initiative. He acknowledged concerns that changes in parking behaviour could affect income but considered Cabinet's decision to proceed to be reasonable, as it provided an opportunity to assess the impact of free parking on town centre activity and resident behaviour. Councillor Hassall added that the effectiveness of free parking in supporting local economies had been debated previously and that the scheme offered an opportunity to gather evidence. He also referred to the mitigation measures discussed, including the ability to terminate the scheme at an early stage if necessary, and sought confirmation that the financial thresholds for such action would be determined once the detailed grant information had been received.

The Corporate Director for Place advised that it was not possible to specify a fixed financial threshold at that stage, as any assessment would need to be based on ongoing monitoring of parking income trends and usage patterns against established budget assumptions. He assured Members that the concerns raised had been noted and that appropriate safeguards and flexibilities would be sought within the grant agreement. He further advised that, should satisfactory protections not be secured, the Council would not enter into the agreement.

Councillor Hassall then commented that it was reasonable to expect Officers to monitor the scheme's impact and take appropriate action if adverse financial consequences emerged.

Councillor Martin stated that, if implementation of the scheme resulted in financial consequences exceeding the levels permitted within existing delegations and budget provisions, this would become a matter for full Council rather than Officers or Cabinet alone. He therefore maintained that Council should approve any necessary delegations and determine the extent of financial exposure it was prepared to accept.

The Corporate Director for Place informed Members that virements, defined as the transfer of funding between budget headings within the approved budget framework, could be authorised under existing delegations, with limits applying to budget managers, senior officers and Cabinet, and matters exceeding those limits requiring approval by full Council. While responsibility for setting fees and charges rested with the Executive, overall responsibility for the budget and policy framework rested with Council. The Deputy Monitoring Officer and the Section 151 Officer had confirmed that the proposed decision was consistent with the Council’s budget and policy framework. The matter fell within Cabinet’s decision-making authority and did not require determination by full Council.

Councillor Martin commented that a similar position had been taken in relation to parking charges in December, when advice had initially indicated that the matter was consistent with the budget and policy framework before a different conclusion was subsequently reached following challenge.

The Chair drew attention to the fact that a review was built into the project prior to the end of the 18-month period.

The Corporate Director for Place clarified that the current proposal differed from the parking fees matter considered in December, where there had been a clearly identified budget shortfall. In contrast, the current report set out that the CPCA grant would cover parking income losses, implementation and reinstatement costs, and included contingency funding to address potential behavioural changes. He advised that these financial assumptions had been reviewed by the relevant officers, including the Section 151 Officer.
Councillor Ioannides sought clarification on the measurable success criteria for the scheme, including any numerical targets relating to increased footfall, parking usage and business activity. He also asked what evidence would be used to demonstrate that any additional town centre spending resulted from new visitor activity, rather than existing visitors benefiting from subsidised parking. In response, Councillor Kerr advised that the purpose of the scheme was to monitor and assess its effects over time. Evaluation of the wider economic value of the free parking initiative was not a determining factor in the Council's decision-making process, as the offer had been made by the Combined Authority. Assessment of the overall success of the initiative would be a matter for the Mayor and the Combined Authority.

Councillor Ioannides asked how, in the absence of baseline measurements or predetermined numerical targets, Members would be able to objectively assess the success of the scheme. Councillor Kerr advised that baseline data on average parking levels was available and would be used to monitor changes in parking patterns over time. Any increase in parking activity, including during the 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm period, would be identifiable through trend analysis. determining the reasons for any changes in parking behaviour was outside the scope of the assessment.

Councillor Ioannides stated that no data would be available to demonstrate whether the initiative had generated additional business within the town. An increase in parking during the relevant period could reflect existing activity being redistributed rather than new business being created, and therefore raised concerns about the potential financial implications of the scheme. In response, it was clarified that parking usage data would enable the Council to identify whether demand was shifting from peak periods to the 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm period through car park occupancy figures.

Councillor Hassall sought clarification on whether, in the event that the scheme resulted in a significant reduction in income, officers would have the flexibility to take appropriate corrective action in a timely manner. It was confirmed that any action would be taken in accordance with the delegations set out in the Constitution. Decisions relating to financial impacts of up to £250,000 could be taken by the Corporate Leadership Team, including the Section 151 Officer, while matters involving up to £500,000 would require Cabinet approval.

Councillor Tomlinson observed that any financial impact would be identified retrospectively through monitoring, creating the possibility that expenditure could reach the relevant intervention threshold before action could be taken. Councillor Kerr expressed the view that concerns regarding potential losses of several hundred thousand pounds in parking revenue were overstated. There was finite capacity within the Council's car parks and any shift in parking behaviour would primarily involve users redistributing their visits. Only town centre car parks were likely to be materially affected. The scheme would result in only minor changes to parking trends.

The Corporate Director for Place explained that the previous decision concerning parking charges had resulted in a clearly identified budget shortfall, which the Council was required to address. In contrast, the proposal under consideration had been modelled and assessed as cost-neutral, with no anticipated adverse financial impact. The Monitoring Officer further advised that the scheme's financial performance would be monitored through the Council's usual budget monitoring processes and that the Section 151 Officer would have the authority to intervene should any significant financial concerns arise.

Councillor Seeff expressed the view that responsibility for assessing the economic benefits and value for money of the proposal rested initially with the organisation providing the grant, in this case the CPCA, as part of the grant application and justification process. It was not expected to add additional cost to the Council.

Councillor Ioannides emphasised that as the scheme was funded through public resources the Council should have a clear understanding of the financial and contractual risks involved before implementation. He was concerned that Members had not been provided with the full business case or final grant agreement, and that the financial modelling relied on historic income data without fully quantifying potential changes in user behaviour. There was an absence of defined measures of success. The Member clarified that they were not seeking rejection of the proposal, but rather that appropriate grant protections, measurable outcomes and democratic oversight be secured before implementation. On that basis, he supported referring the matter back to Cabinet.

The Chair re-stated that the costs and risks associated with the proposal had been discussed at a previous Overview and Scrutiny meeting and had also been considered in detail by Cabinet. Furthermore Officers had provided assurances on this point.

Councillor Hassall sympathised with a number of the concerns that had been raised, but he considered those issues to be matters for the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA), rather than for the Cabinet. Any concerns regarding the design or conditions of the scheme should be directed to the Mayor and the CPCA.

Councillor Martin responded by raising the question of ownership of the proposal. He wondered whether the proposal originated from Officers, Cabinet, or the CPCA. He suggested the Council had been allocated a fixed sum and had developed the proposal within those financial constraints. Councillor Kerr advised that the proposal originated with the Mayor and the Mayor's Office, and Officers then worked with colleagues from the Mayor's Office to provide local data and model a range of options. The Mayor subsequently developed the proposal.

Councillor Martin sought clarification whether the option had been developed and proposed by the Mayor. The Panel were advised that a number of options had been developed and presented to the Mayor for consideration. The final decision on which option to pursue rested with the Mayor.

Councillor Gardner questioned the financial implications of withdrawing from the scheme before its conclusion. In response, it was pointed out that the costs associated with the early cessation of the scheme had been factored into the financial assessments presented to Members. The Chair confirmed this was the case. The Panel were then advised that it is common for grant proposals to be considered and approved in principle at Heads of Terms stage, with detailed grant conditions negotiated subsequently. Where detailed negotiations identify conditions that expose the Council to undue risk, officers may determine that the agreement should not be entered into and, where appropriate, refer the matter back to Members for consideration. No information has been provided within the Heads of Terms or the Mayor's proposal regarding any formal penalties or contractual requirements.

Councillor McIlwain queried whether details and associated costings for the alternative options were available. In response, it was stated that alternative options had been presented to the Mayor for consideration. The selection of the preferred option was a matter for the Mayor, and the decision regarding which option to pursue rested with him rather than with officers.

Comment was made that the options had been provided to the Mayor by Huntingdonshire District Council and therefore should be documented. It was explained that a range of cost analyses had been undertaken based on different operational hours, with each option carrying a different associated cost. These options were considered as part of the assessment process. Officers provided data on car park usage, operating hours and associated costs, which informed discussions with the Mayor. This information was commercially sensitive. The Director advised that the report before Members contained all relevant information required to make an informed decision on the offer presented, and that no alternative offer was available for consideration. The Chair reminded Members that the associated costs and risks had previously been considered in detail by Cabinet. In that respect, a question was asked whether Cabinet had been provided with sufficient information to make an informed decision. It was confirmed that the report prepared by Officers reflected the proposal put forward by the Mayor.

Clarification was then sought on whether a shorter trial period could have been considered to gather evidence before committing to a longer-term arrangement. The Chair stated that the proposal was for an 18-month trial period with review arrangements built into it.

It was further advised that the proposal was already structured as a trial and that the arrangement would be reviewed throughout its duration. An 18-month trial was more appropriate than a six-month trial, as parking patterns could vary significantly, particularly around the Christmas period. A longer trial would provide a more robust evidence base for evaluation.

Following a question whether the reason for not awaiting completion of the Parking Strategy was the risk that the Mayor might withdraw the funding offer, the Executive Councillor acknowledged that this was a potential risk but that a Parking Strategy was not required in this instance, as the proposal would not affect the Council's budget.

After a further question whether any steps had been taken to establish whether withdrawal of the offer was a genuine risk, the Executive Councillor confirmed that no such steps had been taken. However, she noted that the offer was time-limited and that any delay could reduce the value of the funding available and, consequently, the level of benefit that could be provided to residents.

Councillor R Tomlinson stated that the Panel had unanimously recommended deferring the proposal until completion of the Parking Strategy and that Cabinet's decision not to follow that recommendation had been based on the risk that the Mayor might withdraw the funding offer. No evidence had been presented to Cabinet to substantiate that risk. Correspondence from the Mayor dated 24 June invited further discussion rather than imposing a deadline. He therefore asked what discussions had taken place with the Mayor to establish whether there was a genuine risk of the offer being withdrawn before that risk was presented to Cabinet. In response, it was stated that the potential withdrawal of the funding offer had been identified as a possible risk after other risks had been considered. The risk was not regarded as high but was raised as a potential consideration when assessing the proposal and its associated risks.

Regarding the previous Overview and Scrutiny meeting, discussion had taken place on the fact that the Mayor had wished the scheme to commence in October and that implementation would require a lead-in period of approximately 12 weeks. These timescales indicated there was some risk that delays could affect the proposal and its delivery.

Councillor Martin expressed the view that Cabinet had not considered all relevant information when making its decision and that correspondence received from the Mayor after the Panel's earlier consideration indicated a willingness to discuss alternative options. He argued that the perceived risk of losing the funding had been given undue weight and was not supported by the available evidence. He, therefore, proposed that the matter be referred back to Cabinet for further consideration and reiterated the Panel's previous recommendation that a decision be deferred until the Parking Strategy had been completed. He also suggested that further discussions take place with the Combined Authority and the Mayor regarding potential alternative options once the Strategy was available. In addition, he proposed that delegated authority to implement the scheme be removed, with any final decision being brought back through the Council's formal decision-making process to allow further scrutiny.

The proposal was duly seconded by Councillor Tomlinson who reserved his right to speak.

Arguments against the proposal included the fact that any associated risks were either minimal or capable of being managed and did not provide sufficient grounds to delay implementation. The funding offer had been made by the Mayor and, while it may not have been their preferred option, there was no reason not to proceed with it. The Cabinet had followed the appropriate decision-making process. Furthermore, the proposal was unlikely to have a significant impact on the development of the Parking Strategy and there would be little benefit in delaying the scheme. Referring the matter back to Cabinet could create unnecessary delay and increase the risk of complications in implementing the proposal. There was no evidence that awaiting the Parking Strategy would materially affect the decision.

In support of the motion, it was suggested that it is HDC's decision to accept the proposal from the Mayor. It was argued that the Mayor's commitment to free parking and subsequent correspondence indicating a willingness to continue discussions suggested that the funding was unlikely to be withdrawn, there was no risk of delay, and the Mayor's scheme could be considered in line with the forthcoming car parking strategy.

A recorded vote was requested and, the threshold having been reached, following the discussion, the Panel voted on the following motion:

That the matter be referred back to Cabinet for reconsideration, with the recommendation that:

1. Cabinet defer implementation of the proposed free parking scheme until the Council's Parking Strategy has been completed and considered by Members.

2. The Council continue discussions with the Mayor and the Combined Authority regarding potential alternative options, informed by the findings of the Parking Strategy.

3. The delegated authority to implement the removal of parking charges be withdrawn, with any final decision on implementation being brought back through the Council's formal decision-making process for Member consideration and scrutiny.

For (6) Councillors I Gardener, R Ioannides, R Martin, D McIlwain, H Tobais and R Tomlinson.

Against (6) L Ascroft, A Blackwell, M Hassall, G Seeff, W Smith and A Wood.

The Chair used his casting vote against the motion. The proposal was therefore declared to be LOST.

Councillor Seeff proposed that no further action should be taken.

Councillor Ascroft seconded the proposed motion.

Councillor Ioannides requested the following amendment:

1. that regular reports on the scheme's finances, performance and compliance with grant conditions be provided to Members, and that any material variation to, or permanent cessation of, the scheme be referred back to elected Members for consideration.

The amendment was seconded by Councillor Tobias.

On being put to the vote the amended proposal was declared to be CARRIED and became a substantive motion.

On being put to the vote the amended proposal was declared to be CARRIED.

It was, therefore

RESOLVED

That no further action be taken and that that regular reports on the scheme's finances, performance and compliance with grant conditions be provided to Members, and that any material variation to, or permanent cessation of, the scheme be referred back to elected Members for consideration.

Chair