
Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Planning and Finance)

Report of the meetings held on 10th February and
9th March 2004

Matters for Information

**56. HUNTINGDONSHIRE HOUSING PARTNERSHIP –
STREET WARDEN SCHEME**

The Panel has received a presentation from Huntingdonshire Housing Partnership on issues relating to the operation of their Street Warden scheme.

This provided an overview of the service, its neighbourhood management role, details of the duties and objectives of the wardens, their relationship with Police Community Support Officers and the reasons for the introduction of the service. The cost of providing the service is in the region of £130,000 per annum, fifty percent of which is funded by Government grant until 2005. Currently no financial contributions are made by either the District Council or the Parish Councils in Huntingdonshire but HHP hope that the success demonstrated by the scheme will encourage future donations, especially when the Government grant expires.

The Panel have been informed that two neighbourhood wardens and four street wardens currently operate within the District between the hours of 9.00am and 5.00pm. In relation to their involvement in dealing with drug related incidents, the Panel were informed that the Wardens are trained to deal with discarded needles, had played a role in the Police's recent drug related operation in the District and are required to act as professional witnesses in appropriate circumstances.

57. BUDGET AND 2004-2009 MEDIUM TERM PLAN

The Panel has considered the final recommendations by the Cabinet to the Council on the level of Council Tax for 2004/5 against the background of further changes issued by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for consideration in the formulation of the level of Council Tax for 2004/05.

The Panel noted the potential risk of Government capping in the event of an above inflation increase in Council tax but had regard to the Council's previously low levels of taxation.

As both Overview and Scrutiny Panels had recommended that increases in Council Tax be implemented on a gradual basis rather than steep increases in future years, the Panel had no further comment on the Cabinet's recommendations to Council for an increase of £12 in the current year for a Band D property. With regard to the ensuing years, the Panel were informed that it was difficult to forecast accurately the level of Council Tax in 2005/6 and 2006/7 as this was dependent upon the outcome of the base budget review and the identification of any savings from the Customer First programme.

58. BALANCE OF FUNDING – LGA CONSULTATION PAPER

The Panel has discussed the content of a recent consultation paper issued by the Local Government Association on the balance of local authority funding and which was subsequently considered by the Cabinet at the meeting held on 12th February 2004. (Item No. 134 of their Report refers).

At the request of the Panel, Councillors C W Looker and P G Mitchell examined the paper and presented their views as to the alternatives identified as sources for local government finance. Although Members agreed that the current system required some amendment, there were contrary views as to which form of local taxation was preferable. Whilst a minority of the Panel expressed support for the introduction of a local income tax, the majority considered that this would be detrimental to local accountability and create additional bureaucracy. It was also felt that any transference of local income tax to local government would be unlikely to lead to a corresponding fall in the level of taxation collected nationally.

Of the available options, the majority of the Panel were of the opinion that a property based taxation system offered the most preferable form of taxation but that consideration should be given to extending the number of Council Tax bands and reviewing the benefits system to take into account income from investments rather than the level of investment itself thereby assisting those on fixed incomes. Members also favoured a greater proportion of business rates being retained locally, whilst acknowledging the requirement for central government to use the grant mechanism to assist those authorities with specific needs.

With regard to the other forms of local taxation mooted in the consultation paper, the Panel broadly agreed that these would raise insufficient revenue to justify the administration involved in their collection. Members' comments have been conveyed to the Cabinet for consideration when formulating their response to the LGA paper.

59. AUDIT AND INSPECTION ANNUAL LETTER 2002/3

The Panel has received and noted the District Auditor's Audit and Inspection Annual Audit Letter for 2002/3. As a result of their

discussion, the Panel concluded that there were no particular issues emerging from the document that required their attention.

60. ABOLITION OF LOCAL AUTHORITY SOCIAL HOUSING GRANT – UPDATE

The Panel has received an update on the current position following Government announcements on changes to the funding of affordable housing and the termination of Local Authority Social Housing Grant which had enabled the Council to recover funds paid to housing associations for the construction of social housing.

Members' attention has been drawn in particular to the Council's lack of success in bidding for transitional funds from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister which, having regard to the low level of available funding, has been restricted to those authorities with committed schemes. All future funding for the delivery of affordable housing will be allocated by the Housing Corporation and although the outcome of the latest bidding round to the Corporation had yet to be announced at the time of the Panel's meeting, Members were informed that it was likely there would be insufficient resources to meet demand. In practice, alternative methods of securing affordable rented homes will need to be explored by officers to meet the demand identified on the housing waiting list.

61. EMERGENCY PLAN

The Panel has considered the Council's Emergency Plan which was approved by the Cabinet on 29th January 2004, in advance of the impending Civil Contingencies Act which is likely to strengthen the need for more formally documented emergency planning arrangements. In so doing, Members commented on the importance of keeping Ward Members informed during an emergency situation.

62. REVIEW OF THE CONSTITUTION

In conjunction with the Council's other Committees and Panels, the Panel has discussed the annual review of the Council's constitution and present constitutional arrangements. The Panel has recommended the Standards Committee to consider the creation of a third Overview and Scrutiny Panel, both in view of the present workload of the existing two Panels and to facilitate the involvement of a greater number of Councillors in the scrutiny process. The report of the Standards Committee at Item No 16. of their Report contains that Committee's recommendations to Council on the Review.

63. SUBSTANCE MISUSE IN HUNTINGDONSHIRE

As part of their continuing study into substance misuse in the District, the Chairman invited the Director of Operational Services in her capacity as Chairman of the Community Safety Partnership and Councillor Mrs P Gregory, Executive Councillor for the Environment to their meeting to respond to issues raised by the Panel about the effectiveness and accountability of expenditure under the

Communities Against Drugs Fund and the co-ordination of the agencies involved in tackling issues associated with substance misuse.

The Panel has been assured that Communities Against Drugs (CAD) funding is allocated upon criteria established by the Home Office and that the Community Safety Partnership is required to prepare a business plan before funding can be secured. The Panel has noted that the business plan and financial expenditure by the Community Safety Partnership is monitored on an ongoing basis with quarterly and half yearly reports being submitted to the Partnership.

Having been informed that CAD funding is to be replaced by a "Building Safer Communities" fund at the end of the current year, the Panel has acknowledged the difficulties in effective forward planning presented by short term funding programmes and noted that in such circumstances, efforts are being made to ensure that projects/programmes have an appropriate exit strategy at the time when funding ceases.

In relation to projects funded through the distribution of CAD grants, the Panel has been informed that an evaluation process has been implemented during the course of their study. All projects are now required to identify projected outcomes and complete evaluation sheets at key milestones and at their conclusion to enable the Partnership to identify whether those outcomes have been achieved.

With regard to the co-ordination of the agencies involved in tackling drug misuse, the Panel's attention has been drawn to the wide range of organisations involved. Members have been assured that adequate co-ordination is provided by the Drug Action Team and more locally by the Community Safety Partnership.

Having regard to the further information supplied, the Panel has concluded that they are satisfied with the effectiveness of the CAD funding programme and the co-ordination of the agencies involved in preventing drug abuse. Nevertheless the Panel has requested that the results of the Community Safety Partnership's crime audit and their annual report be submitted to future meetings and for the Panel to be consulted on the formulation of the 2005 review of the Community Safety Strategy.

64. POLICE COMMUNITY SUPPORT OFFICERS – GOVERNANCE PROTOCOL

The Panel has considered the details of a proposed Governance Protocol between the Council and the Police on the supervision and deployment of PCSOs in Huntingdonshire. They also received a draft service agreement on the potential involvement of PCSOs in the enforcement of the Council's powers in relation to the control of dogs and a report on the first six months operation of the scheme. In addition the Panel requested sight of the agreed Memorandum of Understanding on the funding of the PCSOs, a draft of which had been submitted to their October meeting.

The Panel has expressed their full support for the concept of funding PCSOs in Huntingdonshire but raised a number of queries which they suggested should be reflected in the Governance Protocol.

The Panel has been informed that operational control of PCSOs will remain the responsibility of the Police and that Officers will be allocated to areas in the District which experience statistically higher levels of anti social behaviour. However the Panel has suggested that although smaller communities may experience fewer incidents, these may have a disproportionately higher impact on those communities than in larger towns where a greater volume of incidents are experienced. The Panel has suggested that this should be acknowledged and reflected within the Protocol.

The Panel has also questioned the inclusion of traffic management enforcement and road safety education as one of the five objectives in the Governance Protocol. While accepting that there may be occasions where it will be appropriate for PCSOs to become involved in such issues, the Panel has suggested that this should be afforded a lower priority than the other objectives in the Protocol.

With regard to the performance of the scheme to date and in response to specific questions, the Panel has been assured -

- ◆ that PCSOs are equipped with the same means of communication as Police Constables;
- ◆ that issues of local concern should be channelled through the Community Safety Task Groups; and
- ◆ that the Council's support for the scheme can be varied annually as part of the MTP process.

Questions have also been raised as to how the Council's level of financial support is reflected in the total number of PCSOs employed in Huntingdonshire in comparison with the contributions by other authorities elsewhere in the County.

The Panel has requested that their views on the Governance Protocol and associated documents be submitted to the Cabinet for their consideration and that information on the performance of the scheme and on the development of the Governance Protocol be submitted to the Panel at regular intervals.

65. USE OF MECHANICALLY PROPELLED VEHICLES ON RIGHTS OF WAY – CONSULTATION PAPER

The Panel has considered the content of a DEFRA consultation paper on the use of mechanically propelled vehicles on rights of way, together with details of a draft response prepared by the County Council on this issue.

Having welcomed the proposals within the consultation paper, the Panel has endorsed the comments made by the County Council and

requested that a copy of the District Council's response be sent to the local Member of Parliament.

66. GROWING SUCCESS – A CORPORATE PLAN

The Panel has considered the content of the replacement Corporate Plan prior to its submission to the Council for approval. In so doing, the Panel has commented upon the importance of recognising the geographical diversity which exists between different parts of the District and suggest that this should be reflected in the new Plan. Discussion also arose about the practicality of balancing economic growth to reduce out commuting with a minimal impact on the environment and quality of life within the District.

Having noted that an important element of the corporate planning process relates to the setting of targets to promote improvement from the current baseline, the Panel have acknowledged that once completed, this will provide a useful process for the Overview and Scrutiny Panels to monitor the Council's performance in future years.

67. BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE SUMMARY

In conjunction with the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery and Resources), the Panel has reviewed the Council's provisional performance in a range of Best Value Performance Indicators. In so doing, the Panel has requested clarification of the meanings of BVPI 16b and 17b concerning the size of the economically active disabled and minority ethnic population within the District. In addition, the Council's performance in terms of an increasing level of energy consumption in local buildings will be drawn to the attention of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery and Resources).

68. BEST VALUE REVIEWS – PROGRESS

The Panel has monitored the progress of the Best Value Reviews within its remit.

69. WORK PLAN STUDIES

The Panel has reviewed its work plan on studies.

70. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2000 – FORWARD PLAN

The Panel has been acquainted with details of the Forward Plan and forthcoming key decisions which has been prepared by the Leader of the Council.

71. PROGRESS

The Panel has been apprised of the progress of actions required as a result of its previous decisions.

72. SCRUTINY

The Panel has considered the latest editions of the Decision Digest and has requested that a report be presented to a future meeting on the financial aspects of the Private Finance Initiative for Waste.

P A Swales
Chairman