

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, 7 November 2024.

PRESENT: Councillor J E Kerr – Chair.

Councillors S Bywater, S J Criswell,
M A Hassall, M Kadewere, C Lowe,
S R McAdam, S Mokbul, D J Shaw and
C H Tevlin.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors T Alban and N J Hunt.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors L Davenport-Ray, S W Ferguson and B M Pitt.

28. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of 3rd October 2024 were approved as a correct record and were signed by the Chair.

29. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor J Kerr declared a registerable interest in minute 24/31 by virtue of owning multiple properties within the district.

Councillor S Mokbul declared a registerable interest in minute 24/31 by virtue of owning multiple properties within the district.

30. 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 the current Notice of Key Executive Decisions which had been prepared by the Leader for the period 1st July 2024 to 31st October 2024 were presented to the Panel.

19:03 Councillor C Tevlin entered the meeting

31. COUNCIL TAX PREMIUMS

By means of a report by the Revenues and Benefits Manager (a copy of which was appended in the Minute Book), the Council Tax Premiums report was presented to the Panel.

It was confirmed to the Panel that the proposal was to charge 100% Council Tax Premium after one year of the conditions being met. It was also confirmed that the date that the property became empty would be the date used once the proposed changes come into effect.

The Panel heard that whilst there was no legal definition in what constituted an unfurnished home, the broad view was that the home should be habitable with some furniture and white goods present. Following a further question from Councillor Hassall, it was clarified that the Council proposed to charge the maximum amounts permitted by the legislation.

The Panel heard that the Council were able to exercise discretion in genuine cases of houses being on the market and specifically where a property had been through probate for a period longer than exception provided. Further detail on this would be worked into future policy development. It was also confirmed that notice would be placed into local newspapers to confirm the changes along with 12 months notice of these coming into effect.

It was advised to the Panel that properties which were vacant due to the occupant/s moving to a care home would remain exempt provided that they remained unoccupied.

It was confirmed to the Panel, that the empty period after which a premium could be charged, as set out within the recommendations, was set in legislation.

It was advised that guidance was in place to ascertain what classified as a property being actively marketed for sale, but that further work would be developed on this subject during future policy development.

It was proposed by Councillor Mokbul to add an additional recommendation to the Cabinet report, this recommendation was seconded by Councillor Lowe and the Panel voted unanimously in favour of forwarding the proposed recommendation to the Cabinet;

4) to agree that an update of the numbers of the properties falling under the scheme be reported back to the democratic cycle once the new policy has been in place for 12 months.

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 4 to the report;

4) to agree that an update of the numbers of the properties falling under the scheme be reported back to the democratic cycle once the new policy has been in place for 12 months.

32. COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT 2025-26

By means of a report by the Revenues and Benefits Manager (a copy of which was appended in the Minute Book), the Council Tax Support 2025/26 report was presented to the Panel.

Support for the Scheme was expressed by the Panel and following a question relating to the costs associated with recovering unpaid Council Tax where it was hoped that this would be reduced due to residents no longer being liable for the bill under the new scheme, the Panel heard that the financial impact of the scheme was being tracked against the prediction. The Panel were advised that a more detailed update could be brought once the scheme had been in place for 12 months.

Whereupon it was

RESOLVED

that the Panel's comments would be communicated to the Cabinet in order for an informed decision to be made on the report recommendations.

33. ONE LEISURE PV SOLAR INSTALLS

By means of a report and presentation by the Facilities Manager (copies of which were appended in the Minute Book), the One Leisure PV Solar Installs Report was presented to the Panel.

The Panel heard that the export had not currently been included due to the connection times of UK Power Networks, the aim was to install the system and then a decision on how to manage any generated surplus could be looked at on a case by case basis. The Panel also heard that the designs were based on half hourly data for each centre, based on this there was an anticipated return of over 75%.

Concern was expressed over the usage of lithium and alternative methods of battery storage were queried, alongside the recyclability of the panels at the end of their lifespan. The concerns around lithium were observed and the Panel heard that further detail on the recyclability would be sought and reported back to the Panel at a later date.

The bundling within the report with the return at the St Ives site expected to be 12 years against the other sites at 8 years was of concern to the Panel, particularly the concern that this would affect the SALIX recycling fund. It was further suggested that the £52,000 for the St Ives site may be better used to provide battery storage for the other three sites. The Panel were assured that the project would be funded by Council reserves and that the project was anticipated to have an excellent payback. It was noted that due to the nature of energy consumption at leisure centres, there would be a much different usage when compared to a residential property, and that the designs proposed would make the best use of the available array as possible. Furthermore, it was noted that to proceed with the project across all four sites would massively reduce overhead and that there would be significant financial and environmental benefits through the implementation of the scheme. The Panel were advised that an annual return of 12.1% was anticipated.

It was observed that the siting of the panels within the rooves of the centres would be a much better location than taking up valuable agricultural land, it was also suggested that the Panel would like to

see the progress of the project as it developed and after 12 months of implementation.

It was noted, that energy usage at the St Ives site was more sporadic than the other three sites due to the services provided there.

The Panel heard that there had already been successful installs of solar panels across the council's estate, including Eastfield House and One Leisure and that this was part of the first stage of introducing renewable energy generation.

The Panel were advised, that a solar canopy was due to be installed in the carpark at One Leisure St Ives Indoor following funding from Sport England. It was noted that the steelworks for this type of project doubled the payback period.

Disappointment was expressed that government funding was not available for the project, the Panel heard that by progressing opportunities to decarbonise where they presented was preferable to waiting for funding. It was also noted that significant savings on utilities and carbon emissions would be made by implementing the project.

The Panel heard, that subject to the approval of the project, it was hoped to progress using the supplier already secured for the St Ives canopy work which would allow the work to proceed quickly. It was noted that this supplier was based in Northampton but that work was underway to look at the procurement procedure for the Council and how this could positively impact local businesses. Councillor Shaw proposed to add an additional recommendation to the Cabinet report, this recommendation was seconded by Councillor Mokbul and the Panel voted in favour, with one Councillor abstaining, of forwarding the proposed recommendation to the Cabinet;

3) to agree to apply greater weight to tender applicants from within the district.

Following the discussion and the Panels support of the project, Councillor Shaw proposed to add an additional recommendation to the Cabinet report, this recommendation was seconded by Councillor Lowe and the Panel voted unanimously in favour of forwarding the proposed recommendation to the Cabinet;

4) that the Panel encourage Cabinet to proceed with Option 2 outlined within the report.

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 recommendations 3 and 4 to the report;

3) to agree to apply greater weight to tender applicants from within the district; and

4) that the Panel encourage Cabinet to proceed with Option 2 outlined within the report.

34. PRIORITY ONE DELIVERY UPDATE QUARTER 2

By means of a report and presentation by the Community Services Manager (copies of which were appended in the Minute Book), the Priority One Delivery Update Quarter 2 Report was presented to the Panel.

The Panel heard that residents had historically reached out to the Citizens Advice Bureau when in crisis. By working in partnership with this and other agencies, Council staff were able to signpost residents to the most appropriate service to meet their needs. The Panel observed that it was reassuring to note that residents would be helped regardless of how they accessed the help required.

It was noted that a dedicated officer at Cambridge Skills was able to support residents wishing to further their employment and skills opportunities, and partnership working would be undertaken to ensure that support would be provided when residents in need were identified. The Panel suggested that it would be helpful to increase visibility on this opportunity to residents, following which, it was advised that this would be explored and brought back to the Panel in a future report.

Support for the work undertaken by officers was expressed by the Panel, and it was advised that a whole system approach would be the ideal. It was noted that the GP service could be the weak link within the system due to waiting times but that social prescribers were key to linking into the health service and it was further noted that monthly meetings between service providers were ongoing to streamline the processes involved and improving services for residents.

Chair

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