
Overview and Scrutiny (Planning and Finance)

Report of the meetings held on 8th February and 8th March and a Joint Meeting with the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery and Resources) held on 8th March 2005

Matters for Information

54. COUNCIL TRAVEL PLAN 2005 - 2010

The Panel has considered a draft Travel Plan 2005 – 2010 for the Council, prior to its submission to the Cabinet.

In so doing, Members expressed disappointment that the performance targets and suggested outcomes did not appear particularly challenging nor ambitious and that the Plan lacked detailed explanations as to how the specific aims and objectives would be achieved. Having been advised that the action plan arising from the outcome of consultation with employees will provide a more robust framework and contain the detail which Members sought, the Panel have agreed to consider the action plan at a future meeting.

(The Travel Plan has subsequently been approved by the Cabinet for consultation purposes – Item No. 131 of their Report to Council refers).

55. CORE STRATEGY DPD: INITIAL CONSULTATION ON OPTIONS

The Panel has considered potential policy approaches which might be considered appropriate for inclusion as Core Policies in the Council's Core Strategy Development Plan document as part of the new planning system which has replaced Local Plans.

In considering the key policy changes, the Panel has discussed a number of issues relating to the sustainability of services in smaller settlements, the intention to dispense with settlement boundaries in smaller settlements and contributions from Section 106 Agreements to infrastructure improvements. The Panel has reiterated its concern to ensure that Huntingdonshire receives a proportionate share of investment from Cambridge Horizons in relation to Section 106 Agreements for development in Huntingdonshire.

The Panel has also discussed the policy concerning the mix of housing size on developments. Having being informed that a recent

Government consultation paper has proposed that the housing mix of sites should be a matter for market determination, the Panel has expressed its opposition to the change and its support for the policy area as drafted for inclusion in the Council's Core Strategy DPD.

56. COMMUNITY SAFETY STRATEGY

The Panel has considered the draft Community Safety Strategy prepared by the Huntingdonshire Community Safety Partnership for the period 2005 to 2008.

Having been informed that the Partnership is required to produce a strategy for reducing crime and disorder in the local area every 3 years, the Panel's attention has been drawn to the 6 key priorities proposed for inclusion in the new Strategy, which have been developed following an audit of crime in the local area and a period of public consultation.

Having raised a number of concerns relating to the deployment of Police Community Support Officers in the District, the allocation of recent Home Office funding and the perceived lack of a visible Police presence in rural villages, the Panel has recommended that the Community Safety Strategy for 2005 – 08 be approved by the Council.

(Item No. 127 of the Cabinet report refers).

57. WASTE PFI UPDATE AND RECYCLING BUDGET

The Panel has been acquainted with recent developments surrounding the County Council's application for Private Finance Initiative (PFI) credits to support future waste disposal arrangements in Cambridgeshire. To reduce contractual risk and associated costs, the County Council are now anxious to negotiate a "partnering agreement" with each of the waste collection authorities in Cambridgeshire, which will contain details of the types and manner of delivery of waste to be processed by the treatment facilities. The Panel has also been updated with the reasons for variations in the Council's recycling budget.

58. DELIVERING EFFICIENCY SAVINGS

The Panel has considered the scope for the Council to deliver efficiency savings to achieve the Government's targets under the Gershon Review.

Members have been informed that the scope for achieving improvements in procurement is considered to be high, compared with medium for savings in productive time and low in back-office integration and transactional services. Work on procurement savings will be assisted by the Eastern Centre of Excellence together with collaborative work with other authorities in Cambridgeshire and elsewhere.

Having been informed that the Council's first Annual Efficiency statement would be considered by the Cabinet at their meeting on the 7th April 2005 prior to its submission to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on the 14th April, Members have concluded that they have no specific comments which they wish to draw to the attention of the Cabinet.

59. REVIEW OF THE CONSTITUTION

As part of the annual review of the Council's Constitution, the Panel has decided not to submit any comments on the present arrangements for consideration by the Corporate Governance Panel.

60. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2000: FORWARD PLAN

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

61. PROGRESS

The Panel has been apprised of the progress of actions required as a result of its previous decisions. In so doing, the Panel has noted progress to date into their studies into trees and hedgerows, Member development, the base budget and issues associated with office accommodation.

62. HEADQUARTERS AND OTHER ACCOMMODATION

A joint meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels has considered the results of a feasibility study undertaken by Lambert Smith Hampton into the options for the District Council's future Headquarters and Depot accommodation. In so doing, the Panels discussed the potential advantages and disadvantages associated with each of the potential sites identified in the feasibility study. A number of questions were raised in relation to the extent of the consultation undertaken to date and the level of investigation into alternative sites.

Following their previous representations to the Cabinet, the Panels have reiterated their concern relating to the limitation of options in the study to Huntingdon town centre to the exclusion of any examination of an edge-of-town centre site. Members have been reminded by the Leader of the reasons why the Office Accommodation Advisory Group had recommended a town centre location including accessibility for both the public and staff, Huntingdon's public transportation links and the perceived detrimental impact on the town centre economy if the Council's headquarters were located elsewhere. A further reason given was the desirability of co-locating the Council's headquarters and customer service centre. In respect of their previous requests for consideration to be given to an out of town centre location, the Panel have been informed that Officers had been unable to identify any alternative sites that were affordable although the Leader indicated that he was prepared to extend the

parameters of the site search should the preferred site not be feasible.

In response to questions raised about the sequential test to site selection, the Panels have been advised that the Council could relocate offices outside the town centre but only if there were sound and justifiable reasons for doing so. In the opinion of Officers, there was a strong possibility of a planning application for a headquarters location outside the town centre being "called in" by the Government's Eastern Regional Office.

Doubts were expressed by Members in relation to the size of the preferred site and the implications of sharing facilities with other public sector bodies. Notwithstanding Planning Policy Guidance on parking provision, Members also foresaw problems arising from the level of parking provision unless a satisfactory and effective travel to work scheme could be implemented.

In considering the recommendations of the Office Accommodation Advisory Group, the Panel has recommended to the Cabinet that the investigation of sites should not be restricted solely to Huntingdon town centre, and that further consideration be given to possible alternative locations for office accommodation outside the town centre of Huntingdon. In so doing, however, the Panels recognised the importance of locating the proposed customer service centre in Huntingdon Town Centre.

The comments of the Panels were conveyed to the Cabinet for consideration at their meeting to be held on 17th March 2005, (Item No. 149 of their Report refers).

P A Swales
Chairman