
Overview and Scrutiny (Planning and Finance)

Report of the meetings held on 11th October, 2nd and 8th November 2005 and a joint meeting with the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery & Resources) held on 22nd November 2005.

Matters for Information

24. INFRASTRUCTURE RELATING TO NEW DEVELOPMENTS

The Panel has received a presentation by the Head of Planning Services on infrastructure provision for new development and the negotiation of planning obligations.

Having been acquainted with the process for securing obligations, the Panel has discussed issues associated with the viability of individual sites to provide infrastructure contributions and the need to ensure that Huntingdonshire receives an adequate distribution of funds from the combined Section 106 contributions managed by Cambridge Horizons. With regard to the latter, the Panel have been informed that the joint strategy presents the best method of achieving community infrastructure funded by development although the content of each agreement will remain a matter for determination by the local planning authority through the Development Control Panel and that Development Control Officers will continue to try to achieve relevant benefits from developers in the interests of local communities.

25. SECTION 106 AGREEMENTS MONITORING

As part of their continued monitoring of the use of Section 106 Agreement receipts, the Panel has discussed with Councillor Mrs J Chandler, Executive Councillor for Leisure and the Head of Community Services the reasons why a number of sums negotiated from Section 106 Agreements for leisure and open space remain unexpended, even though in some cases a number of years had elapsed since their receipt by the Council. As a result of their questioning, the Panel has been informed that a number of aspects of the Section 106 negotiation and monitoring process had been improved recently and that service divisions were now involved to a much greater extent in the early consultation process.

In respect of the outstanding amounts relating to leisure and open space, the Panel has been informed that the sums have accumulated

over a number of years and that several were awaiting the completion of agreements and indemnities with town and parish councils for the transfer of funding for local use. The Executive Councillor has also assured the Panel that she is aware of the reasons for delay in the cases identified, but that the Council had to be assured that parish and town councils would spend receipts in a manner which met the Section 106 Agreement criteria and in accordance with the requirements of the individual agreements. The Head of Community Services has indicated that he expects the vast majority of expenditure to have been incurred by the end of the financial year.

Having expressed their satisfaction with the information provided, the Panel has agreed to continue to monitor the situation on a quarterly basis.

**26. DRAFT SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING DOCUMENT:
WIND POWER**

The Panel has outlined its support for the Draft Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) on Wind Power which had been approved by the Cabinet as a basis for public consultation.

In considering the document, the Panel has been informed that the SPD should not be interpreted as a definitive statement that a landscape is suitable for a particular development and that there are other factors which need to be taken into account. However the document will assist the local planning authority in making decisions on planning applications and will therefore need to be sufficiently robust to withstand challenge at any planning inquiry.

27. REVIEW OF MEMBER DEVELOPMENT

The Panel has considered the outcome of their review into Member Development. Whilst recognising that existing support mechanisms have worked well over time and that there is much to commend, the evidence examined during the course of the review has highlighted the need for a number of potential improvements to Member support and development. The Panel have therefore endorsed the following recommendations for submission to the Cabinet -

- (i) briefing for Members on specific topics;
- (ii) notification of ward related committee reports;
- (iii) introduction of a mentoring scheme;
- (iv) appointment of training champions; and
- (v) use of alternative training mediums.

The recommendations of the Panel have been considered by the Cabinet at their meeting on 3rd November 2005. (Item No. 78 of their report to Council refers.)

As a result of the Panel's previous request for a broadband facility to be made available for Members on request, a Medium Term Plan bid is in the process of being compiled which will be considered as part of the budgetary process.

28. CALL-IN: NATIONAL NON DOMESTIC RATES DISCRETIONARY RATE RELIEF – BRAMPTON PARK GOLF CLUB

Through the use of the Council's "Call In" procedure, the Panel has reviewed the Cabinet's decision to refuse an application by Brampton Park Golf Club for discretionary rate relief.

The Panel has been advised by Councillor P J Downes of the reasons for his decision to call in the matter for further consideration, which included the Council's approval of discretionary rate relief to other organisations, the absence of any debate at the Cabinet meeting on the item and the Council's rejection of the Golf Club's assertion that they did not place any limitations on their membership. Information was also obtained from the Finance Director of the Club in relation to his own perceptions of the Cabinet meeting and the Club's policy on membership admission which was the area of assessment in which the difference of opinion between the Golf Club and the District Council arose.

The Panel has also received evidence from the Deputy Leader of the Council, Councillor I C Bates in relation to the process by which the application came to be considered by the Cabinet and the way in which it was dealt with at the meeting. Councillor Bates has reassured the Panel that notwithstanding the Golf Club's perception of the local decision making process, Cabinet Members had been fully briefed on the matter and that, based upon the balance of evidence provided and the absence of any further information which might influence the decision, he still considered that the Cabinet decision remained correct.

Having regard to the comments made, the details of other organisations in receipt of rate relief and a reminder by the Deputy Leader that if the Golf Club were willing to change their membership procedure the Cabinet would reconsider the matter, the Panel has agreed not to refer the matter back to the Cabinet.

29. REVIEW OF COUNCIL BUDGET AND EXPENDITURE

The Panel has considered the findings of a review into the Council's budget and expenditure by a working group which had been established for this purpose.

Having regard to the comments of the Head of Financial Services on the outcomes of the review and as a result of their own discussions, the Panel has agreed that further information is required in relation to a number of findings before decisions (if any) can be taken on the recommendations submitted. In this respect the relevant Executive Councillors and Heads of Service are to be invited to attend future meetings and Panel Members been asked to investigate and report

back on the implications of reducing the Council's information and promotion budget, together with the Council's decision on the operation of the Call Centre.

Having regard to the timings of the forthcoming budgetary cycle, the Panel has invited the Cabinet to consider a number of recommendations relating to -

- ◆ the Medium Term Plan;
- ◆ the Financial Strategy and the identification of savings;
- ◆ revenue inflation;
- ◆ efficiency savings arising from the implementation of the Customer First programme; and
- ◆ the funding of Leisure Centre provision.

The Cabinet's consideration of the recommendations are summarised in Item No. 81 of their Report.

30. PERFORMANCE MONITORING

In considering the quarterly performance monitoring report, the Panel has noted those areas in which performance was not being achieved in the current year and the progress being made towards the achievement of the Council's Improvement Plan.

Members have outlined their concerns in respect of the lack of clarity as to the actions which are being taken to address those areas which are identified as being below target. Having regard to the fact that there are a number of measures which contribute to any given outcome area and Members' need to obtain a better understanding of the overall process, the Panel has requested further information on those measures contributing to the outcome for Accessible Services & Transport Choices.

31. SCRUTINY

Arising from their consideration of the latest edition of the Council's Decision Digest of decisions made by the Council over the previous month, the Panel has agreed to consider at a future meeting the problems that can arise from the operation of private hire businesses from residential properties.

32. HEADQUARTERS AND OTHER ACCOMMODATION

As a result of their request for further information, the Panel has received an additional report relating to the refurbishment of Pathfinder House, issues associated with the decanting of staff, car parking and the overall project cost and affordability. The Panel has discussed further the issue of funding the new development with particular attention to the impact on the Council's Financial Strategy. In that respect the Panel have recommended the Cabinet to defer any decision in relation to office accommodation until such time as the Council have considered and determined the Financial Strategy.

At a subsequent joint meeting of the Planning & Finance and Service Delivery & Resources Panels, consideration was given to the final evaluation of the shortlisted tenders submitted for the procurement of new headquarters, together with an analysis of a scheme for the refurbishment of Pathfinder House. Having regard to the deliberations of the District Council & other Accommodation Advisory Group on the matter the Panel has agreed to endorse their recommendations.

Any potential questions with regard to the Panel's deliberations on this item should be dealt with as part of the Cabinet's report on office accommodation when the press and public have been excluded from the meeting.

P A Swales
Chairman