
Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Support)

Report of the meetings held on 11th July and
12th September 2006

Matters for Information

11. LOCAL PROCUREMENT

The Panel has considered the question of local procurement by the Council and ways in which this potentially can promote the local economy within Huntingdonshire. The issue was raised initially by Councillor S J Criswell following approaches to him by members of the Huntingdonshire Business Network requesting that the Council do more to encourage business opportunities for local suppliers to tender for Council services and supplies.

To gain an appreciation of the issues involved, the Panel has received information from the Council's Economic Development and Procurement Managers and listened to the views of a representative of Huntingdonshire Business Network on the potential impact of Council expenditure in the local economy. It was suggested by the latter that practical difficulties were encountered by local businesses wishing to tender for Council services and supplies and that it would be helpful if more guidance was provided by the Council on the opportunities available.

The Panel's attention has been drawn to studies undertaken elsewhere which suggest that local purchasing by an authority is multiplied several fold in its impact on the local economy. Having been advised that a recent study calculated that approximately 9% of the Council's purchases were made in Huntingdonshire and 30% in Cambridgeshire, the Panel concluded that the subject was worthy of further, more detailed investigation. Councillors D B Dew, P J Downes and R J West therefore have been appointed to a Working Group for the purpose of undertaking a study, the precise terms of reference of which will be determined in discussion between the Chairman, the Working Group and Head of Administration.

12. HUNTINGDON TOWN CENTRE VISION

The Panel has been acquainted with the content of the strategy and action plan for Huntingdon Town Centre which was considered by the Cabinet at their meeting on 29th June 2006, (Item No. 27 of their Report refers). The Panel was particularly interested in the amount of

public consultation that the Cabinet was planning to undertake on the proposals and has been reassured that the Vision will be the subject of a public exhibition during September, with a series of meetings with stakeholders in the coming months. The outcome of the consultation exercise will contribute towards the formation of the Council's own policies and the emerging Local Development Framework.

13. THE GREAT FEN – MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT

The Panel has considered the content of a draft memorandum of agreement for the implementation of the Great Fen Project by the Council and other partner organisations. The document subsequently has been endorsed by the Cabinet. (Item No. 38 of their Report refers).

The Panel was pleased to note the potential benefits offered by the Project, both in environmental terms and the promotion of the local economy through the attraction of tourists to the area. The Panel also has noted that Council expenditure on the project to date has been limited in comparison to the grants and donations that have been attracted, with the likelihood of growth area funding also becoming available.

14. TRAVEL PLAN

The Panel has discussed a proposed Travel Plan for the Council, in advance of its consideration by the Employees' Liaison Advisory Group, the Employment Panel and finally the Cabinet.

The Panel has been informed that the Council needs to demonstrate good practice in promoting healthier means of travel and a shared vision between Members and employees to reduce both unnecessary and inefficient car usage and a need for travel through the use of technology. Although the Council had developed a Travel Plan some years previously, this had not been progressed effectively and the Panel was advised that the changes to the Council's accommodation arrangements had prompted a need to produce an updated and revised Plan that would address the specific issues arising from the accommodation changes, whilst also enabling the Council to act as a community leader in setting an example to other Huntingdonshire employers. The Plan therefore was corporate in its application to all of the Council's employment locations but with site specific plans containing objectives and targets for future years.

Although the Panel felt that the Plan had been comprehensively researched and well presented, some doubts were expressed as to whether the actions proposed will be sufficient to achieve the targets identified. The Panel has therefore submitted the following comments to the Employment Panel and the Cabinet for consideration as part of the latter's deliberations on the adoption of the Plan –

- ◆ the proposals could have been firmer if the targets are to be achieved;

- ◆ there should be more incentives for staff to discourage their use of private cars for travel to and from work;
- ◆ concessions should not be made available in town centre car parks for Members or staff who should be required to pay the same charge as members of the public;
- ◆ consideration should be given to providing concessions to staff for the use of alternative forms of transport (e.g. concessions on season tickets for bus travel);
- ◆ current mileage rates which favour the use of cars with larger engines should be reviewed for both employees and Members;
- ◆ there is a need for greater reference to Members in the Plan;
- ◆ the use of alternative forms of fuel for 'pool cars' should be investigated; and
- ◆ the Council should provide greater incentives for car sharing.
- ◆ that consideration be given to the medium-term use of the Bridge Place car park (Godmanchester depot) within the review of the car-parking strategy.

15. PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO DEVELOPMENT CONTROL PROCESSES

The Panel has reported previously on its investigation of the way in which development control applications are dealt with by both the Development Control Panel and the Council. A working group was formed to consider Member involvement in the process while at the same time the Head of Planning Services was considering public speaking at meetings of the Development Control Panel. The two investigations consequently were combined and recommendations have been endorsed by the Panel which can be summarised as follows –

- ◆ the introduction of speaking by the public at meetings of the Development Control Panel;
- ◆ Members representing affected wards in neighbouring authorities and neighbouring parish councils to be permitted to speak at Development Control Panel meetings (in the hope that reciprocal arrangements will be made for Huntingdonshire Members);
- ◆ presentations by officers at Council meetings when planning applications are to be determined by the Council and the replication of the public speaking arrangements in such circumstances;
- ◆ training on planning matters to be extended to all Members;
- ◆ ward councillors (and neighbouring ward councillors, where appropriate) to be invited to attend formal site visits organised for members of the Development Control Panel;
- ◆ the circulation of draft Development Control Panel agenda to ward councillors; and
- ◆ a longer period (at the discretion of the Head of Planning Services) than the current 21 days after publication of the weekly planning list for Members to ask for applications to be determined by the Panel.

The changes proposed hopefully will encourage the public to attend and contribute towards the decision making process and generate interest in local democracy. It is proposed that they be reviewed after 12 months to ascertain their effectiveness and whether amendments are required after experience has been obtained of them working in practice.

The recommendations will be forwarded to the Development Control Panel for comment and, because they will involve changes to the constitution, they then will be considered by the Corporate Governance Panel prior to formal submission to the Council.

16. MONITORING OF SECTION 106 AGREEMENTS

The Panel has undertaken their quarterly monitoring of section 106 agreements entered into by the Council as planning obligations with developers. Disappointment has been expressed by Members that the amount unexpended has grown since the previous quarter and there is little evidence of progress having been achieved during that time in using the money received for individual projects. The Panel therefore has repeated its request for more detailed information in future reports, including a separate annex highlighting where progress has been achieved; asked for ward councillors to be informed when money is received from developers which it is intended to forward to a town or parish council in their ward, and for there to be clear responsibility at executive level for co-ordinating the expenditure of the sums received.

17. WORK PLAN STUDIES

The Panel has discussed its work plan and noted progress in ongoing study areas. Following an informal meeting in July, the Panel also has identified a number of potential new areas for investigation in the forthcoming year and ways in which they might be progressed. In that respect, an early report suggesting a requirement for Member authorisation of vacancies at grade 10 and below has not been supported by the Panel.

As part of those deliberations, Members also have expressed their continuing frustration at the lack of broadband links at home to enable them to access the Council's intranet and download information. As a result, the Panel has asked the Head of Administration in consultation with the Chairman, to give further consideration to the best means of taking this matter forward.

J A Gray
Chairman