
Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery)

Report of the meetings held on the 4th July and
5th September 2006

Matters for Information

6. EMPLOYEE OPINION SURVEY ACTION PLAN

The Panel has been acquainted with the Employee Liaison Advice Group (ELAG) Action Plan – Employee Opinion Survey 2005. By way of introduction Members have been informed that the Employee Opinion Survey is carried out every two years, the first having been in 2003. The Action Plan identifies areas for improvement and has been subject to consultation with ELAG representatives. Progress against various items in the Action Plan also has been reported.

The Panel has discussed work being undertaken to improve communication with employees and the difficulties that exist in reaching those based at the leisure centres and at the Operations Division as they do not have normal “office” work patterns and often tend not to have access to e-mail and the intranet.

7. PARKING ENFORCEMENT

The Panel has received a presentation on parking enforcement. Such enforcement currently is the responsibility of the Police and will remain so unless it is decriminalised. The Government encourages the transfer of responsibility from the Police to local authorities, which at present is on a voluntary basis. Decriminalisation has taken place in Cambridge City and while it is intended to be self-financing, in practice, there are significant set-up costs and it is being subsidised by the County Council. With regard to the possible division of areas for parking enforcement purposes, the current legislation does not make provision for parish level enforcement but it would be possible to create an agency agreement. It also would be possible to designate the whole of the District as a “special parking area” but it is more likely that the County Council will appoint a contractor to undertake enforcement throughout the County. In discussing practical aspects of decriminalised parking enforcement, the Panel has noted the need for a county-wide body to process tickets and to administer the appeals mechanism.

The Panel has discussed local enforcement arrangements, funding of traffic wardens, off-street parking and using neighbourhood panels to influence Police priorities in favour of parking enforcement. Having

noted that discussion already is ongoing with the County Council on this subject, the Panel has requested a progress report in six months time on the decriminalisation of parking enforcement.

8. HOUSING STRATEGY 2006 – 2011

The Panel has reviewed the Housing Strategy 2006 – 2011 and various supporting strategies. Members have been informed that the District Council has a statutory duty to produce a housing strategy every five years. The Strategy is an umbrella document which sets out issues facing the District. The content has been informed by the Council's corporate priorities and contains an action plan detailing how the Council and its partners will balance need and supply, together with improving housing and community facilities. The documents have been the subject of consultation and will be submitted to Go-East for assessment as to whether it is "fit for purpose".

The Panel has discussed the money allocated under the Empty Homes Strategy, alternative ways of providing more houses in the District and the Council's nomination rights.

At the conclusion of the discussion the Panel has approved the documents for submission to the Cabinet.

9. PROMOTING BETTER HEALTH IN OLDER PEOPLE THROUGH PHYSICAL EXERCISE

The Panel has considered the final report by the Older Persons' Working Group. Members' attention has been drawn to the changing demographics in Huntingdonshire, the benefits of falls prevention through exercise in terms of enabling older people to live independently and the relatively low cost of the Working Group's proposals.

The Panel has been informed that there is an opportunity to spread capacity at the Leisure Centres to develop a pilot scheme referred to in the report and that discussions already have been held with a representative of Luminus on this subject. Having discussed the definition of "older" people, possible outreach work in villages and the involvement of general practitioners, the Panel has endorsed the Working Group's recommendations for submission to the Cabinet and requested that a progress report is submitted to a future meeting.

10. SALE OF DISTRICT COUNCIL LAND FOR RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT

The Panel has concluded its study on adopting a policy for requiring a proportion of Council land sold for residential purposes to be devoted to affordable housing. The Panel has received details of the Council's landholdings and the financial implications of introducing such a policy. Members' attention has been drawn to the fact that the Council no longer has any substantial sites suitable for residential development and to a proposal to introduce a procedure to request

the Cabinet to attach a covenant to any site which has been declared surplus to requirements if the provision for social dwellings is insufficient for the site.

The Executive councillor for Resources and Policy has reminded the Panel that the Council has to balance the need for housing in the District with the value of the land involved. As most plots of land that might be sold for housing are small, he has endorsed the proposed new procedure.

The former Chairman of the Panel, who had been invited to the meeting as the originator of the study, has informed Members that in his opinion, as a housing authority, the Council should set an example in the provision of affordable housing, especially as others are expected to do likewise. He felt that the Council has a moral obligation to require affordable housing to be built on land in its ownership and sites were available, which would be suitable for this purpose. In that respect he proposed that a policy be introduced requiring that half of any land sold be used to provide affordable housing, with the Cabinet's agreement being required to remove or change this condition.

Having discussed different types of affordable housing and in noting the difficulties associated with funding, the Panel formally has noted –

- ◆ the established arrangements within the Council to facilitate the future use and release of surplus land;
- ◆ that if land use is determined as residential, it will be marketed with outline permission for that purpose;
- ◆ the intention to continue to sell Council land in accordance with planning policies appertaining at the time of disposal;
- ◆ the introduction of a procedure whereby the Head of Housing Services, after consultation with the Executive Councillor for Housing and Public Health and if he considers the provision of social housing is insufficient for the site declared surplus, will invite the Cabinet to consider whether a covenant should be proposed to secure a greater amount of affordable housing on the site; and
- ◆ the arrangements for the District Council's Housing Services Division to notify housing associations of the availability of opportunities for the development of sites with social housing.

11. CHOICE BASED LETTINGS

The Panel has received a presentation on Choice Based Lettings. Members have been informed that the Government has placed a requirement on all Councils with housing responsibilities to introduce Choice Based Lettings by 2010 and of the success of a bid for funding for the introduction of a sub-regional scheme, which has realised £181,000. They also have noted the principles involved, how schemes will operate and the benefits of Choice Based Lettings for the Council and for vulnerable clients.

The Executive councillor for Housing and Public Health has informed the Panel that Choice Based Lettings will not obviate the need for the Council to use bed and breakfast accommodation and has expressed concern at residents from outside the District moving to Huntingdonshire for accommodation, over which the Council had no discretion.

The Panel has established that tenants tend to stay in the area in which they reside and that only 10% of accommodation will be subject to Choice Based Lettings. In fact, Housing Corporation rules suggest that there will be more scope for Huntingdonshire residents to move to other districts. The Panel also has been acquainted with arrangements for administering the system. More use will be made of technology and employees will tend to have a greater role in assisting clients. Members have concluded by expressing concern that Choice Based Lettings represents a step towards regional government.

12. CONTINUATION WITH CHANGES TO CALL HANDLING ARRANGEMENTS

The Panel has reviewed a report on the outcome of trials of improvements to the call handling arrangements at the call centre. Having been reminded of the background to the trial, the Panel has discussed its previous recommendation that measures should be put in place to enable the transfer of calls between the District and County Councils to be made. Members have been informed that there are, at present, technical difficulties preventing this from happening and that a solution is some way off. The Executive councillor for the Council Headquarters and Information Technology has stated that this facility had not been included in the original specification and that there was a need to rectify the situation as soon as possible, a view which the Panel has endorsed.

The Panel has discussed the call centre disaster recovery system. Two telephony servers are in place, and in an emergency, calls can be directed to the switchboard at Pathfinder House. The system recently has been called into use and a report is to be prepared on lessons learned.

A report seeking continuation of the improvements has been endorsed for submission to the Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Support) will be requested to pursue the matters raised above, which now fall within its remit.

Matters of Interest

13. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SERVICE DELIVERY) – PROGRESS

The Panel has reviewed its programme of studies at each of its meetings.

14. LOCAL GOVERNMENT – 200: FORWARD PLAN

The Panel has been acquainted with details of the relevant Forward Plan of Key Decisions at its meetings.

15. SCRUTINY

The Panel has considered the latest editions of the Decision Digest and received answers to queries on matters contained therein.

S J Criswell
Chairman