
Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery)

Report of the meetings held on 6th March and
3rd April 2007

Matters for Information

30. HOME ENERGY EFFICIENCY ENVIRONMENT STRATEGY

At the meeting in March the Panel has received a presentation by Mr C Jablonski, Environment Team Leader, and Mrs J Thackray, Home Energy Efficiency Officer, on energy efficiency, which initially referred to global climate change, the energy consumed by individuals, the references in the Local Government White Paper to sustainability and the Council's leadership role in relation to the environment. With regard to the latter, the draft Environment Strategy contains three challenges and the Council has devised an internal structure to address them. The most important step individuals could take to reduce their impact on the environment is the installation of home energy efficiency measures, which includes loft insulation, cavity wall insulation, double glazing and energy saving lighting and appliances. A breakdown also has been provided of the associated costs and potential savings from solar panels and wind turbines. The presentation concluded with details of grant schemes that currently are available for measures to reduce household impact on the environment.

The Panel has established that the Council actively promotes various grant schemes that are available and provides advice on the schemes of other organisations. However, it appears that the current system of grant funding for measures to improve energy efficiency is excessively complicated and inconsistent.

The Panel has reached the conclusion that planning permissions should require developers to incorporate energy efficiency and renewable energy measures in new developments over a certain size. This would have the knock-on effect of creating demand amongst the building trade for their installation, thereby reducing the cost of such works. In addition, a pilot initiative at the London Borough of Merton Council to require developers to install a percentage of renewable energy measures in housing developments over a certain size has been rolled out to approximately 300 other local authorities and Members have expressed the view that a similar policy should be implemented in Huntingdonshire. The delay in the

adoption of the Core Strategy presents an opportunity to develop this idea.

The Panel has discussed the possibilities for local renewable energy generation by creating a system involving farmers growing crops with a view to producing bio-ethanol. This is a widespread practice in some other countries but that before it could happen in this country the tax system needs to be changed to make it feasible.

At the subsequent meeting in April the Panel has reviewed progress with current and proposed projects under the “service impact” and “sustainable communities” strands of the Environment Strategy’s delivery structure. The initial tasks will be to “scope” each of the projects and prioritise them. A five year action plan will be produced which then will be reviewed annually.

The Panel has discussed various projects. Particular concern has been expressed at the implications of reducing the depth of the Council’s swimming pools in terms of the potential to discourage their use and their reduced effectiveness as swimming teaching facilities. Comment has also been made on projects to encourage farming including providing a permanent outlet for local produce and the production of bio-ethanol. Although not included in the report, the latter is already being pursued by Officers.

With regard to transport, the Panel has suggested that the standard of buses needs to be improved, that taxi “routes” should be investigated and that consideration should be given to extending bus passes to include free taxi journeys.

Having reiterated their view that enhanced requirements to include renewable energy sources should be placed on larger developments through the Core Strategy, the Panel has stressed the need to develop a methodology to assess the environmental benefit of projects against their cost. The Panel also has requested sight of the final Strategy document before its publication, which should include project costings.

31. CORPORATE EQUALITY POLICY AND ACTION PLAN

The Panel has endorsed the draft Corporate Equality Policy and Action Plan for submission to the Cabinet. Councillor A Hansard has informed the Panel that the Action Plan has links to the Council’s Corporate Plan “Growing Success”, which will allow the Council’s performance to be measured against its objectives. The Policy contains a number of actions, which the Council need to achieve to reach Level 2 of the Equality Standard.

The Panel also has been informed that the existing Policy has been reviewed and that most of the actions have been completed. New actions will now be identified which will assist the Council in obtaining Level 3 of the Equality Standard.

In response to a comment that the Policy should contain details of service specific measures it has been pointed out that this level of detail will be addressed in the Level 3 Action Plan. Comment also has been made on the need for equal benefits for employees, the lack of travellers' sites in the District and accommodation for migrant workers. Equality Impact Assessments of services now will be carried out.

**32. CHOICE BASED LETTINGS –
CONSULTATION LETTINGS POLICY**

The Panel has reviewed the Choice Based Lettings Consultation Lettings Policy. Having been reminded of its background, Members have been informed that the new sub-regional system will have the same eligibility to apply as the old one, that it contains local connection criteria and enables cross boundary moves. It will be based on bands rather than a points system, which will reflect the length of time applicants have been registered within a band and it provides assistance for vulnerable people. In response to concerns that the Council would have to compromise within a sub-regional system, the Panel has been informed that each Council will have its own policy, which will remain the same.

The Panel has discussed detailed aspects of the bidding process and the ways and length of time properties will be advertised. The latter has yet to be finalised, but will be subject to budget provision. With regard to the Council's wider housing responsibilities, the Panel has been acquainted with the eligibility criteria and options available under the various schemes operated by the Council. Members have stressed the need to manage expectations that the new system could provide increased numbers and quality of accommodation. This will be taken care of through the feedback generated by the automated bidding system.

33. THE GENDER EQUALITY DUTY

The Panel has reviewed the Gender Equality Scheme, which has been produced on the basis of feedback on the Council's services and in the light of a duty on all public bodies to promote gender equality. Although the figures have revealed little difference by gender, the Council is actively required to promote gender equality in the same way as it is required to promote race and disability equality. The Action Plan may be subject to change following consultation with employees and then will be used to conduct impact assessments of all the Council's services.

34. STUDY – GRANT AID

The Panel has extended the remit of the working group looking at the Small Scale Environmental Improvements Scheme to include all of the Council's grants schemes. The Working Group has been asked to look at the schemes' criteria, publicity, application processes, officer involvement and approval process. The exception is the

Shopmobility grant aid, which will be considered as part of the Disability Access Study.

Other Matters of Interest

35. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2000: FORWARD PLAN

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

36. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SERVICE DELIVERY) - PROGRESS

The Panel has reviewed its programme of studies at each of its meetings. Members have discussed the remit of studies into disability access and grant aid.

37. 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