
Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Support)

Report of the meetings held on 13th February and
13th March 2007

Matters for Information

32. EXPANSION OF CUSTOMER SERVICES IN ST IVES AND ST NEOTS AND CASH PAYMENT ARRANGEMENTS

The Panel has been acquainted with proposals to convert St Neots and St Ives Cash Offices to Customer Service Centres and to transfer the handling of cash payments from the Council's cash offices to an alternative payment provider.

Access to services in convenient locations originally had been identified by the Council in the Customer Services Strategy in 2003 and the opportunity presented by the Council's Headquarters Accommodation Project has now brought this matter to the fore. As a result, the cash office in Castle Hill House will transfer into the new Customer Service Centre which will open later in the year in temporary accommodation at Centenary House pending the completion of the new office accommodation project. The opportunity also will be taken to introduce similar arrangements to create Customer Services Centres in the existing cash offices in St Neots and St Ives. It is anticipated that the customers/relationship management system and advice now available at the Call Centre will be extended to all of the Customer Service Centres to enable staff to provide the same range of services.

The Panel also has noted the preparations being made for the transfer of cash payments from the cash offices to a local provider and which will provide customers with an increased number of outlets at which cash payments could be made, including post offices and other locations in larger villages and towns.

In expressing their support for the improvements in customer service which these arrangements would facilitate, the Panel has noted that the cost of the proposals will be met under the existing Customer First programme.

33. LOCAL DEVELOPMENT SCHEME

The Panel has been acquainted with a series of draft issues and options with reference to Chapter 2 of the Core Strategy

Development Plan Document and has raised no objection to their release for consultation with statutory consultees and stakeholders.

Members were made aware that Planning Inspectors elsewhere in the country had highlighted certain deficiencies in DPDs and that, given advice received from the Government Office of the Eastern Region regarding the soundness of the Council's DPD, it had been decided to prepare further guidance on potential locations for new housing, employment and retail development in the District.

The draft issues and options presented to the Panel were directed towards identifying broad directions of growth and provide guidance for the site specific allocations in the Planning Proposals DPD. To ascertain the suitability of these growth areas, a Housing Land Availability Assessment and Employment Land Review has been undertaken to produce the required evidence base.

The Panel has emphasised the importance of ensuring that sites identified for retail, housing and employment are sustainable both in terms of infrastructure and in setting targets for emissions and the need for additional affordable housing within the District.

Subsequently, the Panel has noted that the Cabinet has recommended approval of a revised Local Development Scheme, authorised the withdrawal of the submitted Core Strategy Development Plan Document and recognised that the Council would need to adopt an interim Planning Policy Statement. (See Agenda Item No 3 ante.)

34. DEVELOPER CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARDS AFFORDABLE HOUSING – SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING GUIDANCE

The Panel has been reminded that the Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) – Developer Contributions towards Affordable Housing was subject to a period of public consultation which concluded in November 2006. In all, approximately 1,900 representations were received and generally the response from local Councils was supportive of the proposals.

35. A14 ELLINGTON TO FEN DITTON – FURTHER PUBLIC CONSULTATION

The Panel has considered the latest public consultation by the Highways Agency regarding the proposed improvements to the A14 between Ellington and Fen Ditton.

Members may recall that the subject was considered at the meeting of the Council held on 21st February 2007 (Minute No. 56 refers) when support for the Orange route was approved, subject to consideration by the Highways Agency as to the best alignment and environmental solution for Brampton to the west of the A1.

36. REVIEW OF CURRENT SPEED LIMIT POLICY

The Panel has been presented with proposals by the County Council to review their current speed limit policy as a result of new guidance that has been issued recently by the Department of Transport. Members were acquainted with the County Council's current speed management policy for Cambridgeshire and the proposed policy which had been drawn up following discussions with other stakeholders including representatives of the District Council.

The County Council's current policy has been discussed by the Panel on a number of occasions previously and the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Panel of the County Council had been requested, without success, to carry out a review of their policy.

The Panel was made aware that a report on the implications of the new DfT advice had been submitted to the various Traffic Management Area Joint Committees in the County and that the Huntingdonshire meeting which had been held on the previous day had supported the proposed speed limit policy for the County.

Having regard to the new guidance, the Panel has expressed its disappointment that the resultant changes appear unlikely to result in significant change. Excessive speeding by motorists is a matter that is raised often with Ward Councillors by their constituents and it was felt that the commencement of 30 miles per hour speed limit zones slightly outside the edge of village development encourages motorists to reduce speeds more than if the zone commence at the edge of the development itself. Notwithstanding a suggestion by the County Council that evidence suggests that this is not effective, Members are aware of other counties where a more flexible approach appears to be taken by the respective highways authorities.

The Panel therefore decided to submit its concerns to the County Council calling for a 30 miles per hour speed limit to be the norm for villages in Huntingdonshire.

37. CAR PARKING STRATEGY FOR THE MARKET TOWNS

The Panel has considered the initial findings of consultants engaged by the Council to undertake a review of the current parking strategy.

The consultants had carried out an extensive review, meeting with stakeholders in each market town within the District and initially reporting to the Cabinet in November 2006. They have now submitted their final report with a series of recommendations for each of the market towns.

Although the Panel had been invited to nominate representatives to a Working Party to be established by the Cabinet to discuss the subject, the Panel recognised that any Member who did so, would be unable to scrutinise the resultant car parking strategy and action plan. It was, decided therefore that it would be preferable if Panel Members did not sit on the Working Party.

Following an extensive discussion, Members suggested that although the consultant had proposed extra capacity to meet parking demand and the use of pricing to control both demand and encourage the use of other modes of transport, there was a need to integrate the car parking strategy with other similarly related strategies such as the emerging Environment Strategy and the Council's adopted Travel Plan.

Whilst the Panel has acknowledged that the detailed preparation of the strategy and action plan will be a matter for discussion by the Working Party, it has suggested a number of ideas for consideration by both the Cabinet and the Working Party. These include the need to discourage motorists from driving into the centre of towns causing traffic congestion, the need to address the impact of parking being displaced onto residential streets adjoining town centres and an investigation of the feasibility of park and ride schemes which, in Huntingdon, might also include travellers to the railway station and hospital. It has also been suggested that positive support for users of alternative transport should be explored as well as incentives for the use of more environmentally friendly vehicles.

38. LOCAL PROCUREMENT

Following a Working Group review of local procurement, the Panel has been pleased that a positive and constructive discussion has taken place between representatives of the business community and the Working Group and the Executive Member for Finance. This has resulted in agreement on a number of measures which will facilitate an awareness on the part of local businesses in future Council contracts and improve opportunities for local procurement.

It has been decided therefore that the Working Group should continue to monitor progress of these initiatives and review the position with the business community representatives again in the autumn.

39. WORK PLAN STUDIES

The Panel has discussed its work plan and noted the studies that had been identified previously. In order to progress a number of those issues it has been suggested that new Working Groups be established to investigate aspects of the Council's Travel Plan and the Council's expenditure on cycling.

40. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SERVICE SUPPORT)

The Panel has been apprised with the progress of actions required as a result of previous decisions.

41. FORWARD PLAN

The Panel has been acquainted with details of the Forward Plan and forthcoming key decisions which have been prepared by the Leader of the Council. In so doing, Members have identified a number of

items for consideration at their future meetings and have been updated on the likely dates for consideration of those reports previously requested.

J A Gray
Chairman