

STATE OF THE DISTRICT CONSULTATION WORKING GROUP
(Report of the Working Group)

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The State of the District Consultation Working Group met on 18th October 2007 when Councillors Mrs M Banerjee, K J Churchill and P J Downes were present. I Brandstatterova, A Roberts and L Sboui were in attendance.
- 1.2 No declarations of interest were received.
- 1.3 Councillor K J Churchill was appointed as the Working Group's rapporteur.

2. STUDY REMIT

- 2.1 The Working Group has been given the task of considering and making recommendations on a suggestion that the Council should introduce measures to solicit the views of residents of the Huntingdonshire on the "state of the District". The suggestion arose during the last review of the Council's Constitution and, following discussion by the Corporate Governance Panel, the Council referred it to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) for detailed consideration.
- 2.2 The proposal was that every two years a "state of the District" half-day conference should be held on the second Saturday in September. The public would be invited to attend and would be able to speak. Specific invitations would be sent to Parish Councils, local business and various representative bodies, including those for young people. The following Council meeting, at the end of September, would consider the views expressed. These views also would inform the budget and MTP processes. In addition, the Conference might generate issues for the Scrutiny Panels to consider.
- 2.3 The Overview and Scrutiny Panel acknowledged the difficulty in engaging with the public on a District-wide level and, as a result, asked the Working Group to investigate the use of smaller area consultation groups involving all tiers of local government in the process. The Working Group also was asked identify potential subject areas for discussion at forums.

3. ENGAGEMENT EVENT PURPOSES

- 3.1 The Working Group discussed the potential benefits of holding events to engage Huntingdonshire residents in discussing the Council's strategies. In the course of this Members have reviewed the draft Consultation and Engagement Strategy. It has been concluded that engagement events could help to deliver the Strategy's aims and the Council's commitment under it by ensuring a strategic approach is taken to consultation and that the outcomes are used to inform policy and decision making by contributing to the variety of methods used to

enabling as many people as possible have the opportunity to give the Council their views. These events will fit with the emerging 'Engagement and Consultation Strategy'

3.2 In addition, the Working Group is of the view that holding engagement events will provide forums:

- for Councillors to obtain an understanding of the state of the District;
- for two way information exchange and mutual learning;
- to enable County, District, Town and Parish Councils to engage in a joint debate on local authority services; and
- for direct contact between Councillors and members of the public.

On the basis of these discussions the Working Group has concluded that there could be merit in holding engagement events. In order to ensure they are effective, however, Members are of the view that they should be introduced initially on a trial basis. The implication of this suggestion is that the Working Group does not recommend at this stage that the Council's Constitution is amended to include a state of the district consultation mechanism.

3.3 The Working Group has, however, asked that the Action Plan to the Consultation and Engagement Strategy is amended to include reference to Member state of the District engagement events. The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) will be consulted separately on the Strategy.

4. FURTHER STUDY

4.1 The Working Group, having agreed the principle of holding engagement events, will next consider a range of practical matters before it produces its final report.

4.2 Following initial discussions Members have suggested that engagement events will during the evening on weekdays in Huntingdon, St Ives, St Neots and Yaxley. Suitable venues have yet to be identified. Extensive publicity will be required prior to events being held, which is something that will be discussed further. A programme for events has been put forward but will be refined, including possible discussion topics. It also has been suggested that an independent Chairman might be appointed for events. Finally, the Working group will consider whether it might be necessary to provide facilitators to assist discussion groups.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The Working Group has been requested to examine a proposal for the Council to amend the Constitution to require measures to be introduced to obtain information on the state of the District. Having considered the proposal Members are of the view that there could be merit in holding engagement events; however, they feel that before the Council commits itself to amending the Constitution, a pilot should be held and the outcome evaluated.

- 5.2 The next meeting of the Working Group will be held on 12th November when Members will discuss a range of detailed matters, which are intended to make the engagement events successful.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Notes of meeting of the State of the District Consultation Working Group.

Reports and Minutes of the Corporate Governance Panel, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) and the Council.

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