

## Decision Digest

Edition 85

Monthly summary of the decisions taken at meetings of the Council, Cabinet, Overview & Scrutiny and other Panels for the period 31st May to 27th June 2008.

### **EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY POLICY**

Arising from recent legislation which has placed a greater accountability on employers for ensuring that there is equality of opportunity in the workplace, the Employment Panel has endorsed the contents of a policy outlining the District Council's commitment to equality of opportunity for employees and Councillors. The Policy details how this is to be achieved and monitored and will compliment the existing Corporate Equality Policy.

### **REQUESTS TO FILL VACANT POSTS**

The Employment Panel has considered the circumstances applicable to a number of vacancies across the Council's Directorates and has authorised the Head of HR and Payroll Services to recruit to the following posts:-

- ◆ Housing Service Administrator;
- ◆ Benefits Manager;
- ◆ Environmental Health Officer;  
and
- ◆ Director of Central Services.

### **LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK: THE CORE STRATEGY DOCUMENT SUBMISSION**

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Support) has considered the submission document for the Core Strategy before it is approved by Council for formal submission to the Secretary of State.

The Panel has expressed its support for the proposed policies within the submission document but considers that insufficient importance has been paid to the role of agriculture in the local economy and as a local land use. Recent world food shortages and the growth in the use of bio-fuels has increased the demand for agricultural crops but the Panel feels that the Core Strategy has failed to recognise the emergence of these trends in recent months, for example by referring in the Core Strategy to the historic role of agriculture and food production in Huntingdonshire. Although the Core Strategy places emphasis on the need for strategic green space enhancement, the Panel is concerned at the possible implication that access and enjoyment of the countryside may be regarded more important than the contribution that agriculture

makes to the local economy and wider market. The Panel has therefore suggested to the Cabinet that a change in wording and emphasis to retain the value of local agriculture in the Core Strategy would be advisable and helpful.

Subsequently, the Cabinet has requested that the Spatial Vision document be amended to reflect this. Having authorised the Head of Planning Services, after consultation with the Executive Councillor for Planning Strategy and Transport, to approve any amendments to the documents prior to their publication, the Cabinet has recommended to Council that the Core Strategy and its supporting papers be approved for submission to the Secretary of State.

### **CYCLING IN HUNTINGDONSHIRE**

Following the conclusion of its investigations into the Council's expenditure on cycling in Huntingdonshire earlier in the year, the Panel has been updated on progress in developing a revised action plan for safe cycle routes, including a revised list of cycle schemes for Huntingdonshire.

Although the Panel is pleased with the progress which has been made, it remains of the view that the County Council should invest more funding into cycleway development in the District. Having been advised that a revised list of cycle schemes is to be submitted to the Huntingdonshire Traffic Management Area Joint Committee, the Panel has also raised questions over the involvement of Ward Members in revising and updating

the list which originates from the Cycling Strategy last approved by the Council in 2000.

### **PARKING OF HEAVY GOODS VEHICLES**

The Panel has received the final report of its Working Group which had been established to investigate the use of Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGV) parking throughout the District. The matter had been raised initially by Councillor P H Dakers in response to the closure of this "Night Owl" lorry parking facilities at Alconbury and his concerns relating to a reduction in overnight parking facilities for HGVs across the District.

The Panel has acknowledged that there is a clear need to provide suitable parking on the trunk road network to avoid the problems which arise from a lack of provision for local authorities, local communities and haulage drivers alike. The problem is being compounded by proposals to rationalise layby arrangements along the A14 corridor. However, the Panel has recognised that there is little that the District Council can do in isolation to tackle a national problem and the Council's main influence on the provision of lorry parking facilities in Huntingdonshire will be through the Local Development Framework in terms of the identification of sites for HGV parking and opposing the redevelopment of closed sites for alternative uses.

Having regard to issues that are being experienced elsewhere within the County, the Panel have concluded that a collaborative

approach involving all of the local authorities within Cambridgeshire would be the most effective way of raising awareness and achieving progress. The Panel has therefore recommended to the Cabinet:-

- ◆ that the County Council be invited to establish a countywide forum, involving the County Council, District Councils, local Members of Parliament, Cambridgeshire Constabulary and HGV operators to lobby Government to investigate the problem urgently and take steps to resolve it;
- ◆ that the matter be raised through the Cambridgeshire Together: Local Area Agreement Board; and
- ◆ that the District Council as local planning authority seek to influence the development of suitable HGV parking opportunities on the trunk roads across the District.

### PERFORMANCE MONITORING

The Council's performance against the targets within the Corporate Plan "Growing Success" has been reviewed by the Overview and Scrutiny Panels.

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Support) has been pleased to note that most of the targets are being met or exceeded. However, the Panel has observed a failure to achieve the target relating to the objective of ensuring the Council is an employer that people wish to

work for. As the measure of satisfaction was derived from a staff survey, the Panel has asked for further details of the analysis of the staff response to ascertain whether there are any particular reasons that can be identified for the failure to meet the target and whether any measures have been or need to be introduced to address this issue.

In reviewing the Council's performance against its priority objectives, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) has noted the reasons why the two areas identified within the report have not achieved their respective targets. The Panel has expressed their satisfaction with the levels of performance achieved by the Council in 2007/08 and noted that a review of Growing Success will be completed over the ensuing months and that, the views of the Corporate Plan Working Group will be taken into account during this process.

The timetable for review and performance data also has been received by the Cabinet.

### MONITORING OF SECTION 106 AGREEMENTS: PLANNING OBLIGATIONS

The Panel has been updated on the receipt and expenditure of money negotiated under Section 106 Agreements by the Council.

### CAMBRIDGE SUB-REGION STRATEGIC HOUSING MARKET ASSESSMENT

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) has appraised the contents of the Cambridge Sub-

Regional Strategic Housing Market Assessment and its implications for the District.

The Panel has discussed housing register trends, migration into and out of the District and the availability of affordable housing in light of current economic trends. The Panel has noted that the Government is currently discussing with the Housing Corporation the possible relaxation of restrictions which might enable registered social landlords to utilise unoccupied private sector housing as, at present, the specification for these buildings is not the same as that required for social housing.

#### **CORPORATE EQUALITY POLICY: ACTION PLAN AND PROGRESS**

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) has reviewed the progress made in respect of the Council's Corporate Equality Policy Action Plan. Having noted the achievements under the Plan over the previous year, including the attainment of Level 2 of the Equality Standard, Members have been advised that the Council will now work towards achieving Level 3 of the Standard.

A random sample survey carried out by an independent market research company has revealed that 84% of local people believe that the Council offers services that meet their needs.

The Panel also has been advised that the Council maintains a directory of employees fluent in other languages and that an interpretation service, both face to

face and via the telephone, is available if required. In terms of literature, documents are made available in the four main languages spoken in the District.

As a result of their deliberations the Panel has suggested that the Cabinet should approve the new Corporate Equality Action Plan and a revised Equality Impact Assessment timetable. Subsequently, the Cabinet has approved the Plan and proposed timetable for assessment.

#### **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SERVICE DELIVERY) – STUDIES**

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) has reviewed its programme of studies and considered its work programme for the forthcoming year. The Panel has been reminded of the adoption of a study template following an internal audit of the Overview and Scrutiny function in the previous year and were reminded that both Scrutiny Panels had a budget of approximately £6,000 for use to pursue their study aims.

Owing to their interests in the study, Councillors M F Shellens and J S Watt have been appointed to the Adoption of Roads and Sewers Working Group.

In acknowledging that the study on Disability Access will conclude shortly, the Panel has discussed potential future study areas, including the Community Safety Partnership, the Great Fen Project and the impact of the new A14 in terms of air quality and noise

pollution. A scoping report on Community Safety Partnerships will be submitted to the next Panel meeting.

### **BUDGET AND MEDIUM TERM PLAN (MTP) PROCESS 2009 – 2010**

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Corporate and Strategic Framework) has reviewed the approach, process and timing for the review and approval of the financial strategy, the 2009/10 budget and the 2010/14 Medium Term Plan (MTP). Attention has been drawn to the Council's financial performance in previous years, likely future inflation trends and Executive Councillors' role in compiling next year's budget. The Panel has been informed of the order of required additional income or reduced spending in 2009/10 and in subsequent years and of the need for ongoing efficiency savings to be identified throughout the Council. Assurances have been received from the Executive Councillor for Finance and Environment that Executive Councillors will consider all future MTP bids critically in light of the Council's current financial position.

Members' attention has also been drawn to future years' forecast variations from the current year's budget, including the reasons for the variations, and the project income, planned use of resources and additional savings that are required in the period to 2012/13. The Panel has noted that a number of financial receipts are expected in the course of next year, which will be included in the budget.

Having queried the financial implications of the Council's Environment Strategy, it has been reported that provision for it has been included within the MTP for the current year and in the following two years.

Following concerns raised regarding the impact on the Council of increased fuel costs, the Panel has been advised that efforts are being made across the Council to enhance energy use efficiency. Changes in the cost of fuel will be factored into inflation calculations in September for use in future forecasting.

Members have been encouraged to forward to Officers suggestions for spending adjustments before September 2008. The Panel has recommended that the Cabinet should approve the timetable of the stages for considering amendments to service plans, the financial strategy, budget and MTP and confirm the importance of identifying efficiency savings across the Council. Subsequently, the Cabinet has endorsed the proposed timetable and having been reminded that the Budget/Medium Term Plan process should be increasingly challenging over the coming years, the Cabinet has reiterated the need to view all budgets and schemes to identify further opportunities for efficiency savings.

### **HUNTINGDONSHIRE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY AND LOCAL ECONOMY STRATEGY**

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Corporate and Strategic

Framework) has discussed the outcome of work to refine the outcomes and objectives contained within the Huntingdonshire Sustainable Community Strategy and to develop delivery plans for each of the strategic themes.

With regard to the strategic theme for Growth and Infrastructure and, particularly the need to improve the provision of school and health facilities, the Panel has been advised that it is intended to produce an Investment Strategy for Huntingdonshire. The Strategy will be based on evidence and will include likely costs for proposed schemes.

The Panel has been advised that the Council's Environment Strategy will form the basis of the Action Plan for the environment strategic theme.

In respect of the Children and Young People's strategic theme, comment has been made on the fact that contact with some statutory organisations, such as Connexions, is not compulsory for young people. The Panel has been advised that the Inclusive, Safe and Cohesive Communities strategic theme includes reference to community transport and have also been reminded that the Council has appointed Councillor Hansard as its Champion for Children and Young People. The Panel were encouraged to note the range of work already being undertaken by the Council to incorporate children and young people's views into its policies and services.

In examining the Action Plan for the Inclusive, Safe and Cohesive

Communities strategic theme, the Panel has discussed the potential benefits of providing advocacy services for migrant workers. Having been acquainted with the likely financial implications for the Council of this suggestion, the Panel has been reminded of a previous Scrutiny Panel recommendation that Cambridgeshire should attempt to become a targeted area for English for Speakers of Other Languages, which is being pursued via the Regional College.

As a result of a previous request, the Panel has reviewed the Action Plan associated with the Local Economy Strategy for Huntingdonshire. Members have noted that new statutory powers have become available with which to pursue the current work and that the Plan will be used to attract funding and to influence regional activities. The Panel has requested that pump priming for commercial sites be included in the Plan. Finally, Members have discussed the agricultural industry in the District. As it represents a small proportion of economic activity and of employment locally it has not been included as one of the sectors that the Plan intends to promote. It will, however, be promoted through the local procurement network.

The Action Plans have yet to be finalised and Members have been invited to submit comments on them for this purpose. Completed Action Plans for all the strategic themes will be presented to the Panel in September. Furthermore, the Local Strategic Partnership structure is currently under review and Members will be informed of the

resulting changes at a seminar in July 2008.

### **THE EAST OF ENGLAND PLAN – REVISION TO THE REGIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY FOR THE EAST OF ENGLAND**

The Government Office for the East of England has issued the East of England Plan – which is the Spatial Strategy for the Region for the period to 2021 and beyond. The Development Control Panel has noted that the Plan will guide and influence all strategic development and planning decisions in the region, impact upon the future character of Huntingdonshire and be relevant material evidence in the determination of development applications by the Panel. The Plan also has been received by the Cabinet.

### **LOCAL ASSESSMENT OF CODE OF CONDUCT COMPLAINTS: REQUIREMENTS OF NEW REGIME**

The Standards Committee has responded to the introduction of the Standards Committee (England) Regulations 2008 by establishing Referrals (Assessment) and Review Sub Committees and approving a terms of reference for each body.

The Sub Committees which will comprise one Independent Member, one Town and Parish Councillor and one District Councillor, will have responsibility for the initial assessment of allegations, and review decisions made on an original allegation should the complainant request it.

To populate the various sub committees and hearings, should they be necessary and to ensure membership of each body does not overlap, the Committee has recommended that the Council appoint an additional Independent Member for the remainder of the current four year term to May 2011.

Other matters required of the authority by the Regulations have been delegated by the Committee to the Director of Central Services and Monitoring Officer.

### **APPLICATION FOR DISPENSATION**

The Standards Committee has granted a dispensation to 16 Members of St Ives Town Council, who act as trustees to the Norris Library and Museum Charity to enable the Councillors to speak and vote at meetings of the Town Council or its committees on matters relating to the Library and Museum until 30<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

### **DELIVERING THE GOODS: LOCAL STANDARDS IN ACTION**

Messrs P Boothman and D L Hall, Independent Members and Mr G Watkins, town and parish council representative have been authorised by the Committee to attend the Annual Assembly of Standards Committee to be held in Birmingham in October. The conference is to focus on the new local standards framework and the delivery of effective local assessment.

## **TREASURY MANAGEMENT ANNUAL REPORT**

The level of performance for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2008 of fund managers in the investment of the Council's capital receipts has been noted by the Cabinet.

## **PROSPEROUS PLACES: TAKING FORWARD THE SUB NATIONAL REVIEW OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND REGENERATION CONSULTATION DOCUMENT**

The Cabinet has approved the contents of a suggested response to a consultation paper issued by the Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform entitled "Prosperous Places: Taking Forward the Sub National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration". The document proposes a series of measures aimed at streamlining the regional tier, strengthening the local authority role in economic development and supporting collaboration by local authorities across economic areas. In considering the proposals outlined, the Cabinet has emphasised that a concerted approach should be made to ensure that local input at district level is an integral element within this process.

## **ECO-TOWNS: LIVING A GREENER FUTURE – RESPONSE TO THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION.**

The attention of the Cabinet has been drawn to the inclusion of a greenfield site at Hanley Grange near Hixton in South

Cambridgeshire in the Governments shortlist of fifteen possible locations for new eco towns as part of their initiative to develop additional housing growth in sustainable ways. Having recognised the implications of the proposals for the District in terms of the adverse impact upon the Cambridgeshire Planning and Sub Region Growth Strategies, the Cabinet has authorised the Head of Planning Services, after consultation with the Executive Councillor for Planning Strategy and Transport, to approve the content of a joint response being prepared by Cambridgeshire Authorities and Cambridgeshire Horizons.

## **CONSERVATION AREAS: BOUNDARY REVIEWS AND CHARACTER ASSESSMENT STATEMENTS**

Approval has been given by the Cabinet to draft character statements and boundary reviews for the Earith and the Hemingfords Conservation Areas which will be used to guide decisions on planning matters to ensure that the character and appearance of these areas are not diminished.

## **BENEFIT FRAUD PROSECUTION POLICY AND PROCEDURES**

A draft Benefit Prosecution Policy for the prosecution of benefits claimants, landlords, employees and Members who may committed benefit fraud has been considered and endorsed by the Corporate Governance Panel and the Cabinet. At the same time, the Corporate Governance Panel and the Cabinet have authorised the Fraud Manager to undertake court hearings and



issue formal cautions and administration penalties. Staff within the Fraud Team have been authorised to undertake investigations in fraud affecting all other District Council services and to report to the relevant Head of Service on the outcomes, findings and recommendations arising from these investigations. A number of efficiencies will be gained in pursuing this course of action, particularly given the number of cases being investigated which continues to rise year on year.

### **REPRESENTATIONS ON ORGANISATIONS – 2008/09**

The Cabinet and Licensing and Protection Panel has made appointments/nominations for representatives to serve on a variety of organisations and authorised the Chief Executive, after consultation with the Deputy Leader of the Council, to make any changes that may be required throughout the year and to appoint to the vacant post of “Champion” for Oxmoor and for training.

### **FINAL ACCOUNTS 2007/08**

The Corporate Governance Panel has approved the draft statement of accounts for the year ended 31<sup>st</sup> March 2008 to enable the audit to commence. Members’ attention has been drawn to a number of corrections and a series of issues arising from the accounts, which included the Council’s investments, its debtors and creditors, the pension provision, the treatment of capital and the collection fund.

The Panel has noted that the accounts would be published on the Council’s website and publicised in District Wide.

The Panel’s attention has been drawn to minor changes to the way the accounts were compiled and have questioned Officers on the financial accountability of Eastfield House, in particular, the perceived value of the building. The Panel has expressed their view that consideration should be given to the future benefits to be received from the Operations Centre over a prolonged period of time.

The Panel has been apprised of the sources of the Council’s income, which excluded the Leisure Centres, and have noted that Centre accounts were dealt with separately.

### **ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE INTERNAL AUDIT SERVICE**

The Corporate Governance Panel has been acquainted with the outcome of a review of the effectiveness of the system of internal audit, which is a requirement of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2006. Members have noted the external auditor’s view of the service and identified areas for improvement. Additionally, the Panel has recommended that a review of the Council’s effectiveness against CIPFA’s best practice guidance for Audit Committees be undertaken.

**INTERNAL AUDIT SERVICE:  
INTERNAL AUDIT AND  
ASSURANCE PLAN**

The Corporate Governance Panel has approved the Internal Audit and Assurance Plan for a 12 month period commencing 1<sup>st</sup> August 2008.

**CHANGES TO THE  
CONSTITUTION – STANDARDS  
COMMITTEE**

The Corporate Governance Panel has recommended the Council to approve the changes required to the Constitution under the Standards Committee (England) Regulations 2008.

**COMPLAINTS**

The Corporate Governance Panel has received an analysis of the Council's internal complaints and a summary of complaints concerning the District Council which have been determined by the Local Government Ombudsman in 2007/08.

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT  
OMBUDSMAN: LOCAL  
SETTLEMENT OF COMPLAINT**

The Corporate Governance Panel has received details of a complaint against the Council by a member of the public and the terms of compensatory payment negotiated by way of local settlement.

**COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT  
COMPLAINT: AWARD OF  
COMPENSATION**

The Corporate Governance Panel has approved a compensation payment made under the Council's internal complaints system.