
Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Service Support)

**Report of the meetings held on 14th October and
11th November 2008**

Matters for Information

19. PETITION

A petition signed by ten people has been presented to the Panel drawing attention to problems experienced by residents from commuter parking in the Longsands area of St Neots. The Panel has been informed that residents would like to see restrictions imposed to limit on-street parking in the area to prevent all day parking.

A further petition containing 173 signatures also had been presented recently to the Huntingdonshire Traffic Management Area Joint Committee which has asked for a feasibility study to be undertaken by the County Council when funding becomes available from its minor traffic management budget. The Chairman has therefore written to the Chairman of the Area Joint Committee to inquire whether the matter could be progressed at an earlier opportunity.

The Panel also has invited a representative from First Capital Connect to attend a future meeting to discuss their plans for future car parking at Huntingdon and St Neots Railway Station.

(Note: A response from the Chairman of the Huntingdonshire Traffic Management Area Joint Committee has subsequently been received, advising that further information will be available in the New Year when investigations have been undertaken by the County Council.)

20. IMPROVING LOCAL ACCOUNTABILITY CONSULTATION: CHANGES TO OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY POWERS

In conjunction with the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) and the Cabinet, the Panel has considered a response to a consultation paper on improving local accountability issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) which forms part of a series of consultation documents produced to implement the proposals in the recent White Paper "Communities in Control".

A number of the proposals in the paper have already been introduced by the Council and others will be addressed in the current review of the Council's democratic structure by a working party under the chairmanship of the Special Adviser to the Cabinet. The Panel has endorsed answers suggested to the consultation paper and emphasised that the promotion of local accountability was best left to local discretion rather than the prescriptive approach adopted in the paper.

21. LOCAL PROCUREMENT REVIEW

Following an earlier review of local procurement, a working group has held a further meeting with representatives of the local business community to monitor progress on the actions agreed at the outcome of the review. During a positive and constructive discussion, updates were given on developments within the economic development service, ongoing work to standardise the terms and conditions of procurement with other district councils and the implications of the Council's emerging Environment Strategy.

The Working Group will be holding a further meeting in the new municipal year to review the position and continue the dialogue with business community representatives.

22. GREAT FEN PROJECT GOVERNANCE

Following extensive discussions with the Executive Councillor for Planning Strategy and Transportation, the Director of Environmental and Community Services and the Project Manager of the Great Fen Project, the Panel has expressed its support for a recommendation to Cabinet to enter in to a Collaboration Agreement in respect of the Great Fen Project for a five year fixed term on a renewable basis. The Panel concluded that the District Council could best influence and guide the project in the interests of the local area and its residents by continuing involvement in the Project Steering Group.

Nevertheless the Panel has expressed some reservations about the way in which the project is developing and has made their views known to the Cabinet. These can be summarised as relating to:-

- ◆ the implications for some of the local people most directly affected;
- ◆ the loss of arable land in the current climate of global food shortages;
- ◆ improved communications with local communities in close proximity to the project
- ◆ the economic and employment forecasts given the investment made by EEDA to date;
- ◆ the future financial viability of the visitors centre and the long term management of the land and the source of any subsidy required;
- ◆ improved accessibility to Woodwalton Fen and Holme Fen, especially car parking;

- ◆ the role of the District Council in the Great Fen Partnership as the democratic representative of local people and the local economy; and
- ◆ communication with Members on the project as a whole, given its significance and importance.

The Panel recognise that some of the above are likely to be addressed in the Master Plan shortly to be published by the Project and the Panel also has asked that the report on the content of the collaboration agreement be submitted to a future Panel meeting before its consideration by Cabinet.

23. GYPSY & TRAVELLER SITES DEVELOPMENT PLAN DOCUMENT: INITIAL ISSUES CONSULTATION DOCUMENT: PRINCIPLES AND PROCESSES

A proposed consultation document which had been designed to invite views on the issues which will help guide the preparation of the Development Plan Document for Gypsy & Traveller sites has been endorsed by the Panel prior to its consideration by Cabinet.

The Panel has recognised the potentially contentious nature of the issue, especially once the process moves on to site identification, and therefore appreciates the need for a robust basis for the site selection exercise and the importance of generating interest and comment at this stage of the process. The Panel has raised a number of questions concerning the availability of consultation responses, the method of engaging with the gypsy & traveller community, the options available for the acquisition and allocation of appropriate land and the role which District Council Members can play in the process. Concerns also have been raised about the implications for Huntingdonshire residents of potential site selections by neighbouring authorities near to the District boundary.

Having regard to the possibility of sites being chosen in the more rural areas in the District, the Panel has suggested that the 6 weeks consultation period may be too short for some of the smaller parish councils to respond. As the scope to extend the deadline for comment is constrained by the need for early approval of the DPD, the Panel has asked officers to alert town and parish councils and Members of the District Council of the forthcoming publication of the document and its significance. Officers have also been asked to consider the possibility of convening a limited number of workshops for interested town and parish councils.

This report has subsequently been considered by the Cabinet. (Item No. 54 of their Report refers).

24. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD PANELS

The Panel has been updated with the latest developments in respect of local and national initiatives arising from the Government's White Paper – Communities in Control: Real Power, Real People.

In view of the significant number of policy initiatives currently and the need to ensure a co-ordinated approach in considering the implications for both the District Council and the communities in Huntingdonshire, the Panel has endorsed a suggestion that the consideration and development of community engagement initiatives should be dealt with by the Democratic Structure Working Party.

25. HOME WORKING: PILOT SCHEME

The Panel has been acquainted with the outcome of a pilot scheme which has enabled five District Council employees to work full time at home over the preceding year.

Having noted the positive benefits demonstrated by the pilot, the potential savings in office accommodation costs and the intention to roll-out full time home working to other employees where appropriate, the Panel has welcomed the home working initiative and agreed that efforts to expand the pilot should be encouraged.

26. FORWARD PLAN

The Panel has been acquainted with details of the Forward Plan of forthcoming key decisions prepared by the Leader of the Council, arising from which Members have identified a number of items for consideration at future meetings.

27. WORK PLAN STUDIES

The Panel has been advised of progress made to date by the working groups reviewing the Section 106 process and the social consequences of alcohol.

28. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SERVICE SUPPORT) - PROGRESS

The Panel has been apprised of progress on actions required as a result of recent decisions.

J A Gray
Chairman