

Decision Digest

Edition 89

Monthly summary of the decisions taken at meetings of the Council, Cabinet, Overview & Scrutiny and other Panels for the period 1st to 28th November 2008.

APPOINTMENT OF CORPORATE DIRECTOR, CENTRAL SERVICES

Having interviewed the short-listed candidates for the post, the Appointments Panel has appointed Mr I Leatherbarrow as Director of Central Services with effect from 10th November 2008.

GYPSY AND TRAVELLER SITES, DEVELOPMENT PLAN DOCUMENT: INITIAL ISSUES CONSULTATION DOCUMENT: PRINCIPLES AND PROCESSES

A proposed consultation document to help guide the preparation of the Development Plan Document for Gypsy and Traveller sites has been endorsed by the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Service Support) prior to its consideration by Cabinet.

The Panel has recognised the potentially contentious nature of the issues, 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

and traveller community, the options available for the acquisition and allocation of appropriate land and the role which District Council Members play in the process. Concerns also have been expressed about the implications for Huntingdonshire residents of potential site selections by neighbouring authorities near to the District's 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.

Having been advised of the Panel's views, the Cabinet has approved the document for public consultation and has supported a decision to hold an explanatory workshop on the consultation process to which

Members of the District, Town and Parish Councils will be invited.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD PANELS

The Overview and Scrutiny Panels have 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.

The Service Delivery Panel has discussed a series of models through which community engagement might be achieved. Following extensive discussion on the Neighbourhood Panel's powers, size, training and membership, the Panel has expressed some concern over the financial and other resource implications that the proposal might have for the District. Members concurred with the view that any new Neighbourhood Panels should not have Executive decision-making powers and concluded that new arrangements should be kept as simple as possible.

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 Panels have endorsed a suggestion that the consideration and development of community engagement initiatives should be dealt with by the Democratic Structure Working Party.

HOME WORKING: PILOT SCHEME

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Support) 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 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.

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 Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Support) has expressed its support for a recommendation to Cabinet to enter into 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 through its 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 its 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 recognised that some of the above are likely to be addressed in the Master Plan, shortly to be published by the Project and also has asked that a report on the content of the collaboration agreement be submitted to a future

Panel meeting before its consideration by Cabinet.

Having been advised of the Panel's views, the Cabinet has approved arrangements for the Council to enter into a Collaboration Agreement for a renewable five-year fixed term. The Cabinet also requested that the final draft agreement be considered by the Panel prior to its consideration by Cabinet.

REVIEW OF POLICY TO LIMIT HACKNEY CARRIAGE LICENCES

The Licensing and Protection Panel has agreed that consultation should be undertaken to consider the delimitation of licensed hackney carriage numbers in Huntingdonshire.

The Council is now in a minority of authorities that restrict the issue of hackney carriage licences on the basis that there is no significant unmet demand in the area. In response to an Office of Fair Trading recommendation that local authorities should not retain the powers to restrict numbers, the Government has agreed that it is wrong in principle to restrict entry to the market for those who meet the relevant criteria but they have left this at the discretion of local authorities. As another survey to gauge unmet demand is now due at an estimated cost of £20,000, if the present restriction of 44 licences is to be maintained, the Licensing and Protection Panel feels it is an appropriate time to consider delimitation and at the same time new licences to be issued for wheelchair accessible vehicles only.

The Licensing and Protection Panel will be considering the matter further in light of the replies to the consultation exercise.

LICENSING OF HACKNEY CARRIAGES, PRIVATE HIRE VEHICLES AND PRIVATE HIRE OPERATORS

The Licensing and Protection Panel has approved, subject to any minor amendments, revised and updated licence conditions relating to hackney carriages, private hire vehicles and private hire operators. Revisions to the conditions pertaining to licensed drivers are in the process of being prepared but will require amendment to the current hackney carriage byelaws.

HACKNEY CARRIAGE FARES

The Licensing and Protection Panel has approved a revised table of hackney carriage fares to be advertised to come into effect from 12th January 2009. The fares were last reviewed in October 2007 and a new tariff is being proposed to address concerns raised by the taxi trade over the cost of short journeys and recent increases in fuel costs.

ALCOHOL ENTERTAINMENT AND LATE NIGHT REFRESHMENT LICENSING

The Licensing Committee has received an overview of the scale of the impact of the Licensing Act within the District, following the compilation of statistical information for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport on the number of licences and certificates in force in the District and the number of

applications received in 2007/2008. Over 50% of the licences issued by the Council for alcohol consumption on the premises permitted live music, contrary to suggestions nationally that live music venues had decreased in numbers as a result of the Act. The number of personal licences administered by the Council rose by 18% in 2007/08 but as such licences have nationwide validity, this does not present an accurate reflection of personal licence holders currently authorising sales of alcohol in the District. The Licensing Committee also has been updated on the national statistics recently published by the DCMS which showed that the number of premises licences have increased by 6% in the year to 31st March 2008 and the number of personal licences by 19%.

ALCOHOL DISORDER ZONES

The Licensing Committee has received a report on the powers available to the Council to designate Alcohol Disorder Zones. The use of such measures is intended to be a last resort when problems relating to alcohol consumption were incapable of being attributed to an individual licensed premises and can not be dealt with by any other means. The Panel has noted that ADZs can be used only to address alcohol related nuisance for disorder issues and cannot be applied to problems caused by late night food outlets or litter.

BUDGET AND MEDIUM TERM PLAN 2009/2014 DRAFT PROPOSALS

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Corporate and Strategic

Framework) has considered and endorsed the draft budget and Medium Term Plan (MTP) for the Council as the basis for the production of the 2009/2010 budget, the revised MTP for 2013/2014 and the financial strategy to 2023/2024. In doing so, the Panel has welcomed the greater involvement of Executive Councillors in the budget setting process and recognise the difficulties created by the current economic climate.

Although the Panel had no specific issues which it wished to bring to the attention of the Cabinet with regard to the proposals, the Panel raised a number of questions relating to the need for Council borrowing to fund capital projects for 2009/2010, the likely impact of a reduction in income achieved from National Non-Domestic Rates, the proportion of District Council expenditure between the market towns and villages and extent of Council expenditure on housing services.

HOUSING STRATEGY FOR THE CAMBRIDGE SUB-REGION

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) has been acquainted with details of the Housing Strategy for the Cambridge Sub-Region. The document sets out how the District Council would work in partnership on housing issues that extend across local authority boundaries, which comprise seven local authority areas within the region. The Strategy is important because it enables funding for housing purposes to be made at a regional level.

The Panel has discussed the impact of the current economic downturn in terms of the achievement of the Action Plan. Although noting that the downturn has produced positive effects in terms of delivering social housing, Members have registered their concern at the level of the demand for advice for those residents experiencing difficulties in making mortgage repayments.

At a subsequent meeting of the Cabinet, Executive Members approved the content of the Strategy whilst expressing caution over the achievement of its objectives given the current climate in the housing market.

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ASSESSMENTS

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) has received an update on the latest position with regards to the length of time taken by Occupational Therapists to conduct assessments of need for home adaptations across the District. It was noted that significant reductions in waiting time have been achieved over the previous six months period. The financial implications for the Council of expediting the process has also been discussed.

GRANT AID

The final report of the Grant Aid Working Group has been submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery).

The Working Group has been tasked with investigating all grant aid schemes offered by the Council,

including the criteria of each scheme, how they relate to the Council's corporate priorities, the methods adopted to publicise availability of grant funding, the application process, Officer / Member involvement in the approval process and the level of external funding brought into the District. It is hoped that the Working Group's recommendations will streamline and promote the current grant aid process.

The Panel has commended the Working Group for their efforts and has endorsed their findings for submission to the Cabinet after a review of the Council's service level agreements with Voluntary Sector Organisations has been undertaken.

LEISURE CENTRES – RE-STRUCTURING

The Employment Panel has been informed of the results of the staff consultation and evaluation of posts involved in the proposed changes to the management structure within the Leisure Centres.

Having noted the views of Employees Side representatives who had expressed some concerns about the financial implications of the proposals for a number of the employees affected, the Panel endorsed the proposed re-structure for implementation by 1st April 2009.

ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE INTRODUCTION OF A REVIEW SCHEDULE FOR ADOPTED POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Over a number of years, Human Resources (HR) policies and procedures have been introduced as a result of business need or in response to legislative requirements.

To facilitate an increasingly proactive approach to the HR service, the Employment Panel has agreed a three year rolling programme for the review of all policies and procedures to ensure that they reflect current best practice, comply with legislative requirements and reflect the needs of the Council. In endorsing the proposed review schedule, the Panel has noted that there are currently just over 50 policies and procedures, although it is anticipated that some will be consolidated as the review programme progresses.

STAFF ATTENDANCE

The Employment Panel has endorsed a revised Attendance Policy for the Council which has been designed to reflect national provisions and to provide a measure of clarity across the District Council for managers and employees.

The Panel has been pleased to note that employee absence rates for the District Council compare favourably to both the public sector and national averages reported by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development.

COMMUNITIES IN CONTROL: REAL PEOPLE, REAL POWER: CODES OF CONDUCT FOR LOCAL AUTHORITY MEMBERS

AND EMPLOYEES – A CONSULTATION

Following the receipt of a recent consultation paper by the Department of Communities and Local Government seeking views on the proposed introduction of a model code of conduct for local government employees, the Panel has authorised the Director of Central Services in consultation with the Chairman and a representative of the Employees Side to agree the content of the Council's response.

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 HR Manager to recruit the following posts, together with any subsequent posts vacated as a result of internal promotion:-

- ◆ Auditor; and
- ◆ Environmental Health Officer.

In respect of the post of Head of Policy and Strategic Services, the Panel has agreed to defer its consideration to a future meeting.

SICKNESS PAY

Having been apprised of the circumstances applicable to a member of staff on long-term sick leave, the Employment Panel has endorsed a decision taken by the appropriate Head of Service to grant an extension of full pay to the employee pending determination of

their application for ill-health retirement.

Subject to such decisions being reported to its next ensuing meeting, the Panel also has authorised the Director of Central Services after consultation with the Chairman of the Panel, to determine variations to the national terms and conditions for sickness pay where they cannot be determined by the Panel within the relevant timescale.

FINANCIAL MONITORING

The Head of Financial Services has drawn to the Cabinet's attention variations to the approved Capital Programme and spending variations in the revenue budget for the current year. At the same time, the Cabinet has approved the commencement of the Medium Term Plan Schemes for the St. Ivo Leisure Centre – Football Improvements, Huntingdon West Development, St. Neots Green Corridor and Sustainable Homes Retro-Fit Scheme. The latter is subject to the Executive Councillor for Finance and Environment being consulted on the scheme's timing in relation to the situation within the housing market.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND PETERBOROUGH JOINT MUNICIPAL WASTE STRATEGY

The Cabinet has approved the content of the revised Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Joint Municipal Waste Strategy. The Strategy has retained the original principles of the first Strategy published in 2003 and has addressed the following key themes, associated objectives and actions:-

- ◆ underlining strategic principles for the waste strategy;
- ◆ joint working;
- ◆ climate change;
- ◆ protection of the environment;
- ◆ waste prevention and re-use;
- ◆ recycling and composting;
- ◆ management of residual waste;
- ◆ wider waste roles; and
- ◆ stakeholder engagement.

Whilst discussing recycling levels, the Cabinet has congratulated residents for their continuing efforts in recycling which has resulted in the strategy target for 2010/2011 of 55-60% already being achieved.

ENHANCED SERVICES CLEANSING SERVICES

The Cabinet has considered further reports by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) regarding the use of alcohol disorder zones and the introduction of additional cleansing services in the town centres on Sunday mornings to deal with the effects of the Saturday night time economy.

In discussing their recommendations, the Cabinet still consider that the Panel has failed to explain sufficiently the scope for any re-distribution of cleansing services in the Operations Division, the precise extent of the streets to be cleaned and whether financial contributions might be forthcoming from the Town Councils towards an enhanced service. Nevertheless in

expressing its support for an improvement to the appearance of town centres, the Cabinet has agreed to accept in principle, the introduction of cleansing services on Sundays in the market towns across the District. At the same time, the Cabinet has requested that financial contributions towards the cost of implementing additional cleansing be sought from the relevant town councils and that the Head of Operations looking into and report back to the Cabinet on the feasibility of re-scheduling cleansing rotas within existing resources.

In considering the circumstances in which Alcohol Disorder Zones (ADZs) could be introduced in the District, and in noting that ADZs are intended as a short-term, last resort measure to address a high level of alcohol-related nuisance and disorder, circumstances which are not applicable in the District, the Cabinet has recognised that their use is inappropriate to deal with the problem of litter.

SUPPORTING LOCAL RETAILERS

The introduction of a car parking voucher scheme aimed at supporting local retailers by increasing the number of people who choose to shop in Huntingdon, St. Neots and St. Ives during the present economic climate has been endorsed by the Cabinet. The voucher, printed in the Winter edition of Districtwide, can be used to park free of charge for up to 4 hours in any long stay car park on Saturdays in December or January.

DECENT HOMES FOR VULNERABLE PEOPLE IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The Council has been successful in obtaining a grant of £163,400 from EERA's Housing and Sustainable Communities Panel to help improve "non-decent homes" in the private sector. In 2007 a similar grant was received and its use was reserved for thermal efficiency improvements. Despite targeted publicity the take-up of this grant was lower than anticipated. Having been made aware that the demand for grants was expected to increase due to rises in fuel costs and the expansion of the scope of the grant criteria, the Cabinet has agreed to use the 2008/09 award in the current year for decent homes for vulnerable people – to rectify category 1 hazards and thermal efficiency improvements and that the 2006/07 and 2007/08 award be rephased for the same purpose with £75,000 of it being used in the current year to assist in funding the Sustainable Homes Retro-Fit Scheme. As part of this process, the Cabinet has requested that a review of the programme be undertaken once the basis and likelihood of the allocation of grant in future years is known.

FREE SWIMMING FOR THE OVER-60'S AND UNDER 17'S

A proposal to introduce free swimming for the Over-60's has been given the go ahead by Cabinet. Members were advised that the proposal was one of two Government incentives, the other being free swimming for Under 17's. Having considered the benefits and risks associated with each incentive,

along with the funding allocation being offered by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Cabinet has recognised that free swimming for the Over 60's could be both cost-effective and manageable given the numbers likely to take-up the offer. However, it was felt that free swimming for Under 17's could have a significant impact upon admissions and the reimbursement offered was not commensurate with the costs involved in providing the extra staff required for the anticipated demand. The decision has received the support of the District's five Leisure Centres Management Committees.

URBAN DESIGN FRAMEWORK: LAND AROUND BUTTSGROVE WAY, THE WHADDONS AND SUFFOLK HOUSE, HUNTINGDON

The Development Control Panel has commended the content of the Urban Design Framework prepared to guide development of an area comprising 3.5 acres around Buttsgrove Way, the Whaddons and Suffolk House, Huntingdon. The areas are currently made up of 1960s/70s bungalows and a seven storey block of flats. The Cabinet has been recommended to adopt the brief as Informal Planning & Design Guidance,.

APPLICATION FOR DISPENSATION – HEMINGFORD ABBOTS PARISH COUNCIL

At a special meeting, the Standards Committee has granted a dispensation to 7 members of Hemingford Abbots Parish Council for the period ending 30th April 2012 to enable them to speak and vote on

business relating to the Hemingford
Abbots Playing Fields Charity.

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