

Decision Digest

Edition 96

Monthly summary of the decisions taken at meetings of the Council, Cabinet, Overview & Scrutiny and other Panels for the period 6th July - 28th August 2009.

ANNUAL AUDIT AND INSPECTION LETTER

Having regard to the Annual Audit and Inspection Letter for 2007/08, the Corporate Governance Panel has noted that the Council's rate of improvement in the priority areas identified compared favourably against other District Councils. The Council also has consistently exceeded the Audit Commission's criteria for "performing well".

HOUSING BENEFIT COMPLAINT: AWARD OF COMPENSATION

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 which has been awarded to the complainant.

AUDIT STRATEGY DOCUMENT

The Corporate Governance Panel has received details of the approach to be undertaken by the Council's external auditors, Grant Thornton UK LLP, to the audit of the Council, which will include the former Leisure Centre Management Committees.

INTERNAL AUDIT SERVICE: INTERNAL AUDIT PLAN

The Corporate Governance Panel has approved the Internal Audit and Assurance Plan for the twelve months period commencing 1st August 2009.

ANTI-FRAUD AND CORRUPTION FRAMEWORK

The Corporate Governance Panel has noted the outcome of a review of the Council's Anti-Fraud and Corruption Framework and endorsed the content of a revised Action Plan.

COMPLAINTS

The Corporate Governance Panel has received an analysis of the Council's internal complaints and a summary of complaints involving the District Council which have been determined by the Local Government Ombudsman in 2008/09.

FINAL ACCOUNTS 2008/09

The Corporate Governance Panel has approved the draft Statement of Accounts for the year ended 31st March 2009 and Members' attention has been drawn specifically to a series of issues arising from the accounts, which included the Council's investments, the pension

fund, the treatment of capital and the collection fund.

The Panel has expressed some concern at the suggested deficit of funds available in the pension fund but has been informed that whilst the funds assets were currently valued at market value for investments, a full valuation every three years took account of a wide variety of factors including liability and potential changes in investment markets and that this would be used to evaluate changes in the employer's contribution rate. Concern has also been expressed at the risks associated with the Council's approach to long-term investments. In response, assurances have been received from Officers that appropriate procedures were in place through the Council's Treasury Management Strategy.

Having questioned the appearance of Government Departments as one of the Council's debtors, the Panel has been advised that this related to grant funding from Central Government which was still awaited.

GREAT FEN COLLABORATION AGREEMENT

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) has considered a proposal which would result in the Council entering, together with other organisations, into a Great Fen Collaboration Agreement. The Panel accepts that the collaboration agreement offers the most appropriate governance arrangement between the various partners at the present stage of the Great Fen Project. The agreement will be reviewed once the project moves into a trading position. The Panel has expressed its ongoing support for the Council's

involvement in the project, which enables the views of the local community to be represented and provides a democratic focus for the project.

With regard to the collaboration agreement itself, the Panel has raised a concern that while Clause 7.1 of the Agreement appears to cover all of the salary costs of the project manager, it does not refer explicitly to all potential costs that might occur such as severance or personal injury claims. The Panel also has suggested that the wording could be more precise to avoid future ambiguity. The Panel has expressed a view that the confidentiality provisions in Section 14 of the Agreement could impede future scrutiny and transparency in the management of the project. The Panel feel that the section should be re-drafted to ensure that scrutiny is not precluded. It was also suggested that an annual report be presented to partners on progress towards achievement of the project's aims and objectives.

Subsequently, the Cabinet has approved in principal, arrangements to enter into a Collaboration Agreement for a renewable five-year fixed term. Having concurred with the views of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel, the Cabinet has requested that the Agreement be re-drafted to reflect these sentiments. With this proviso the Cabinet has authorised the Director of Environmental and Community Services to sign the Agreement.

SCRUTINY OF HUNTINGDONSHIRE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

The Overview and Scrutiny Panels have received information on the areas that fall within each Panel's

responsibility with regard to the scrutiny of Huntingdonshire Strategic Partnership (HSP). The Environmental Well-Being Panel has noted that they will be responsible for the scrutiny of the Environment Forum and the Growth and Infrastructure Thematic Group established under the HSP. The Panel has been acquainted with the strategic aims and objectives of those themes as set out in the Huntingdonshire Sustainable Community Strategy.

The Social Well-Being Panel has been advised that they will be responsible for scrutinising the Children & Young People, Health & Well-Being and Inclusive, Safe and Cohesive Communities Thematic Groups.

A joint event involving representatives of Overview and Scrutiny and the Strategic Partnership is currently being arranged and a countywide conference on the scrutiny of partnerships will be held on 7th September 2009.

ADOPTION OF ROADS AND SEWERS

The Overview (Environmental Well-being) Panel has endorsed the final report of the adoption of roads and sewers working group which was established to investigate the processes and procedures involved with a view to expediting the adoption process. The Panel was encouraged to note that DEFRA had announced that with effect from April 2011, responsibility for 200,000 kilometres of privately owned sewers and lateral drains in England

will be transferred to statutory water and sewage companies. Furthermore, Persimmon Homes have appointed staff to assess outstanding matters which have held up the adoption process on their developments. The Panel have expressed their appreciation to the Members of the Working Group.

WORK PLAN STUDIES

The Overview and Scrutiny (Environmental Well-Being) Panel have appointed Councillors M G Baker, P Godley, M F Newman and J S Watt to the Development Management Process Working Group, which has been established to examine the process for the determination of planning applications.

LEISURE CENTRES – PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has received the Huntingdonshire Leisure Centres Annual Report 2008/09. The report summarised the activities of the Leisure Centres in Huntingdonshire over the preceding twelve months.

Total admissions to the Centres had exceeded 1.74m for the first time and a saving of £569,000 against the budget across the Centres as a whole has successfully been achieved.

DISABILITY ACCESS – FOLLOW UP

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has planned its follow up work on their previous

study into disability access. A number of aspects that the Panel wish to pursue have been identified, which includes requesting updates from the County Council and Police on matters previously referred to them and informing Town and Parish Councils of the outcome of the study. Progress of discussion on the provision of joint advocacy/advice services by organisations supporting those with disabilities has also been requested.

STUDY – PARKING AT HINCHINGBROOKE HOSPITAL

The scope of a study on parking at Hinchingsbrooke Hospital, Huntingdon has been discussed by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). A number of potential areas for investigation have been identified, which includes the management of the car park, the effectiveness of the Hospital's travel plan, the availability of public transport and parking practices nearby. A representative of the Hospital will be invited to attend a future Panel meeting.

FORMER FIRE STATION SITE, WASTE RECYCLING CENTRE, HUNTINGDON STREET, ST. NEOTS

The Cabinet has agreed to the preparation of a development brief and the subsequent marketing exercise for the disposal of the leasehold of an area of Council-owned land at the former fire station site and waste recycling centre, Huntingdon Street, St. Neots. The Cabinet has been advised that the domestic waste recycling centre is due to be relocated by Cambridgeshire County Council at the end of the year. In order to ensure that the site is fully marketed a detailed development brief will be

prepared and a comprehensive marketing exercise undertaken. Applicants will be invited to submit details of their proposals including drawings showing layout, size and external appearance. The applications will then be assessed on the basis of their compliance with the development brief which also should feature some benefit to the local community.

SAFETY ADVISORY GROUP - EURO BIN MANUAL HANDLING ARRANGEMENTS

Having considered the findings of a report by Her Majesty's Ergonomics Specialist Inspector into the Eurobin manual handling arrangements, the Cabinet has deferred consideration of the matter to enable further information on the health and safety aspects to be submitted to a future meeting. The Inspector's report had concluded that the task of emptying 1,100 and 1,280 litre glass recycling eurobins should be undertaken by two employees rather than the current one.

NEW HEADQUARTERS DELIVERY AND OPERATIONAL REVIEW

The Cabinet has been apprised with progress made to-date on the delivery of the new District Council Headquarters and Other Accommodation. In considering issues associated with the future use of Castle Hill House, the Cabinet has agreed that the accommodation of all headquarters based staff in future years be contained in buildings B, C, D and E. At the same time, the Cabinet endorsed the suspension of the marketing of the site for Building A, to enable the Chief Executive to investigate options available for the disposal of Castle Hill House and

have agreed the reservation of sums to meet contractual claims and variations within the financial forecast for the project. The Medium Term Plan will be changed to reflect this at its next review.

ETHICAL STANDARDS AND THE CODE OF CONDUCT

In accordance with "Best Practice" recommended by 'Standards for England', Councillor I C Bates has recently addressed the Standards Committee. This follows a similar presentation by Councillor P J Downes. Councillor Bates made reference to several themes, including improvements in the administration and conduct of local councils as a result of the standards process, the resource intensive regime prompted by the 2008 Regulations and whether 'Standards for England' (formerly the Standards Board) provided value for money. Councillor Bates' ideas prompted a wide ranging discussion at the meeting.

STANDARDS COMMITTEE (FURTHER PROVISIONS) (ENGLAND) REGULATIONS 2009

The Standards Committee has noted the coming into force on 15th June 2009 of the Standards Committee (Further Provisions) (England) Regulations 2009 which will enable 'Standards for England' to suspend the functions of a local Standards Committee if it is failing to perform satisfactorily and either to discharge the functions itself to transfer them to another authority. The Regulations also give the power to establish joint committees with

other authorities vary the rules in respect of dispensations.

STATISTICS

Having noted the outcome of research commissioned by 'Standards for England' and in particular the observation that Councils with better conduct made training mandatory, the Monitoring Officer was requested to look into the legality of this step and whether code of conduct training could be made mandatory for District Councillors.

ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF STANDARDS COMMITTEE

The Standards Committee has nominated Messrs J Alexander, D L Hall and G Watkins to attend the Annual Assembly at the ICC Birmingham on 12th/13th October 2009.

LOG OF CODE OF CONDUCT

The Standards Committee has noted the nature of the code of conduct enquiries recorded by the Monitoring Officer since the last meeting.

HARTFORD MARINA

The Development Management Panel has considered the outcome of a review by a Working Group tasked with looking at a variety of issues relating to unauthorised occupation at Hartford Marina. Recommendations of the Working Group were endorsed and these related to -

- ◆ preparation of a policy on permanent occupation of marinas;
- ◆ the undertaking of enforcement action against unauthorised occupants of the flats/apartments at the Marina;
- ◆ rationalisation of the current position at the Marina once the policy begins to emerge;
- ◆ no action being taken against the current floating residents pending formulation of a policy on marinas provided they help in recovering unpaid council tax;
- ◆ no further expansion of the Marina without planning consent.

PERFORMANCE MONITORING

As part of their regular monitoring of the activities of the Development Management Division, the Panel has noted that quarterly income is currently £91,000 over the projected budget due in part to fees received from a major strategic planning application.

DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT

Over two meetings, the Panel has considered a total of 25 applications with 7 refused, 14 approved, 3 deferred and one delegated to the Head of Planning Services.