

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) held in the Meeting Room, Eastfield House on Thursday, 10 September 2009.

PRESENT: Councillor J D Ablewhite J D Ablewhite – Chairman.

Councillors J T Bell, Mrs J A Dew, A N Gilbert, M F Shellens, G S E Thorpe and R G Tuplin.

24. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 16th July 2009 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

25. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor G S E Thorpe declared a personal interest in Minute No. 26 by virtue of being a Member of St Neots Town Council.

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

(Councillor A Hansard, Executive Councillor for Resources and Policy, was in attendance for this item).

Pursuant to Minute No. 16 and with the aid of a report by the Head of Law, Property and Governance (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel reviewed the Cabinet's recent decisions in respect of the former fire station and recycling site in Huntingdon Street, St Neots. In introducing the report Councillor A Hansard, the Executive Councillor for Resources and Policy, explained that the site was due to close as a recycling centre on 9th October 2009. The recycling facilities would transfer to Marston Road, St Neots and the Huntingdon Street site would be cleared by a contractor and contamination tests carried out. Councillor Hansard stressed that there was no intention to sell the site. Instead, the land would be leased out and the Council would retain ownership of it.

Councillor Hansard informed the Panel that two organisations had already expressed an interest in the site; however, the view had been taken that in order to achieve the best possible terms for the Council, the site should be placed on the open market. This would entail interested parties preparing a design brief. Development Management would draw up a planning brief for this purpose and this would be supplemented by specified site constraints.

In the ensuing discussion, it was established that housing would not

be one of the potential uses for the site but it might involve leisure or retail uses. The brief would take into account the findings of the St Neots Healthcheck. In response to a question by a Member regarding the costs for developers of producing a design brief, it was explained that this should not deter genuinely interested parties and that the brief would form part of a future planning application. Following a further question on the loss of car parking that would result from development of the site, Councillor Hansard assured the Panel that the only loss of parking would be that allocated to the existing building and amounted to 28 spaces.

In conclusion, Members concurred with the suggestion that the Council should seek leisure or retail uses for the site and they endorsed the Cabinet's decision to approve the preparation of a development brief and commence a marketing exercise for the disposal of the leasehold of the site.

27. FINANCIAL FORECAST

(Councillor T V Rogers, Executive Councillor for Finance, was in attendance for this item).

Consideration was given to a report by the Head of Financial Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) on the Council's position in relation to the Council's financial forecast for the period to 2018/19. Members were acquainted with potential variations in a number of sources of income and other factors that would affect the Council's financial position and their likely effects on levels of reserves and of Council Tax. Councillor T V Rogers, Executive Councillor for Finance, advised Members that significant savings would have to be found in the period of the forecast. He also made reference to inflation and government funding.

In the ensuing discussion the Panel made reference to the uncertainty created by current economic and political conditions. Members were advised that in the current year the Council had been able to keep its revenue spending below budget but that it had been necessary to meet a deficit from reserves. In response to a question by a Member, the Panel was informed of the circumstances that had led to capital expenditure being higher than budgeted. The Panel also discussed the Council's planned future levels of reserves and projections for inflation, employer contributions to pensions, council tax levels and capping, concessionary fares and disabled grants. While the high level of uncertainty involved was recognised, Members stressed the importance for the Council of undertaking this work and of monitoring changes in these and other factors. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the report now submitted be endorsed for submission to the Cabinet and Council.

28. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2000 - FORWARD PLAN

The Panel considered the current Forward Plan of Key Decisions (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which had been

prepared by the Leader of the Council for the period 1st September to 31st December 2009.

With regard to an item on the Asset Management Plan, the Scrutiny and Review Manager explained that this was an annual report on the performance of the Council's assets against a range of criteria. The view was expressed that the report would represent an indicator on the local economy.

29. PERFORMANCE MONITORING

The Panel considered a report by the Head of People, Performance and Partnership (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) containing details of the Council's performance against its priority objectives in the quarter to 30th June 2009. Of the 37 corporate objectives eight were priorities and these had been split between the three Overview and Scrutiny Panels. With regard to matters raised by the Corporate Plan Working Group, the Panel noted that a number of posts had been deliberately held vacant in order to save costs. In addition, the leisure centres had made the full year's NNDR payment following receipt of an invoice for the full amount and that no discount was available for payment by this method.

RESOLVED

that the comments of the Corporate Plan Working Group be endorsed for submission to the Cabinet.

30. EXTENSION OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY POWERS

The Panel received and noted a report by the Head of Democratic and Central Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) containing details of new powers, which had recently been introduced to extend the scope of overview and scrutiny. Members were advised that Regulations enabled district councils, in areas where there was also a county council, to widen the role of their overview and scrutiny committees through scrutiny of Local Area Agreements (LAAs) and gave those committees the power to obtain information from LAA partners as long as it concerned a local improvement target. The Scrutiny Manager explained that the Regulations also gave overview and scrutiny committees the power to make reports and recommendations to the County Council on LAA matters and would create a requirement for partners to the LAA to have regard to such reports and recommendations.

31. WORKPLAN STUDIES

Consideration was given to a report by the Head of Democratic and Central Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) on the studies being undertaken by the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Panels. Members discussed a range of potential subjects for future studies including some, which had been suggested by the Corporate Plan Working Group following examination of the Council's performance against its non-priority targets.

RESOLVED

that the following subjects be added to the Panel's programme of future studies:

- management of capital projects by the Environmental Management Section;
- the effect of the loss of the Huntingdonshire Enterprise Agency and the cost implications of this, and
- the Performance Development Review process.

32. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) PROGRESS

In considering a report by the Head of Democratic and Central Services on the studies being undertaken by the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Panels, (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book), the Panel decided that as the same organisations from within the local business community were represented at both Local Procurement meetings and at meetings of the Strategic Partnership's Economic Prosperity and Skills Thematic Group and as the Thematic Group had local procurement in its remit, in order to prevent duplication, the Thematic Group should be asked to assume responsibility for local procurement.

33. SCRUTINY

In receiving and noting the latest edition of the Decision Digest, concerns were expressed at the lack of detailed financial information available on the Great Fen Project. It was agreed that the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny (Environmental Well-Being) Group should be made aware of these concerns.

Chairman