

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the CORPORATE GOVERNANCE PANEL held in the Kestrel Room, Countryside Centre, Hinchingsbrooke Country Park, Brampton Road, Huntingdon, PE29 6DB on Tuesday, 22 September 2009.

PRESENT: Councillor C J Stephens – Chairman.
Councillors M G Baker, P L E Bucknell, S J Criswell, A Hansard and T V Rogers.

APOLOGY: An Apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor P J Downes.

16. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 23rd June 2009 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

17. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor P L E Bucknell declared a personal interest in Minute No. 18 by virtue of his association with the Council's proposed new Auditors, Pricewaterhouse Coopers.

18. AUDIT COMMISSION PROPOSAL FOR CHANGE OF EXTERNAL AUDITORS

(See Minute No. 17 – Members' Interests)

The Director of Commerce and Technology drew the Panel's attention to a proposal made by the Audit Commission to change the Council's External Auditors from Grant Thornton UK to Pricewaterhouse Coopers. Members were advised that the proposal would result in all Cambridgeshire based authorities being audited by the same firm, which would assist with the move towards the Comprehensive Area Assessment process.

19. REVIEW OF HOUSING BENEFIT FRAUD INVESTIGATION ACTIVITY & THE COUNCIL'S WHISTLEBLOWING POLICY

Consideration was given to a joint report by the Head of Customer Services and Audit & Risk Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) summarising the activity of the Benefits Fraud Investigation Team over the previous three years and detailing the outcome of the annual review of the Whistleblowing Policy and Guidance.

In noting the activity undertaken by the Housing Benefit Fraud Investigation Team over the 2006 to 2009 period, the Panel were encouraged to note that a 69% success rate for all cases investigated over the 2008/09 financial year had been achieved, which reflected

an improvement of 2% when compared to the previous year.

With regard to the review of the Whistleblowing Policy and Guidance, the Panel were encouraged to note that 7 incidents had been received through the various Whistleblowing channels.

RESOLVED

- (a) that the work undertaken in respect of benefit fraud be noted;
- (b) that the Benefit Fraud Investigation Team be commended on their work and approach to countering fraud which has been nationally recognised by their professional association; and
- (c) that the annual review of the Whistleblowing policy and procedure has been undertaken and that no changes be required to the current policy or guidance.

20. REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CORPORATE GOVERNANCE PANEL

With the assistance of a report prepared by the Head of Financial Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel were acquainted with the action taken to enhance the Panel's own effectiveness, which had been compiled against CIPFA's best practice guidance for Audit Committees. Members were encouraged to note the action taken to address the areas which had been identified in the 2008 Action Plan. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that progress against the Action Plan appended to the report now submitted be noted.

21. RISK REGISTER

With the aid of a report by the Audit & Risk Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel was acquainted with the changes made to the Risk Register between the period March to August 2009 inclusive.

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report be noted.

22. INTERNAL AUDIT SERVICE: ANNUAL AUDIT REPORT

The Panel received a report by the Audit & Risk Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which contained his opinion on aspects of the Council's systems of internal control and which summarised the progress made against the 2008/09 Annual Audit Plan and the performance standards achieved.

Members noted the Audit & Risk Manager's conclusions in relation to the level of assurance provided by those areas of the Council's

internal control environment which had been the subject of evaluation by the Internal Audit Service. The Panel were encouraged to note the improvement that continued to be made in respect of the implementation of agreed audit actions. Having drawn the Panel's attention to breaches of the Code of Procurement, Members were advised that a report summarising the steps taken to address this matter would be submitted to the Panel's December meeting.

RESOLVED

- (a) that the report and statement be noted; and
- (b) that the Director of Central Services and/or the Director of Commerce and Technology be requested to submit a report to the December meeting of the Panel on the steps taken to ensure compliance with the Code of Procurement.

23. ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SYSTEM OF INTERNAL AUDIT

The Panel received and noted a report by the Audit & Risk Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) on the outcome of a review of the effectiveness of the system of internal audit. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the outcome of the review of the effectiveness of the system of internal audit be noted and included in the annual review in preparation of the Annual Governance Statement.

24. GOVERNANCE STATEMENT

Consideration was given to a report by the Head of Law, Property and Governance (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) on the outcome of the annual review of the Council's governance arrangements. In addition, it was reported that the Chairman and Vice-Chairman, together with Executive Councillors whose portfolios include finance and corporate governance had taken part in and were satisfied with the annual review of governance arrangements which was the basis of preparing the Annual Governance Statement.

The Panel discussed the Governance Statement, which had been prepared on behalf of the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council, summarised the corporate governance work carried out in 2008/09 and identified matters to be addressed during 2009/10.

RESOLVED

that the Governance Statement prepared by the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council on behalf of the Council for 2009/10 be endorsed and countersigned by the Chairman of the Panel.

25. APPROVAL FOR PUBLICATION OF THE 2008/09 ACCOUNTS

(Mrs L Sandford and P Winrow of Grant Thornton UK LLP, the Council's External Auditors, were in attendance for consideration of this item).

The Panel considered the draft accounts for the year 2008/09 (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). Having considered the Council's letters of representation and noted the Auditor's reports, Members were informed by Mrs L Sandford that an unqualified opinion would be provided on the accounts.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

- (a) that the letters of representation be approved and the Director of Commerce and Technology be authorised to sign it on behalf of the Council;
- (b) that the Auditor's reports and the appended Action Plans for dealing with the matters highlighted be noted; and
- (c) that the revised set of accounts now submitted be approved for publication.

Chairman