

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) held in the Corporate Training Suite, Eastfield House, 6 Latham Road, Huntingdon on Thursday, 15 October 2009.

PRESENT: Councillor J D Ablewhite – Chairman.
Councillors J T Bell, Mrs J A Dew,
L W McGuire, M F Shellens and
G S E Thorpe.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors A N Gilbert, Ms M J Thomas and R G Tuplin.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor T V Rogers

34. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 10th September 2009 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

35. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

36. HUNTINGDON TOWN HALL - THE WAY FORWARD

With the assistance of a report by the Director of Environmental and Community Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel was acquainted with the contents of an independent report, which had been commissioned by the District Council into the future use of Huntingdon Town Hall, and included a number of recommendations and a suggested project plan.

Members were advised that the District Council owned the freehold of the Grade 2* listed building. However, Her Majesty's Court Service (HMCS) was in possession of a 999 year lease for the ground and first floors, which meant that HMCS was responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of the building. The Town Council, although having no formal lease, occupied the top floor. Discussions between the District Council and the occupiers were ongoing to seek a practical and viable way to secure the fabric of the building and to identify appropriate uses for it.

In response to Members' questions, the Director of Environmental and Community Services explained that the building had been maintained by the leaseholder and that the Council, under the current arrangements, had no maintenance liabilities. In discussing the extent to which HMCS had complied with its maintenance obligations under the terms of the lease, Members were informed that specialists had

ascertained that the building was not in a condition that would mean enforcement action was required by the Council under Planning and Listed Building legislation. The Panel also noted that it was likely that English Heritage would require any future owner to retain some of the internal court space. This, coupled with the fact that the Council held the building in trust for the benefit of local people, meant that alternative, income generating uses were limited. In addition, it had been estimated that in the region of £2,000,000 would be required to improve and modernise the premises to make them suitable for public uses. However, potential sources of funding were identified in the report by EWC.

Members were advised that the formation of a Building Preservation Trust (BPT) had proved to be best practice in other parts of the country for dealing with premises such as the one in question. A BPT would have access to grant funding schemes, which were not available to a local authority. As a result the Panel supported the proposal to establish a steering group to oversee the possible transfer of the building to a BPT. The Panel, however, suggested that, owing to Huntingdon Town Council's interest in the building, the Cabinet should investigate the possibility of exchanging the Town Hall for land currently in the ownership of the Town Council. This would ensure the District Council had achieved the best possible return for the loss of the ownership of the building. In addition, the view was expressed that should the decision be taken to transfer the Town Hall to a BPT, the terms of the transfer should include provision for the ownership of the building should its future operating income be insufficient to make the building viable and the BPT ceased to operate.

RESOLVED

that, subject to investigations being carried out into the feasibility of an exchange of land in return for transfer of ownership of the Town Hall to Huntingdon Town Council and to adequate provision being made to safeguard against the building failing to become viable and the BPT ceasing to operate, the Cabinet be recommended to accept the recommendations contained in the report by EWC.

37. THE PLACE SURVEY

With the aid of presentation by the Senior Policy Officer the Panel gave consideration to the Report of Findings on the Place Survey (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). The Survey formed part of a national assessment, which was carried out on the Council's behalf in 2008. Members were informed that the Survey methodology had been closely prescribed by the Government and that, overall, Huntingdonshire had performed well compared with the results for Cambridgeshire and nationally. In response to a question by a Member, details were provided on how respondents had been selected and the confidence levels that this gave to the results.

In reviewing the findings of the Survey, Members' attention was drawn to the results that had particular relevance to their remit. In their discussion the focus was on the areas where the public felt improvements were required. The Panel acknowledged that provision of activities for teenagers was one area where the Council might be

able to contribute toward improvements. Members also noted that a significant number of respondents had expressed the view that the District's shopping facilities needed to be improved. As a result a suggestion was made that this subject might form the basis of a study by the Panel. A scoping report was requested for this purpose, including details of actions being taken by the Town Centre Initiatives and Partnership groups working in this area.

Members were informed of the links between the Survey results and the Cambridgeshire Local Area Agreement improvement targets. The Panel would be able to monitor progress in these respects as part of its extended remit to scrutinise the Council's partnership working. Having noted that further analysis of the results would be carried out and that additional research would be undertaken, it was

RESOLVED

- a) that the report be received and noted, and
- b) that a report be submitted to a future meeting on the potential scope of a study into shopping facilities in the District.

38. 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 October 2009 to 31st January 2010. Members noted that the draft Medium Term Plan would be considered at the next meeting.

39. APPOINTMENT OF CO-OPTED MEMBERS TO THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANELS

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) on the appointment of co-opted members to the Overview and Scrutiny Panels. A Scheme of Co-option was appended to the report.

The Panel were reminded that as part of the review of its democratic structure, the Council had decided to introduce provision for independent members to be appointed to each of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels. A total of six independent members would be required, with two members being appointed to each Panel. Applicants would be asked to express an interest in the remit of one the Panels. Members' attention was drawn the fact that co-opted members would be entitled to speak at meetings but not vote.

The Panel was advised that, in order to generate expressions of interest from members of the public, a programme of publicity had been designed. Town and Parish Council's and partner organisations had already been contacted and initial responses had been encouraging. Having expressed the view that, in order to reach the greatest number of potential candidates, recruitment publicity should be included in the next edition of District Wide, it was

RESOLVED

- a) that the contents of the Scheme of Co-option be noted;
- b) that the Head of Democratic and Central Services be authorised to convene a politically balanced Panel of Members to sit on an Appointments Panel, and
- c) that the Appointments Panel be requested to make recommendations on the recruitment of two independent Members.

40. LOCAL PROCUREMENT

Pursuant to Minute No. 32, and with the aid of a report by the Head of Democratic and Central Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book), the Panel received the final two reports of local procurement meetings. The Panel was advised that, owing to an over-run in its business, the former Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Support) had not been able to consider the report of the Local Procurement meeting on 12th March 2009. A report of the final meeting, which had taken place on 14th September 2009, was also submitted.

The Executive Councillor for Finance, Councillor T V Rogers, who had been present at the meeting on 14th September, outlined the concerns of business representatives at the decision to ask the Strategic Partnership's Economic Prosperity and Skills Thematic Group to assume responsibility for local procurement owing to their perception that local businesses would not be adequately represented at Thematic Group meetings. He also expressed the view that local procurement meetings brought together business representatives and District Councillors. In response the Chairman reported that the same business organisations were represented on the Thematic Group and that local procurement was already included in its remit and its Local Economy Action Plan. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the reports of the Local Procurement Meetings held on 12th March and 14th September 2009 be endorsed for submission to the Economic Prosperity and Skills Thematic Group.

41. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY (ECONOMIC WELLBEING) PROGRESS

In considering a report by the Head of Democratic and Central Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) on the Panel's current programme of studies, it was noted that the regular report on the performance of Customer Services would be presented to the next meeting.

42. WORKPLAN STUDIES

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 the studies being undertaken by the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Panels.

43. SCRUTINY

In receiving and noting the latest edition of the Decision Digest, Members discussed the lessons that had been learned from the Neighbourhood Forum pilot, which had recently taken place in St Neots.

44. FUTURE MEETING VENUE

Members noted that, unless otherwise agreed, for the remainder of the Municipal Year all meetings of the Panel would take place in the Corporate Training Suite at Eastfield House.

Chairman