
Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being)

Report of the meeting held on 12th November 2009

Matters for Information

**28. BUDGET AND MEDIUM TERM PLAN 2010 - 2015
DRAFT PROPOSALS**

The Panel has considered the draft 2010/11 budget, the Medium Term Financial Plan to 2014/15 and the longer term financial forecast to 2023/24, which are included in the Report of the Cabinet to the Council meeting.

The Panel has been advised of Executive Councillors' involvement in the development of the Plan and has examined proposals to draw on £19m of revenue reserves over the next four years. The Plan reflects levels of income from government grant and Council Tax that are lower than had been assumed in the financial plan approved by Council in February 2009.

Members have questioned whether the proposed budget will enable the Council to achieve its service delivery targets and have been informed that, with the exception of the Arts Service, this should be possible. Members have expressed reservations about the Council effectively ending its direct involvement in the arts, though they have noted that the Council will continue to promote the arts through grant funding.

Members have also been assured that the Council's Corporate Plan has been taken into account in devising the budget. Members have made the point that the proposals relating to parking charges could conflict with the Council's objectives to promote the local economy and have been informed that this has been considered in developing the Plan.

The Panel has discussed the proposal to transfer to the Town Councils responsibility for the cleaning and maintenance of the District's public conveniences, which currently costs the District £156k per year. The rationale for this is that the Town Councils are in a better position to manage them because they are more familiar with the level of local need. The Town Councils previously have requested the District Council to give them more powers. The significance of this proposal lies in the fact that savings will be achieved but it might also mean that the proposed construction of new public conveniences

might not go ahead. Members have also discussed the effect of the proposal on tourism, though consensus was not reached on this.

The Panel has requested the Cabinet to review and justify the proposed level of spending on Huntingdon Bus Station and consider instead undertaking some form of refurbishment. Among other matters discussed is the level of investment in the leisure centres. Members are of the view that the Council should recognise the benefits of the service to local people and the likely return on its investment that should be achieved. Similarly, Members have accepted that the sum for the A14 Inquiry is necessary to ensure the Council's perspective is adequately represented during the Inquiry process and to enable detailed aspects of the scheme to be addressed.

The Panel has discussed the assumptions on which predictions about the effect of the Guided Bus have been made and have questioned the level of provision made for the Great Fen Project. The latter will be pursued separately during ongoing scrutiny of the Project. Members have also noted that the proposed level of increase in Council Tax, which represents a decrease in income of £175,000 compared with some previous forecasts, could change as circumstances alter.

29. CUSTOMER SERVICES MONITORING REPORT

The Panel has received the Customer Service Quarterly Performance Report for the period July to September 2009, which outlines the levels of performance and standards achieved by the Service. Members have been informed that all customer service targets have been met and that the service has continued to achieve high levels of customer satisfaction despite adverse trends in the economy. They also have been advised that the Ramsey and Yaxley Customer Information Centres have received customer excellence awards.

The Panel has noted that although the number of calls has not increased, they have become more complex and this has led to an increase in the time taken to answer calls. The range of services offered has also continued to expand.

The Panel has been made aware of the potential risk in continuing to rely on the goodwill of staff to meet service targets. This and the level of vacancies in Customer Services will be monitored by the Head of Service.

Other Matters of Interest

30. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2000 – FORWARD PLAN

The Panel has been acquainted with details of the current Forward Plan of Key Decisions. A report on the Asset Management Plan is

due to be submitted to the Panel's December meeting; the Treasury Management Strategy and Prudential Indicators have been requested for a future meeting and the development brief for the former Fire Station in St Neots will be examined when it becomes available.

31. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) - PROGRESS

The Panel has reviewed its programme of studies. The quarterly monitoring report on the Council's performance against its targets, following its consideration by the Corporate Plan Working Group, will be submitted to the December meeting.

32. WORK PLAN STUDIES

The Panel has reviewed its work plan and received details of studies being undertaken by the other Overview and Scrutiny Panels.

33. SCRUTINY

In considering the latest edition of the Decision Digest, Members have clarified their intention in recommending the Cabinet to investigate the possibility of swapping land owned by Huntingdon Town Council for Huntingdon Town Hall.

J D Ablewhite
Chairman