
Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being)

Report of the meeting held on 11th March 2010

Matters for Information

49. ICT STUDY PROPOSAL

The Panel has received a presentation by Dr J Stanley, University of Cambridge, Dr G Briscoe, London School of Economics and J Josephra, Bind Technology on Sustainable Information Communications Technology (ICT) Provision. The Council had been contacted by Dr Stanley with a suggestion for a study into the use of cloud technology as she felt it could have considerable benefits for the Council and for the District.

As part of the presentation, the Panel has been acquainted with common causes of problems with the development of large scale ICT projects, which include being locked into existing contracts and poor initial requirement specifications. Dr Stanley has proposed that an independent governance panel might be established to provide advice on project development before requests for proposals are issued. The long term goal is to create an expanded governance panel taking representation from a number of regional authorities with the aim of creating a knowledge and skills pool and a special skills register.

Having considered the proposals within the presentation, the Panel has decided not to proceed with a study. Members are of the opinion that, given the current financial constraints being faced by the Council they could not justify the employment of consultants to undertake the work that would be required for the governance panel. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that the Council already has strong project management arrangements in place for ICT development.

50. GREAT FEN LOAN

The Panel has been acquainted with the details of a request for a loan from the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and Peterborough for up to £1.2m. The Trust needs the loan to acquire the leasehold of land which will assist in the delivery of the Great Fen Masterplan and the decision on the report is reported under item 76 of the Report of the Cabinet.

In considering the request, the Panel has been informed that the Trust is confident of obtaining sufficient donations and grants over the next few years in order to repay the loan. The Panel has discussed detailed aspects of the loan and as a result, has expressed, concerns relating to the security being offered as part of the loan agreement and suggested that the Wildlife Trust's fund raising plans need to be examined to establish whether they are realistic and achievable. Comments have also been made in relation to the wider principle of making a loan and whether there is a risk that the Council might suffer damage to its reputation either by being a cause of the loss of agricultural land or through the failure of the loan arrangement. In order to reduce this risk the Panel has suggested to the Cabinet that the resolution of the outstanding governance arrangements should be made a condition of the loan.

With regard to the flexible repayment arrangements being sought by the Trust, which will allow for its early repayment, the Panel has concluded that the request for a cap on the maximum level of interest that is payable should not be granted and that alternatives methods of repayment should be explored. Subject to these points and the Director of Commerce & Technology being satisfied with the robustness of the terms and the security offered, the Panel has recommended that the Cabinet approve the loan to the Wildlife Trust.

51. LEISURE CENTRES' INCOME AND EXPENDITURE

As performance monitoring reports in the previous two quarters have indicated that the Council's Leisure Centres have not achieved their financial targets, the Panel has requested and received details of the Leisure Centres' financial performance for the year 2009/10. Members noted that although income is lower than the target, greater savings in the same period mean that the net position represents an overall improvement. However, Members have been advised that, following the introduction by Cambridgeshire County Council of new school sport funding arrangements, income from school bookings will be £80k lower than the previous year but that negotiations to effect a solution to this problem are ongoing.

In discussing individual centres, Members have been advised that capital investment at One Leisure Huntingdon has generated a 26% increase in income and a 13% rise in admissions. With regard to the planned redevelopment of One Leisure St Neots, Members have been informed that research by the in-house marketing team strongly suggests that the new facilities will attract more customers and that the Council's investment will be recouped.

52. PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO THE HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL BUDGET 2010 - 2011

The Panel has received details of proposed amendments to the Budget 2010 – 11, which had been submitted by the Liberal Democrat Group to the full Council meeting on 17th February 2010. The Council referred them to the Panel for consideration. In order to investigate the proposals fully, the Panel has agreed to convene a

special meeting and various additional information has been requested.

53. PERFORMANCE MONITORING

The Panel has considered the Council's performance against its priority objectives in the quarter to 31st December 2009. Members concurred with a suggestion by the Corporate Plan Working Group that the Cabinet should investigate whether there are any opportunities for jointly employing expert staff to avoid the greater costs incurred by using specialist consultants.

Other Matters of Interest

54. FORWARD PLAN

The Panel has been acquainted with details of the current Forward Plan of Key Decisions, which has been prepared by the Leader of the Council. In doing so, Members have asked to see the report on the transfer of the Section 106 asset at Loves Farm prior to its consideration by the Cabinet in June 2010.

J D Ablewhite
Chairman