



HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

ANNUAL REPORT 2009/10

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INTRODUCTION

Following a comprehensive review of its political management structure, in 2009 Huntingdonshire District Council introduced three new Overview and Scrutiny Panels. The new Panels' remits have been designed to reflect the Council's duty to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of the District. This makes explicit the fact that the Panels are able to scrutinise the Council's internal operation together with its partnership working and any other matters affecting the area.

Membership of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Group



Councillor Steve Criswell

Chairman of the Social Well-Being Panel



Councillor Philip Godfrey

Chairman of the Environmental Well-Being Panel



Councillor Jason Ablewhite

Chairman of the Economic Well-Being Panel



Councillor Richard West

Vice - Chairman of the Social Well-Being Panel



Councillor David Harty

Vice - Chairman of the Environmental Well-Being Panel



Councillor Gordon Thorpe

Vice - Chairman of the Economic Well-Being Panel

The Annual Report summarises the Panels' activities over the past year and presents examples of how Scrutiny has contributed to change and service improvements. It also illustrates some of the measures that have been adopted to develop and improve the way Scrutiny works in Huntingdonshire and looks to the future by identifying some of the plans for 2010/11.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY IN HUNTINGDONSHIRE

The Overview and Scrutiny Panels operate in accordance with the four Principles of Good Scrutiny as identified by the Centre for Public Scrutiny, which are:

1. “To provide a ‘critical friend’ challenge to executive policymakers and decision-makers”
 - ❖ Clarity of purpose
 - ❖ Constructive, Robust and Purposeful Challenge
 - ❖ A Constructive Working Relationship with executive colleagues including external bodies
 - ❖ Be open, transparent and inclusive in its actions
2. “Enable the voice and concerns of the public and its community”
 - ❖ Ensuring an ongoing dialogue with the public to create an ‘accountability relationship’
 - ❖ Representing and engaging diverse communities and addressing inequalities where they exist in the district.
 - ❖ Promoting public understanding of the scrutiny role
3. “Independent minded governors’ should lead and own the scrutiny process”
 - ❖ Champions of the value and potential for good public scrutiny as the vehicle for public accountability
 - ❖ Active engagement of non-executive committee members in a scrutiny role
 - ❖ Ensure adequate public accountability and community leadership
4. “Drive improvement in public services”
 - ❖ Promote community wellbeing and improve the quality of life
 - ❖ Harness public concern as a lever for addressing wider issues
 - ❖ Coordinate reviews of policy and service performance in line with strategic objectives

More specifically, the Panels have the tasks of:

- ❖ holding the Cabinet to account;
- ❖ scrutinising decisions, both prior to and after they are made;
- ❖ developing and reviewing policies;
- ❖ monitoring performance; and
- ❖ investigating matters affecting the District.

Overview and Scrutiny continues to present ways in which Members can promote active community leadership and governance as well as addressing the needs of the residents of the District by enabling them to set their own agenda and to take an innovative approach to their work.

In practice this often means they consider and, where necessary question, decisions made by the Cabinet. They also monitor the way services are delivered and make recommendations on new policies or changes to existing policies.

Addressing issues of public concern has been an increasingly important role for the Panels which, for example, has resulted in a public campaign to defend Hinchingsbrooke Hospital against threatened closure.

The Panels meet in public every month, so that people can see what is being done and supporting background information is available in the public domain. The Panels are making access easier by improving the Council's website to enable people to submit their own comments and ideas on the issues being considered.

In the course of 2009/10, between them, the Panels have submitted in the order of 30 reports to the Cabinet. They have also made 23 recommendations on various policy development matters. In addition, one report has been submitted to an external body, which contains seven recommendations for changes. Examples of this work appear in the following paragraphs.

APPOINTMENT OF INDEPENDENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL MEMBERS

Given past challenges experienced in carrying out overview and scrutiny and the opportunities presented by recent legislative changes, a number of options for developing overview and scrutiny were considered in the course of the review of the Council's political management structure. The ability to co-opt independent members on to the Panels offered an exciting opportunity to encourage members of the public to participate directly in Council business. It will also help to promote involvement in local democracy.

Following an extensive recruitment process, both the number of applications received and the quality of applicants applying were extremely high. A total of six individuals have been appointed, two to each of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels. Each of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels now comprise ten elected members plus two co-opted persons.

A co-option scheme was then developed and formally adopted. Although, they do not have voting rights or the right of call-in, the new members will be in a position to make a significant contribution to the Council. They have been appointed for a period of four years, so this is a significant commitment on the part of the Council. This initiative will enable the Council to benefit from the skills and knowledge of individuals that would not otherwise be available to it, whilst at the same promoting local community engagement.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SOCIAL WELL-BEING)

- Councillor Steve Criswell - Chairman
- Councillor Richard West – Vice-Chairman
- Councillor Peter Bucknell (part)
- Councillor Mrs Kendal Cooper
- Mr Roger Coxhead
- Councillor Paul Dakers (part)
- Councillor John Davies
- Councillor Jeff Dutton (part)
- Councillor John Garner
- Councillor Ms Patricia Jordan
- Councillor Peter Mitchell
- Councillor A Monk (part)
- Mrs Moira Nicholas
- Councillor John Sadler

Car Parking at Hinchingsbrooke Hospital

The Social Well-Being Panel has focussed on a study into car parking at Hinchingsbrooke Hospital. The study was proposed by the Chairman of the Panel following representations on this subject to him and other Huntingdonshire District Council members.

In the course of the study, the Panel took evidence from a range of sources, including Mr C Plunkett, Hinchingsbrooke Hospital's Facilities Business Manager, and representatives of Cambridgeshire Local Involvement Network.

A report on the Panel's findings has been submitted to the Hospital for consideration. Although the Hospital has not gone as far as the Panel would have wished in respect of the main recommendation regarding charging levels, the minimum period of stay has been reduced. A range of other recommendations also appear in the final report and these will be considered by the Hospital and Members are hopeful that they will be adopted.

The Provision of Play Facilities in Huntingdonshire

The Social Well-Being Panel has also completed a study into the provision of play facilities in Huntingdonshire. The 2008 Place Survey reveals that Huntingdonshire residents consider the provision of activities for young people to be the highest priority area in need of improvement in the District. For this reason the Panel has made a number of recommendations designed to secure the future of existing facilities and create conditions to encourage others to invest in providing new ones.

The recommendations have been put to the Cabinet and, as a result, the Council is to investigate the potential benefits of co-ordinating insurance and inspection schemes on behalf of Town and Parish Councils.

Petition

The Panel has received a petition from local residents on disturbance from the park at Hill Rise, St Ives caused by anti-social drivers late at night. Having referred the issue to the Community Safety Partnership, it was discussed at the local neighbourhood forum.

The Panel then was able to endorse proposals to address residents' concerns including making the area a police priority, introducing zero tolerance towards anti-social use of vehicles in the Park, the issue of Fixed Penalty Notices to those that are found to be using their vehicles anti-socially and the installation of speed-humps CCTV within the park. Residents expressed themselves satisfied with this outcome and this matter will be revisited in the autumn.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ENVIRONMENTAL WELL-BEING)

- Councillor Philip Godfrey - Chairman
- Councillor David Harty – Vice-Chairman
- Councillor Michael Baker
- Councillor Keith Baker
- Councillor Mrs Madhabi Banerjee
- Councillor Peter Downes OBE
- Councillor Jeff Dutton (part)
- Councillor Peter Godley
- Mr David Hopkins
- Councillor Miss S Kemp (part)
- Councillor Andy Monk (part)
- Councillor Michael Newman
- Mr Mike Phillips
- Councillor John Watt

Development Management Processes

The Environmental Well-Being Panel has put most of its energy into a detailed study of the Council's Development Management processes. Arising from anecdotal evidence of public concern over the pre-decision planning process, the Panel decided to look at the practices and procedures from first enquiry by potential applicants to the preparation of an officer's final report and recommendations, involving pre-application advice, public consultation, plans and amendments, duration of the process and other related matters.

Evidence was taken from a range of sources such as Town and Parish Councils, members of the public who have experience of the process, local developers and Ombudsman investigations.

The outcome was that charging developers for pre-submission advice will be investigated, relevant consultees and neighbours will be consulted again on amended plans, except for those of very minor significance, steps will be taken to ensure that all of those households that abut a development site be sent a consultation letter, training will be provided for town and parish councils on all aspects of the development management process; consideration will be given to allowing external speakers to respond to what they perceive to be factually incorrect information and the Council will take a robust approach concerning the retention of development where permission is subsequently refused.

Charges for Car Parking

The Environmental Well-Being Panel has made use of its ability to call-in decisions in relation to proposals to extend the scope of the charges the Council makes for off-street parking. Having already discussed this matter with Councillor D Dew, the Executive Councillor for Planning Strategy and Transport, the Panel felt that insufficient weight had been given to its views and formally invited Councillor Dew to return to expand on their case.

The formal procedures to implement a new car parking order are proceeding and the Panels views will be submitted as part of the consultation process.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING)

- Councillor Jason Ablewhite - Chairman
- Councillor Gordon Thorpe - Vice-Chairman
- Councillor John Bell
- Councillor Eric Butler
- Councillor Mrs Julie Dew
- Councillor Andrew Gilbert
- Mr Roger Hall
- Councillor Lawrence McGuire
- Mrs Helen Roberts
- Councillor Michael Shellens
- Councillor Ms Mandy Thomas
- Councillor Richard Tuplin

Budget and Financial Planning

The Economic Well-Being Panel has primarily been occupied with scrutinising the Council's budget and future financial planning, the outcome of which has meant that it has been possible to endorse the proposed Budget, Medium Term Plan, Financial Plan and Council Tax for 2010/11.

Treasury Management

Importantly, given recent events concerning the economy and banking, the Panel has accepted responsibility for scrutinising the Council's treasury management.

Open System Computing

The Panel has considered a suggestion by a local resident that the Council might investigate the potential benefits of open system computing to itself and the local community. The suggestion was looked at with a research fellow from Cambridge University and her colleagues who are experts in the field. The likely cost of the consultants required to make the transition to open system computing meant it has not been possible to pursue it any further.

Leisure Centres' Financial Performance

Through its role in holding the Executive to account the Panel has monitored the Council's performance against its stated priorities. The Panel has highlighted concerns that the leisure centres' financial targets were not being met and asked for a detailed appraisal to be undertaken. This revealed that although income in 2009/10 was lower than the target greater savings meant

that the net position represented an overall improvement in the centres' financial performance

The Panel has suggested that the Council should take steps to promote the fact that this is the result of the Council's investments in its facilities.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY IN HUNTINGDONSHIRE IN 2010/11

The composition of the Panels changes every year and they set their own Agenda so, to a large extent, the work programmes will be determined at the first few meetings in the new Municipal Year. All of the Panels, however, have ongoing work with which to continue.

The Environmental Well-Being Panel has given initial thought to a study on the rural economy, with particular emphasis on farming. The suggestion is that this could be done in conjunction with Overview and Scrutiny colleagues from South Cambs District Council.

The Social Well-Being Panel has recently adopted a role monitoring the progress of S106 agreements for the maintenance of play equipment and open space. A number of schemes have not been implemented despite being agreed some time ago. The Panel will investigate why this is the case.

The Economic Well-Being Panel has identified a potentially important area of work while reviewing the findings of a previous study into the consequences of alcohol consumption for the health of the local population. The rate of alcohol-specific hospital admissions for under 18s is higher in Huntingdonshire than in other areas of the Eastern region so this will be investigated further.

An important new role for the Panels will be Scrutiny of the Council's work in conjunction with its partners. A programme of training involving Overview and Scrutiny and the Strategic Partnership has been devised as has a protocol through which this work will be undertaken. It is stressed that this will be approached in a constructive way and will extend further the Panels' influence.