

Decision Digest

Edition 104

Monthly summary of the decisions taken at meetings of the Council, Cabinet, Overview & Scrutiny and other Panels for the period 25 March to 20 May 2010.

HUNTINGDONSHIRE COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has scrutinised the work of the Huntingdonshire Community Safety Partnership, which is a requirement under the Police and Criminal Justice Act 2006. The Partnership was established in response to the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, and aims to reduce crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour within the District. A number of strategic links have been established by the Partnership, particularly to the Huntingdonshire Strategic Partnership (HSP) and other District and County-wide groups. The Panel has acknowledged the complexity of the way in which the Partnership is required to operate to meet the challenges faced by the District and has concluded that it is effective in its work.

The Panel has reviewed the Huntingdonshire Community Safety Plan 2010-11 and Members have been advised that a Strategic Assessment is conducted each year to inform the priorities that are included within the Plan. A number of matters have been discussed,

including the publication of crime statistics, the contribution made by all Partners to the work of the Partnership, various projects/initiatives undertaken and the role of the two Anti-Social Behaviour Case Workers.

The Panel has expressed their satisfaction that the Partnership has appropriate monitoring and accountability mechanisms in place. Additionally, the Panel has been reminded of the programme of events designed to assist all Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels in complying with the duty to scrutinise the HSP.

PROVISION OF PLAY FACILITIES WORKING GROUP

The final report of the Provision of Play Facilities Working Group has been submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). Investigations have been undertaken into a number of areas associated with operating play facilities, the inspection of facilities for maintenance purposes, Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents inspections and the costs associated with these activities.

A number of recommendations arising from the Working Group's investigations have been endorsed by the Panel, which are intended to ensure that there is adequate provision of facilities for teenagers in Huntingdonshire. Owing to the current financial pressures on the Council, the Panel has decided that the feasibility of introducing a maintenance agreement should be investigated by the Cabinet in which responsibility for meeting Town facilities' revenue costs should be divided between the District Council, Town Councils and users before consideration is given to extending the Council's own commitments.

In discussing these recommendations the Cabinet concurred with the Panel that further research into the availability of group insurance schemes with the aim of achieving a lower insurance premium and the feasibility of combining safety inspections should be investigated further. However, in discussing the suggestions on the future revenue funding of play equipment, the Cabinet has agreed not to take any action in respect of the Panel's proposed formula for the maintenance of play equipment. Executive Councillors are of the opinion that the provision and management of local play facilities should be undertaken at a local level by local parish councils and community organisations and that the District Council role should be confined to strategic, district wide initiatives and advising on opportunities for funding.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE HEALTH AND ADULT SOCIAL CARE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Councillor R J West has drawn the Overview and Scrutiny Panel's (Social Well-Being) attention to issues surrounding mental health and the inequalities in service provision that exist within the District. A Working Group has therefore been appointed by the Committee to investigate dementia services, to which Councillor West has been appointed.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SOCIAL WELL-BEING) – PROGRESS

In respect of parking at Hinchingsbrooke Hospital, Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) have requested that the Hospital's Business Facilities Manager be invited to a future meeting to report upon the Senior Executive Group's final decisions on the Panel's concluding report and the recommendations contained within it. Whilst a decision on the car parking charges has already been made to reduce the minimum length of stay of £2 for 2 hours, the Panel's other recommendations are still subject to consideration by the Executive Group at a future meeting.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2000: FORWARD PLAN

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has requested sight of items entitled Home Improvement Agency Review –

Future Delivery Model and Homelessness Strategy prior to their consideration by the Cabinet.

COVERT SURVEILLANCE POLICY – RIPA

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has received a joint presentation by Mr W Smalley, the Council's Solicitor and Mr N Jennings, Fraud Manager, on the use of covert surveillance by the District Council.

As part of the presentation, the Panel has been acquainted with the background to the use of covert surveillance by local authorities and the scope of its use for the prevention of crime and disorder. The Panel has also received details of the policy employed by the District Council, including the authorisation procedure and the reporting and record keeping arrangements in place. The Panel has noted that the Council's use of covert surveillance is low, that overt surveillance was used whenever possible and covert surveillance only used as a last resort.

The Fraud Manager has provided information on the ways in which surveillance is used within the Benefits division, together with the outcomes of benefit fraud investigations in recent years. The Panel has been advised that there had been 35 authorisations since the introduction of the regulations, 2 of which had taken place in the previous year. Members have been informed that covert surveillance was a valuable tool which, in addition to supporting or refuting allegations of benefit fraud, was

used to identify weaknesses in the Council's systems.

Having considered the content of the presentation, the Panel has commented on the cost of intensive training for authorising officers compared to the small number of authorisations that were made. Questions have also been raised as to whether noise monitoring was effective when targets had to be informed that such action was being undertaken and the role of the Communications Commissioner.

In discussing the investigation of potential benefit fraud, the Panel has queried whether the evidence obtained might be weakened by not undertaking surveillance of suspects throughout the night and has also commented that use should be made of the local press to publicise the outcome of successful prosecutions for benefit fraud as a deterrent to others.

REQUEST FOR A LOAN TO THE WILDLIFE TRUST FOR BEDFORDSHIRE, CAMBRIDGESHIRE, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE AND PETERBOROUGH - FEEDBACK

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel Economic Well-Being has received a report outlining the conclusions of the Cabinet in respect of a request for a loan to the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and Peterborough. The Panel noted that the Cabinet had agreed with their earlier conclusions on the matter.

STANDARDS COMPLAINTS

Information has been provided to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) outlining the financial costs incurred by the Council in dealing with complaints against District and Parish Councillors since the responsibility for dealing with complaints was transferred to local authorities from Standards for England in May 2008.

Having considered the information provided, which included an estimate of the time spent by the Monitoring Officer and his deputy on standards related matters, the Panel has expressed their disapproval at the imposition of this significant area of work without additional funding from the government.

The Panel has also discussed the sanctions which could be imposed upon individuals found to have acted inappropriately under the Code of Conduct, the mechanisms by which details of cases were circulated to Parish Councils and the outsourcing of investigations to an external investigator because of staff capacity within the Council. In respect of the latter, the Panel has noted that the use of a former employee with experience in the subject matter has been significantly cheaper than the alternatives

PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING ENFORCEMENT: THE CRIMINAL LAW ACT 1977 AND THE PROTECTION FROM HARASSMENT ACT 1997

The Cabinet has authorised the Director of Environmental and

Community Services to appoint Officers to enforce the provisions of the Criminal Law Act 1977 and the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 when dealing with allegations of harassment and illegal eviction in the private housing sector. Eight to ten reports of such cases are reported each year but at present, the Council does not have the necessary powers to undertake investigations and prosecute offenders. The new powers will enable Officers to regain possession of a property on a tenant's behalf enabling them to reside there until the correct legal procedures for possession have been followed. The changes will not have any financial implications for the Council.

GROWING SUCCESS

The Cabinet has considered the performance of the authority against its priority objectives in the quarter to 31st December 2009 which are defined in "Growing Success" - the Council's Corporate Plan. At the same time, the Cabinet has approved the revised targets, objectives and measures for 2010/2011.

HOUSING AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFITS, ANTI-FRAUD STRATEGY AND PROSECUTION POLICY

In approving the contents of a revised Benefit Fraud Strategy and Policy the Cabinet has authorised staff within the Fraud Team to undertake investigations in fraud affecting Local Taxation and Housing Services and to report to

the relevant Head of Service on their findings.

CHEQUERS COURT, PLANNING BRIEF, SUPPLEMENTARY DOCUMENT

The contents of the planning brief for Chequers Court in Huntingdon has been approved by the Cabinet as a Supplementary Planning Document. The brief sets out the vision for the redevelopment of the area so that developers will be fully aware of what is expected of them in the preparation of more detailed proposals.

GREAT FEN MASTERPLAN

The Overview and Scrutiny (Environmental Well-Being) Panel has received a report on the Great Fen Masterplan which has been approved by the Project Steering Committee. Members have been informed that further detailed work will be undertaken to produce action plans by the partners and that it is for the partners to satisfy themselves as to the business and financial planning aspects of the Great Fen on which they will be leading. The Panel have agreed to a suggestion that a site visit to the Great Fen be convened with representatives of partner groups and the Project Manager present to enable Members to review how the land is being managed and to discuss the project with partners.

The contents of a revised Masterplan for the Great Fen has been considered by the Cabinet. The Masterplan is a spatial plan that indicates how the project might be developed by the partner

organisations. The document was the subject of extensive consultation with interested parties prior to its approval by the Project Partners.

FINANCIAL MONITORING

The Head of Financial Services has drawn to the Cabinet's attention variations to the approved Capital Programme and spending variations in the revenue budget for the current year. Having noted that savings in the revenue budget are likely to be achieved which will enable the contribution to the special reserve to be increased to the sum of £1.6m, the Cabinet has approved its transfer on the closure of the account.

PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT FOR ICT DEVELOPMENT WITHIN CAMBRIDGESHIRE

The principle of entering into an Information Management and Technology Partnership alongside Cambridgeshire County Council, Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service, Fenland District Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council has been approved by the Cabinet. The purpose of the Partnership is to oversee a number of Cambridgeshire ICT projects including the procurement of the Cambridgeshire Public Sector Network which aims to extend the scope of the shared infrastructure and the "Tell Us Once" Initiative which concentrates on the sharing of information.

LAND AT CEMETERY ROAD, ST. NEOTS

The Cabinet has approved the transfer of land at Cemetery Road, St. Neots to St. Neots Town Council. The Urban District Council of St. Neots acquired the land in 1933 for the purpose of a burial ground. However as a result of local government organisation in 1974 the land became invested to Huntingdonshire District Council and the land was never formally transferred. The terms of the transfer will ensure that the land is used for cemetery purposes only.

WESTERN LINK ROAD, HUNTINGDON

The Cabinet has authorised the Director of Central Services, after consultation with the Executive Councillors for Finance and for Resources and Policy, to approve the terms for the acquisition of properties required for the implementation of the Western Link Road, Huntingdon. The road will improve traffic movements on the ring road and will open up land for new development. The acquisition of properties is subject to an assessment that demonstrates there is minimal risk to the Council.

DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT PROCESS

The Development Management Panel has considered the report of the Working Group appointed by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) to investigate the process for the determination of planning

applications. Of the recommendations made by the Working Group, the Panel were aware that these either had been largely implemented or were being considered further by the Development Management Division. Above all, the Panel concurred with the conclusion that it was essential to establish an ongoing programme of training and assistance to town and parish councils. The Working Group were commended for their endeavours and the quality of their final report.

PROPOSED S106 AGREEMENT - RAF UPWOOD, RAMSEY

In the event that the Secretary of State determines following the current appeal hearing, that proposed development at RAF Upwood should proceed, the Development Management Panel has, following support by the S106 Agreement Advisory Group, authorised the Head of Law, Property and Governance to enter into an appropriate S106 Agreement for the development.

TOWN CENTRE REGENERATION, HUNTINGDON

The Cabinet has approved in principle the making of a Compulsory Purchase Order to acquire land required for the construction of a multi-storey car park as part of the redevelopment of Chequers Court, Huntingdon. In authorising the Director of Environmental and Community Services to undertake the necessary preparatory work, Executive Councillors have requested that a

further report be submitted to Cabinet on the cost implications of serving the CPO. The redevelopment of Chequers Court is an important element of the overall regeneration of Huntingdon town centre.