

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) held in CIVIC SUITE, PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON PE29 3TN on Thursday, 15 July 2010.

- PRESENT: Councillor J D Ablewhite – Chairman.
- Councillors J T Bell, E R Butler, Mrs J A Dew, Hall, Roberts, M F Shellens, Ms M J Thomas, G S E Thorpe and D M Tysoe.
- Mrs H Roberts and Mr R Hall.
- APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors S Greenall and N J Guyatt.
- IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor B S Chapman.

17. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 10th June 2010 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

18. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor G S E Thorpe declared a personal and prejudicial interest in Minute No. 21 by virtue of his membership of St Neots Town Council and left the meeting for the duration of the discussion on this item.

19. 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 July to 31st October 2010. Members decided that they did not wish to consider the outcome of the consultation on the Council's political leadership arrangements.

20. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED

that the public be excluded from the meeting because the business to be transacted contains exempt information relating to the financial or business affairs of the authority.

21. FORMER FIRE STATION SITE AND WASTE RECYCLING CENTRE, HUNTINGDON STREET, ST NEOTS

(Councillor B S Chapman, Ward Councillor for St Neots Priory Park was in attendance for this item).

The Panel considered a report by the Head of Law, Property and Governance (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) containing details of applications received for the leasehold of land at the former fire station site and waste recycling centre, Huntingdon Street, St Neots. By way of introduction, the Panel were advised that the Cabinet had approved a planning brief earlier in 2010 and that, following marketing, four bids had been received. The bids had been assessed in accordance with the selection criteria.

The Panel commented on the difficulties encountered by small businesses in preparing bids for contracts and on the timing of the decision to enter into a lease given current market conditions.

Councillor B S Chapman addressed the Panel as Ward Councillor. He drew attention to similar developments in other areas and the nature of the involvement of the local authority in their delivery.

In discussing the merits of the bids, the Panel focussed on their financial terms, the potential benefits they would bring and the degree to which they complied with the planning brief. Members acknowledged that a balance had to be struck between these factors and suggested that the Cabinet should be provided with further information for consideration as part of their deliberations.

With regard to the recommendations contained within the report and having regard to the importance of achieving the objectives within the planning brief, suggestions were made in relation to terms and conditions for inclusion in any future agreement. Whereupon it was

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be recommended to

- i. proceed with the scheme to develop the Former Fire Station and Waste Recycling Site in Huntingdon Street, St Neots as proposed subject to additional information being provided on the bids that have been received;
- ii. include the construction of a cinema in the agreement with the successful bidder; and
- iii. make the agreement conditional on the release of the necessary land by St Neots Town Council.

22. RE-ADMITTANCE OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED

that the public be re-admitted to the meeting.

23. ANNUAL REPORT ON ORGANISATIONS SUPPORTED BY GRANTS VIA SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENTS

(Councillor A Hansard, Executive Councillor for Housing and Public Health was in attendance for this item).

Pursuant to Minute No. 09/ 20, the Panel considered a report by the Head of Environmental and Community Health Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) containing details of the performance of voluntary organisations in Huntingdonshire who received funding from the Council via service level agreements. By way of introduction, Councillor Hansard reminded the Panel of the Cabinet's decision in 2007 to move from a system of open applications for grant aid to a commissioning model and introduce agreements, with one exception, for a 5 year period.

The Council's Community Manager, Mr D Smith, then outlined the background to the current performance framework, which was designed to link the funding provided to local organisations to the priorities set out in the Council's Corporate Plan – Growing Success and the objectives of the Cambridgeshire Local Area Agreement. Information was also provided with regard to the management of the agreements and Members were informed that all organisations were monitored against a set of agreed performance indicators and other organisational criteria on a quarterly basis. Members' attention was also drawn to the only indicator where the performance target had not been achieved in the previous year, which related to the provision of a Shopmobility service in St Ives in 2009/10. This was the result of funding not being secured.

Discussion ensued on the terms of the agreements between the District Council and voluntary organisations. Members queried whether consideration would be given to moving to three year agreements, particularly in light of the ongoing Government Spending Review. In response, the Community Manager drew attention to recent proposals by Cambridgeshire County Council and NHS Cambridgeshire to introduce a single funding agreement for the Councils of Voluntary Services across Cambridgeshire. Members were also advised that under the proposals three year agreements were the standard length of agreement but the model developed by the District Council had been identified as a good practice model by both District Audit and Go-East. The use of three year agreements would be considered when the negotiations took place on their renewal.

With regard to performance indicators within the report, comment was made on the number of cases dealt with by the Disability Information Service Huntingdonshire in the previous year. Members were advised that the reduction in the number of cases dealt with was not the result of reduced demand and could be attributed to the adverse weather conditions in the early part of the year. Comment was made on the success of some organisations in securing additional funding and whether this provided an opportunity for a reduction in the District Council's funding. In response, Members were advised that whilst the levels of funding involved could be re-negotiated at the end of the current agreements, the District Council's funding was used to cover core costs and it was likely that the organisations would be unable to

attract additional funding should this be withdrawn. Following a question concerning the validity of the performances reported, the Community Manager explained that targets were based on performance in the previous three years and all targets were increased by 10% each year. In the event that organisations consistently underperformed, the Council retained the option to terminate agreements. Having noted that a number of voluntary organisations were instrumental in helping the Council to achieve some of its objectives, it was

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report be noted.

24. CUSTOMER SERVICES

(Councillor T V Rogers, Executive Councillor for Finance and Customer Services was in attendance for this item).

Pursuant to Minute No. 10/06, the Panel received a presentation by Ms M Greet, the Council's Customer Services Manager, on the development of Customer Services within the District Council. By way of introduction, the Panel were advised of the background to the establishment of the Council's Contact and Customer Services Centres, the range of services currently provided and statistical information on customer enquiries. Information was also provided on customer feedback, staffing requirements during fluctuations in demand for services and the challenges facing Customer Services.

The Customer Services Manager outlined the savings that Customer Services had achieved, the additional work that had been absorbed at no extra cost and a series of options for future service provision together with the savings that these might achieve. Members noted that Officers would continue to review the service to achieve savings.

Councillor T V Rogers referred to the importance of Customer Services to the delivery of the Council's services and the need to maintain current customer interface standards. The Panel discussed the extent to which back office costs might be shared with other authorities and, specifically, whether there was any potential to provide a customer services function on behalf of other authorities. The Customer Services Manager explained that such a move had not been explored. The Head of Customer Services then drew attention to the implications of changes to housing benefit legislation, which would come into force in 2013 and were likely to create a number of challenges for the service.

Arising from the presentation, a question was asked on new requirements relating to data security and the impact they might have on the way the Council provided its services. In response the Head of Customer Services explained that the need to achieve the standard required by the Code of Connection posed a number of problems for the authority with regard to remote access and home workers. Having been advised of the likely cost to the Authority of complying with the standard and in noting that the Authority was to be inspected in October 2010, Councillor Rogers reported that representations had

been made to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government that the inspection should be delayed to enable further work to be undertaken.

Following a question about the contingency arrangements, which were in place to tackle sickness levels within the service, the Panel were informed that service provision was augmented by a small number of contract workers who were employed during peak periods. Members noted that advisors at all locations had responded well to high demand. However, by providing cover during absences, some advisers were accruing high levels of flexitime. In the longer term, there would be a need to consider issues relating to staff recruitment and retention.

Consideration also was given to the Customer Service Quarterly Performance Report for the period April to June 2010 (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). Members noted the levels of performance and standards achieved by the Service. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report and the information presented be noted.

25. RISK REGISTER

(Councillor T V Rogers, Executive Councillor for Finance and Customer Services was in attendance for this item).

Pursuant to Minute No. 09/101, the Panel considered a report by the Audit and Risk Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) containing details of changes made to the Risk Register in the period 1st September 2009 to 28th February 2010. The report had been requested at a previous meeting when it had been noted that 44 new entries onto the Register had been made during this period.

By way of introduction, the Council's Audit and Risk Manager, Mr D Harwood, outlined the background to the establishment of Risk Register, a copy of which appeared on the Council's Intranet. Members were advised of the process by which significant operational risks were added to the Register and noted that this was reviewed on a quarterly basis by Heads of Service. Having regard to the 44 new entries made in the previous period, the Audit and Risk Manager explained that this was the first period during which Activity Managers had been asked to identify risks and it was for this reason that more had been identified. Members were advised that those risks which had been identified as having high residual risk, together with the options available to manage their likelihood of occurring and severity, would be considered by the Cabinet at their next meeting.

The Panel discussed specific risks identified within the report. With regard to the high risk relating to the appropriateness of investment decisions, Members were advised that it was inevitable that investments involving large sums of money would always be considered a risk and the Head of Financial Services outlined the

measures which had been taken to mitigate the risks. Following a question on whether the budgetary savings which had been announced at the Council meeting in June would create any degree of risk for the Authority, Members were informed that the options for savings currently were subject to public consultation and that the Risk Management Team would consider proposals for savings as they emerged.

Having discussed the method of assessment and classification of individual risks and the cost of the software employed to monitor them, suggestions were made for changes to the way the information within the report was presented. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report be noted.

(Councillor Mrs J A Dew left the meeting part way through this item and Councillor E Butler left at its conclusion).

26. STRATEGIC / PARTNERSHIP SCRUTINY

(a) JOINT SCRUTINY

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 were acquainted with recent developments concerning joint scrutiny between the Cambridgeshire Councils. Members were advised that Cambridgeshire Scrutiny Officers were due to discuss this matter at their next scheduled meeting and the Scrutiny and Review Manager invited comments from Members on the proposals.

Having been advised of the comments made by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) who had been broadly supportive of the proposals provided that no additional organisational structures would be created, that savings could be clearly identified and that matters were addressed on an issue by issue basis, Members acknowledged that joint scrutiny was the best way that some services could be effectively scrutinised.

Having expressed their support for the principle of joint scrutiny and emphasised the need for any new arrangements to operate efficiently, Members endorsed the comments made by the Overview and Scrutiny (Social Well-Being).

(b) SCRUTINY OF PARTNERSHIPS

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 considered their approach to scrutinising the partnerships in which the Council was involved.

Members were reminded that the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 placed a duty on the Council to scrutinise the Local Strategic Partnership and of the role that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) had in this work.

Having been advised that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) had requested further information in relation to the thematic groups within their remit, it was agreed that the Economic Well-Being Panel would consider the Action Plan of the Economic Prosperity and Skills thematic group and its regular monitoring report on performance against the Action Plan.

27. WORKPLAN

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

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

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) reviewing progress of matters that had previously been discussed. Members were informed that Councillor G S E Thorpe had requested further information on the use of S106 money for transport schemes in St Neots and that the Scrutiny and Review Manager would discuss the scheduling of waste collection rounds and the promotion of the use of re-useable nappies directly with Mrs H Roberts.

29. SCRUTINY

The Panel received and noted the latest edition of the Council's Decision Digest. Following a suggestion by Mrs H Roberts, Members requested details of the measures the Council took to protect the data it held on the District's residents.

Chairman