
Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being)

**Report of the meetings held on 13th July and
14th September 2010**

Matters for Information

10. THE GREAT FEN

Following a tour of the Great Fen which was hosted by Project partners, the Panel has been reminded that the Council has entered into a five year agreement with a £20,000 per annum contribution towards project management costs. Members have been advised that the collaboration agreement is renewable after five years, although the income from the 4,700 acres owned by the project will assure its future should the agreement not be renewed. Members have been informed that the Council has a broader interest than other partners and will benefit by having influence over the project's future. The Panel has noted that the Council's involvement has played a major part in enabling the project to secure lottery funding.

Having regard to plans for a visitor centre, Members have been advised that a temporary information point at Halfway Farm will be opened later in the year while plans for a permanent centre that can be extended and adapted as visitor numbers increase is developed.

The Panel found the visit and opportunity to meet representatives of Project Partners to be very useful in understanding the long term aims and structure of the partnership and has welcomed an offer by the Director of Environmental and Community Health Services for updates to be presented to the Panel at six monthly intervals on progress.

11. CIVIL PARKING ENFORCEMENT

The Panel has considered a report outlining the options open to the Council for pursuing civil parking enforcement (CPE) in a co-ordinated approach as encouraged by the Department for Transport. The potential for a county-wide CPE operation has been discussed between the County and District Councils and various service delivery options have been considered.

Members have been informed that while there is a general view that better enforcement, particularly with respect to on-street parking, would be beneficial, further work is required regarding the financial impact on the authority before any decisions can be taken regarding

the concept of extending CPE. This would also be subject to an application to Government for the delegation of the necessary powers.

Members have been reminded that the enforcement of both charged and non-charged car parks is currently carried out by the Council's street ranger service along with small areas of charged on-street parking managed via an agency agreement with the County Council. It is likely that a move to CPE within Huntingdonshire will result in a need to significantly increase on-street parking charges which could have an effect in increasing the demand for off-street parking provision. Conversely it could have implications for the cost effectiveness of the street ranger service.

Members have been acquainted with the different scenarios available, with the County Council indicating their preference for managing both on and off-street arrangements which will have the potential drawback of requiring the transfer of some district council staff. The Panel has been advised that whichever method of administration is adopted, the difference in terms of income will be an approximate loss of £37,000, although this might be offset by the potential for increased revenue for the District Council from the increased use of off-street car parks.

The Panel therefore has recommended that the Cabinet supports the continuation of negotiations with the County Council regarding the possible introduction of CPE in Huntingdonshire.

12. PUBLIC CONVENIENCES

The Panel has considered a report providing an update on the Council's position with regard to public conveniences following the submission of petitions in response to the Council's decision to reduce expenditure on their maintenance. Members have been reminded that the decision to close the public conveniences or transfer maintenance to the town councils was taken by the Council when the budget was approved for the current year.

The Panel was updated on the position with regard to the implementation of the Council's decision. Of the nine public conveniences owned and maintained by the Council, with the exception of those at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park and Paxton Pits Visitor Centres, some of the conveniences in St. Neots are being transferred to the town council with the District Council continuing to maintain the facilities at St. Ives and Huntingdon Bus Stations. The other facilities have been closed as the town councils have been unwilling to accept a transfer in responsibility. The only exception is a temporary facility at Ramsey funded by the town council pending the redevelopment of the Grand Cinema site.

The Executive Councillor for Environment and Information Technology has reminded Members that facilities are not funded by the District Council elsewhere in Huntingdonshire, with public conveniences having been removed from the larger villages some

years previously. Attention has been drawn to the facilities available in public buildings and retail outlets in the market towns and the view has been reiterated that the Cabinet feels that the provision of public conveniences is best dealt with at a local level by town and parish councils. The Executive Councillor has indicated that he is prepared for staff to facilitate negotiations with venues to make facilities available to the public, on the understanding that any financial incentive has to be provided by the town and parish councils concerned. As ward councillor, Councillor C Hyams has acquainted the Panel with details of complaints he has received in respect of the closure of the public conveniences in Godmanchester and he has suggested that other cost-cutting measures should be considered prior to the closure of the public conveniences.

The Panel's attention had been drawn to the receipt of three petitions from the Huntingdon Shopmobility and residents of Godmanchester and Ramsey about the closure of public conveniences in those towns. However the Panel did not consider that any new information or evidence was contained in the petitions which was not available when the budget was set by the Council for the current year. Under the circumstances, the Panel did not consider that the earlier decisions on closure or transfer should be revisited.

Nevertheless the Panel requested the Cabinet to consider the possibility of exploring a package of help and guidance to town and parish councils to enable them to provide conveniences available for use by the public if they choose to do so.

13. JOINT SCRUTINY

The Panel has been acquainted with recent developments concerning the introduction of the greater joint scrutiny between Cambridgeshire Councils.

In considering the benefits that can be derived by focusing on a geographic basis, linking scrutiny to leadership of place and the key outcomes of importance to local communities, the Panel has agreed that the scrutiny of subject areas should be adopted which would involve greater multi-agency working as opposed to focusing on services provided by the District Council.

14. REVOCATION OF THE REGIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY

The Panel has considered a report on the revocation of the Regional Spatial Strategy and the implications for strategic planning locally. Members have been reminded that Huntingdonshire remains very much at the forefront in terms of the delivery of the sustainable growth strategy for Cambridgeshire and the sub-region which is reflected in the Council's Core Strategy.

The Panel was encouraged to note that the District Council is one of a minority of local planning authorities in the Region that has an adopted Core Strategy which sets out a positive and robust framework to deliver sustainable development. Moreover the Strategy

has been tested at a public inquiry and found by a Planning Inspector to be sound. The Panel is pleased that the ambitious targets for development in Huntingdonshire mooted by the defunct East of England Regional Assembly for the review of the East of England Plan to 2031 have now been abandoned. However Members have noted that, with guidance from the Secretary of State calling for local planning authorities to identify a fifteen years supply of land for housing, the Core Strategy which extends until 2026 may soon need to be re-visited.

Issues that remain a concern to Members are the need for employment provision to cater for the housing growth and infrastructure improvements in advance of developments taking place. Members have drawn particular attention to the A428 which is under increasing pressure from housing development in St. Neots.

The Panel has welcomed the apparent change in direction over the provision of gypsy and traveller sites which will enable the District Council to assess its own need for additional pitches as opposed to this being determined regionally. Having been informed by the Executive Councillor for Planning Strategy and Transport that further guidance will be awaited before progressing with the gypsy and traveller site DPD, the Panel has suggested that the Cabinet should make a public announcement on the present situation having regard to the magnitude of the public response to the recent SHLAA exercise on the identification of potential sites.

The Panel requested that the Cabinet note their support for the recommendations within the report and consider their comments as part of its deliberations on the revocation of the Regional Spatial Strategy.

15. COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION

Councillor J Davies has addressed the Panel on his concerns over the scale and timing of the felling of a large number of trees on the former St. Ives Golf Course and along Houghton Road, St. Ives in advance of the residential development which is to take place on the site. He also drew attention to instances elsewhere where developers have felled trees in advance of obtaining permission. As the loss of mature trees was of concern to many people, Councillor Davies asked if improvements could be made in the way that the Council dealt with the problem, either by more rigorous enforcement or by means of improved communication with land owners, developers and the public generally.

Having regard to the particular development at St. Ives Golf Course, the Panel has been advised that it was made clear before permission was granted for development at this site that a significant number of trees would be lost, although they should not have been felled in the nesting season. The Head of Planning Services has confirmed that no trees have been removed from the site without prior permission and that re-planting will be required under the planning permission, with other trees protected by conditions attached to the permission.

The Panel has accepted that unauthorised works to trees is an issue within Huntingdonshire which is exacerbated by the smallness of the team in the Planning Division. While commending the work of the officers in the Team and those involved in the parish planting scheme, the Panel suggested that that a strategy for the retention and planting of trees would be of assistance in raising the profile of this issue and encouraging good practice and public awareness.

Having been advised by the Executive Councillor for Planning Strategy and Transport that work on such a strategy has commenced and that Member involvement would be welcome, Councillors Banerjee, Davies and Godfrey have agreed to form a Working Group to work with the Tree Officers for this purpose.

16. CARBON MANAGEMENT UPDATE

The Panel has considered a report providing an update on progress against the targets set in the Carbon Management Plan. The Panel has been pleased to note that the District Council is on course to meet the 10:10 Campaign objectives with an 11% reduction in carbon emissions and a 9% reduction in energy costs being achieved over the past year. Members have been advised that works are ongoing to determine which efficiency saving measures are the most appropriate for each District Council site to ensure the most cost-effective systems are put into place.

Although Members have agreed that the progress made against targets in the Carbon Management Plan is encouraging, the Panel has questioned the energy efficiency of Pathfinder House. The Executive Councillor for Environment and Information Technology has advised that the Environmental Management Team are assuming responsibility for the management of the premises and a report on the performance of the building is due to be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny (Economic Well-Being) Panel in October.

Having regard to the Green House Project, the Panel has been advised that a provisional launch date for the opening of the properties has been set for 29th October 2010 which coincides with National Energy Saving Week. A visit to the properties for members of the Overview and Scrutiny (Environmental Well-Being) Panel will be arranged in due course.

17. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

The Council's performance against the environmental well-being targets within the Corporate Plan "Growing Success" has been reviewed by the Panel.

18. WORK PLAN STUDIES

The Panel has been advised of progress made to date on its programme of studies.

**19. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
(ENVIRONMENTAL WELL-BEING) PROGRESS**

The Panel has been advised of progress on issues that had been previously discussed. The Chairman advised that the Joint Accountability Committee had requested the attendance of the Leader of Cambridgeshire County Council to its next meeting to question her about the performance of Cambridgeshire Together.

The Panel has been informed that the review of cycling priorities has been put on hold due to funding shortages and the Vice-Chairman has undertaken to make enquiries with the County Council regarding the audit trail for Section 106 transportation contributions generated from development in Huntingdonshire.

20. SCRUTINY

The Panel considered the latest edition of the Council's decision digest summarising the Council's decisions since the previous meeting.

P M D Godfrey
Chairman