

Decision Digest

Edition 107

Monthly summary of the decisions taken at meetings of the Council, Cabinet, Overview & Scrutiny and other Panels for the period Monday, 9th August to Friday 1st October 2010.

HILL RISE PARK, ST IVES

Action taken to address nuisance caused by anti-social drivers late at night in Hill Rise Park, St Ives has been reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). The matter was originally raised through a petition signed by local residents which was presented to the Panel at its February 2010 meeting. Members were encouraged to learn that a series of actions had resulted in a very low number of instances occurring in the intervening period. Officers have been asked to report these findings to the next St Ives Neighbourhood Forum meeting and to continue to monitor the situation over the next six months.

ENHANCED CLEANSING SERVICES – PROPOSALS FOR MARKET TOWNS

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) have been updated on the latest position with regard to proposals for enhanced Sunday cleansing services in St Ives, Huntingdon, St Neots, Ramsey and Godmanchester. A cleansing service is now provided on Sundays in the four market towns covering the main shopping areas. As very few complaints have been received about the cleanliness of the towns, the Panel has concluded that there is no need to expand the current Sunday cleansing regime.

Taking into account the current financial position of the authority and anticipated

budget announcements, the Council will reconsider this subject again in the context of the whole cleansing service. The Panel has commented that they would not wish to see service reductions in the future as this would be detrimental to the vibrancy of the town centres and has received assurances that should a review of the cleansing service be undertaken, then appropriate discussions will be held with the Town Councils.

PROVISION OF PLAY FACILITIES IN HUNTINGDONSHIRE

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has received feedback from the Cabinet on the possibility of the Council investigating the feasibility of co-ordinating on behalf of parish councils a group insurance scheme and combined safety inspections. It was understood that for legal reasons it was not possible for the District Council to organise group insurance for third tier authorities. An analysis of the costs involved and potential savings that might be achieved also indicate that it would not be possible to make any significant reductions in costs to town or parish councils for safety inspections. Although the option of revisiting the study has been discussed, Members have requested details of what the Council spends on such facilities, together with details of where the funds have been allocated before proceeding further.

SINGLE EQUALITY SCHEME

Progress towards the achievement of the Corporate Equality Policy Action Plan has been reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). Trends on residents' perceptions on the two outcomes and associated measures identified within the Policy have been discussed and Members were mindful that the data captured reflects individuals' perceptions of all local public services and not just those provided by the District Council.

The Panel was informed of the legislative background to the decision to introduce a Single Equality Scheme, which now brings together all equalities matters into a single framework. Following external assessment, the Council has attained Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government. Other matters that were discussed included the completion of the outstanding Equality Impact Assessments, the impact of potential service reductions on the monitoring of equalities issues and employees attitudes towards equalities matters.

The Cabinet and the Employment Panel has noted progress made to date on the delivery of actions and targets set out in the Corporate Equality Action Plan and approved the content of the Single Equality Scheme. The scheme streamlines the Council's equality scheme and policy into one document.

STUDY: CONSULTATION PROCESSES

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has identified the Council's consultation processes as an area for investigation, with a view to determining whether the approach taken to consultation is consistent across the authority. The role of the Policy and Research Team in offering advice and guidance to internal service

departments on consultation and research methodologies was noted together with the terms of a Consultation and Engagement Strategy, consultation calendar and database.

The Panel has discussed a number of matters including the cost and role of Market Research UK in assisting the Council with its various consultations, the level of responses to postal surveys, the cost of different survey methods, how results are interpreted, the value of undertaking consultation exercises and public perceptions of the consultation process. The Panel will be pursuing this study as a full Panel investigation and have requested that further information be submitted to a future meeting.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

The Overview and Scrutiny Panels have reviewed the Council's performance against its priority objectives, which are contained in "Growing Success" – the Corporate Plan. Each of the Panels have endorsed the views of the Corporate Plan Working Group, particularly with regard to objectives where targets have not been achieved and have endorsed suggestions by the Working Group designed to enhance the Council's approach to its strategic budget planning and performance management.

The Panel for Social Well-Being has noted the response to several questions raised by the Corporate Plan Working Group on the number of users visiting Leisure Centres, exercise classes for older people and alternative types of affordable housing.

Responses to questions raised with regards to Leisure Centres hospitality income and internal promotions have been provided to the Panel for

Economic-Well-Being, together with an update on progress being made in respect of the submission of a bid for a Greater Cambridge-Greater Peterborough Local Enterprise Partnership. The Panel has asked for further information as to the returns which had been made on capital investment at the Leisure Centres to be provided at a future meeting.

The Economic Well-Being Panel has also discussed the deliberations of the Corporate Plan Working Group on the Council's use of external consultants and has recommended that the amount the Council spends on employing external consultants should be reduced by £1.5m in the current financial year.

The Environmental Well-Being Panel has requested clarification as to the definition of 'Songbird funding' which has reportedly been downgraded which will result in the re-assessment of broad band projects (to complement BT roll out).

In response to questions raised by the Corporate Plan Working Group, the Panel has been informed that because of the complex nature of the retail and development aspects of certain forthcoming planning applications, it will be necessary, in order to determine these applications and suitably protect community interests, to retain both specialist retail and legal advice. While the costs of retaining that advice will be partially off-set by the planning fee income received, it is likely that some additional costs will be incurred by the Council. However the significant, wider benefits of delivering an enhanced retail opportunities within Huntingdon and facilitating the long-sought after redevelopment of parts of the town centre are considered to justify any additional cost involved.

With regard to the failure to meet the target for the number of energy

efficiency and renewable energy measures carried out as a result of District Council schemes and promotions, the Head of Environmental Management has explained that this was due to an unavoidable delay in appointing contractors for the Cosy Homes Insulation Scheme.

These conclusions have subsequently been referred to the Cabinet who have agreed to consider the Panel's recommendations over the coming months as and when decisions are made on the Budget for 2011/12 onwards and changes to the Corporate Plan, Community Strategy and system of performance management.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE ADULT WELL-BEING AND HEALTH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has received updates on matters currently being considered by the Cambridgeshire Adult Well-Being and Health Scrutiny Committee, which include Addenbrooke's Hospital nursing staff, the future closure of day services for older people, proposed changes to dermatology services and the Scrutiny Annual Report for 2009/10.

FINANCIAL FORECAST

In conjunction with the Cabinet, the Economic-Wellbeing Panel has been acquainted with the present position in relation to the Council's financial forecast for the period to 2018/19. To assist them in their deliberations, all Members of the Council were invited to attend and take part in the discussions.

Members have been informed of potential variations in a number of sources of income and other factors that could affect the Council's financial position. The Panel has acknowledged

the uncertainty surrounding the current forecast and a number of assumptions which will be clarified over the next few months.

The Panel has acknowledged the severity of the situation facing the Council and the problems created by current economic and political conditions, together with the likely deficit for the year, falling revenue reserves, the emerging prospects for lower government funding and government plans to replace Council Tax capping from 2012/13. Members have also acknowledged that the total shortfall is likely to rise to over £8 million per annum in four years time. As a result, the Panel has recognised that radical decisions will need to be taken by the Council which are likely to affect most services in some way.

Attention having been drawn to the potential for changes in the level of Government grant the Council will receive in the next few years, the Panel has been advised that the forecast has been based on a cash reduction of 25% in grant over 5 years but this could increase to 40% and, importantly, does not include inflation. It is envisaged that the authority will be afforded an element of protection as any reductions should not be greater than the average for similar authorities. Having examined the options and the constraints that are likely to exist in relation to the level of Council Tax, it has been suggested that should proposals which are developed require a referendum, this should not be undertaken in conjunction with the County Council, whose proportion of the Council Tax represents a much larger element of local taxation.

The Panel's attention has been drawn to the recent budget consultation exercise, which has generated almost 2000 responses and will be used to gauge public views on changes in services and what local priorities are.

Members have suggested that they would like to see the responses analysed by source as this could affect the overall findings.

On the subject of the Council's financial planning process, Members have discussed whether the Council should take steps in preparation for the anticipated reduction in Government grant, which is expected to be announced on 22nd October 2010. Some Members are of the opinion that the Council should start to make plans at the earliest opportunity for likely budgetary reductions, while others think that decisions can only be made once the level of grant and the situation with regard to potential changes in the Council's responsibilities are known.

Comment has been made on the possible devolution of services to towns, parishes or localities. With the recent decision on public conveniences in mind, the Panel has recommended that if these organisations are to be invited to take on board other additional responsibilities, consultation should be undertaken with them at the earliest opportunity to enable them to incorporate the need for any additional funding into their budget setting processes. The Panel has further suggested that the District Council might engage with towns and parishes about opportunities for other budgetary savings.

The Panel has discussed the extent to which the Council is statutorily required to provide services. Members have suggested that it is not possible to make recommendations on possible changes in service levels and functions without sufficient knowledge of the Council's statutory responsibilities and the non statutory services it provides. Whilst the Panel has acknowledged the inherent difficulties in producing such information, the Panel has asked for details to be circulated, together with an

indication of the number of employees who are currently employed to undertake wholly non statutory functions.

Having noted that the Council's basic statutory functions are limited, the view has been expressed that the Council's priorities should be taken into account when planning reductions in services. Comment has also been made that the Council provides some services which were not classified as statutory under UK Parliamentary Law but nevertheless are subject to other influences arising from, for example, European Union Legislation, such as recycling targets. At the same time consideration should be given to facilities which are provided on a joint or shared basis and the contractual arrangements and obligations which exist. It will also be necessary to consider the effect of any changes to services and functions on the Council's reputation.

The Panel has strongly recommended that the Council should adopt a strategic approach to planning changes to its services. Members have suggested that the current challenges might provide an opportunity to refocus the Council through an overarching vision. The Strategy should demonstrate what the Council will do in future and how it will get there. Similar concerns have been voiced at a recent meeting of the Corporate Plan Working Group who had suggested that a clear vision of Council services is required in advance of any organisational changes. The Council will need to know what it is seeking to achieve and which positions it will need to retain to do so before it proceeds with implementing the Voluntary Redundancy scheme.

With regard to the need to make savings, a Member has suggested that a business approach should be adopted and Heads of Service invited to identify ways in which savings might

be made as part of an action plan. In addition, a flexible approach should be taken towards the salary differentials between levels in the Council's organisational structure and, generally, the salary assigned to posts should be reduced as employees leave.

The Panel will be formally invited to consider proposals for variations in the budget in due course, Members have emphasised the need to develop a clear plan outlining possible proposals for reductions and to involve all Members of the Council in these discussions at an early stage. It will not be possible to make any decisions before the results of the public consultation has been considered but it is intended to hold initial discussions with Members prior to the formal discussion of proposals for changes at the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) in November 2010. The Panel is of the opinion that Overview and Scrutiny has an important role in the development of the financial plan and an additional meeting will be convened for Members to undertake the necessary preparatory work to enable them to fulfil this role.

As part of their deliberations a number of suggestions for possible savings have been made by individual Panel members and other members of the Council in attendance. A list of the suggestions has been submitted to the Cabinet for consideration. The suggestions include the need for a comprehensive approach to reviewing all services that could potentially be delivered through collaborative working, a review of the Council's Management Structure, the introduction of Zero based budgeting from a statutory perspective over 5 years and a review of services in comparison with other authorities.

Having recognised the significant financial challenges which face the

authority in future years, the Panel have emphasised the need to highlight the challenges which need to be addressed over the coming months to all Members of the Council.

The Panel has endorsed the recommendations with regard to the annuity basis for the calculation of Minimum Revenue Provision for submission to the Cabinet.

Subsequently, the Cabinet has acknowledged the need to produce detailed objectives, consult with Towns and Parish Councils and other organisations at the earliest opportunity and to involve the Overview and Scrutiny and Members generally in the process. With this in mind, the report was recommended to Council.

FORMAT OF THE COUNCIL'S EXECUTIVE – THE CHOICE OF EXECUTIVE LEADER OR ELECTED MAYOR

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 has introduced significant changes to the Leader and Cabinet system and has narrowed the choice of executive arrangements open to local authorities to –

- An elected Mayor and Cabinet appointed by him; or
- An Elected Leader appointed by the Council from its membership and a Cabinet appointed by the Leader.

These executive arrangements have been the subject of a public consultation exercise, which indicated a clear preference for an Executive Leader. The Cabinet has recommended to Council that the proposals for a change in governance arrangements to an Executive Leader and Cabinet Executive be approved.

The Corporate Governance Panel has also endorsed these recommendations.

DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURE WORKING GROUP

The Cabinet has been acquainted with the findings of a review by the Democratic Structure Group on the membership of the Employment Panel and a proposal to introduce the title of Honorary Aldermen and Alderwomen to past members of the members of the Council and Honorary Freemen and Freewomen to local citizens.

The Cabinet has acknowledged that the present arrangements for the Employment Panel and ELAG are cumbersome and offer little opportunity for constructed dialogue. In that respect they have concurred with the Group that they would benefit from a change in scheduling to introduce a period of 4 weeks between the meetings.

Whilst discussing the introduction of honorary titles, the Cabinet has recognised the benefits of such awards and saw no reason why they should not be introduced.

These views have been forwarded to the Corporate Governance Panel who have also endorsed the recommendations of the Democratic Structure Review Working Group for submission to the Council.

THE REVOCATION OF THE REGIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY – IMPLICATIONS FOR THE HUNTINGDONSHIRE CORE STRATEGY 2009 AND THE JOINT CAMBRIDGESHIRE APPROACH

On 6th July 2010, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government announced that Regional Strategies would be revoked with immediate effect. The statement was accompanied

by new planning guidance clarifying the status of adopted Local Development Documents. The guidance strongly advocates that planning authorities should continue to prepare and bring forward appropriate development plan documents (DPDs) and confirms that adopted DPDs will continue to provide the statutory planning framework. In discussing these documents, the Cabinet has noted that the adopted Huntingdonshire Core Strategy 2009 will remain as the Council's primary planning policy document.

Have been made aware of the work undertaken to review the current strategic policy position for Cambridgeshire the Cabinet has endorsed a joint statement made by the Cambridgeshire Authorities which sets out their current position and the effects of the recession on the delivery of key development sites.

Having considered the same issue, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) 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. 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 development taking place. 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 that further guidance is 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.

COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION

Councillor J W Davies has addressed the Overview and Scrutiny (Environmental Well-Being) 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.

Having regard to 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. The Panel has suggested 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 that work on such a strategy had 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.

CARBON MANAGEMENT UPDATE

The Overview and Scrutiny (Environmental Well-Being) 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. 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 Panel has been 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.

With regard to the Greenhouse Project, the Panel has been advised that a provisional launch day 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.

VALUE FOR MONEY CONCLUSION 2009 / 10

The Corporate Governance Panel has considered the results of the Council's Value for Money (VFM) conclusion, which had been undertaken by Grant Thornton LLP, the Council's External Auditors.

Having been acquainted with the key findings and actions required by the Council, the Panel has agreed to adopt an associated action plan which is intended to assist the Council in improving its performance in key areas of its activity.

ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SYSTEM OF INTERNAL AUDIT

The outcome of a review of the effectiveness of the system of internal audit has been received by the Corporate Governance Panel which is a requirement of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003. To support the four key elements of the review, details of the current risk assessment matrix and the Annual Internal Audit Report have also been provided, together the opinion of the Internal Audit Manager on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's internal control and governance processes.

The Panel has agreed to take this information into account as part of their deliberations on the Corporate Governance Statement.

GOVERNANCE STATEMENT

The Corporate Governance Panel has approved the Council's Governance Statement which summarises the corporate governance work carried out in 2009/10 and identified matters to be addressed during 2010/11. The Statement has been produced following

the annual review of the Council's Governance arrangements and is an essential element in assuring proper governance practice in the conduct of the Council's business, in safeguarding the use of resources and in engendering confidence in the accountability and integrity of the Council.

APPROVAL FOR PUBLICATION OF THE 2009/10 ACCOUNTS

The Corporate Governance Panel has approved the Council's audited accounts for 2009/10 for publication and the Panel has noted the report of the External Auditor and associated action plan which highlights the key issues arising from the Council financial statements for the year ending 31 March 2010.

As part of this requirement, the Panel has also endorsed the Council's Letter of Representation for submission to the external auditor which sets out the actions taken by the Council to ensure its financial records are accurate.

COUNCIL TAX COMPLAINT: AWARD OF COMPENSATION

The Corporate Governance Panel has been advised of the details of a complaint against the Council by a member of the public and the terms of a compensatory payment approved as a consequence thereof.

STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND - THE FUTURE

The Standards Committee has noted the Government's intention to abolish the Standards Board regime. Indications suggest that the Decentralisation and Localism Bill, to be published at the end of October, will provide for the abolition of not just Standards for England, but of the Code of Conduct for Members and of the

Standards Committee. However, in all likelihood, the draft Bill might not be enacted before Summer 2011 which will mean the Council will retain the duty to continue the ethical standards regime until early 2012.

APPOINTMENT OF PARISH COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVES

Having considered the proposed methodology for appointment to the vacant post of Parish Council representative on the Standards Committee, Members have agreed to approach town and parish councils directly to invite expressions of interest in the post by 20th September. The Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Monitoring Officer and an existing parish council representative will make the final selection.

ANNUAL REPORT 2009/10

The Standards Committee has approved for publication its Annual Report for 2009/10 which will be produced and circulated in a cost effective way using the District Council's website, email and District Wide magazine.

WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT

Work to enhance the standards and conduct pages on the District Council's website has been undertaken. FAQs on the Code of Conduct have been published and the web team are currently engaged in creating an online form to allow for code of conduct complaints to be completed and submitted online.

APPLICATIONS FOR DISPENSATION

The Standards Committee has approved two applications for dispensation from Great and Little Gidding and Southoe and Midloe Parish Councils to allow Members from those

Councils to speak and vote on community matters which have arisen in their parishes, in which they have a personal and prejudicial interest.

TRAINING UPDATE

Although approving a training programme which was to be offered to Parish Councils in the autumn, the Standards Committee has decided to defer undertaking the sessions given the uncertainty over the future of the Standards regime and to reconsider the position at their next meeting in December.

DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT PROGRESS REPORT - 1ST APRIL- 30TH JUNE 2010

In its review of the activities of Development Management Services during the quarter, the Development Management Panel has drawn attention to an apparent disparity between an increase in the applications received against a reduction in fee income. The Panel has noted that this position was due largely to the receipt of minor applications or those which do not generate high fee income. It was the expectation that several major applications would be registered in the autumn and that this pattern should not continue.

POLICY REVIEW: REDUNDANCY SCHEME AND VOLUNTARY RELEASE SCHEME

The Employment Panel has adopted the terms of a revised Redundancy Policy and Voluntary Release Scheme subject to minor amendments. Both have been subject to consultation with all staff and Employee Side Representatives. The Panel has discussed the appeals process for both elements of the scheme and the proposed schedule of events for the Voluntary Release Scheme. The latter

will be rolled out in two phases to all eligible staff from 28th September 2010 to 12th January 2011 inclusive which will be supported through a comprehensive communications plan to ensure that communication is maintained at all times with employees.

It is also the intention to extend the remit of the Appointments Panel to include the dismissal of employees in accordance with Officer Employment Procedure Rules. The Panel has authorised Officers to amend the Grievance Policy to include the Chief Executive and Chief Officers and requested Chief Officers and the Chief Executive respectively to instigate any Directorate or cross-Directorate restructuring as a result of the take-up of the Voluntary Release Scheme or application of the Redundancy Policy.

STRESS MANAGEMENT POLICY

The Employment Panel has considered the content of a revised Stress Management Policy which was updated to take into account guidance issued by the Health and Safety Executive together with a number of changes made to organisational procedures since the Policy was initially adopted in 2003. Subject to amendment to the employee and manager self assessment forms contained within the stress management toolkit to include questions relating to an employee's personal circumstances, the Policy was endorsed by the Panel.

REQUESTS TO FILL VACANT POSTS

The Employment the Panel has authorised the Head of People, Performance and Partnerships to recruit to the post of Building Control Officer. Justification why it was necessary to recruit to the post has been received.