

Decision Digest

Edition 109

Monthly summary of the decisions taken at meetings of the Council, Cabinet, Overview & Scrutiny and other Panels for the period 1st to 30th November 2010.

HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY: CONSULTATION DRAFT

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has considered the Council's draft Homelessness Strategy, which was reviewed under the provisions of the Homelessness Act 2002. Homelessness is of growing concern for the Council and increases in financial and resource pressures and changes prompted by the Government to the Council's housing benefit system will further add to the increasing levels of demand for housing advice and homelessness within the District.

A number of preventative measures have contributed towards the homelessness reductions achieved by the Council, the most successful of these measures is the Rent Deposit/Rent In Advance Scheme.

Concern was registered at the need to identify funding and resources for a number of actions contained within the Strategy, owing to the fact that funding from the Government's Homelessness Prevention Budget might not continue beyond 2010/11. The challenge to identify resources will continue to remain, particularly when considering the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review announcement and the Council's future budget process and efficiency programme. Other matters that were discussed included the types of accommodation available, migrant workers and the factors that constrain the Council from using exception sites within the District.

The Cabinet has subsequently noted the concerns of the Panel and approved the contents of the Strategy for publication.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE LOCAL INVESTMENT PLAN

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has considered the Cambridgeshire Local Investment Plan (CLIP) which is currently subject to consultation. The Plan intends to facilitate the delivery of investment in a range of housing, infrastructure, regeneration and community activities taking into account locally determined priorities and a number of existing Countywide strategies and plans. The Plan identifies investment needs across Cambridgeshire and will primarily be used as evidence to support bids to draw in external funding to the area.

The establishment of a Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP) will assist with streamlining the current partnership framework across the County which is considered to be complex. Under the LEP, cross boundary working practices will be adopted. Members have expressed differing views on the extent to which the Council should engage in collaboration with other authorities and on the benefits it would bring. The importance of the CLIP in competing for financial resources has been acknowledged by the Panel, particularly as the Homes and Communities Agency has experienced a 50% reduction in funding which was

announced in the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review.

The Panel has registered concern at the way upgrades or improvements to the local road network infrastructure have been prioritised. The implications of this for housing and economic growth in the area have also been considered. Particular reference was made to the A14 and the A428.

Discussion has taken place on housing schemes within Huntingdonshire identified for completion between 2010/11 and 2013/14. The Panel has suggested that the data employed by the County Council in respect of population projections for the District should be updated.

Finally, the Panel has requested that a further report be submitted to them on the implications of the CLIP for local housing to include potential shortfalls in the delivery of affordable housing within the District.

Subsequently, the Cabinet has approved the content of the Plan, in doing so they have concurred with the Panel over the importance of upgrading the A14.

MONITORING OF SECTION 106 AGREEMENTS (PLANNING OBLIGATIONS)

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-being) has been updated on the receipt and expenditure by the Council of money negotiated under Section 106 Agreements. The Section 106 Agreement Advisory Group did not concur with the Panel's suggestion to adopt a project plan for each scheme as it was felt that the current arrangements were satisfactory. As the Panel is still of the view that such a plan would enable more effective monitoring to take place, Councillor P G Mitchell has undertaken to raise the matter at

the next Development Management Panel meeting.

PROVISION OF PLAY FACILITIES

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has noted that the Council spent an estimated £22,300 per year on revenue costs for six skate park facilities located within the District. These costs include weekly inspections, surface painting, other repairs and ROSPA inspections.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

The outcome of the Cabinet's deliberations in response to the Overview and Scrutiny Panels' report on the Council's performance against its priority objectives was received and noted by the Overview and Scrutiny Panels. The matter concerning external consultants has been referred back to the Corporate Plan Working Group for further review to include the criteria used in the appointment of consultants and an assessment of the cost and value gained from using them.

In considering the content of the report, the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) have agreed that the review of the use of external consultants might best be undertaken by them and have appointed Councillors J D Ablewhite, G S E Thorpe, D M Tysoe, Mr R Hall and Mrs H Roberts to a working group for this purpose.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE ADULTS WELL-BEING AND HEALTH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has received an update on matters currently being considered by the Cambridgeshire Adults Well-Being and Health Scrutiny Committee which included the Older Peoples' Mental Health Strategy.

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

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has reviewed its programme of studies. Hinchingsbrook Hospital is shortly due to commence its review of the revised pricing structure and car park concessions at the Hospital. Clarification on how the Panel will be involved in the review process is being investigated by Officers.

DRAFT BUDGET 2011/12 AND MTP 2012/16

In conjunction with the Cabinet, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) have examined the draft Budget for 2011/12 and Medium Term Financial Plan (MTP) for the period 2012-16 at its meeting on 11th November 2010. To assist the Panel in their deliberations, all Members of the Council were invited to attend.

Following an extensive discussion, the Panel has made a number of comments for consideration by the Cabinet in the preparation of the Budget for 2011/12. These include the need to consider:-

- weighting the Council's priorities;
- investigations into ways of retaining some services through shared services and job sharing;
- investigations into alternative ways of delivering services rather than completely deleting some services;
- shaping the MTP into a vision;
- concerns regarding cuts in grants to voluntary

organisations and in planning enforcement;

- outsourcing;
- the need for a rationale for mothballing CCTV and consultations with the Community Safety Partnership on this service.
- reviewing the proposals for District Wide through a strategic approach to communication with residents;
- comments about the potential to provide Customer Service Centre functions from Leisure Centres;
- retaining front-line services;
- reviewing further back-office functions;
- the need to communicate with Town and Parish Councils at the earliest opportunity;
- the need for investments to be informed by business plans;
- the need for contingency planning and for a rationale to be produced for changes; and
- staggering increases in car parking charges.

The Panel has also received a preliminary response from the Executive Councillor for Finance & Customer Services with regard to the proposals for financial savings presented by the Liberal Democrat Group to the Council meeting on 3rd November 2010.

These conclusions have subsequently been referred to the Cabinet who have

recommended to Council that the draft Budget and MTP be approved as a basis for the development of the budget for 2011/2016 and the MTP for 2012/2016. Whilst considering the options for the determination of levels of council tax for 2011/2012, the Cabinet has been mindful of the Government's incentive of a 2.5% grant for councils that decide to freeze their council tax for the coming financial year. Having referred also to the current economic climate and the impact on local residents, the Cabinet has recommended to Council that no provision be made for an increase in Council Tax for 2011/12.

TREASURY MANAGEMENT – REVIEW OF PERFORMANCE

Having been reminded of the background to the introduction of enhanced arrangements for overseeing the management of the Council's financial investigations and borrowing, the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has reviewed the performance of the Council's Investments for the period 1st April to 30th September 2010.

The Panel has noted that the latest forecast outturn had predicted an increase in investment income and the reasons for this. The Panel has also noted recent changes to the definition used for fixed and variable rate investments and the need to change the borrowing limits in order to maximise the flexibility to react to changes in interest rates.

Attention having been drawn to the recent decision to invest with the Cambridge Building Society which had enabled the Council to achieve a higher rate of return compared with other Building Societies, the Panel has discussed the risks associated with such investments. Having done so, the Panel has recommended that the

Council should be invited to note the contents of the report.

Subsequently, the Cabinet has approved the contents of the report.

DEVELOPMENT APPLICATIONS

Fifteen applications were considered by the Development Management Panel in November. Of interest generally will be the Panel's decision to refuse an application for a new Lidl Neighbourhood Foodstore on Stukeley Road, Huntingdon principally because the applicant had failed to demonstrate why the store could not be located in the town centre or not have an adverse impact on planning retail development in the town. However, it was also considered that the siting, design, layout and landscaping of the proposal did not represent the high quality scheme which would be desirable in the area.

The Head of Planning Services was authorised to approve, following a contaminated land risk assessment, an application for a new purpose built scout and guides centre on land between Weston Farm, Great Drove and Mere View, Yaxley. The land is currently owned by Yaxley Parish Council.

The Panel also has indicated its support for an application which will involve the relocation of Rushton's Engineering Co from their existing site on Brampton Road, Huntingdon to two purpose built factory units on land at Fenton Road, Warboys. A proposed S106 obligation will ensure that RECO is the first occupier of the new site and secure the cessation of the use of the existing site in Huntingdon. As this application is a proposed departure from the Development Plan, it will be considered by Council on 15th December.

S106 AGREEMENT ADVISORY GROUP

The Development Management Panel has appointed Councillor P L E Bucknell to replace Councillor Mrs B E Boddington in the Membership of the S106 Advisory Group. In thanking Councillor Mrs Boddington for her contribution to the Group, the Panel acknowledged that it was her duties as Vice-Chairman of the Council that had prevented Councillor Mrs Boddington from attending meetings of late.

DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT PROGRESS REPORT: 1ST JULY - 30TH SEPTEMBER 2010

Having commented previously about the disappointing level of income received from planning fees against budget in the previous quarter, the Development Management Panel were pleased to note that the number of applications submitted in the quarter 1st July - 30th September had improved over the corresponding period in 2009 which had, in turn, resulted in a consequential increase in income. It was suggested that the ongoing trend appeared to be a rise in the workload for the Development Management Division.

GREENHOUSE PROJECT

Having had a tour of the two properties in St. Ives and St. Neots modernised by the Council as part of the "Greenhouse Project". The Overview and Scrutiny (Environmental Well-Being) Panel has stated that the cost savings associated with the energy saving measures should be widely publicised to householders alongside the reduction in carbon emissions. With regard to the staffing implications of having the houses manned while they are open to the public, Members have been advised that it will be possible for officers to

work from the houses due to the availability of wi-fi.

ABANDONED SHOPPING TROLLEYS

The Overview and Scrutiny (Environmental Well-Being) Panel has been advised that at the previous meeting of the Huntingdon Neighbourhood Forum complaints had been raised by members of the public about the number of shopping trolleys being abandoned by customers at town centre shops. Members have been informed of the powers available to the Council if Section 99 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 is adopted which would enable the Council to collect shopping trolleys that appear to have been abandoned and store them for up to six months. If a trolley is not claimed within this time, it can be sold or disposed of by the Council. If a trolley is seized, the owners have to be served with a notice within 14 days stating that it has been removed, where it is being stored and, if it is un-claimed, that the Council will dispose of it. The cost of seizing, storing and returning a trolley can be recovered by the Council from the owner of the trolley if the company ask for its return. With regard to the possibility of adopting Section 99 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, the Panel has been advised that the Council has limited storage facilities for any trolleys that are collected and that the low number of complaints together with the co-operation of supermarket owners makes such a venture unnecessary.

ST. NEOTS EAST URBAN DESIGN FRAMEWORK

The Overview and Scrutiny (Environmental Well-Being) Panel has considered a report on development opportunities for land east of the railway line, St. Neots. The principal areas of concern were highways and

educational provision. In view of the separation from the rest of the town by the East Coast main rail line, the Panel has acknowledged that, without careful planning, there is a danger of a separate community developing which is not integrated with the remainder of the town. The Panel has accepted that the idea of a third secondary school in St. Neots located within the Eastern expansion might exacerbate the sense of a separate identity and therefore have not supported the recommendation of the Development Management Panel in that respect. The Panel has suggested that an adequate financial contribution be secured from developers to ensure that the existing secondary education establishments in St. Neots could be expanded to meet the anticipated increase in pupil numbers. With regard to primary education, the Panel has been advised that the County Council have sought a minimum of three new schools as part of the development as there is under-capacity west of the rail line in existing establishments. The land use plan suggested an allocation of land for two new schools in addition to the existing primary school already provided as part of the Loves Farm Development. However, the Panel has queried whether it is sufficient for a projected development of 5,000 homes. The Panel has also queried the proposed distribution of sites for primary schools within the eastern expansion with those houses in the north-eastern sector of the new development being some distance from the primary school proposed. The Panel have also commented on the highway provision and particularly the uncertainty over improvements to the A428 before the development takes place, with the new development creating greater pressure on the already congested A428. The Panel is also keen to ensure that there is sufficient vehicular links in addition to those proposed for cyclists and walkers

as a failure to do so could lead to unacceptable congestion on those which currently exist via Cambridge Street via the A428.

These conclusions have subsequently been referred to the Cabinet who have approved the document as Planning Policy.

PLANNING FOR SCHOOLS DEVELOPMENT CONSULTATION

Councillor P J Downes has addressed the Overview and Scrutiny (Environmental Well-Being) Panel on a recently published planning for schools development consultation exercise which has invited views on the Government's proposals to make changes to the general permitted development order to give permitted development rights for a change of use for a school development. The purpose of the proposals is to support the Department for Education's policy on new "free schools" but Councillor Downes has raised a concern that the proposed absence of any requirement for planning permission will prevent any local objection to the opening of the new school, dispense with the requirement for a traffic impact assessment and remove any democratic involvement in the process. Under the circumstances it has been decided that an ad-hoc working group be set up to include Councillor Downes, Councillor P G Mitchell as Chairman of the Development Management Panel and Councillor D B Dew as Executive Councillor for Planning Strategy and Transport to draft a response to the consultation for consideration at the next meeting of the Panel prior to the closing date for comment of 10th December 2010.

RECOMMENDATIONS ARISING FROM THE EMPLOYEE LIAISON ADVISORY GROUP

The Employment Panel has considered a request from Employee Side representatives to extend the period during which employees may apply for the Voluntary Release Scheme until the Council's Budget has been determined in February 2011. However, the Panel has concluded that it would not be practical or equitable to extend this stage of the scheme.

The Panel has also been acquainted with discussions which had taken place at a recent meeting arranged for all staff by Employee Side and Trade Union representatives on the Council's draft Budget and the implications for employees.

CHANGES TO THE EMPLOYEE LIAISON ADVISORY GROUP

The Employment Panel has been acquainted with the outcome of the review by the Democratic Structure Working Group on the operation of the Employment Panel and its related structures, which had been endorsed by the Council at their meeting in September 2010.

Although the Council had made no changes to the operation of the Employment Panel, the Panel has noted the changes which had been made to the membership and operation of the Employee Liaison Advisory Group (ELAG). Consequently the Panel has appointed Councillors J W Davies, Mrs P A Jordan, P A Swales and T V Rogers to serve on the Group for the remainder of the municipal year.

The Panel has also endorsed minor changes to the Group's Terms of Reference. The changes relate to the size of the quorum and also will enable attendance at the Group of Trade Union representatives on an advisory or consultative basis if required.

VOLUNTARY SCHEME

The Employment Panel has received an update on the roll-out of the Voluntary Release Scheme across the Council and noted that the first stage has now concluded. Three applications had been received and considered by the Employee Selection Panel.

The Panel has been advised of progress with the second stage, noted that there were 6 weeks remaining and received details of the guidance and support which was being given to Managers and employees by HR Services.

The Panel also has been updated on the ongoing review of pay, the pay structure and allowances, which would form the basis of discussions with employees in due course.

DISABILITY AT WORK POLICY

To comply with the 2010 Equality Act and reflect best practice, the Employment Panel has adopted a policy for disability at work. The Policy is intended that disabled employees are supported at work, that there is no unfair discrimination or harassment of them on the grounds of disability. It also provides managers and employees with guidance on a range of reasonable adjustments that the Council can provide to disabled employees to support them in the workplace.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES EMPLOYMENT MONITORING

Having noted that the 2010 Equality Act requires the Council to publish information relating to the characteristics of its employees, the Employment Panel has received and noted the results of the equal opportunities monitoring of its workforce

over the period 1st April 2009 to 31st March 2010.

managers under stage 1 of the voluntary release scheme.

In reviewing the statistics, the Panel has observed several issues which reflect well on the organisation and suggest that there is no evidence of discrimination within the Council. The Panel has also noted that further reports will be produced as required under the Act, Regulations and Codes of Practice and that every effort would be made to ensure that they provide a cost benefit.

STATEMENT OF LICENSING POLICY

Having considered the contents of a revised Statement of Licensing Policy under the Licensing Act 2003, the Cabinet has recommended its approval to Council. The statement has been updated to take into account the latest regulations and guidance issued by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

LAND AT MILL ROAD, EATON SOCON

The Cabinet has approved in principle the sale of Council owned land at Mill Road, Eaton Socon to an adjoining landowner for the development of a residential scheme. The transaction will include the developer providing replacement facilities for an existing scout headquarters that currently occupies the land.

EMPLOYEE SELECTION PANEL – APPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY RELEASE

In accordance with the Officer Employment Procedure Rules, the Cabinet has confirmed that there are no material objections to the recommendations of the Employee Selection Panel regarding applications for voluntary release from senior

