

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) held in CIVIC SUITE 0.1A, PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON PE29 3TN on Thursday, 6 October 2011.

PRESENT: Councillors G J Bull, S Greenall, R B Howe, A J Mackender-Lawrence, P G Mitchell, T V Rogers, M F Shellens and A H Williams.

Mr R Hall.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors E R Butler and R Harrison and Mrs H Roberts.

38. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED

that Councillor T V Rogers be elected Chairman of the Panel for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

Councillor T V Rogers in the Chair.

39. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 8th September 2011 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

40. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

41. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2000 - FORWARD PLAN

The Panel considered and noted the current Forward Plan of Key Decisions (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which had been prepared by the Executive Leader of the Council for the period 1st October to 31st January 2012. Members were advised that the 'Draft MTP' would be presented to a future meeting as a matter of course.

In considering the contents of the Plan, Councillor P G Mitchell suggested that the Panel ought to consider the forthcoming report on 'CCTV Future Funding'. Having noted that the report did not fall within the Panel's remit, it was agreed that a copy of the report should be circulated to interested Members

who would determine whether they wished to consider the matter formally at a future meeting. Councillor M F Shellens requested sight of the RAF Brampton Urban Design Framework prior to its inclusion on the Agenda for the November meeting of the Environmental Well-Being Panel.

42. CAMBRIDGESHIRE PUBLIC SECTOR ASSET MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

(Councillor J A Gray, Executive Councillor for Resources, was in attendance for this item).

With the assistance of a report by the Managing Director (Communities, Partnerships and Projects) (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel received an update on proposals to prepare a Cambridgeshire Public Sector Asset Management Strategy and establish a Making Assets Count Board for Huntingdonshire.

By way of introduction, the Managing Director (CPP) explained that the Asset Management Strategy had been devised to enable all public sector organisations in the Cambridgeshire area to develop a joined-up approach to the management and use of their property assets. Sharing facilities with other public sector partners had the potential to generate significant financial benefits through reduced costs and enhanced returns and work had already been undertaken to capture details of local public sector assets in a database. He went on to explain that it was now proposed to establish a Project Board in each of the District areas to focus on specific projects where there appeared to be potential for sharing accommodation and improving service delivery. Members' attention was drawn to the terms of reference for the Huntingdonshire Board and those projects which had been identified as a priority. These included Huntingdon Town Centre, Huntingdon Operations Centre, St Neots Town Centre, Training Facilities and the development of community hubs for service delivery at Yaxley, Ramsey and Sawtry.

Members welcomed the principle of joined up asset management. However, given that the proposal was expected to yield financial benefits, they suggested that the report should contain performance targets. It was also suggested that the project should have a more broadly defined commercial objective and that further consideration should be given to the Huntingdonshire Board's aims and objectives. In addition, Members queried whether there was any potential to involve the voluntary sector in these proposals. They were informed that there was likely to be some cross over with the voluntary sector support project and with ongoing efforts to let parts of the Council's Headquarters to other organisations.

Discussion then ensued on a range of issues including the need

to ensure that decisions made in the current economic climate did not prejudice any future decisions about office accommodation, how to ensure that the District Council achieved the best value from the Huntingdonshire Board and the impact on the local economy if public sector organisations were to lease fewer properties. Members noted that whilst there had been little interest from the commercial sector in renting space in the Council's headquarters, it was hoped that the Making Assets Count initiative would lead to parts of the Council's buildings being occupied by other organisations.

In response to a question by Councillor T V Rogers regarding potential future changes to the structure of local government, the Panel was informed that the local authority property portfolio would be flexible to suit the circumstances of the time and the local area. Members suggested that this should take into account the potential in the longer term for public sector employee numbers to go up as well as down. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

- i) that the Cabinet be recommended to
 - a) note the contents of the report;
 - b) confirm their support for the Making Assets Count Programme and the establishment of a Huntingdonshire 'MAC' Board; and
 - c) endorse the Cambridgeshire Public Sector Asset Management Strategy; and
- ii) that the Managing Director (Communities, Partnerships and Projects) be requested to submit a further report outlining progress made on the Huntingdonshire projects in six months time.

At the conclusion of discussion on this item, Councillor J A Gray, newly appointed Executive Councillor for Resources, was invited to address the Panel on his approach to his new role. As part of his address, Councillor Gray thanked his predecessor for the hard work, which he would endeavour to build upon. He explained that in the longer term he would like to achieve a balanced budget and that some progress had already been made in this respect. The more immediate question for him was the historically low level of the council tax base and future

council tax levels.

Councillor Gray emphasised the importance of a strong voluntary sector locally and the need to ensure that charities did not diminish in the current economic climate. With regards to the financial challenges facing the Council, he stated his intention to discuss increased borrowing and the reduction in Council reserves with the Panel in due course. Members were advised that housing benefits and the localisation of business rates were also matters to be addressed. The latter had the potential to make the District a better place to live and work. Consequently there would be a need to ensure that the area continued to be competitive and well served by local businesses.

Councillor Rogers thanked Councillor Gray for his remarks and emphasised that the Panel would like to work with the Cabinet to address the financial challenges faced by the Cabinet. In concluding the discussion he urged Councillor Gray and the Cabinet to continue to consider the Council's Budget in its entirety and not to adopt a piecemeal approach to financial decisions.

43. DISABLED FACILITIES GRANTS AND CHARGES ON PROPERTIES

(Councillor N J Guyatt, Executive Councillor for Strategic Planning and Housing, was in attendance for this item).

With the assistance of a report by the Head of Housing Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel considered a proposal to impose charges on properties in certain circumstances which had been adapted with Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs).

Councillor N J Guyatt reminded Members that they had previously supported a supplementary capital estimate of £1.116m for DFSGS to avoid delays in applicants receiving adaptations to their homes. He went on to explain that the current proposal would enable the Council to impose a limited charge on adapted properties if they were sold within ten years and if the grant was for more than £5k. In his view, given its current financial position, the Council was under an obligation to recoup this money. Members noted that repayments could only be sought in respect of properties that were occupied by their owners. It would not be possible to impose charges on properties owned by Registered Social Landlords. However, it was anticipated that Landlords would manage their housing stock to ensure that tenants who required adaptations were allocated properties that had already been adapted in a way that met their needs, thus reducing future demand for new Grants.

Members' attention was drawn to the criteria that the Council would consider when determining whether to seek repayments. They went on to discuss a number of matters including the likely impact of the proposals on property values, the cost of imposing charges and the length of time occupiers might remain in their properties. With regard to the costs associated with the proposals, Members were informed that investigations were currently being undertaken into what was the most appropriate route for levying charges on properties in terms of the processes, risks, costs and time-scale involved. In response to a question as to whether there would be a sliding scale for repayments according to the length of time that had expired since the grant was made, Members were informed that if a property was sold within a ten year period the full amount would be claimed up to a maximum limit of £10,000.

Members referred to the limited funding which was provided by Central Government for DFGs. It was suggested that the Council, in conjunction with other authorities in the region, should make representations to Government requesting additional support. It was further suggested that the maximum amount that could be reclaimed by local authorities had been capped at £10,000 for several years and that representations should also be made that this figure should be index linked. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be recommended to

- a) agree that charges be placed on properties where owner occupiers receive a disabled facilities grant in excess of £10,000 (excluding HIA fees) where the grant is for a garage or outbuilding conversion, or extension or any combination of these;
- b) agree that the Head of Legal and Democratic Services together with the Head of Housing Services, in consultation with the Executive Member for Strategic Planning and Housing, should determine the most effective and efficient procedure for placing charges on properties; and
- c) delegate authority to decide on seeking repayment, as set out at paragraph 2.5 of the report now submitted, to the Head of Housing Services.

44. PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Consideration was given to a report by the Head of Legal and

Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) to which was attached a draft Corporate Guide to Managing Projects. By way of introduction, the Scrutiny and Review Manager explained that the Panel had previously identified a need for the Council to introduce internal guidelines on the kind of information, which should be included in the business case for large projects. It was suggested that as some work had already been undertaken in preparing the draft Guide, the information required in business cases should be embedded in it.

Mr R Hall reminded Members that as a result of his investigations with Councillor M F Shellens into the business case for the multi-storey car park in Huntingdon, it had become apparent that a number of key matters such as risk assessment, sensitivity analysis and social benefit had been missing from the approved project. Members were not aware that the Council had a particular problem in managing projects. The question that had been raised primarily concerned the composition of the business case.

Councillor G Bull suggested that it would be useful to determine what, if any, significant projects the District Council had planned in the medium term. This information would enable the Panel to decide whether it was necessary to pursue the study. If it did proceed, it would focus on the Council's existing project management arrangements and those areas which had been identified by Councillor M F Shellens and Mr R Hall as being necessary in a business case for large projects. It was also suggested that any project management methodology should include rigorous post project appraisals. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that a list of forthcoming Council projects should be obtained for consideration at the next meeting to enable Members to discuss a possible way forward with the project management study.

45. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REMITS

Consideration was given to a report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) containing a proposal to change the way the remits of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Panels were defined. The remits previously had been organised around Executive Councillors' responsibilities. Following changes to the Cabinet, it was suggested that the Panels' remits should be defined according to the Council's service functions. The change would require an amendment to be made to the Council's Constitution. It was hoped that it would obviate the need for further amendments should there be future changes to the Cabinet. The Scrutiny and Review Manager reported that Executive

Portfolios were still under review.

In considering the areas which had been allocated to the Economic Well-Being Panel, Members were generally satisfied with their responsibilities, though it was recognised that all of the Council's activities had financial implications. Reference was made to the fact that the practices, which had been developed to deal with issues which were of interest to more than one Panel, appeared to be working well.

Councillor M F Shellens indicated his interest in discussing the economic impact of major developments within the District such as those planned at the Alconbury Airfield Site and in Huntingdon Town Centre. This would include the Government's suggestions for the future of Business Rates, which would have significant implications for the District.

46. APPOINTMENTS

The Chairman reported that following the appointment of Councillor D M Tysoe to the District Council's Cabinet, it was necessary to review the Membership of the Panel's existing working groups.

RESOLVED

- a) that no change be made to the Membership of the One Leisure Working Group; and
- b) that Councillor T V Rogers be appointed to the Corporate Plan Working Group for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

47. WORKPLAN STUDIES

The Panel received and noted a report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) containing details of studies that were being undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Panels for Social and Environmental Well-Being. Members were reminded that if they had an interest in any of the studies, there was an opportunity for them to be involved. In response to a question by a Member, an update was provided on the site visits that had been undertaken by the Voluntary Sector Working Group.

Following comments by the Chairman that the Cabinet should always consider the Council's Budget as a whole rather than make decisions on individual financial matters on an ad-hoc basis, the Panel endorsed a suggestion that they should

monitor carefully any items which were submitted to the Cabinet for a decision outside of the budget process.

48. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) - PROGRESS

The Panel received and noted a report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) reviewing progress of matters that had previously been discussed by the Panel. Having commented that the Department for Transport had funding available for schemes that would need to be spent by March 2012, Members requested information on the schemes, which had been submitted by the County Council to improve the A14. Members were advised that a scoping report on the Council's support services would be submitted to their next meeting and it would be suggested that a Panel adopt a case study approach to their review.

49. SCRUTINY

The Panel received and noted the latest edition of the Council's Decision Digest (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). Councillor P G Mitchell expressed the view that the Cabinet was not taking due account of the Panel's recommendations. He referred in particular to previous discussions on the Council's Budget and specifically the CCTV service. Members were reminded that they were able to call-in Cabinet decisions for review though, to do so, a Member would need to secure the support of two additional members of the Panel. With regard to the issue of CCTV, the Panel noted that discussions were ongoing with Town and Parish councils and the future funding of the service had not yet been determined.

Chairman