

Decision Digest

Edition 123

Monthly summary of the decisions taken at meetings of the Council, Cabinet, Overview & Scrutiny and other Panels for the period 27 February to 23 March 2012.

CASTLE HILL HOUSE – FORMER HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICES – HIGH STREET, HUNTINGDON

The Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) and the Cabinet have considered the options that the Council had previously considered for Castle Hill House, High Street, Huntingdon and the details of an offer which had been received for the property.

Having been advised of the financial implications for the Council and the Medium Term Plan of the offer, the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has considered the assessment of Barker Storey Matthews on the local property market and the prospect for change.

During their deliberations on the matter, the Panel has discussed a range of issues including the terms of the current offer, changes in property values, and the cost of refurbishing the building. The Panel has also queried the difference between the offer and the figures included in the MTP for the sale of Castle Hill House and the timing of the decision to put the building on the market. Having also considered other uses of the building, the Panel agreed that the Cabinet should be recommended to accept the offer for Castle Hill House, Main Street, Huntingdon on the terms described to them.

The Cabinet has subsequently requested the Managing Director (Resources) to instruct the Council's Agents to contact the potential purchaser and to advise them that the Council will accept an offer of £625,000 for Castle Hill House but that this excludes the hardstanding area of land east of the property. Should this figure be unacceptable, the Cabinet agreed that the Council's agents should continue to market Castle Hill House with the aim of attracting potential interest locally and from outside the area.

Having discussed the potential to return the building to residential use, the Cabinet has authorised the Managing Director (Resources) to instruct another agent to market the property as a residential dwelling.

The outcome of the Cabinet's deliberations was reported to the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) at their meeting on 8th March 2012 and the Chairman reported that he had raised his concerns with the Executive Leader about the principle of items being submitted to the Cabinet at short notice.

OFFICER EMPLOYMENT PROCEDURE RULES

Having been acquainted with the requirements of paragraph 4(e) of the Office Employment Procedure Rules, the Cabinet has confirmed that there was no material or well-founded objection to the Senior Officers' Panel's

decision to make the post of Head of Housing Services redundant and the consequential deletion of the post from the establishment.

LOCATION OF THE CALL CENTRE

The Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has considered a range of options for the future location of the District Council's Call Centre and the key developments which had taken place since their previous deliberations. Members have noted that the Council has now reached a licence agreement to let part of the Civic Suite to another public sector organisation which has enabled the Council to meet targets in the Medium Term Plan.

The Panel has discussed the investigations which have been undertaken to establish whether there could be any benefit achieved from co-locating the District Council's Call Centre with the Huntingdonshire Customer Service Centre. Members have questioned the validity of the comparison with Harlow District Council and suggested that other co-located facilities could have been found that would have better facilitated this decision. The Panel has also discussed whether there would be any opportunity to achieve staff savings from co-locating the services and have noted that benchmarking of the service is undertaken on a regular basis.

In considering the contents of the report, the Panel has welcomed the decision to prioritise improving the Council's resilience and has suggested that as a professional exercise has established the necessity to have disaster recovery arrangements located in a separate urban area, this should include improving resilience at Pathfinder House. In this respect, the Panel has received an update on the work which was being undertaken to review the Council's existing Business

Continuity Strategy and the Chairman will discuss with the Chairman of the Corporate Governance Panel, the best way for the Economic Well-Being Panel to contribute to the review.

Members are of the view that customer service quality is of paramount importance, that the call centre works extremely well and that there are no apparent advantages to changing the current arrangements. With this in mind, the Panel has congratulated the Head of Customer Services on the achievement of a Customer Service Excellence award and has recommended that the Council should seek to negotiate a new lease for Speke House for up to 5 years with a break after 3 years.

Subsequently, the Cabinet has agreed to the Call Centre being retained at Speke House. The Managing Director (Communities, Partnerships and Projects) also has been authorised to negotiate the best terms available for a new lease for Speke House, before its expiry in June 2013.

BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT – HUNTINGDON

Arrangements to establish a Business Improvement District for Huntingdon has been supported by the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being). A Business Improvement District (BID) is an area within which local businesses agree through a local ballot to pay an additional charge on their business rates. The BID will focus on the town centre and is essentially the area circumscribed by the ring road which covers 369 businesses across the retail and office sectors.

The Panel has asked about the operating arrangements for the collection of the BID levy and queried how the success of the BID will be measured. Members noted that if the

Business Plan was not convincing, this would be reflected in the outcome of the BID Ballot. In addition all projects would have their own critical success factors and it would be possible to dissolve the BID at any time if local businesses do not consider that it is delivering anticipated outcomes.

The Panel has discussed the funding which had been provided by the District Council to assist with the development phase of the BID and whether funding would be available to assist other towns if they wished to adopt a similar approach. The Economic Development Manager has explained that Huntingdon Town Partnership had evolved to such an extent that the District Council funding only amounts to 40% of its overall budget and therefore the town is best placed to become a Business Improvement District. Members have also commented on the changing face of high street shopping and the likelihood that town centres will become more leisure orientated and a focal point for the community in future years.

On the question of car parking being identified as a key priority area for BID activities, Members have been advised that it was possible for the BID to use its funding to reimburse the local authority to provide for free car parking. However, in other areas this had been considered but not pursued.

Having been advised of the Panel's views, the Cabinet has authorised the Head of Customer Service to enter into the BID Levy Operating Agreement required in order to meet the Council's obligations under the Local Government Act 2003. With regard to the 14 premises/areas under the Council's ownership that will be entitled to a vote in the local ballot, the Managing Director, Communities, Partnerships and Projects has been authorised to cast any votes to which

the District Council is entitled after consultation with the Executive Leader.

In discussing the potential impact an additional cost will have on small businesses and charities Executive Councillors have been advised that, subject to the agreement of those liable, the BID Regulations 2004 will allow for this vulnerable group to be excluded from the charge.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE RENEWABLES INFRASTRUCTURE FRAMEWORK (CRIF) AND CAMBRIDGESHIRE COMMUNITY ENERGY FUND (CEF)

The Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) has received a presentation from the Head of Environmental Management on the CRIF and the CEF. This helped in the understanding of what is a complex, technical subject.

Members welcomed the news that solar panels had been installed at Eastfield House. These will provide the Council with electricity, a supply for external use and a significant return on its investment. It is recognised that developers are likely to challenge the inclusion of renewable energy policies in the Local Plan. It is, however, accepted that the Council needs to have in place policy provisions to ensure that CEF income is retained locally.

With specific reference to wind power, it is suggested that the Council should try to influence where wind turbines are located. Under the new National Planning Policy Framework the Council should be able to specify the area where wind farms are more suitable. In making this recommendation it is recognised that there is no upper limit that can be imposed on the amount of wind turbines in an area. Huntingdonshire, at present is dependent on wind and photovoltaic

power for its renewable sources of energy. It will be necessary to make use of the full range of other options for renewables to fill the gaps. Having recently visited Waterbeach Waste Management Park, the Panel recommends that the options should include deriving energy from waste.

The CEF presents commercial opportunities both for public sector organisations and commercial businesses. It is significantly cheaper to install renewable measures during construction than retrofit existing properties. A key question will be developer contribution rates. They should not be set at such a level that developers only provide on-site renewable measures. Given that Huntingdonshire has the greatest renewable potential in Cambridgeshire, it is possible that the District could be a net beneficiary of CEF funds. There is the possibility that the CEF could require considerable management and monitoring. The Panel recommends that the Cabinet controls the arrangements that are put in place for these purposes to ensure they do not proliferate.

As the CRIF and CEF is a complex, technical subject, the Panel strongly recommends that a clear communication strategy is developed for it. This should comprise simplified messages and stress the cost-savings that can be obtained from renewables rather than carbon emissions. It might also make reference to energy conservation as this appears to be missing from current documents.

At the conclusion of their discussions on this Item, the Panel recommended the Cabinet to –

- ◆ note the work undertaken, formally to sign off the CRIF/CEF projects and to

endorse the future approach to energy and renewables;

- ◆ delegate authority to the Managing Directors to carry forward work on energy and renewables in the District, to deliver the best possible outcomes for Business, the Community and Public Sector, within the Framework of the CRIF, and;
- ◆ note that the Managing Directors will consider the merits of setting up a CEF.

Subsequently, these recommendations have been approved by the Cabinet. Executive Councillors have concurred with the Panel that the Council should try to influence the location of wind farms. In addition, the Cabinet has stated that the delivery of wind farms should not be restricted to private developers and that CRIF should recognise the commercial opportunities for public sector organisations.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE FUTURE TRANSPORT STUDY

The Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) has appointed Councillor Mrs M Banerjee to a joint Scrutiny Review of Cambridgeshire Future Transport which has been established to find solutions to Cambridgeshire's transport and accessibility challenges.

GREATER CAMBRIDGE – GREATER PETERBOROUGH LOCAL ENTERPRISE PARTNERSHIP: INCORPORATION AS A COMPANY LIMITED BY GUARANTEE

The Cabinet has supported the incorporation of the Greater Cambridge – Greater Peterborough Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) as a Company Limited by Guarantee. The Managing Director (Communities, Partnerships and Projects) and the

Head of Legal and Democratic Services have been authorised to complete the appropriate legal documentation and processes. Corporate membership will expand the Board's remit and enable it to enter into contracts.

CONSULTATION PROCESSES – AN UPDATE

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has received an update on progress on its completed study on the Council's consultation and engagement processes. The Panel will appoint Members to assist with a review of the Council's Consultation and Engagement Strategy at its June 2012 meeting.

VOLUNTARY SECTOR FUNDING

At the request of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) the Panel for Social Well-Being has agreed to examine the proposed future relationship between the Council and the Voluntary Sector. Of particular concern to the Economic Well-Being Panel is the potential resource implications associated with administering the scheme and the decision making process employed to determine future applications for funding. The Panel will decide how to undertake their investigation in June, during their deliberations on a report by the Head of Environmental and Community Health Services on Voluntary Sector Funding.

POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONERS

Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) received details about the role and responsibilities of the Police and Crime Commissioner who will be elected on 15th November 2012. The Commissioner will be responsible overall for crime and disorder matters

across the Cambridgeshire area. A Police and Crime Panel will be established to scrutinise the role and performance of the Commissioner, discussions for which have commenced between the Police Authority and Cambridgeshire County and Peterborough City Councils. The Panel has expressed strong concerns that Huntingdonshire is not being represented at these meetings and has requested the Executive Councillor for Healthy and Active Communities' attendance at their April 2012 meeting to explain why this is so.

NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUMS WORKING GROUP

The outcome of a recent meeting of the Neighbourhood Forums Working Group was reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). The Panel has endorsed the Working Group's proposals in respect of revised boundaries, composition, voting and constitutional terms for the proposed Local Joint Committees. It is intended that a consultation exercise will commence with the Town and Parish Councils and Partners shortly.

ONE LEISURE WORKING GROUP

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) was updated on the outcome of a meeting of the One Leisure Working Group. The Working Group has split into two Sub-Groups. The Social Sub-Group will investigate the development of a methodology for the quantification of social value and the Economic Sub-Group will investigate the business model to be employed by One Leisure.

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

Following concerns expressed by Members of the Overview and Scrutiny

Panel (Social Well-Being) over the lack of communications about the future of Housing Services, the Executive Councillors for Customer Services and Strategic Planning and Housing have been requested to attend the Panel's April 2012 meeting.

ANNUAL ENFORCEMENT REPORT

The Development Management Panel has reviewed the activity undertaken by the Enforcement Team during 2011 and progress achieved against objectives identified for the service in 2010.

92% of recorded site visits had been undertaken within 10 working days underlining the importance now placed on making an initial visit shortly after a complaint had been made.

Regarding priorities for 2012, it was agreed that these should be –

- ❖ to focus on quality outcomes where unacceptable breaches were identified; and
- ❖ to maximise the efficiency of the enforcement service.

The Panel also has been made aware of the potential impact of the Localism Act on enforcement provisions but assured that these would not affect either the 2012 priorities or case loads.