
Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being)

Report of the meeting held on 12th June 2012

Matters for Information

**1. EQUALITY FRAMEWORK FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT:
EQUALITY PEER CHALLENGE – ACHIEVING ACCREDITATION**

The recent achievement by the Council of accreditation as an “Achieving” authority under the Equality Framework for Local Government has been noted by the Panel. Members’ attention has been drawn to the findings arising from the assessment, in particular, the areas for future consideration. In response to a question on how the Council compared to other local authorities, it has been noted that South Cambridgeshire is the only other Cambridgeshire authority that has attained the “Achieving” status.

The Panel has been informed that an action plan has been produced to address the areas which have been identified for future consideration. The Panel has established a Working Group to review the plan and make recommendations on achieving it.

**2. HOUSING BENEFIT CHANGES AND THE POTENTIAL IMPACT
ON HUNTINGDONSHIRE**

The Panel has considered the effect of Government changes to the Housing Benefits system which have arisen from the Welfare Reform Act. The changes have resulted in a reduction of £370,000 per annum being paid to Housing Benefit claimants renting in the private sector. Of particular concern to Members are the larger households that reside in 4 bedroom properties that will experience a significant reduction in their entitlement. Given a shortage in the availability of social rented housing, it is likely that there will be an increase in the number of households facing homelessness. This is a trend that is already starting to emerge and there has been an increase in the number of households accepted as homeless in 2011/12 when compared to the previous year. Efforts are being made to approach these households with a view to discussing the options available to them, however this is resource intensive and is dependent on households accepting the Council’s offer for assistance.

The Panel has discussed a number of ways in which the changes could have an impact. These include landlords potentially selling their properties because the returns are insufficient, thereby further reducing the number of homes available for rent in the private sector,

the relocation of households into the District from other local authority areas, in particular London Boroughs, in their search for more affordable housing, whether certain areas within the District will be affected more than others, utilising empty properties in the District to assist with meeting the shortfall in housing and other ways of increasing the stock of social rented housing.

Mention has been made of the financial implications of the reforms for Cambridgeshire Councils. Local authorities are required to have in place localised Council Tax Support schemes by April 2013. Consultations with precepting authorities will take place over the summer, the outcome of which will be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) and the Cabinet in September 2012. The Panel has requested an invitation to attend the Economic Well-Being Panel's meeting when discussion on this takes place. If agreement on a local scheme is not reached by January 2013, then the Government will impose its own scheme on the Council. The challenge will be to meet claimants' needs while not introducing a scheme that attracts claimants from different areas because it is less draconian than others. It will also be necessary to balance this against the Council's other budget priorities.

Officers are exploring a number of ways to mitigate the impact of the reforms on claimants and on the Council. These include a review of the Council's Housing Strategy, which incorporates the Lettings Policy and discussions with the Head of Planning and Housing Strategy on the use of planning policy to assist with meeting the need for social housing.

The Panel has placed on record their grave concerns over the impact of the Government's Welfare Reform programme and reiterated their wish to receive quarterly updates on the matter.

3. CAMBRIDGESHIRE ADULTS, WELLBEING AND HEALTH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Minutes of the Cambridgeshire Adults, Well-Being and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 21st March 2012 have been received and noted by the Panel. Members have also been informed of matters that have been discussed at a subsequent meeting held on 29th May 2012. These include the development of clinical commissioning in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, review of progress against the Adult Social Care Integrated Plan, sexual health redesign, developing Healthwatch Cambridgeshire and an update on the redesign of mental health services across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

4. REMIT AND WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel has reviewed its programme of studies and considered its work programme for the forthcoming year. Updates have been received on the redesign of mental health services across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, the Corporate Plan and the ongoing review of the Neighbourhood Forums in Huntingdonshire.

Members have reaffirmed their wish to undertake scrutiny of the Council's budgets of the services that fall within their remit. The Corporate Plan will be presented to the Panel at its July 2012 meeting. The Plan will be used to produce quarterly performance reports, which the Panel may use to inform future study work.

The Panel also has reviewed the membership of its Working Groups looking at the Council's Consultation Processes and One Leisure Performance (Social Well-Being). Further to earlier discussions on the Equality Peer Challenge, the Panel has established a new Working Group to consider the action plan arising from the peer assessment.

Members have been acquainted with details of studies being undertaken by the other Overview and Scrutiny Panels and have been reminded of the opportunity they have to participate in these investigations should they wish.

Other Matters of Interest

5. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2000 – FORWARD PLAN

The Panel has been acquainted with the Forward Plan of Key Decisions. The item entitled Housing Strategy 2012-15, which includes the Tenancy Strategy, will be considered by the Panel at its September 2012 meeting.

6. SCRUTINY

The Panel has considered the latest edition of the Decision Digest.

S J Criswell
Chairman