

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SOCIAL WELL-BEING) held in Civic Suite 0.1A, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon, Cambs, PE29 3TN on Tuesday, 4 September 2012.

PRESENT: Councillor S J Criswell – Chairman.

Councillors R C Carter, Mrs P A Jordan,
P Kadewere, Ms L Kadic, M C Oliver,
J W G Pethard and R J West.

Mrs M Nicholas – Coopted Member.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors S Akthar and K M Baker and Mr R Coxhead.

27. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 3rd July 2012 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

28. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillors S J Criswell, Mrs L Kadic and R J West declared disclosable pecuniary interests in Minute No. 12/33 by virtue of their membership of Cambridgeshire County Council's Safer and Stronger Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

29. 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 September to 31st December 2012. Members were reminded that the Town and Parish Council Charter and Housing Strategy 2012-15 – to include the Tenancy Strategy would be submitted to the Panel's October meeting. It was further noted that details of the Gambling Act 2005 – Revised Statement of Principles had been circulated around electronically to the Panel for information purposes.

30. HOUSING BENEFIT CHANGES AND THE POTENTIAL IMPACT ON HUNTINGDONSHIRE

(Councillor B S Chapman, Executive Councillor for Customer Services, was in attendance for consideration of this item).

Consideration was given to a report by the Head of Customer Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) outlining the effects of Government changes to the Housing Benefits system arising from the Welfare Reform Act.

The Executive Councillor for Customer Services reported that the changes were Government led and that they would not benefit the Council in anyway. The Head of Customer Services then informed Members that there appeared to be a general acceptance amongst claimants that they would experience a reduction in their Housing Benefit and that there had been little contact from claimants on the changes made to date. Customers falling into arrears as a result of the reforms were encouraged to contact the Council immediately for assistance and assurances were delivered to Members that efforts would continue to be made to contact those who were now reaching the end of their transitional protection arrangements.

A question was raised by Councillor Mrs L Kadic querying whether the letters which had been sent out to those affected by the proposals had been written in plain English. In response, the Head of Customer Services reported that she personally had reviewed the letters prior to their dispatch to ensure that recipients would understand the extent of the changes.

Having commended the Customer Services Team for their work in engaging with Housing Benefit claimants to advise them of the impact of the Welfare Reforms, the Panel

RESOLVED

that the content of the report now submitted be noted.

31. REVIEW OF COUNCIL'S LETTINGS POLICY

(Councillor B S Chapman, Executive Councillor for Customer Services, was in attendance for consideration of this item).

Consideration was given to a report by the Head of Customer Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) detailing the outcome of a review of the Council's Lettings Policy. By way of background, the Executive Councillor for Customer Services reported that the review had been prompted by legislative change arising from the Localism Act and the Welfare Reform Act. The Housing Needs and Resources Manager then explained that the Policy was currently undergoing consultation with Members, current housing register applicants and a wide range of stakeholder organisations. It was noted that all partners within the sub-regional Home-Link Choice Based Lettings scheme were also consulting upon their own Lettings Policies as it had been necessary to review these policies together to ensure that a consistent approach to the legislative changes was being adopted across the sub-region area.

Members' attention was drawn to the changes introduced by the Localism Act and other welfare reforms together with proposed revisions to the Policy. They were advised that it would be a challenge for Officers to determine priorities between households with similar levels of need, particularly if additional categories were introduced. The most significant proposal, which would affect a majority of Housing Benefit claimants, related to occupancy levels. It meant that households with spare bedrooms would be regarded as under-occupying their homes and that consideration would also be

given to the age and sex of children in the household. Children of the same sex would be expected to share bedrooms. Members were advised that work had commenced, in conjunction with Housing Providers, to identify affected households and to put in place an incentive scheme to assist with moving costs.

Other matters discussed by the Panel included the impact that the proposals would have upon homelessness, environmental health regulations relating to the sharing of rooms and the methods utilised to generate awareness of the consultation. Following a suggestion made by the Chairman, it was agreed that an Executive Summary would be incorporated within the Lettings Policy document. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the content of the report now submitted be noted.

32. ANNUAL REPORT ON ORGANISATIONS SUPPORTED BY GRANTS THROUGH SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENTS - 2011/12

(Councillor T D Sanderson, Executive Councillor for Healthy and Active Communities, was in attendance for consideration of this item).

The Panel considered a report by the Head of Environmental and Community Health Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) containing details of the performance of voluntary organisations in Huntingdonshire who received funding from the Council via service level agreements. The Executive Councillor for Healthy and Active Communities reported that the agreements would end in March 2013. The Community Health Manager then outlined the background to the current performance framework and apprised Members of how the agreements were managed by the Council. In so doing, he reported that all organisations were monitored against a set of agreed performance indicators and other organisational criteria on a quarterly basis. Members' attention was drawn to the five indicators where the performance targets had not been achieved in the previous year and the reasons for the performance reported.

In response to a question by the Chairman, it was confirmed that once the Council had transferred from the present commissioning model to a grants based system, future reports would include evidence of need and demand for voluntary services. Organisations that applied for grant funding to the Council would be asked to demonstrate how their services were able to meet demand. Members requested that the Council was mindful of the need to keep to a minimum the demands it placed upon voluntary organisations. Having expressed their satisfaction with the content of the report, the Panel

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report be noted.

33. DOMESTIC ABUSE JOINT MEMBER LED REVIEW: FINAL REPORT

(Mr R Jakeman, Scrutiny and Improvement Officer for Cambridgeshire County Council, was in attendance for consideration of this item).

With the aid of a report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the findings of a joint Member-led review on domestic abuse by Cambridgeshire County Council and Huntingdonshire and Fenland District Councils were received and noted by the Panel.

In introducing the report, the Scrutiny and Improvement Officer drew the Panel's attention to a number of statistics which had been collated as evidence to assist with the study. It was encouraging to note that the County Council's Cabinet had fully or partially accepted all the recommendations, with the exception of one which related to the stricter regulation of incidents categorised as "Level 3" by appropriately trained staff. It was however reported that this issue was currently under review by the Lead Member, Councillor Ms S Hoy. It was further reported that one of the main outcomes of the investigation was that the County Council now collected data on domestic abuse in a consistent way which could be utilised to influence the budget setting process.

Members discussed the under-reporting of domestic abuse incidents and expressed the view that communication in this respect should be improved. Furthermore, across Cambridgeshire, local authorities and partner agencies had different systems and data collection practices, which it was felt should be harmonised. This would facilitate better understanding of this matter and joint working. Some progress had already been made to improve these systems.

In noting that Huntingdonshire District Council's responsibilities in respect of domestic abuse rested with the Huntingdonshire Community Safety Partnership, it was reported that the Partnership would consider the report at its October 2012 meeting. In so doing, Members requested that a feedback report was submitted to them at a future meeting.

RESOLVED

- (a) that the content of the report now submitted be noted; and
- (b) that a report on the outcome of the Huntingdonshire Community Safety Partnership's discussions on the report be submitted to a future meeting of the Panel.

34. LEADERSHIP DIRECTION

With the assistance of a report by the Executive Leader and Deputy Executive Leader (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel gave consideration to the Council's Leadership Direction, which set out the intended direction of travel and key milestones for the Council. The Chairman reported that the Corporate Plan Working

Group was currently in the process of producing the Council Delivery Plan, which would sit beneath the Leadership Direction. Work was yet to commence on the development of a performance monitoring reporting system; however, it was reported that the Overview and Scrutiny Panels would play a part in monitoring the Council's performance.

Councillor Mrs P A Jordan drew Members' attention to the findings of the recent Employee Opinion Survey. She was particularly concerned that only 75% of respondents felt that they were treated with dignity and respect at work by Councillors. The Scrutiny and Review Manager reported that in response to the findings of the survey Managing Directors had held a series of meetings with Heads of Service and Team Managers with a view to resolving any identified areas of concern. Furthermore, it was reported that the survey would now be undertaken on an annual basis, whereas previously it had been undertaken biannually. In discussing the way forward, the Chairman and Vice-Chairman undertook to raise these matters at the next meeting of the Corporate Plan Working Group.

35. DRAFT CAMBRIDGESHIRE HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY 2012-17- CONSULTATION RESPONSE

Pursuant to Minute No. 12/20, the Panel received a report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) seeking the Panel's endorsement of a response to the consultation on the Draft Cambridgeshire Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2012-17. The Working Group appointed by the Panel at the last meeting had met on 25th July 2012 to formulate the response. Members' attention was also drawn to a series of Officer comments which had been included within the report since the Working Group's meeting. In noting the wish to ensure that a corporate response was made to the consultation, the Panel

RESOLVED

- (a) that Sections 2 and 3 of the report now submitted be endorsed as the basis for the Council's response to the consultation on the Draft Cambridgeshire Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2012-17;
- (b) that the Cabinet be invited to comment on and endorse the draft response; and
- (c) that Officers be authorised to submit the response directly to the Cambridgeshire Health and Wellbeing Board.

36. REPORT OF THE CABINET

The Panel received and noted a report from the Cabinet (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) outlining their deliberations on the Panel's studies into the Neighbourhood Forums in Huntingdonshire and on Voluntary Sector Funding 2013/14 onwards. With regard to the former, it was noted that a pilot scheme would be trialled in the Norman Cross County Division for a twelve month period and that the existing Neighbourhood Forums would be subject

to urgent review by the Deputy Executive Leader. The Chairman reported that it had been agreed with the Deputy Executive Leader that the Neighbourhood Forums Working Group would be involved with the pilot. Having been informed by Councillor M Oliver that the pilot would commence on 20th September 2012, the Panel requested that a meeting with the existing Neighbourhood Forum Chairmen be held imminently. Members also noted the Cabinet's request that the Panel undertook a review of the Norman Cross pilot during its twelve months of operation.

Having regard to Voluntary Sector Funding 2013/14 onwards, Members noted that the Cabinet had agreed to move to a three year period for funding with future financial support being tapered to ensure voluntary organisations found match funding for any grant that they received from the Council in the final year of the three year period.

37. CAMBRIDGESHIRE ADULTS, WELLBEING AND HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Panel received and noted the Minutes of the meeting of the Cambridgeshire Adults, Wellbeing and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 19th July 2012 (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). Councillor R J West reported that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on 12th September 2012 when consideration would be given to Clinical Commissioning Groups and the Adult Social Care Integrated Plan.

38. WORK PLAN 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) which contained details of studies being undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Panels for Economic Well-Being and for Environmental Well-Being.

39. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SOCIAL 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) which contained details of actions taken in response to recent discussions and decisions. Brief updates were delivered on recent meetings of the One Leisure (Social) Sub-Group and the Equality Working Group. Members agreed to remove the Scrutiny of Council Budgets within the Panel's Remit from the work programme.

Following a question by Councillor P Kadewere on the membership of the Huntingdonshire Community Safety Partnership, Officers undertook to circulate this information electronically to the Panel.

40. SCRUTINY

The 126th Edition of the Decision Digest was received and noted.