

Decision Digest

Edition 127

Monthly summary of the decisions taken at meetings of the Council, Cabinet, Overview & Scrutiny and other Panels for the period 1st August to 21st September 2012.

HOUSING BENEFIT CHANGES AND THE POTENTIAL IMPACT ON HUNTINGDONSHIRE

The quarterly report on the effect of Government changes to the Housing Benefits system arising from the Welfare Reform Act has been considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). There appears to be general acceptance amongst claimants that they will experience a reduction in their housing benefit. Customers falling into arrears as a result of the reforms have been encouraged to contact the Council immediately for assistance should this be the case. Efforts continue to be made to contact those who are now coming to an end of their transitional protection arrangements.

REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S LETTINGS POLICY

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has taken the opportunity to comment on the Council's draft Lettings Policy. The policy was revised following legislative changes outlined in the Localism and Welfare Reform Acts.

The most significant proposals relate to overcrowding, under-occupancy and allocation of properties and the resultant proposed changes to the priority banding levels. This means that a number of households will be regarded as under-occupied and that consideration will need to be given to

same sex children sharing bedrooms. Work has 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 include the impact of the proposals on homelessness, the level of press attention generated on the reforms, environmental health regulations relating to same sex children sharing rooms together with the methods utilised to generate awareness of the consultation.

ANNUAL REPORT ON ORGANISATIONS SUPPORTED BY GRANTS THROUGH SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENTS – 2011 - 12

A report on the performance of voluntary organisations in receipt of funding from the Council through service level agreements has been received by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). All organisations that have a service level agreement with the Council are monitored against a set of agreed performance indicators and other organisational criteria on a quarterly basis. These agreements are due to end in March 2013.

The Panel has expressed their satisfaction with the performance of the voluntary organisations.

DOMESTIC ABUSE JOINT MEMBER LED REVIEW: FINAL REPORT

The findings of a joint Member-led review on domestic abuse by Cambridgeshire County Council and Huntingdonshire and Fenland District Councils has been reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). The County Council's Cabinet has fully or partially accepted all the recommendations, with the exception of one which relates to the stricter regulation of incidents categorised as "Level 3" by appropriately trained staff. One of the main outcomes of the investigation is the way in which the County Council will now collect data that influences the budget setting process.

The report will be considered at the next meeting of the Huntingdonshire Community Safety Partnership. A feedback report will be submitted to a future Panel meeting.

LEADERSHIP DIRECTION

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has considered the content of the Council's Leadership Direction which has been prepared by the Executive and Deputy Executive Leader and sets out their intended direction of travel and key milestones for the Council. The Corporate Plan Working Group is currently working with Officers to produce the Council Delivery Plan, which will sit beneath the Leadership Direction. A performance monitoring reporting system is yet to be developed but it is intended that the Overview and Scrutiny Panels will play a part in monitoring the Council's performance.

The Panel has discussed the outcome of the recent Employee Opinion Survey and are concerned with some of the findings. Councillors S J Criswell and R

J West have undertaken to raise these matters at the next Corporate Plan Working Group meeting.

DRAFT CAMBRIDGESHIRE HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY 2012 - 17 – CONSULTATION RESPONSE

Further to their last meeting, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has considered a draft response formulated by a Working Group appointed by the Panel on the draft Cambridgeshire Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2012-17.

Subsequently the Cabinet has endorsed the paper which will enable a corporate response to be submitted. The response includes comments made by Officers from Housing Services and Environmental and Community Health Services.

NEW GUIDANCE FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES ON THE HOME ENERGY CONSERVATION ACT 1995 (HECA) AND DELIVERY OF THE GREEN DEAL IN HUNTINGDONSHIRE

Both the Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) have considered new guidance for local authorities on the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995 and the delivery of the Green Deal in Huntingdonshire. Members have noted the benefits of working in partnership with commercial Green Deal providers and community partners to facilitate and deliver a local scheme. The Council's role in this arrangement will be to provide leads for potential customers to be followed up by providers. The Council will benefit through the receipt of referral fees. It is estimated that this could produce an income in the order of £150k per annum.

The Panel have expressed a view that safeguards should be put in place to guarantee the standards of work by providers and emphasised that the Council's partner companies should employ acceptable sales practices. Members have been assured that these matters will be addressed through a procurement exercise to identify partners which will realise a single scheme for Cambridgeshire with acceptable sales methods and quality products.

Having been advised of the Panel's views, the Cabinet has authorised Officers to develop an outline business case for an action plan to deliver the procurement of a joint local authority Green Deal for Cambridgeshire. When completed the outline business case will be presented to Members for consideration.

JOINT STATEMENT ON THE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY FOR CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND PETERBOROUGH BY THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES

The Cabinet has endorsed the contents of a Joint Statement on the Development Strategy for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough by the local authorities. The strategy will provide a basis for the authorities to continue to work together at a strategic level to ensure the right development targets are set. Prior to the Cabinet meeting the Statement was noted by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being).

DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) has received the interim report of its Working Group which has been established to examine concerns raised over the Loves Farm development in St

Neots and to make recommendations to inform future developments. Members have been assured that lessons have been learnt from the Loves Farm scheme, specifically the importance of phasing and road construction. The Panel has been advised that a further meeting will be arranged between the Working Group and the Council's Urban Design, Trees and Landscape Team Leader to discuss aspects of the Design Guide in more detail.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF AGRICULTURE TO THE ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY IN THE CONTEXT OF PLANNING POLICIES

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) has received the findings, to date, of its Working Group which was established to examine how agriculture and its environmental work is reflected in the Council's policy framework. Given its significance to the local, regional and national economy, the Working Group has formed the view that this should have greater prominence in the Council's policies.

The Planning Service Manager (Policy) has advised Members that the new Local Plan will address some of the issues raised by the Working Group, specifically the protection of high quality agricultural land.

In light of the Head of Planning & Housing Strategy's response to the Working Group's recommendations, it has been agreed that the Working Group will meet with Planning Officers to discuss the issues raised and agree a way forward for the study.

COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT FROM 1ST APRIL 2013

The Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has received an update on progress being made towards the implementation of a new local Council Tax Support Scheme for the District, which must be in place by 31 January 2013. The Local Government Finance Bill stipulates that before adopting a scheme, the Council must consult their major precepting authorities, publish a draft scheme and carry out a consultation exercise with stakeholders and interested parties.

The Panel has noted that the District Council currently awards approximately £8.1m (net of adjustments) in Council Tax Benefit. The Government is to reduce the funding it provides to Councils to meet the cost of Council Tax support. Whilst some of those who could have been affected are protected from any reduction in the support they receive, the Panel has concurred with the view that the whole reduction should not be passed on to the remaining recipients of support and that the Council should make up part of the difference. Members are also of the view that when changes are being developed and implemented, the Council should make clear that the Government has imposed the reduction and that the Council will not benefit from any savings.

Having been advised of the responses, which have been received as part of the current consultation to-date, Members have commented on the fact that the consultation has not targeted all Council Tax payers. It has been suggested that it might have been more widely distributed. Although it is important that those affected are consulted to enable the Council to complete an impact assessment, these comments will be taken into account when the responses are analysed.

On behalf of the Social Well-Being Panel, Councillor S Criswell has expressed the view that the Council is minimising the effects of the changes as far as possible and that if the Council made up the whole of the shortfall it would have to find an extra £1m in savings. The Council will need to take a decision on behalf of all Council Tax payers on the basis of the consultation responses received.

Finally, Members have suggested that the Council might assist those affected to move to properties in a lower Council Tax band and they have been assured that the facility for some payers to pay their Council Tax over twelve months will not cause the Council any cash flow problems.

In considering the key components of the new arrangements, the Cabinet has reiterated the Panel's view that the funding shortfall should not be passed onto the remaining recipients and that the scope of the consultation exercise be taken into account when analysing the responses.

THE TECHNICAL REFORM OF COUNCIL TAX

The Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has received an update on the Government's proposals to reform Council Tax from 1st April 2013 which will enable the Council to use certain discretionary powers.

Members have reviewed proposals for a number of changes to Council Tax discounts and exemptions, which will generate extra income for the Council and will be used to reduce the impact on the Council of forthcoming changes to Council Tax Support. Having considered the three types of discounts /exemptions and noting that those affected will include individuals who inherit property and private landlords,

the Panel has expressed their support for the proposals to:-

- grant unoccupied and unfurnished (Class C) properties 100% discount for 1 month and 0% thereafter;
- reduce Second Home Discount to 0%;
- grant uninhabitable properties (Class A) 100% discount for a maximum of 12 months;
- levy Empty Homes Premium after two years at 50% in addition to the 100% charge currently made;
- continue to require monthly instalments to be made on the 15th day of each month; and
- continue to work in Partnership with other Cambridgeshire local authorities to publish the 48 page Council Tax Booklet.

With regard to the proposal to reduce the exemption for unoccupied and substantially furnished properties from six months to one month, the Panel has been assured that testing has been undertaken to maximise the cost effectiveness of the change.

The Panel has also discussed the social consequences of the proposals and has concluded that overall they will result in houses being occupied more quickly. This has been endorsed by the Chairman of the Social-Well Being Panel.

Subsequently, the Cabinet has agreed the proposals in principle, subject to the enactment of the relevant legislation.

FINANCIAL FORECAST

In conjunction with the Cabinet, the Overview & Scrutiny (Economic Well-Being) Panel has been acquainted with the present position in relation to the Council's financial forecast and details of the progress made to-date in the achievement of planned savings. Although the financial forecast reveals that at present the Council is in a better position than had been anticipated, the Panel has acknowledged that the risks and unknown factors facing the Council are of a greater magnitude this year than they have been in previous years. Members have also recognised that future Government grant levels present a further risk given the success the Council has had in obtaining income from the New Homes Bonus. A number of these factors will have been resolved by the time the Council sets its budget in February and Members have been advised that further work is being undertaken by the Cabinet to identify further efficiencies to ensure that the Council will have a sound plan to achieve a balanced budget whilst maintaining an acceptable minimal level of reserves.

The Panel has discussed the Council's approach to borrowing and the effect of repayments on the revenue budget. The view has been expressed that cumulative borrowing will increase in the medium term and the repayments will have an effect on the Council's revenue budget. It has equally been argued that borrowing should be undertaken if it is for appropriate capital purposes and that, in this case, the Council needs to retain the flexibility to borrow when the most advantageous terms are available. Members have concluded that the Panel needs to debate what the Council's approach

should be and has established a Working Group to identify the terms of this debate. A report will then be received on the Council's current and future borrowing and its assets.

Members also have expressed a particular interest in the Council's level of reserves, having formed a working group to examine this matter and the Council's provisions in this respect. For the purposes of the Financial Forecast, the Working Group does not recommend that the minimum level of reserves is increased and this view has been endorsed by the Panel. The Panel has also been advised of the Council's potential liability arising from the insolvency of Municipal Mutual Insurance (MMI) in 1992 and has noted that the External Auditors are of the opinion that the current provision in the Accounts for this purpose should be reduced.

In terms of the risks and uncertainties listed within the Forecast, a Panel Member has raised a number of specific questions which have been responded to at the meeting. This has drawn attention to the increasing volumes of people with housing and financial difficulties, and to ensure they receive an adequate service, extra spending will be required. In concluding their discussions, the Panel has supported the recommendation that the annuity basis is used for the calculation of Minimum Revenue Provision.

Subsequently, the Cabinet has also approved the annuity basis for the calculation of Minimum Revenue Provision and having requested Officers to review the level and predictions for New Homes Bonus on a quarterly basis, made appropriate recommendations to Council.

LOCALISATION OF BUSINESS RATES

The Cabinet has been updated on progress to date on the establishment of a local business rates pool as part of the Government's rates retention scheme. An expression of interest on behalf of the Cambridgeshire authorities has been submitted to the Government by Cambridgeshire County Council and work has progressed to agree management proposals for the scheme. In endorsing a proposed scheme for Cambridgeshire, the Cabinet has requested the Managing Directors, after consultation with the Executive Leader, to make any minor consequential amendments to the scheme as necessary. All partners will be able to review the final scheme annually.

FIXED PENALTY NOTICES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) has endorsed a proposal for a change in fine level for Fixed Penalty Notices issued under sections 46 and 47 of the Environment Protection Act. The change is required by an Amendment Order. As the Council offers a reduced fine for swift payment, as Section 46 notices have rarely been used and no Section 47 notices ever issued by the Council, the Panel has recommended that the change is made.

Subsequently, the Cabinet has approved a charge of £80 reduced to £60 if paid within 10 days for such offences.

MANAGING ABSENCE & ATTENDANCE WITHIN THE DISTRICT COUNCIL

The Employment Panel has received a presentation on the management of

absence and attendance within the Authority.

It is well recognised that the effective management of absence is key to the well being and cost of an organisation. During 2011/12, the average sickness per employee was 8.5 days and the Panel has noted that this was reasonable compared to other local authorities within the area and remains well below the average for local government. Having received information on the national picture, the Panel has noted details of the Council's existing absence management process, the challenges which face Managers in dealing with sickness within their teams and the support provided from human resources to assist them.

Information on the way in which the Human Resources Team deals with stress related absence also has been presented and the Panel has noted that further work is to be undertaken shortly by LGSS to review the existing caseload. Members also have requested that future reports should include information on the number of individuals who are hitting the prescribed trigger points within the absence monitoring process.

EMPLOYMENT REPORT

The Employment Panel has received a quarterly report on the Human Resource matters impacting on the performance of the organisation. The report includes the latest position and trends relating to:-

- ◆ employee numbers;
- ◆ salary costs;
- ◆ employee turnover;
- ◆ retention of new starters;
- ◆ sickness absence reporting; and
- ◆ the Human Resources caseload.

In future, Members considered that it would be useful to be able to make comparisons with other public sector organisations. Further information also has been requested on employee turnover and the number of days lost to sickness per quarter.

Comment also was made on stress related absences and the need to manage information to ease any perception of uncertainty amongst employees. The Panel also have noted that the various services will experience different types of absence depending on the nature of their work.

Having received clarification on a number of aspects, the Panel has endorsed a series of measures which have been designed to improve the Council's existing absence policies and procedures. A review of the District Council's Sickness Absence Policy will be undertaken shortly and considered by the Panel at a future meeting.

The Chairman congratulated LGSS on their recent showcase event to demonstrate the training and development opportunities which would be made available to District Council employees.

ARRANGEMENTS FOR CORPORATE HEALTH & SAFETY

In order to fulfil the Council's statutory responsibilities and to ensure consistency in health and safety across the organisation, the Employment Panel has adopted a new set of arrangements for ensuring the health and safety of District Council employees which will be incorporated within the Council's existing Health and Safety Policy. These arrangements set out the way in which specific issues are to be dealt with and collate individual service based standards into a single document, which will be easier to

access and maintain. It was envisaged that performance standards will be developed for the specific arrangements detailed in the policy in due course.

Having regard to the disadvantages which had been highlighted in terms of the potential isolation of those individuals who were regularly working from home, the Panel was assured that these employees were receiving adequate support.

Having noted a request from Employees' Side representatives that a representative should be appointed to the Council's Safety Advisory Group to help with consultation on health and safety matters, it has been suggested that this request could be considered as part of a review of the operation of the Employment Panel and Employee Liaison Advisory Group.

EMPLOYEE OPINION SURVEY RESULTS

The responses to an opinion survey undertaken during April 2012 to find out how employees felt about working for the Council have been presented to the Employment Panel. Where possible, the findings have been used as benchmarks for comparisons with survey results in previous years.

In considering the results, Members were mindful that the effect of recent reductions in local government funding, the general economic climate and a number of significant changes within the Council would have had an impact on the survey outcome. Their attention having been drawn to the responses by Management to the issues highlighted, the Panel has noted that the findings will now be used by the Senior Management Group in conjunction with LGSS and Team Managers to develop local action plans. In order to ensure that those issues highlighted by

employees are addressed the survey will now be run on an annual basis.

Concern has been expressed that only 75% of employees felt that they were treated with dignity and respect at work by District Councillors. The Panel noted that arrangements were being made for a meeting of Group Leaders to discuss this matter further. Members also identified a need to address some of the longer term issues which had been identified by the survey.

The Panel also has discussed the views expressed by employees on the adequacy of information available to them on the Council and, having been reminded of the context in which the survey was undertaken, has made a number of comments concerning the need to supply key concise information to staff. Having commented that it was difficult for Members to interpret the general information which had been presented to them, the Panel noted that this had been analysed by Division for use by Heads of Service.

A copy of the full report is available from the Corporate Office on request.

PAY REVIEW PROJECT

The Employment Panel has received an update on the progress being made on the Council's Pay Review project. Phase 1 has now been completed and 38 core posts (which equated to 218 staff) within the organisation had been evaluated and moderated using a revised Job Evaluation Scheme. Phase 2 is expected to start shortly and the outcome will enable work to commence on the modelling of a new District Council pay structure early in the New Year.

The Panel also has authorised the Managing Director (Resources) after consultation with the Chairman of the Panel and the Executive Leader to

agree and offer a pay award to District Council employees in the 2013/14 financial year.

BEARSCROFT FARM, GODMANCHESTER

Having endorsed the observations that it had previously made on the Draft Urban Development Framework for land at Bearscroft Farm, Godmanchester, the Development Management Panel also have requested that the Cabinet be advised of its concern at the impact of additional traffic likely to be generated by the development on the medieval bridge in Huntingdon.

