
Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being)

Report of the meeting held on 2nd October 2012

Matters for Information

22. HOUSING STRATEGY 2012-15

The Panel has considered the adoption of a new Housing Strategy 2012-15 for Huntingdonshire. Members' attention has been drawn to a number of achievements made under the previous Housing Strategy 2006-11 and to various statistics for the Huntingdonshire area, in particular, those relating to anticipated population projections and average house prices. These statistics indicate that there is a need to maximise opportunities to deliver more affordable housing. The revised Strategy focuses on the Council's new priority areas.

With regard to the impact of developments on individuals' quality of life, the Panel has been advised that there is a need to ensure the right balance is achieved and that due process is followed. The National Planning Policy Framework places a duty on the Council to meet the housing needs of the District. The Council endeavours to comply with this duty whilst at the same time ensuring that large scale developments are located in the least harmful areas. The Panel has concluded that good communication is important in terms of challenging negative attitudes towards development.

The Panel has discussed private sector rental rates and how they compare with the public sector. This is a matter, which is being pursued by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being). A recent report to that Panel reveals that there has been little change in rent levels.

Other matters discussed by the Panel include homelessness levels within the District and the role and importance of community planning within Parishes. During community planning some communities identify older people's homes as one of their community priority areas. These and other such views will assist with shaping local planning policy in future years.

The Panel has recommended the Cabinet to endorse the Housing Strategy 2012-15.

23. DRAFT TENANCY STRATEGY

The Panel has supported the adoption of a Tenancy Strategy for Huntingdonshire. There is a requirement under the Localism Act 2011 that the Council has a Tenancy Strategy. The Strategy is based on seven key principles, including the expectation that social housing landlords will take a proactive approach to tackling anti-social behaviour. The most significant change that the Strategy will introduce is fixed term tenancies for social housing tenants. All social housing within the District is managed by Registered Providers. These Providers are not required to offer this option to their tenants but they are expected to have regard to the Council's Strategy when setting their own policies.

Of the 9,000 social homes available within the District, around 8,000 are managed by Luminus. Luminus has indicated that it will introduce fixed term tenancies to new tenants from April 2013 onwards. This will not affect tenants on existing assured tenancies (even if they transfer to another property) or those in receipt of exemptions. Tenants' circumstances will be reviewed by social landlords prior to the end of their fixed term and all housing options will be assessed, including those on offer within the private sector. It is intended that the proposals will encourage more effective utilisation of social housing whilst at the same time alleviating some of the pressures on the Housing Register.

Targeted consultation with social tenants has not been undertaken by the Council. This is a matter for Registered Providers as it will be their own policies that affect tenants. Work is being undertaken in conjunction with Registered Providers to communicate the changes to affected tenants.

24. HUNTINGDONSHIRE CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU

The Executive Leader has addressed the Panel on social aspects of the recent announcement by the Huntingdonshire CAB that it will go into voluntary liquidation. A number of discussions have been held between the Council and the CAB in the months leading up to the announcement over the financial viability of the organisation. The CAB provides support to the District's residents in key areas and attempts are being made to work positively with the organisation to manage the situation and to identify the next steps forward. Service is expected to cease in December 2012 and interim arrangements are currently being planned for the final quarter of the financial year, with consideration also being given to finding a long term solution for Huntingdonshire. Any future service provision will be made available across the whole District.

31st October 2012 marks the closing date for applications under the Council's new voluntary sector funding arrangements. It is expected that some proposals will be forthcoming on behalf of the CAB. All Members will receive a summary of the applications that are received prior to any decisions being made by the relevant Executive Members.

The Panel has commented on the valuable service provided by the CAB's volunteers. These volunteers will have an important role during the transition period, particularly by maintaining communications with the public. It will be important that trained volunteers can be retained and that an ongoing training and development programme for volunteers is maintained. The Panel has also indicated that the organisation should have adequate insurance cover.

A further update will be provided to the Panel in November 2012.

25. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2011/12

The Panel has reviewed the draft Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report for 2011/12. Having been reminded that under the Council's Constitution a Report has to be produced each year, Members have approved the draft for publication.

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

Councillor R J West has updated the Panel on matters currently being considered by the Cambridgeshire Adults, Wellbeing and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, including Clinical Commissioning Groups and the Adult Social Care Integrated Plan.

Other Matters of Interest

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

The Panel has reviewed its programme of studies. An update has been delivered on Circle Healthcare's Annual General Meeting and the Corporate Plan, Consultation Processes and Social Well-Being Working Groups.

At the request of the Corporate Governance Panel, a review of the effectiveness of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels will be undertaken starting on 22nd October 2012. Councillors S J Criswell, R J West and Mrs P A Jordan, together with Mr R Coxhead, will be participating in the review process, alongside representatives of the other Overview and Scrutiny Panels.

The Panel has agreed to extend an invitation to Circle Healthcare to attend the Panel's March 2013 meeting. This will be timely given that it will be a year since Circle addressed the Panel.

28. WORK PLAN STUDIES

The Panel has received details of studies being undertaken by the other Overview and Scrutiny Panels.

29. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2000: FORWARD PLAN

The Panel has been acquainted with the current Forward Plan of Key Decisions. The item entitled "Town and Parish Council Charter" will be presented to the Panel in November 2012.

30. SCRUTINY

The Panel has considered the latest edition of the Decision Digest and discussed matters contained therein.

S J Criswell
Chairman