

Decision Digest

Edition 132

Monthly summary of the decisions taken at meetings of the Council, Cabinet, Overview & Scrutiny and other Panels for the period 1st to 28th February 2013.

DRAFT ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR BILL

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has agreed to submit a response to the current Government consultation on the Draft Anti-Social Behaviour Bill in respect of the proposals for a Community Remedy. The Remedy will enable victims of anti-social behaviour and the community to have a say in the treatment of offenders and to agree what sanctions would be meaningful. The Panel has stressed that, where necessary, victims' anonymity should be protected.

ANNUAL EQUALITY PROGRESS REPORT

(a) Annual Progress Report

Progress towards the achievement of the Council's Single Equality Scheme and associated Action Plan was reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). The Panel has discussed the forthcoming redundancy of the Diversity and Projects Officer post and the impact that this will have upon the Council. Various aspects of the Equality Impact Assessments undertaken in 2012, in particular those which relate to refuse and recycling round rescheduling and charging for a second green bin have been queried by Members.

(b) Equality Working Group

The outcome of a recent meeting of the Equality Working Group was reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). The Working Group has reviewed information relating to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender inequalities within Huntingdonshire and the outcome of the 2012 Employee Opinion Survey.

CONSULTATION PROCESSES WORKING GROUP

Progress made by the Consultation Processes Working Group on their investigations to date was reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). The Panel has endorsed the view that Officers should be encouraged to populate the Consultation Calendar and Database with details of consultations they are undertaking and to evaluate them once they have been completed. Additionally, it has been agreed that an annual evaluation report summarising the consultations undertaken by the Council each year should be presented to the Panel. Both matters will be incorporated within the Strategy and Guidance which is expected to be submitted to the Panel and Cabinet in June/July 2013.

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

Members of the Hinchingsbrooke Hospital Working Group attended a meeting of the Cambridgeshire Adults Wellbeing and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee when an update on Hinchingsbrooke Hospital's progress and plans was delivered by representatives of Hinchingsbrooke Healthcare NHS Trust, Circle and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Shadow Clinical Commissioning Group. Matters discussed included the Hospital's financial position, the terms of the management contract and headlines in the local press. Representatives of the Hospital will be in attendance at the Panel's March 2013 meeting.

REVIEW OF HUMAN RESOURCE POLICIES

The Employment Panel has adopted a number of new District Council policies and procedures to manage sickness absence, the probationary period, appeals against dismissal and employees who are absent without leave. Training will now be organised for all Managers across the organisation.

In the forthcoming quarter, LGSS will undertake work to review the Council's Employee Capability Policy and develop a policy for time off for reasons other than sickness absence.

UPDATE ON REVIEW OF CONSULTATION AND INFORMATION PROPOSALS

The Employment Panel has received an update on the progress made with proposals to streamline the process for the consideration of employment matters currently dealt with by the Employee Liaison Advisory Group and Employment Panel.

Having been advised of the views of the Corporate Governance Panel, the Panel has been given an opportunity to comment and endorse a set of proposed parameters within which the Head of Paid Service will operate when making employment decisions.

The matter will now be considered again by the Corporate Governance Panel at their meeting on 26th March 2013.

EMPLOYMENT REPORT

The Employment Panel has received a quarterly report on Human Resource matters impacting on the performance of the organisation. On this occasion, the report included 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.

Although the level of sickness absence remained below the local government average, the Panel was made aware that the trend line for absenteeism was rising year on year at a time when sickness appeared to be reducing in other public sector organisations. The Panel was of the view that it would be a useful exercise to benchmark the Council's performance against other organisations.

QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE REPORT FOR HR, PAYROLL AND ORGANISATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

The Employment Panel has considered a report outlining the performance of LGSS Human Resources, Payroll and Organisational Workforce Development

services across the key service measures put in place at the start of the contract during the period 1st October to 31st December 2012. LGSS performance is measured in three areas namely:

- ❖ HR Strategic and Advisory
- ❖ Recruitment and Payroll
- ❖ Organisational Workforce Development.

Having noted that performance standards had largely been achieved, the Panel has noted that key areas of activity for the next quarter will include support for the Pay Review and the completion of the review of employee relations and consultation. Work will also be undertaken to review the Council's policies on employee capability and time off for reasons other than sickness absence. A Strategy for Workforce Development is also expected to be completed by April 2013.

In terms of the performance standards achieved, the Panel has noted that it is the intention to agree specific performance targets at the conclusion of the first year of the LGSS contract.

PAY POLICY STATEMENT

The Employment Panel has endorsed for submission to the Council, the content of the Statement of Pay Policy for 2013/14. The Pay Policy Statement provides information about the Council's policies relating to the pay and reward of Chief Officers and other employees, as required by Sections 38 – 43 of the Localism Act 2011. The Statement will be published on the Council's website together with data on senior salaries required by the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency.

As there are a number of pieces of work underway including the review of

the Pay and Grading Framework and the restructuring of the senior management team, the Panel noted that a revised Policy Statement will be issued later in the year.

PAY REVIEW PROJECT

The Employment Panel has received an update on the progress being made on the Council's Pay Review project. Members were informed that Phase 3 of the Job Evaluation work stream had now begun and was expected to be completed by the end of April 2013. Work to establish 'Job Families' for business support staff is also nearing completion. LGSS will commence work on the modelling of a new District Council pay structure shortly, once 80% of the posts within the organisation have been evaluated.

During their consideration of the paper, the Panel discussed the significant milestones which form part of the project and the potential for issues raised, during the consultation and negotiation stage, to delay the project timetable.

In terms of communications with employees on the pay review project, the Panel has sought assurances from the Chairman of the ELAG Staff Side that communication was satisfactory and have noted that a number of methods had been used to disseminate information to staff. Having noted that communications will become more significant as the project progresses into the next phase, the Panel has been informed that a detailed communications plan will be developed to address these issues.

PROCURING A GREEN DEAL PARTNER RELATIONSHIP FOR CAMBRIDGESHIRE

A proposal to establish a Green Deal Partnership scheme within the County

has been considered by both the Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being). The Home Energy Act requires all local authorities to actively promote and report on local Green Deal activity within their area whilst also playing a lead role towards its delivery. The scheme enables households to spend up to £10,000 on energy saving measures within their homes with repayments made through their energy bills. Certain properties will also qualify for a grant from the Government's "Green Deal Pioneer Places" fund if they are regarded as hard to treat properties, vulnerable or fuel poor households.

Matters discussed by the Panel included the procurement practices to be employed, the accreditation and certification of energy improvement assessors and installers, the need to protect the Council's reputation and the establishment of points of contact within the Council and communities to act as "trusted" informants about the scheme. Other matters discussed included the likely timescales for the launch of the scheme, the level of referral fees and the role of the Environment Team in generating leads and undertaking marketing activity for the scheme.

The Panel has requested an update on progress of the scheme after 12 months operation.

In the meantime, the Cabinet has endorsed the establishment of a Partnership Scheme for Cambridgeshire and has supported the undertaking of a joint procurement exercise to select one or more Green Deal Provider. The Cabinet has authorised the Head of Paid Service and Head of Legal and Democratic Services to negotiate a Memorandum of Understanding governing joint working and to enter into a contract with the chosen provider. In order to

safeguard the Council's reputation, the Cabinet has requested the Head of Paid Service to clarify the terms under which the Council could withdraw from the Partnership should the implemented scheme not be meeting its objectives.

REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

The outcome of a review of the effectiveness of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels was reported to the Environmental Well-Being Panel. The findings reveal that all Panels are generally acting effectively in discharging their responsibilities and fulfilling their terms of reference. Opportunities for improvement have been identified and will be incorporated within an Action Plan that will be subject to review by the Working Group. The Panel has endorsed a recommendation that the Working Group should meet with the Executive Leader to discuss opportunities for earlier scrutiny and involvement with the formulation of policy.

AGRICULTURE WORKING GROUP

An in-depth study into the Council's Planning Policy Framework as it relates to agriculture has been completed by the Agriculture Working Group appointed by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being). The relevant part of the Draft Huntingdonshire Local Plan to 2036 was examined by the Working Group and a number of comments made. The Working Group is satisfied that most of the issues they had previously raised are covered within the draft policy.

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

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) has queried why they have not been provided with

information on the new waste collection rounds which will go live on 25th February 2013. In addition, the Panel is concerned that the Landbeach Waste Management Plant still was not in operation and that this continued closure would significantly increase the level of waste being directed to landfill. The Chairman undertook to make enquiries in both respects and will report back to a future meeting. A request also was made for information on current recycling figures to establish what the impact of the situation at Landbeach has been.

BUDGET 2013/14 AND MEDIUM TERM PLAN 2014 TO 2018

At its meeting in February, the Overview & Scrutiny Panel for Economic Well-Being reviewed the Medium Term Plan (MTP) for 2014 -18, the Budget and the level of Council Tax for 2013/14.

The Panel has been reminded of Executive Councillors' four financial objectives relating to achieving a balanced budget - the level of reserves, securing the Council's finances after the New Homes Bonus had ceased and capital borrowing. Having considered each aspect of the Budget and MTP and future Council Tax levels in detail, the Panel has drawn attention to the fact that the overall budget is 4.8% higher than the forecast outturn for 2012/13. The increase is a result of multiple factors but inflation is a major contributor. The pay review also will have a significant effect on overall budget requirements in future years. The introduction of more efficient working practices will also be beneficial. Whilst it is recognised that the Council is working at capacity, it is not necessarily the case that all areas are operating as efficiently as they might be. Some services have introduced efficiencies and it is suggested that the organisational culture needs to develop

so that all sections constantly strive to find efficiencies. This will be assisted if there is a change to the Budget process, so that it is influenced from the bottom up and the top down. The Panel will re examine the Budget process once the current budgetary cycle has been completed.

With regard to the level of Council Tax, the Panel questioned the suggested approach that the Council should introduce the maximum increase allowed. The view was expressed that a lower level of increase should be considered. However, mindful of the historical context and the fact that the Council continues to subsidise services from reserves, the Panel recommended that Council Tax be increased by £4.67 per year, which equates to a Band D charge of £133.18.

Having been acquainted with the methodology introduced to determine the Council's position in respect of Business Rates, the Panel has received assurances that a Memorandum of Understanding with Urban and Civic would ensure that Huntingdonshire based businesses will not be allowed to transfer to the Enterprise Zone unless their need to expand cannot be accommodated in their existing locations. This will minimise the effect of the Enterprise Zone on the Council's Business Rates income.

The Panel has considered a suggestion by Councillor S J Criswell that the town and parish council's tax base grant should not be provided after 2013/14. The MTP currently contains provision of £357k each year until 2017/18 for this purpose. Although there is some support for the current approach, abuse of the grant by some councils has led others to believe that it should not continue after 2013/14. If this is the case, it is suggested that an adequate period of notice is allowed and that consideration is given to providing a

“soft landing”. The Panel has asked to be consulted before a final decision is taken.

The Panel has expressed its appreciation of the additional provision of £100k, which has been included for homelessness. This is the result of a recommendation by the Panel. Members also recognised the fact that the budget did not contain any unidentified savings for 2013/14, which is a considerable achievement.

Having thanked Officers and Executive Councillors for their work in preparing a sound, efficient and effective Budget in particularly difficult circumstances, the Panel concluded that the Cabinet should recommend the Council to approve the proposed MTP, Budget and Financial Plan and increase the Council Tax for 2013/14 by £4.67 per year; that is, a Band D charge of £133.18.

Subsequently, the Cabinet has recommended to Council that the proposed Budget, Medium Term Plan and Financial Plan be approved and that the Council Tax for 2013/14 be increased by £4.67 per year (a Band D charge of £133.18). In so doing, the Cabinet has thanked the Panel for its input into the budgetary process and has noted their intention to examine, in detail, the future budget once the current budget process has been completed. In noting the Panel's concerns over the abuse of the tax base grant by some town and parish councils, the Cabinet has reiterated that similar grants in future years could not be guaranteed.

2013/14 TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

In accordance with its responsibility for scrutinising Treasury Management, the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has reviewed and

endorsed the Treasury Management Policy and Strategy for 2013/14 and the Prudential Indicators for submission to the Cabinet and Council. The Strategy is based upon the revised version of CIPFAs Code of Practice and Government Guidance, which expects priority to be given to the security and liquidity of investments rather than simply maximising the interest earned.

Having been assured that the Treasury Management Group provides oversight of the Strategy and the actions taken under it, the Panel has been advised of the terms of the contract for the receipt of advice from an independent firm of Treasury Management Advisors. The Panel also was acquainted with the legal rules relating to the receipt of Council Tax, the onward payment of it to other precepting bodies and the use of the cash flow benefit that is created. It is not envisaged that these arrangements will change.

A new element of this year's Policy and Strategy is the potential for the Council to provide loan finance to local organisations that can support Council services. This will enable the Council to make a margin on the loan subject to adequate safeguards. Other local authorities make loans to organisations and the Panel supports the suggestion that the District Council should investigate whether this might provide a contribution towards the savings the Council needs to find. The inclusion of these terms in the Strategy will allow the investigations to take place. Members have stressed that loans should only be made for the purposes stated above.

In recommending the adoption of the Strategy to Council, the Cabinet has confirmed that the provision of loan finance to local organisations will be

considered by the Treasury Management Group.

DOCUMENT CENTRE REVIEW

The Overview & Scrutiny Panel for Economic Well-Being has endorsed the findings of its Working Group, which had been established to review the costs of the District Council's Document Centre and to form a view on its efficiency and cost effectiveness. Overall, the Panel was very impressed with the way the Document Centre was run and is of the opinion that it operates effectively and efficiently. The cost of running the centre has been reduced by 10% in the last three years and there are currently no capacity issues being experienced. The Panel has endorsed a number of recommendations relating to internal printing / design services and post, mail handling and scanning which are designed to achieve further efficiencies and cost savings.

Having noted that there are only six departments using Electronic Document Management (EDM), the Panel has expressed concern that EDM has not been rolled out throughout the District Council as was originally intended. It is recommended that this is the subject of a separate investigation.

The Panel has endorsed the view that there is scope to improve the financial performance of the Document Centre and have considered a number of options through which this might be achieved. To do this, the Council will need to determine whether it has the appetite to undertake significant levels of investment to develop the service. It has been pointed out that alternative approaches might be considered, including the opportunities presented by electronic media.

The methodology employed during the study will be reviewed for use in future investigations. As part of this, the

involvement of senior management in finalising recommendations will be considered. The report will now be submitted to the Cabinet, for consideration by Executive Members.

ST NEOTS RAILWAY STATION FOOTBRIDGE

The Cabinet has been advised of a shortfall in funding of approx. £360K for a scheme to install a new footbridge at St Neots Railway Station. Members were advised that the cost of the original project, initiated in 2005/06, had increased and the project's S106 had reduced following a renegotiation of the BCIS index. The proposed footbridge is a critical element of the new infrastructure for St Neots, providing an important link for pedestrians and cyclists travelling between the St Neots Expansion area, the railway station and the rest of the town. In order for the project to proceed any additional funding will need to be financed by the District Council as the contributions from the County Council and the developer, Network Rail, are fixed. Members were advised that the shortfall could be met from a number of efficiencies in the 2013/14 revenue budget for Planning Services and from unspent capital provision for Town Centre Developments. The Cabinet has subsequently asked the Council to approve a capital contribution for the scheme from these reserves.

DELEGATED POWERS – ENVIRONMENTAL ENFORCEMENT

The Cabinet has approved a series of amendments to the powers delegated to Officers in respect of the enforcement of environmental crime such as littering, fly tipping, nuisance cars for sale and abandoned vehicles.

SUMMARY OF ENFORCEMENT ACTIVITY

The Development Management Panel has been updated on the extent of enforcement activity during 2012 and endorsed three objectives for the Service in 2013. Despite pressure on resources, the Panel was pleased to note that the Team continued to undertake 95% of initial site visits, following enquiries, within 10 working days to make an early assessment of allegations and determine the degree of priority which should be accorded to new cases. Although new cases had reduced by 11%, the overall number of cases received was broadly equivalent to the average recorded over the previous 10 years.

As the Enforcement Team has limited resources, the Panel acknowledged that all Councillors have a part to play in monitoring potential planning breaches and enforcement issues in their wards and for drawing these to the attention of the Team. The objectives for 2013 are as follows –

- to focus on quality outcomes where unacceptable breaches are identified;
- to maximise the efficiency of the enforcement service; and
- to consider preparing a local enforcement plan as recommended by the National Planning Policy Framework.

DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT PROGRESS REPORT – 1ST OCTOBER – 31ST DECEMBER 2012

Although the number of applications being dealt with by the Development Management Service remains broadly similar to the corresponding quarter in 2011, the Development Management Panel has been advised that several applications for major housing development in the District had been

submitted, potentially involving 11,000 new houses, which will impact on the level of income received from planning fees which is currently marginally below the estimated budget for the quarter. The service continues to exceed all targets for the determination of major, minor and other applications in their respective time periods.

APPEAL DECISIONS

In noting the conclusions by the Planning Inspectorate in 12 appeals against the District Council's decision to refuse permission for development, the attention of the Development Management Panel was drawn to a situation whereby permission had been granted by the Inspector for residential development on employment land. The Inspector had concluded that, amongst other reasons, the development would not significantly diminish the area's employment capacity given the extent of vacant employment space currently available in St Neots. He also considered that the conversion of office units would provide a modest boost to the local economy given the construction services required to undertake the conversion works.

DEVELOPMENT APPLICATIONS

At the February meeting, the Development Management Panel considered nine applications of which three were refused, four approved, one deferred for further information and one delegated to the Head of Planning & Housing Strategy to determine pending receipt of amended plans for garages to two new proposed dwellings in Hemingford Grey. The Panel also approved a proposal to construct a new footpath for pedestrian and cycle use along the northern boundary of Mill Common aside The Walks North. It is anticipated that this new link will assist cross town movements and discourage cyclists from using the High Street.