

Decision Digest

Edition 134

Monthly summary of the decisions taken at meetings of the Council, Cabinet, Overview & Scrutiny and other Panels for the period 25th March to 21st May 2013.

HEALTHWATCH CAMBRIDGESHIRE

The Chairman of Healthwatch Cambridgeshire gave a presentation to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) on the process undertaken to establish a local Healthwatch scheme. The organisation will be accountable to Cambridgeshire County Council and is established as a company limited by guarantee. It will involve a Board comprising 4 non-Executive Directors and 5 members of staff; one Chief Executive and four Healthwatch Co-ordinators.

Healthwatch Cambridgeshire is established under the Social Care Act 2012. The organisation will seek to become the new independent consumer champion for users of health and social care services. Key functions will include signposting and the provision of advocacy services.

The Panel asked a number of questions and received a response to each query raised. Matters that were discussed included the methods of engagement to be employed by Healthwatch Cambridgeshire, the role of Healthwatch England, the proposal to develop role descriptions for volunteers and the importance of working in partnership with interested stakeholders, including the voluntary and community sectors.

HOUSING BENEFIT CHANGES AND THE POTENTIAL IMPACT UPON HUNTINGDONSHIRE

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) continues to monitor the effect of Government changes to the Housing Benefits system arising from the Welfare Reform Act. The Panel was concerned that claimants renting in the private sector might not be fully aware of the impact of the changes as only a small proportion of residents had made contact with the Council to date. There was further concern that such claimants were building up rent arrears on their homes.

The Panel has discussed a number of matters relating to various aspects of the reforms. Information on the Call Centre's performance in the week prior to the 1st April 2013, together with details of the Council's Rent Deposit scheme and homelessness budget will be circulated to Panel Members outside of the meeting. The Panel has further suggested that a more collaborative approach to the reforms should be adopted by all Registered Providers operating within the District.

Monthly updates on the impact of the reforms will be provided in the Member's Brief.

SOCIAL VALUE WORKING GROUP

An update on the progress of investigations undertaken by the Social Value Working Group was reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). The Working Group will now attempt to attach a financial value to the social, financial

and health benefits of One Leisure and produce a detailed account of the methodology used to undertake this work.

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

The Panel has requested an update on the impact of the redesign of mental health services across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough for submission to a future meeting.

Having expressed their disappointment over the lack of progress with the North West Huntingdonshire pilot Local Joint Committee, the Panel will be requesting the Cabinet to reconsider its original proposals to establish a series of pilot Local Joint Committee's across the District.

BORROWING

The Economic Well-Being Panel has considered the deliberations of its Working Group, which had been established to identify the terms of a debate on the Council's policy on borrowing and to develop an understanding of the District Council's approach to it. The Executive Councillor for Resources was in attendance and took part in discussion.

Following a lengthy debate on the matter, the Cabinet has been asked to:

- ❖ consider whether there are any capital items that are currently funded through borrowing, which should be funded from revenue when this is affordable; and
- ❖ agree a limit on the cost of borrowing of 15% of net revenue spend. The limit could then only be exceeded with the approval of Council.

In considering the Panel's view that there does not appear to be any constraints on long-term borrowing, the Cabinet has supported a limit for borrowing cost of 15% of net revenue spending which could only be exceeded with the approval of Council

With regard to the Panel's recommendation that a narrower definition of capital expenditure should be used for funding from borrowing and the remainder should be funded from revenue, Executive Councillors concurred with the Panel that in the current financial situation this cannot realistically be achieved. The Cabinet has agreed to reconsider this issue when a balanced budget has been achieved.

BUDGET

During the 2013/14 budget setting process, the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) held two informal discussions to enable Members to identify potential budgetary savings. Representatives from the Liberal Democrats and the UKIP were also invited to present their views on the Council's Budget and Medium Term Plan. At the subsequent Panel meeting the Panel reviewed all the suggestions that had been made.

The Panel has discussed the principles that should be adopted towards identifying spending adjustments. Members have suggested that generally there should be a 'top down' approach and that the Council should look at ways of achieving adjustments in the short and longer terms. The focus should be on the areas of highest cost. It was recognised that given the order of savings that are required, it is likely that the Council will have to consider ceasing some activities.

In considering the Panel's recommendations, the Cabinet were of the opinion that the proposals relating to selling advertising space on Council's car parks, greater enforcement of Council's car parks and alternative use of the shopmobility portakabin were managerial issues and should be dealt with as such.

The Cabinet acknowledges that better Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE) particularly with respect to on street parking would be beneficial. However, extra work is required regarding the financial impact on the authority of pursuing CPE before any further discussions can be undertaken.

In discussing the use of consultants, the Cabinet recognised that there were occasions when this was necessary, primarily to provide expertise not available "in-house" such as undertaking supporting research for local plan purposes and upholding the Council's position in respect of planning and other appeals. Having mentioned also the use of agency staff by the Operations team, the Cabinet felt that both these issues should be referred to the Employment Panel.

On the issue of prioritising training, Executive Councillors discussed the cost of and attendance at member training. Having mentioned the timing of training sessions and perceived difficulty in encouraging all Members to attend, the Cabinet agreed that this matter be referred to the Member Development Working Group for further discussion.

With regard to the other suggestions relating to shared services, the Council's electoral arrangements and improved procurement, the Cabinet has agreed to discuss these further at a meeting of the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Panel and the Managing Director.

MONITORING OF THE REVENUE BUDGET AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME

The Assistant Director, Finance and Resources has drawn the Cabinet's attention to spending variations in the Revenue Budget for the current year and modifications to the approved Capital Programme.

COUNCIL CONSTITUTION

The Corporate Governance Panel has endorsed a number of recommendations which were referred to the Council in relation to proposed changes to the constitution. These involved the Codes of Financial Management and Procurement and a number of other constitutional issues relating to key decisions, executive decision making, access to information arrangements, the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules, appointment of Honorary Alderman and the terms of reference for the Corporate Governance Panel. In addition, the Panel has agreed that six key delegations relating to employment matters be given to the Head of Paid Service.

The Panel has discussed proposed changes relating to arrangements for a recorded vote and agreed to leave unchanged the current rule which allows for a vote to be taken and entered into the Minutes if at least one third of Members present demand it before the vote is taken.

GRANT CERTIFICATION 2011/12

A report from the external auditor detailing the certification of specific grants received by the Council in 2011/12 has been presented to the Corporate Governance Panel.

EXTERNAL AUDIT PLAN 2012/13

The content of the draft External Audit Plan for 2012/13 has been noted by the Corporate Governance Panel. Key risk areas were discussed and the Panel's views on fraud were sought by the external auditors.

ANNUAL EQUALITY PROGRESS REPORT 2012

Progress made to date in respect of the achievement of the Council's Single Equality Scheme and associated Action Plan was noted by the Corporate Governance Panel.

ACCOUNTING POLICIES FOR THE STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2012/13

The Corporate Governance Panel has been informed of six changes to the accounting policies, only one of which was considered to be significant, based on which the 2012/13 accounts will be produced.

PROGRESS REPORT ON ISSUES IDENTIFIED IN THE ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT

Progress made to date in respect of the achievement of the action plans supporting the Annual Governance Statement and the Council's improvement plan has been noted by the Corporate Governance Panel.

PUBLIC SECTOR INTERNAL AUDIT STANDARDS

The Corporate Governance Panel has approved the adoption of Public Sector Audit Standards together with proposals for the discharge of the Panel's responsibilities. The Standards which come into force from 1st April 2013 will be recognised as proper non-statutory practice.

Members' attention was drawn to two significant changes relating to the definition of conflicts of interest for internal auditors and the need to appoint a Chief Audit Executive as the person for managing internal audit. It was explained that the management of internal audit, risk management and insurance services will remain the responsibility of the Internal Audit Manager.

RISK REGISTER UPDATE

The attention of the Corporate Governance Panel has been drawn to the high "red" risks highlighted in the Risk Register, the basis on which the Register had been compiled and the process by which those risks identified had been reviewed.

INTERNAL AUDIT SERVICE: INTERNAL AUDIT PLAN AND AUDIT CHARTER

Members of the Corporate Governance Panel have approved the contents of the Internal Audit Charter and Plan for 2013.

EXTERNAL AUDITOR ISA260 REPORT: IMPLEMENTATION OF 2011/12 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Corporate Governance Panel has noted significant progress to date to implement the recommendations of the Council's External Auditor, PricewaterhouseCoopers, following the audit of the 2011/2012 Statement of Accounts.

HUNTINGDONSHIRE LOCAL PLAN TO 2036 STAGE 3 DRAFT LOCAL PLAN, CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

The Cabinet has received an update on the new Huntingdonshire Local Plan.

Having been satisfied that local residents will be encouraged to become involved in the consultation process, Executive Councillors have authorised Officers to proceed to stage 3, the non-statutory consultation stage.

Members' attention was drawn to the impact of the National Planning Policy Framework which has led to the Development Management Plan Document carrying less weight in the Development Management process. As a result, the Cabinet has endorsed the use of the emerging Draft Local Plan policies when considering planning applications.

REVIEW OF 'LOCAL LIST' APPLICATION VALIDATION REQUIREMENTS

The Development Management Panel has endorsed a proposal to undertake consultation with the local community (including agents and town and parish councils) as part of a review of the information necessary to validate a planning application. The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) (Amendment No 3) Order 2012 requires that an up to date validation criteria needs to be in place by 31st July and reviewed and republished at 2 yearly intervals thereafter. The existing criteria will be used as the basis for consultation although the Panel has already recognised the amendments which will need to be made to this to remove reference to Planning Policy Guidance Notes, Planning Policy Statements and Regional Strategies. It is expected that the new check list will refer to policies on town centres, transport, open space, flood risk and heritage issues. The outcome of the consultation will be reported to the July meeting.

REVIEW OF PRE APPLICATION ADVICE PROCEDURES

Following consultation with developers and agents, the Development Management Panel has approved revised procedures for the provision of pre application advice. The main changes affect charges for written advice and meetings with officers. The authority will also continue to offer the opportunity for meetings with relevant parties on major development in accordance with a range of specified charges.

DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT PROGRESS REPORT: 1ST JANUARY – 31ST MARCH 2013

In their review of the activities of the Development Management Service, the Panel was advised that performance against targets for the determination of minor applications had fallen slightly. However, a significant increase in income from planning fees over the quarter as a result of the submission of applications for major housing development had given the service the opportunity to advertise for two new posts to respond to these minor applications.

DEVELOPMENT APPLICATIONS

Over two meetings the Development Management Panel has determined a total of 11 applications and included within these were applications for seventy eight dwellings at Yaxley and four wind turbines on land at St Mary's Road, Ramsey.