

Decision Digest

Edition 135

Monthly summary of the decisions taken at meetings of the Council, Cabinet, Overview & Scrutiny and other Panels for the period 22nd May to 26th June 2013.

HUNTINGDONSHIRE TOWN AND PARISH CHARTER AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR COMPACT

A copy of the final version of the Huntingdonshire Town and Parish Charter and Voluntary Sector Compact for Huntingdonshire was presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). The compact seeks to achieve the objectives of the Localism Act 2011 by providing a framework within which the County, District, Town and Parish Councils and the voluntary and community sector can work in partnership to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of Huntingdonshire for the benefit of the local community.

Huntingdonshire currently is the only Cambridgeshire authority to have a Charter and Compact document in place. The level of engagement in drafting the documents with both the Town and Parish Councils and the voluntary and community sector has been encouraging.

As both documents are still subject to final agreement with the Town and Parish Councils and the voluntary and community sector, the Panel will have sight of them again September prior to their submission to the Cabinet.

HOME IMPROVEMENT AGENCY SHARED SERVICE REVIEW AND DISABLED FACILITIES GRANT BUDGET

The outcome of a review of the Home Improvement Agency (HIA) shared

service after its first year of operation was reported to both the Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). Details of the ongoing demand for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) were also noted by the Panel.

Despite improvements made to reduce Occupational Therapy (OT) waiting times, the Panel is keen to see further reductions in the future. The Panel is also concerned over the dissolution of Cambridgeshire Community Services and the future OT service provision. An additional Surveyor has been appointed on a temporary basis to assist with the current backlog of casework in Huntingdonshire.

The Panel has noted the HIA's work plan for 2013/14 and suggested that the option of bringing contractors in house should be explored. A number of questions were raised relating to DFGs and a response to each was given to Members. In terms of the budgetary side of DFGs, the Panel suggested that the Council should review its commitment to financing these adaptations in the future.

Having been advised of the Panel's views, the Cabinet has requested Officers to undertake additional modelling of current and future demand for DFG's to feed into the Medium Term Plan process in September 2013.

WORK PROGRAMME

The Overview and Scrutiny Panels have reviewed their work priorities for

2013/14 and the memberships of their respective Working Groups. All three Panels endorsed the content of an Overview and Scrutiny Protocol which provides a framework for the Council's Overview and Scrutiny function.

The Social Well-Being Panel has established a Working Group to undertake a review of elderly patient care at Hinchingsbrooke Hospital. The Panel also has agreed to include a review of Ambulance Service provision within its work programme. Given the Panel has developed its health scrutiny role over the previous few years, the Panel has also requested a report to be submitted to a future meeting on health trends within the District.

The Economic Well-Being Panel has identified a number of potential areas for future investigation which will be discussed further at its next meeting. These include –

- communications and marketing;
- treasury management – shared services;
- the A14;
- the Making Assets Count programme;
- estates; and
- the Local Enterprise Partnership.

The Panel has also agreed to establish a small team to follow-up on the recommendations arising from the review of the Document Centre.

The Environmental Well-Being Panel has identified the following areas as potential future study areas and will discuss how this work will proceed at its July 2013 meeting:-

- car parking management;
- the impact of large scale housing development upon the A428;
- the A14;

- local bus services within Towns; and
- recycling in flats.

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

The outcome of a recent meeting of the Executive Leader's Strategy Group was reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). The Panel's proposals relating to Local Joint Committees (LJCs) will be reviewed again by the Cabinet. Whilst there is support for the proposals, the Executive Leader has stressed that it will be permissive on local communities' part and that it will be up to groups of Parishes to organise, pay for and service the LJCs themselves. A report to this effect will be submitted to the Cabinet in due course.

The Panel has also agreed to widen its scope of work relating to the Local Plan 2036 in respect of social and affordable housing to include supported housing.

HUNTINGDONSHIRE REGULATION 123 AND INFRASTRUCTURE BUSINESS PLAN 2013/14 LIST

The outcome of the public consultation on the Draft Huntingdonshire CIL Regulation 123 List has been reported to both the Cabinet and Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being). The List defines the types of infrastructure that the Council intends to fund from the Levy to ensure that there is no duplication between contributions from CIL and Section 106 Agreements.

Members have been informed that the Government continues to change the Regulations surrounding the Levy and is currently considering proposals to exempt self-build properties. The Council has responded to the consultation on this proposal on the basis that it should not be permitted

because small sites constitute a significant proportion of development within the District.

In view of the concerns which they had previously expressed the Panel has welcomed the work which has now started with town and parish councils to develop the way in which the District Council works with them on how their contributions will be spent.

In considering the contents of the report, a Panel Member has expressed concern that infrastructure previously negotiated by communities through already existing Urban Design Frameworks might not now be delivered. Whilst it is not possible to give any guarantees, the Deputy Executive Leader has explained that best endeavours will be made to meet existing commitments.

The Panel has asked a number of questions on a range of matters, which included the audit trail for the distribution of CIL monies and the publication of proposals for the new Local Plan after the consultation.

In approving the List, the Cabinet has stressed the need to work with Town and Parish Councils to identify their priorities as part of the next stage of the Business Plan process.

COMMUNICATIONS

A presentation on the Council's communications function has been given to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) by the Corporate Team Manager. The aim of the function is to achieve a cross Council, unified approach to communications and secure value for money.

As part of the presentation, the Panel has been advised of the work which is currently being undertaken to develop

an external communications strategy. It has been suggested that local Members could be a useful communications tool for the Council and they should be utilised more than they presently are.

The Panel has discussed the use that is made by the Council of Twitter and Facebook. Their attention having been drawn to the successful use of Twitter by Coventry City Council, Members have expressed the opinion that a more strategic approach should be adopted towards use of the facility. It has also been suggested that it may be useful to segment the twitter feeds for different groups of customers.

Members have also asked about the Council's list of Twitter followers and the ways in which the Council intends to improve on the current number of them.

Information on the budget for communications and the outcome of efforts being taken to measure the benefits of the work which the communications team does also was requested.

TREASURY MANAGEMENT ANNUAL REPORT 2012/13

The Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has reviewed the Council's treasury management performance for the year ending 31st March 2013. Members were pleased to note that the funds had performed well, significantly exceeding both the benchmark and the budgeted investment interest figure.

The Panel has commented on a range of issues including current economic trends and the problems being experienced by the Co-Operative Bank. The Accountancy Manager has been asked to provide the Panel with further

information on the estimated credit budget for the forthcoming year.

Members have noted that the Council's liability for VAT is reviewed annually by HMRC. The Panel has discussed whether there might be a benefit for the Council of transferring the leisure centres to a trust. However given that the Council's VAT liability is not wholly attributable to the leisure centres there would not be a total saving of the VAT sum.

Subsequently, the Cabinet has noted the contents of the report and has recommended to Council that they receive the Treasury Management Annual Report 2012/13.

REVIEW OF GROUNDS MAINTENANCE SERVICE STANDARDS

The first stage of a review of grounds maintenance service standards was reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being). The Panel agrees that the standards in respect of grass cutting should be retained at the current levels. The service has already been streamlined following a review undertaken back in 2011 and it is difficult to achieve further efficiency savings. There is however an opportunity to create efficiencies in respect of litter picking. A report outlining proposals to this effect will be submitted to the Panel in the autumn. The Executive Councillor for Environment has undertaken to investigate a number of suggestions made to him by the Panel once senior management's plans for savings have been published.

MEETING OUR OBJECTIVELY ASSESSED NEED FOR HOUSING: MEMORANDUM OF COOPERATION – SUPPORTING THE SPATIAL APPROACH 2011-2031

In conjunction with the Cabinet, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) has endorsed the content of a Memorandum of Co operation on the assessment of future housing needs. The Memorandum refers to the Council's joint working with partner authorities in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and demonstrated the Council's compliance with the Duty to Co-operate as contained within the Localism Act 2011.

Huntingdonshire will be contributing 21,000 homes within the Cambridge Sub-Region Housing Market Area by 2036 and it is expected that this figure will be achieved.

Matters discussed by the Panel include the methodology employed to determine housing allocations across each local authority area and the factors likely to cause an increase in demand for housing such as fluctuations in birth rates, the ageing population and local economic pressures.

The Cabinet has stressed the need to be mindful of the plans of neighbouring authorities outside the strategic housing area which may have considerable impact on the district.

HOUSING NEEDS COMPLAINT AWARD OF COMPENSATION

The Corporate Governance Panel has approved a compensation payment of £250. The payment relates to a complaint to the Ombudsman regarding a homelessness matter and will be set against a debt owed to the Council by the complainant relating to a bond

granted under the Rent Deposit scheme.

REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANELS

All three Panels have noted the outcome of an exercise undertaken by a Working Group established to review the effectiveness of Overview and Scrutiny. The report concluded that the Panels were generally acting effectively in terms of the discharge of their responsibilities and fulfilling their terms of reference.

Concerns continue to be expressed that the North West Huntingdonshire pilot Local Joint Committee had not materialized as expected in the last year. The Social Well-Being Panel referred to the lack of any forum whereby the three tiers of local government and partners can meet to discuss issues of local concern for the benefit of the community. With this in mind, the Chairman suggested that the Deputy Executive Leader be asked to update the Panel on the progress being made with the pilot scheme.

REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENES OF INTERNAL AUDIT SERVICE

In accordance with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2011, the Corporate Governance Panel has reviewed the effectiveness of the system of internal audit and is satisfied with the Audit and Risk Manager's opinion that the areas of non-conformance were of a minor nature and not considered significant enough to warrant inclusion in the Annual Governance Statement.

FRAUD WORKING GROUP

Councillors E R Butler, K J Churchill, G J Harlock and P G Mitchell have been re appointed to the Fraud Working Group for the ensuing year.

ROLE OF THE EMPLOYMENT PANEL

Following review of the arrangements for the consideration of employment matters which were approved earlier in the year, the Employment Panel has been reminded about their new role and terms of reference.

In considering potential areas for investigation, Members have suggested a number of ideas which might form the basis of a work programme for the year. These included the culture of the organisation and the ways in which Managers managed their teams and staff grievances.

In terms of their future relationship with the Staff Council, the Panel has noted that the Chairman and Vice Chairman will continue to meet informally with employee representatives and that there would be opportunities for the Staff Council to raise issues with the Panel. Democratic Services undertook to clarify the process by which representatives could present directly to the Panel.

MANAGING EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE

As part of LGSS' commitment to review five policies and procedures per year, the Panel has reviewed and endorsed the content of a new policy for Managing Employee Performance.

The new Policy provides guidance to managers on how to help employees achieve and maintain good performance levels and where this falls below acceptable standards ensures that any potential issue is dealt with promptly, sensitively and consistently. It also provides guidance to employees where performance standards are not reached and the potential consequences for their continued employment.

Training on the application of the new policy will be extended to all managers across the organisation.

EMPLOYMENT REPORT – QUARTER 3

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

- employee numbers;
- salary costs;
- employee turnover;
- sickness absence reporting; and
- Human Resources caseload.

The Panel noted that the average days sickness per FTE employee had increased to 8.9 days during the last quarter, which is higher than the corresponding period in the previous year. The Panel also received information on sickness levels being experienced by other public sector organisations and noted that there was a general upward trend.

Having noted that work was being undertaken to investigate a workplace based support service for staff that were experiencing stress at work, the Panel discussed the support which was currently available to staff from First Contact and Occupational Health services. Members were assured that these proposals would provide an additional work based service and that there was no desire to change the existing arrangements. The Panel requested further information on the existing services and an update on the proposals for work based counselling at a future meeting.

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

The Employment Panel considered 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 over the period May 2012 to end of March 2013.

Whilst general service standards had been met, the Panel noted that there was further work to be done in Organisational & Workforce Development to encourage a greater take-up of training courses (only 304 places had been delivered out of a target of 500 in an 11 month period). LGSS will be working with Managers to help address this issue.

The Panel was assured that feedback on the LGSS contract is requested from managers and staff and been reminded that the LGSS contract represented a change in culture for many Managers and an expectation that managers are required to be more self sufficient. Further work is required to help staff understand their new roles and responsibilities, and this will be addressed as part of the training on new policies. The reinvigoration of the Council's Leadership programme also would help in this respect.

PAY REVIEW PROJECT

The Employment Panel has received an update on the progress being made on the Council's Pay Review project. It was noted that Stage 1, the evaluation and moderation process was nearing conclusion and was expected to be completed by mid July. LGSS will then commence work on the next stage of the project (Stage 2), which includes:-

- pay modelling / development of a new pay & grading framework;
- benchmarking;
- pay policy review;
- the consultation process; and
- the appeals procedure.

In response to comments made by representatives of the Staff Council and Members regarding the need to improve communications on the subject and to bring the process to a close as quickly as possible, the Panel was informed that the current timetable for the remainder of the project was to be considered by the new Managing Director. In this regard, the Panel has agreed that the Chairman and Vice Chairman should meet with the new Managing Director to seek to progress the matter further and that in the interim staff should be updated as to the current position.

REPRESENTATIONS ON ORGANISATIONS

The Cabinet has appointed representatives to serve on a variety of organisations for the ensuing year. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services, after consultation with the Deputy Executive Leader, has been authorised to make any changes to the schedule that may arise throughout the year.

COMMUNITY RIGHT TO CHALLENGE

A timetable for the acceptance of expressions of interests (EOI's) under the new Community Right to Challenge Initiative has been approved by the Cabinet.

The Right to Challenge was created by the Localism Act and introduces a right

for defined organisations and persons to submit an Expression of Interest in taking over the provision of a service on behalf of the Council. Where a valid expression is received, the Council will be required to undertake a procurement exercise for that service which may lead to the authority awarding a contract for the service provision. The timetable identifies when services will be open for receiving EOI's.

LOAN TO HUNTINGDONSHIRE REGIONAL COLLEGE

The Cabinet has approved, in principle the provision of a loan to Huntingdonshire Regional College to fund the expansion of their facilities. The College will provide security in the form of a charge against an area of land, the valuation of which exceeds the value of the loan. The Assistant Director, Finance and Resources has been requested to finalise the details of the loan, after consultation with the Executive Leader and the Executive Councillor for Resources.

DEVELOPMENT APPLICATIONS

At its June meeting, the Development Management Panel considered nine development applications of which six were approved, three refused and one deferred. These included consent for a scheme of eight dwellings on a site in Holme which would provide two affordable homes via a related S106 Agreement.

Having regard to two appeals against non determination, the Panel has indicated to the Planning Inspector that it would have been minded to refuse applications for a proposed food store and residential development on Stukeley Road, Hartford and 6 wind turbines and associated infrastructure, south west of RAF Molesworth, Bythorn.