

Decision Digest

Edition 136

Monthly summary of the decisions taken at meetings of the Council, Cabinet, Overview & Scrutiny and other Panels for the period 1st July to 31st July 2013.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND PETERBOROUGH CLINICAL COMMISSIONING GROUP: FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE REPORTS

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) received a presentation from representatives of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Clinical Commissioning Group on the financial and operational performance of the Group, with particular mention made of Hinchingbrooke Hospital. It was reported that the Hospital was achieving its performance targets but that there were some areas of concern relating to diagnostic waiting times and Ambulance handover times. These matters were in the process of being addressed. Constructive responses were given to the numerous questions asked by the Panel. A further update will be delivered in 6 months time.

HOUSING AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT CHANGES AND THE POTENTIAL IMPACT UPON HUNTINGDONSHIRE

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has been updated on the effect of Government changes to the Housing Benefits system arising from the Welfare Reform Act. A number of changes came into effect on 1st April with the Benefit Cap introduced on 15th July. Only 44 households in Huntingdonshire will be affected by the latter.

The Panel discussed a number of matters including discretionary housing payments, the availability of one and two bedroom properties across the District, property exchanges undertaken by housing associations, the level of budget available to assist with homelessness together with the range of preventative work undertaken and the recent acquisition of additional temporary accommodation in Huntingdon.

CCTV OPERATIONS – SHARED SERVICE PROPOSAL

Together with the Cabinet, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has endorsed a proposal to establish a joint CCTV shared service with Cambridge City Council. The service is likely to operate from Eastfield House and the proposals are expected to generate savings of around £200,000 per year. There is also potential for the service to improve its financial performance once the shared service is established.

The Panel is concerned over the financial implications of the transfer of staff from the City to the District Council and has sought assurances that its true impact should be incorporated fully into the proposed business plan. Other matters that were discussed included the potential redundancies that might arise from the proposals and the reconfiguration of the CCTV Control Room.

In considering the Panel's recommendations, the Cabinet has authorised the Head of Operations to approve the establishment of the shared service, based in Huntingdon, on the basis of a detailed business case.

LANDSCAPE SENSITIVITY TO WIND TURBINE DEVELOPMENT DRAFT REVISED SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING DOCUMENT

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) has commented on the Landscape Sensitivity to Wind Turbine Development Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). To add extra weight and to strengthen the support for the proposed SPD, the Panel has suggested that the Cumulative Landscape and Visual Impacts of Wind Turbines in Huntingdonshire (CLVI) document should undergo separate public consultation as it is felt that this would make the SPD better able to withstand the rigours of an appeal. The Panel agreed that explicit reference to the terms "adverse visual impact" and "material harm" should be incorporated within the planning policy framework.

Concerns remained over the group sizes proposed within the SPD. The Panel has recommended to the Cabinet that further work is undertaken to revise the downward size of the groups as it is felt that those proposed are not reflective of the landscape characteristics of the District. The absence of a separation distance is a further area of concern and the Panel has suggested that a minimum distance of 2km is introduced.

The Panel has also discussed the concerns raised by the Molesworth Action Group over various aspects of the SPD.

Subsequently, the Cabinet has requested the Planning Service Manager (Policy) to further review the content of the SPD and to proceed with a public consultation exercise for the CLVI document.

HUNTINGDONSHIRE ECONOMIC GROWTH PLAN 2013 – 23

Both the Cabinet and the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) have reviewed the content of the Huntingdonshire Economic Growth Plan.

The Panel has recognised the importance of the Economic Growth Plan for the District and for the Council and has recommended that the vision should replace that already contained in the Leadership Direction. It has also suggested that the Plan's vision should be amended to refer to Huntingdonshire becoming one of the best places to live in England.

Given the importance that is attached to the Plan, Members were of the view that the Council should make adequate resources available to ensure the actions associated with it can be delivered.

In terms of the contents of the Plan, the Panel has also recommended that

- reference should be made to the District's infrastructure needs;
- contact details should be clearly provided for interested parties who wish to contact the Council about it,
- a more dynamic tone should be adopted throughout, and
- a more explicit explanation should be provided of the "trickle down" effect from

economic activity centres to rural areas.

The Panel has asked to see the marketing and implementation plans in due course.

In discussing the document's key components, the Cabinet has reiterated the Panel's views that the Plan's vision is amended, that a more dynamic tone be adopted throughout and the "trickle down" effect be explained.

USE OF CONSULTANTS, HIRED STAFF AND TEMPORARY STAFF

The Panel has considered the annual report detailing expenditure by the Council on consultants, hired and temporary staff. In noting the reduction in capital expenditure compared to the previous year, concern has been expressed by the Panel at the increase in revenue expenditure. This prompted a number of pertinent questions.

Having noted that the Employment Panel had been asked by the Cabinet to review the use of consultants and agency staff, the Panel has asked the Employment Panel to look at:

- the cost effectiveness of temporary staff;
- the effect of stress within the workforce on their cost and use;
- who reviews the use of temporary staff; and
- whether the revenue costs could be reduced.

PRIVATE SECTOR RENT LEVELS

Following a request for information at a previous meeting, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has received an update on rent levels in

Huntingdonshire. There is currently no evidence to suggest that landlords are adjusting their rents downwards in line with Housing Benefit Local Allowance rates. This has reduced the number of households which the Council has been able to work proactively with to prevent homelessness and contributed to an increased use of temporary accommodation.

The Panel has discussed a number of matters including the work which was ongoing with local Housing Associations to provide temporary accommodation.

Further updates will be provided as and when there is something significant to report. A seminar on housing and benefits has also been arranged for all Members in October.

CUSTOMER SERVICES MONITORING REPORT

The Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has considered the Customer Service Performance report for the period January to June 2013. The report sets out the standards of service that have been achieved and the issues the service will face in the forthcoming period.

In considering the report, the Panel has discussed a range of matters including the reduction in service standards at the Call Centre and the increase in sickness absence. The Head of Customer Services was asked to provide details of the additional costs incurred as a result of the implementation of the Green Bin project.

Having regard to recent changes to systems and procedures within the Call Centre, Members have expressed the view that before the current lease expires, consideration should be given

to combining the call centre with customer services.

A further report will be provided in 6 months.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY STUDIES

The Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has established a Working Group to undertake a study on communications & marketing. Councillors P G Mitchell, P D Reeve, and T V Rogers have been appointed to this Group. A small team has also been established to follow-up on the recommendations arising from the Panel's review of the Document Centre.

In addition, a further Working Group will be established shortly to carry out a study on shared services. The membership is yet to be appointed.

DRIVING STANDARDS AGENCY – DRIVER TESTING

The Licensing and Protection Panel has been updated on the situation with regard to waiting times for Driving Standards Agency (DSA) driving tests for hackney carriage and private hire drivers following complaints from taxi operators.

The Panel had approved the transfer of in house testing by officers to the DSA with effect from January 2012, having been advised that the high and consistent standard of testing by qualified and approved examiners would remove the risk to the Council of not having officers available for testing and would leave it less open to challenge and possible legal proceedings.

The DSA originally estimated waiting times for tests to be 6 weeks and had indicated that additional staff would be employed if this was not the case. Research into the waiting times has

revealed that Cambridge and Peterborough are within these timescales although Cardington is currently taking 11.5 weeks due to the relocation of the Bedford centre. Drivers are not restricted to particular locations.

The DSA has advised that where tests cannot be arranged within 6 weeks they will be slotted into vacant appointments left by private driver tests if appropriately qualified examiners were available.

The Panel understood the concerns of operators and drivers. However, having been advised that reforms were likely to follow current consultation by the Law Commission on Regulations covering taxis and private hire vehicles, they remained of the opinion that national standards should apply to private hire services and testing.

REVENUE BUDGET AND CAPITAL MONITORING: 2012/13 OUTTURN AND 2013/14 BUDGET

The Cabinet has noted the final outturn for revenue and expenditure in 2012/13 and variations already identified in the current year. Executive Councillors noted that, as a result of under spending, the Council has been successful in saving an additional £1 million in reserves. This saving will be placed in the Special Reserve to fund one-off expenditure that will lead to ongoing savings. With regard to the New Homes Bonus Scheme, Members were advised that the grant for 2014/15 may be marginally less than that forecast but within the sum included in the risk provision.

Executive Councillors also have been apprised of variations in the capital programme in the current year and adjustments in the 2013/14 budget

FILMING AND RECORDING AT COUNCIL MEETINGS

As a result of new guidance produced by the Department of Communities and Local Government, the Corporate Governance Panel has considered an amendment to paragraph 17A of the Council's Constitution relating to filming and recording and taking of photographs at meetings that are open to the public and the use of social networking and micro-blogging websites.

The Panel has recognised that some members of the public attending meetings may not wish to be filmed. However, they were of the opinion that those making representations would normally expect to be filmed.

Whilst discussing the circumstances in which termination or suspension of filming might occur, the Panel felt that there would be no benefit in halting filming once a defamatory statement had been made. With this mind and having referred to the circumstances surrounding the filming of the Council meeting in June by a member of the public, it was suggested that future training for Chairmen be adapted to include dealing with such situations.

Members supported a proposal that filming should take place from a specific location, adding that it would be reasonable for the Chairman to direct someone to a particular place in the meeting room.

The Panel was of the view that it would be preferable for anyone proposing to film, record or take photographs of a meeting to advise the Democratic Services Team before the start of the meeting and to provide their name and contact details.

In recommending the amendment to full Council and to avoid any potential

difficulty in the interim, the Panel requested Officers to introduce the guidelines pending their formal approval in September.

REVIEW OF REGULATION OF INVESTIGATORY POWERS ACT (RIPA) POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

New RIPA Policy and Procedure Statements for Covert Surveillance and Communications have been recommended to the Council by the Corporate Governance Panel. The new documents have been prompted by recent changes in legislation, primarily the requirement for all applications to be authorised by a Justice of the Peace and the requisite that all RIPA activity only take place where serious crime was being investigated.

PREPARING THE ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT

In reviewing the action taken to reassess the Code of Corporate Governance, the Corporate Governance Panel has concluded that the 'supporting principles' should refer to providing 'value for money' rather than 'excellence'. The Panel also discussed issues around the preparation of the Annual Governance Statement and concluded that the following issues be recorded in the Plan as significant:

- to develop the themes and aims in the Leadership Direction through service plans and performance measures;
- to improve budgetary control;
- to reinvigorate engagement with stakeholders;
- to introduce a project management methodology; and
- to prepare an annual report for the 2013/13 financial year.

INTERNAL AUDIT SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT

In accordance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards, the Corporate Governance Panel has noted the Internal Audit Manager's opinion on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's internal control and governance processes.

Concerns continue to be expressed over the lack of compliance with the Code of Procurement. The Panel is also concerned that one no assurance and seven limited assurance audit reports have been issued. They have stressed the need to create a culture whereby actions are undertaken and any failures reported to the Chief Officers' Management Team so that they then regularly update the Panel. In the meantime, all Officers are to be reminded of the need to comply with the Code and training provided where necessary.

APPOINTMENT OF PROFESSIONAL ADVISORS

The Corporate Governance Panel has noted the outcome of a review into the procedures adopted to appoint a contractor for a major redevelopment scheme. During the review a number of concerns had been raised by Internal Audit. The Panel has been informed of a series of recommendations aimed at modifying or reinforcing the Council's processes to minimise the likelihood of such issues arising again.

It was reported that the Internal Audit Manager would be reviewing the Internal Audit Plan to ensure adequate contract reviews are undertaken in the future.

In expressing their disappointment that procedures had not been followed, the Panel has agreed that the issues

identified be taken into account when considering the Annual Governance Statement. The Panel also asked that any resulting amendments to the Employees' Code of Conduct and Code of Procurement be submitted to a future meeting.

REVIEW OF 'LOCAL LIST' APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS VALIDATION

The Development Management Panel has considered the outcome of consultation with the local community including applicants, agents, statutory consultees and town and parish councils during a review of the information necessary to validate a planning application. The existing requirements are required to be updated, in any event, to refer to the National Planning Policy Framework and specifically town centre uses, transport assessments and statements, open space and flood risk assessments and heritage statements. Having expressed their satisfaction with the responses given to the comments received during the consultation, the Panel has authorised the Planning Service Manager (Development Management) to finalise the validation check list and to make any necessary changes to the list, in the future, in response to any Government guidance, changes in local policy or circumstance. The Panel's scheme of delegation will be updated accordingly.