
Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being)

**Report of the meetings held on 4th July and
5th September 2013**

Matters for Information

7. HUNTINGDONSHIRE ECONOMIC GROWTH PLAN 2013 - 23

The Panel has reviewed the contents of the Huntingdonshire Economic Growth Plan for 2013 to 2023 prior to its consideration by the Cabinet. The Plan sets out a vision for Huntingdonshire and aims to deliver economic growth by focusing on achieving a set of key ambitions. It contains three main themes: People, Place and Business and Members' attention has been drawn to the variety of ways in which economic growth is promoted within the District.

The Panel has recognised the importance of the Economic Growth Plan for the District and for the Council and has commended the work which has been undertaken to prepare it. Given the importance that is attached to the Plan, Members are of the view that the Council should make adequate resources available to ensure the actions associated with it can be delivered. The Panel has also recommended to the Cabinet that the Growth Vision should be more ambitious. Members have suggested that it should be amended to refer to Huntingdonshire becoming one of the best places to live in England. They are also of the opinion that this should form the Vision for the Council, which would necessitate a change to the Leadership Direction.

During their deliberations on the Growth Plan, Members have discussed the fact that it contains few references to rural areas and the challenges for economic growth which have been identified as part of the economic assessment. In concluding their discussions, the Panel has recommended to the Cabinet that the Plan should:

- ◆ make reference to the District's infrastructure needs;
- ◆ clearly provide for interested parties who wish to contact the Council about it;
- ◆ adopt a more dynamic tone throughout; and
- ◆ provide a more explicit explanation of the "trickle down" effect from economic activity centres to rural areas.

The Panel has asked to see the marketing and implementation plans when they are available in spring 2014 and has invited the Economic Development Manager to its February meeting for this purpose.

8. USE OF CONSULTANTS, HIRED AND TEMPORARY STAFF

The Panel has been provided with details of the Council's expenditure on consultants, hired and temporary staff during 2012/13 compared to the previous year. Having been pleased to note that capital expenditure had reduced, concern was expressed that revenue expenditure had increased from £1,487k to £1,612k in 2012/13. Having noted that the number of consultants, hired and temporary staff fluctuates depending on the schemes or initiatives which are being pursued in a particular year or the availability of additional funding to employ such staff, further information has been requested on a number of items of revenue expenditure.

The Panel has discussed the reasons for the employment of temporary and hired staff and the mechanisms which are in place to review their use. With regard to the latter, Members have been advised that there is an onus on Heads of Service to manage their staffing budgets to avoid creating financial pressures in other areas. They have also been assured that consultants are employed to undertake one off projects and are unlikely to become permanent members of the establishment.

With regard to the levels of stress related absence within the organisation, it has been noted that the employment of temporary staff is one of the tools that the Council uses to provide cover. The Employment Panel is monitoring trends in this respect.

Having noted that the Cabinet has asked the Employment Panel to review the use of consultants and agency staff in accordance with its new terms of reference, the Panel has requested the Employment Panel to consider–

- ◆ whether there is an opportunity to reduce revenue expenditure on temporary, hired and agency staff for the forthcoming year;
- ◆ the mechanisms through which the employment of temporary, hired and agency staff are reviewed to ensure that they are cost effective and provide value for money; and
- ◆ the effect of stress on the cost and use of temporary and hired staff.

9. PRIVATE SECTOR RENT LEVELS

Further to Item No. 42 of the Report to the meeting of the Council held on 20th February 2013, the Panel has been acquainted with trends in private sector rent levels in Huntingdonshire. There is currently no evidence to suggest that landlords are adjusting their rents downwards as the Government expected following the reduction in Housing Benefit Local Allowance rates and in some cases rent levels are still increasing. This has reduced the number of households which the Council has been able to work with proactively

to prevent them from being homeless and has contributed to an increased use of temporary accommodation.

The Panel has discussed the costs which are borne by the Council in dealing with cases of homelessness and the work which is taking place with local Housing Associations to provide additional temporary accommodation as an alternative to bed and breakfast facilities. Officers will continue to work with Local Housing Associations to seek opportunities for funding and mutually beneficial partnership arrangements that might deliver additional accommodation. The Head of Customer Services has been asked to establish whether there is capacity to accommodate tenants on an emergency basis within Luminus properties in Ramsey.

Further updates will be provided when circumstances require it. A seminar on housing and benefits has been arranged for all Members in October.

10. CUSTOMER SERVICES MONITORING REPORT

The Panel has reviewed the Customer Services Monitoring 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 has to face in the forthcoming period. Members have discussed the fact that service standards targets have not been achieved in nine out of the past 12 months and have been informed that this reflects the reduction in staff and the increase in workload at the Call Centre. The current standards will be reviewed shortly. The Head of Customer Services has been asked to provide details of the additional costs incurred as a result of changes to the Green Bin policy.

The Panel has discussed the Services' sickness levels. The average number of days of sickness per Full Time Employee has increased to 18.6 days at the Call Centre, which is higher than the industry benchmark for the public sector. In this regard, the Chairman of the Employment Panel has assured the Panel that the Council's Sickness Absence policies have recently been reviewed and they represent best practice. However, further work is required to adopt a more proactive approach to tackling potential issues before they emerge.

Having regard to recent changes to systems and procedures within the Call Centre, Members have expressed the view that before the current lease at Amundsen House expires further consideration should be given to co-locating the Call Centre with the Huntingdon Customer Services Centre. Members have noted that a review will be undertaken and the outcome presented to the Cabinet at the appropriate time.

A further report will be provided in six months time.

**11. MAKING ASSETS COUNT –
CAMBRIDGESHIRE'S PROPOSED APPROACH TO STRATEGIC
ASSET MANAGEMENT**

Ongoing work is taking place between the Council, other Councils in Cambridgeshire and public sector organisations to try and re-shape, and make more efficient use of, their property portfolios. Members have welcomed the common sense approach which the District Council has taken to date to maximise the use of its assets and have endorsed the overarching principles of the Making Assets Count (MAC) Initiative and future partnership working.

In terms of the proposal to establish a countywide publicly-owned joint venture, Members have expressed reservations about the costs which are likely to be associated with this type of initiative. It is nevertheless felt to be important not to preclude the District Council from participating within the arrangement at a later date if it is deemed to be advantageous. The Panel has therefore recommended the Cabinet to note the creation of a countywide publicly-owned joint venture. Cabinet approval will be required before the District Council makes any commitment regarding its specific assets.

In terms of the MAC Initiative more generally, the Panel has discussed the overall lack of progress which appears to have been made on a countywide basis in the last two years and the barriers it has faced. Members have been reminded that the District Council has already achieved some limited success through the re-letting of the Civic Suite to NHS Cambridgeshire and it will continue to adopt a pragmatic approach with other organisations to explore further 'common sense' opportunities to share assets. The nature of the costs incurred by the Authority to-date has been reported. These have mainly been in the form of Officer and Member time.

12. FINANCIAL FORECAST TO 2019

In conjunction with the Cabinet, the Panel has been acquainted with the Council's present financial forecast position to 2019. Whilst progress is being made to achieve the previously identified savings requirements, the Government's Spending Review has created major additional difficulties for the Council and its ability to deliver its current portfolio of services. The need to secure additional savings of £2.6M for 2015/16 rising to £3.7M by 2018/19 will be a challenging task to achieve.

In considering the outcome of the recent Spending Review, the Panel has discussed the Government proposal to require local authorities to pass on a percentage of their New Homes Bonus to their Local Enterprise Partnerships. Members have supported the intention of the Executive Leader and the Executive Councillor for Resources to lobby the Department for Communities and Local Government to get the level of loss reduced on the Council's behalf. Members are of the opinion that if the Council's funding is to be changed it should be done in a constructive or phased way. There has been no assumption made within the Financial Forecast that the District

Council will see any improved funding from the Local Enterprise Partnership. It is likely that any monies received would be for capital as opposed to revenue initiatives. Having been reminded that the Local Enterprise Partnership comprises Council Leaders, it has been suggested that the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer should be invited to a future Council meeting to give a presentation on their business plan.

Members have discussed whether the Council should give a further grant to Town and Parish Councils to mitigate the impact of changes to the Council Tax support system. Although they do not think there is a case to do this because this year Town and Parish Councils have had sufficient time to make alternative provision through their precepts, the Panel is of the view that this should be subject to there being no change in legislation which might require the Council to reconsider its position. Members have welcomed the early warning which has been given to Town and Parish Councils about this and they have been assured by the Executive Leader that this should not prohibit constructive work from being undertaken between the District Council and the Towns and Parishes on joint initiatives.

In terms of the figures for pay inflation which have been incorporated into the forecast, Members are of the view that this provision is necessary if the Council is to retain dedicated and talented staff. In any case, pay levels are subject to an annual negotiation process with the Staff Council. The Employment Panel is also overseeing work to establish a new pay structure which is fit for purpose.

In discussing the requirement to secure £3.7M in additional savings by 2018/19, the Panel has commented on the need to focus on the larger areas of the Council's expenditure and the importance of communication to ensure that Huntingdonshire residents are able to influence and remain informed of this process. Having recognised the need for collaborative working to achieve this objective, Members have also suggested that the Council should take into account the degree to which the Council's activities are statutorily required and that this should be balanced against the interests of residents. To this end and in response to requests from Members, the Assistant Director, Finance and Resources has indicated that it may be possible to prepare a list of services that the Council has a statutory duty to provide.

Having been informed that a report outlining generic options and areas for further consideration will be submitted to the Cabinet at its September meeting, the Panel has expressed an interest in being involved in this work and has suspended its other activities in order to undertake this task, in conjunction with the Overview and Scrutiny Panels for Social and Environmental Well-Being. The Panel will consider this further at the October meeting.

Other Matters of Interest

13. NOTICE OF KEY EXECUTIVE DECISIONS

The Panel has been acquainted with details of the Notice of forthcoming Key Executive decisions prepared by the Executive Leader. An update has been received on the discussions of Social Well-Being Panel regarding the proposal to establish a joint CCTV shared service with Cambridge City Council. The Scrutiny & Review Manager has undertaken to send a copy of the report on the Whole Waste System directly to Councillor P G Mitchell.

14. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) – PROGRESS

The Panel has reviewed its programme of studies. Members have noted that Officers have formulated a response to their recommendations on the Document Centre and a briefing note on Electronic Document Management has also been circulated to all Members. Meetings of the Customer Services' and Corporate Plan Working Groups will be held shortly.

In view of their wish to be involved in any future work emanating from 'Facing the Future 2013', the Panel has agreed to suspend its other activities in order to undertake this task. A review of the Estates function will commence in December.

15. SCRUTINY

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

T V Rogers
Chairman