

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) held in CIVIC SUite 0.1A, PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON PE29 3TN on Thursday, 3 October 2013.

PRESENT: Councillor T V Rogers – Chairman.

Councillors P L E Bucknell, G J Bull,
E R Butler, S Cawley, S Greenall,
P G Mitchell, P D Reeve, M F Shellens and
A H Williams.

Mr R Eacott – Co-opted Member.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillor R Harrison and Mr R Hall.

34. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 5th September 2013 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

35. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor M F Shellens declared a non-pecuniary interest in Minute No. 41 by virtue of his appointment as a District Councillor representative on Luminus Homes.

36. NOTICE OF KEY EXECUTIVE DECISIONS

The Panel considered and noted the current Notice of Key Executive Decisions (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). Members were provided with a brief explanation of the purpose of the report entitled 'Reconnection Policy', which was scheduled to be considered by the Cabinet at its November meeting.

In terms of the other forthcoming items for consideration by the Cabinet, the Scrutiny and Review Manager was asked to provide Councillor M F Shellens with a copy of the Consultation and Engagement Strategy when it became available. Councillors M F Shellens and S Cawley also requested a copy of the Huntingdon West Masterplan.

37. REVIEW OF DOCUMENT CENTRE

(Councillor T D Sanderson, Executive Councillor for Strategic Economic Development and Legal, was in attendance for this item).

(During the discussion on this item (7.10pm) Councillors G Bull and S Greenall took their seats at the meeting).

Further to Minute No. 94/12 and with the assistance of a report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book), the Panel considered the Management responses to the recommendations which had been made following the review of the Council's Document Centre. Members were informed that these had been discussed and agreed with the Executive Councillor for Resources and the Panel's Document Centre Champion, Councillor A H Williams.

In considering the contents of the report, Members examined in turn the actions taken in respect of their recommendations. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services explained that the corporate mandate to all Officers regarding the use of Document Centre services had been issued in accordance with the timescales for reporting back to the Panel. This formed part of a number of measures which had been designed to educate Council Officers about the Council's printing services.

Members were informed that the Document Centre Manager had arranged to meet with Officers from the Leisure Centres to discuss their current post procedures and use of franking machines. In terms of the arrangements for issuing Councillors' mail, it was suggested that an email should be issued to Members to advise them when there were items in their pigeon holes, which required collection.

With regard to the Panel's intention to undertake a separate review of Electronic Document Management within the Authority, Members were informed that the Internal Audit service was undertaking an audit of this activity. To avoid duplicating this work, it was agreed that the Panel should consider the outcome of the audit when it was concluded.

In response to a question about the savings which had been generated by the review, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services undertook to provide this information to Members directly outside of the meeting.

In concluding the discussion on the report, Councillor A H Williams expressed his appreciation to all the staff at the Document Centre for their assistance with the review and to the Head of Legal and Democratic Services for accommodating his comments in the final report. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Management responses to the Panel's recommendations as set out in the Appendix to the report now submitted be endorsed.

38. CUSTOMER SERVICES STRATEGY 2013 - 18

(Councillor B S Chapman, Executive Councillor for Customer Services, was in attendance for this item).

With the assistance of a report by the Head of Customer Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book), the Panel considered the contents of a draft Customer Services Strategy which had been

prepared for the Authority for the period 2013-2018. By way of introduction the Executive Councillor for Customer Services, Councillor B S Chapman, explained that the existing Customer Services Strategy had now expired and that the new Strategy had been prepared in different economic and demographic circumstances. The growing population within the District meant that the Authority needed to find new ways of delivering services to the customer and at the same time the economic challenges facing the Authority required it to make financial savings. He paid tribute to the work which had been undertaken to prepare the new Strategy and to the Panel's working party which had made a significant contribution to its development. Councillor Chapman explained that one of the challenges was the disengagement between the 'front' and 'back' office. The new Strategy took clear steps to re-engage the two.

The Head of Customer Services drew attention to the two page version of the Strategy which had been prepared for circulation to all staff. She explained that 'Channel Migration' was an important part of the new Strategy. The aim was to encourage customers to use the internet to obtain services. This was increasingly customers' preferred mechanism for contacting the Council and was less costly. Members' attention was then drawn to the Equality Impact Assessment for the Strategy to which they were required to have due regard.

Prior to inviting questions, the Chairmen outlined the work which had been undertaken by the Panel's Working Group to contribute to the Strategy's formation. This had included a visit to the Customer Services Centre in Newport which offered a multi-agency facility for customer services. A visit to the Harrow Customer Service Centre had also been arranged for October 2013.

In considering the contents of the report and specifically the proposal to transfer customer contact online where possible, comment was made about the potential impact of this on adult health, particularly for the District's elderly residents. In response, the Head of Customer Services undertook to establish whether any research on the subject had been published and to circulate the results directly to Members of the Panel. It was also suggested that there could be opportunities to make use of the Town and Parish Councils to support the delivery of District Council Services in their areas. A Member then enquired whether it would be possible to issue Council Tax bills electronically. The Head of Customer Services outlined the difficulties associated with maintaining a database for this purpose and explained that in other areas of the country there had been a relatively low take up where this had been offered. It would also require an initial financial outlay on new IT software.

In response to a question regarding the Council's decision to establish a separate Call Centre and Customer Services Centre, Members were reminded of the reasons for this decision. However, the Head of Customer Services reported that in the next eighteen months consideration would be given to co-locating the two facilities once the lease for the Call Centre premises in St Ives had expired. A Member enquired whether there would be any scope to accommodate other local authorities' Call Centres within the District Council's facility and it was suggested that this was a line of enquiry which should be considered by the project team. Attention was also

drawn to the opportunities which might exist for working in partnership with other public sector organisations to deliver services for Huntingdonshire residents from the Customer Services Centre. The Head of Customer Services undertook to pass this suggestion to the Council's Facilities Management Team for further investigation.

Discussion then ensued on a range of issues relating to the contents of the Strategy and the arrangements for its implementation. Members were informed that whilst the Web Team was not integrated into the Customer Services section, a MTP bid had been developed to establish a new post which would effectively act as a liaison officer. In terms of the delivery of the Strategy, a Member emphasised the need to monitor satisfaction levels to ensure that the implementation of the Strategy did not have an adverse impact on customers. It was also suggested that the identification of a series of milestones to 2018 would enable the Council to monitor whether that the Strategy was on track.

Given the growth of housing in the area, a Member suggested that consideration should be given to preparing a detailed information pack for new householders. It was also suggested that some of the more popular web pages could be used to advertise the Council's own services.

Members noted that the Council's website had been assessed by SOCITM, the professional association for public sector IT, as being amongst the top 12% of District Council facilities within the UK. In response to a number of questions, the Head of Customer Services undertook to provide Members with a list of the web pages which had the most hits and with details of the SOCITM report.

Further to Minute No. 13/22, a Member referred to the stress levels which were being experienced at the Call Centre. The Panel was reassured that there were a number of ways in which the Council worked proactively to help employees who were suffering from stress. Stress levels were likely to increase once the impact of further budgetary cuts began to take effect.

In concluding their discussions on this item, the Panel discussed the ways in which Members could help to support the change in culture which the new Strategy would require. The Head of Customer Services suggested that there was a role for local Councillors to encourage members of the public to use web services where they were able to do so. For the Strategy to succeed, the Council's Management, Officers and Members would have to commit to delivering the changes it required. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet be recommended to approve the Customer Services Strategy 2013-18.

39. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY INVOLVEMENT IN IDENTIFYING PRIORITY AREAS FOR SAVINGS

(Councillor J A Gray, Executive Councillor for Resources, was in attendance for this item).

With the assistance of a report by the Assistant Director, Finance and Resources (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book), the Panel considered a proposed process for undertaking reviews of options for services delivered by the Council and for identifying opportunities for savings. Members had been invited to discuss the proposed approach so that the process could be confirmed by the Cabinet and start in the November cycle of Overview and Scrutiny Panel meetings.

Councillor J A Gray, Executive Councillor for Resources, explained that the Cabinet had been keen to involve all three Overview and Scrutiny Panels in the process. The work would be evenly distributed between the Panels so that the expertise of all Members could be utilised. It was intended that the reviews would be concluded in order to report back to the Cabinet meeting in January 2014.

The Assistant Director, Finance and Resources reminded Members of the the financial position the Authority faced. Given the scale of the work that would be required to make the necessary savings, Officer resources would be extremely stretched over the coming months. The Panels would need to focus on the options that achieved the greatest savings in the easiest ways.

Members' attention was drawn to the service areas which the Panels would be reviewing. Each Panel had approximately the same number of service areas and the allocation between Panels was based on Heads of Service/Executive Councillors' responsibilities. There would be a mix of customer facing and support services. The Assistant Director then outlined the information which would be provided to the Panels to enable them to undertake the reviews and the role of the Panels in assessing this information to identify priority areas for further investigation.

Members discussed a number of issues associated with the proposed process. They were reminded of the pressing need to complete the service reviews and the Assistant Director, Finance and Resources indicated that he would prepare a report once all the service templates had been completed to demonstrate that the exercise had covered all spending. It was suggested that at the conclusion of the process, the Chairmen should determine the overall priorities arising from all the Panels' work.

Members discussed the danger of penalising those service areas that had already been successful in identifying savings and what could be done to avoid this. The Panel was also keen to establish the mechanisms which would be put in place to ensure that service managers were sufficiently challenging and the service templates were accurate. Members were informed that all templates and the overall process would be reviewed by the Chief Officers Management Team to ensure that there was adequate challenge and that the suggested action priority order for each proposal reflected the size of the saving and its ease of achievement.

A Member suggested that the Council might involve its partners in this exercise to provide a fresh outlook on the provision of services. The Partners could include County Council Members and Officers or

representatives from other District authorities in the County. Specific reference was made to the Local Government Association peer review scheme.

A Member enquired to what extent the targeted savings which had been identified for the period to 2019 were robust. The Assistant Director, Finance and Resources provided an update on the current position. The review process could generate greater savings than were required, which would give Members a degree of choice and flexibility.

In response to a comment by Councillor M F Shellens concerning the difficulties town and parish councils would face in establishing their precept levels if the District Council was to transfer services or facilities to them. The Assistant Director, Finance and Resources indicated that if there were any such suggestions, he envisaged that they would be part of the 2015/16 budget setting process.

40. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED

that the press and public be excluded from the meeting because the business to be transacted contains exempt information relating to consultation or negotiations in connection with labour relation matters between the Council and its employees.

41. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY INVOLVEMENT IN IDENTIFYING PRIORITY AREAS FOR SAVINGS

Pursuant to Minute No. 13/39, the Assistant Director, Finance and Resources circulated an example of a completed template. The template contained a range of information on a service area, including its statutory duties, service standards, manpower and financial data. Information was also provided on potential options for future service delivery.

In considering the information within the document, Members sought clarification of the process by which the data was collected and collated into the service template. They suggested it would be useful to include an indication of the value of potential savings and income and expenditure information. In response to a number of concerns about the level of information contained within the template, it was suggested that if Members had a particular concern or required further information on any aspect, they should request this from the Service Manager in advance of the meeting. The Assistant Director, Finance and Resources would consider whether it was appropriate for a number of other suggestions to form part of the template.

A comment was made that the suggested approach would not enable the Panel to consider generic approaches to activities across the authority. In response to a question by a Member, it was reported that the cost of Councillors would be considered as part of the Democratic Services service area.

Members' attention was drawn to a suggested programme of

meetings for undertaking the review of each service area in November and December 2013. In recognition of the need to postpone the Panel's usual activities to fulfil this programme, Members agreed a process for dealing with these matters outside of the normal meeting process. The Panel would however, consider the Budget as normal at their meeting on 5th December 2013. Having noted that all Members of the Council would receive an invitation to attend and participate in any of the forthcoming meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels and that comments could be submitted to the Chairmen in writing if necessary, it was

RESOLVED

- (a) that the Panel's involvement in identifying priority areas for savings as outlined within the report prepared by the Assistant Director, Finance and Resources be endorsed; and
- (b) that two additional Panel meetings be held for this purpose.

42. RE-ADMITTANCE OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED

that the press and public be re-admitted to the meeting.

43. WORKPLAN STUDIES

The Panel received and noted a report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) containing details of studies that were being undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Panels for Social and Environmental Well-Being.

44. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) - PROGRESS

The Panel received and noted a report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) reviewing progress of matters that had been previously discussed.

In response to a question concerning the process for offering loans to other organisations, Members were advised that the Executive Leader and the Executive Councillor for Resources would need to be satisfied with a loan's terms and conditions before a recommendation was presented to the Cabinet. The Assistant Director, Finance and Resources explained that, in the case referred to, further work was required before a decision was taken on whether to submit a report to the Cabinet.

45. SCRUTINY

The Panel considered and noted the latest edition of the Decision Digest (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). Councillor E R Butler requested a copy of the report on the use of consultants

which had been considered by the Employment Panel at its last meeting.

Chairman