

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, 7 November 2013.

PRESENT: Councillor T V Rogers – Chairman.

Councillors S Akthar, G J Bull, E R Butler,
S Cawley, S Greenall, R Harrison,
M F Shellens and A H Williams.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors P L E Bucknell and P G Mitchell.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors S J Criswell, J A Gray and R J West.

46. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 3rd October 2013 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

47. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor M F Shellens declared a non pecuniary interest in Minute No. 50(a) as a Director of Luminus Homes.

Councillor B S Chapman declared a non pecuniary interest in Minute No. 50(a) as a Director of a residential lettings company.

48. NOTICE OF EXECUTIVE KEY DECISIONS

The Panel considered and noted the current Notice of Key Executive Decisions (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). In doing so, Members received further information on the item entitled 'Loan in accordance with Treasury Management Strategy' which would be considered by the Cabinet on 21st November 2013. The Chairman would be provided with a copy of the report when it was available.

49. EXCLUSION OF THE 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 the financial or business affairs of a particular person (including the authority holding that information); and to consultation or negotiations in connection with labour relations between the Council and its employees.

50. FACING THE FUTURE 2013

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

(Councillors S J Criswell, J A Gray and R J West were also in attendance for this item).

With the assistance of a briefing note which had been prepared by the Scrutiny and Review Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel was reminded of the Facing the Future process that had been adopted to undertake reviews of all Council services. Members' attention was drawn to Section 6 of the briefing note, which set out their role in the process.

(a) Housing Needs Service

Following a brief introduction by the Executive Councillor for Customer Services, the Panel examined the Strategic Service Review template for the Housing Needs Service (a copy of which is appended in the annex to the Minute Book). Members asked a number of questions regarding the financial information presented and the Service's performance against its service standards.

Having recognised that the largest area of 'other expenditure' was to provide temporary accommodation for homeless people, the Panel discussed the the schemes which had been or were shortly expected to be brought on line to reduce the Council's used of bed and breakfast accommodation. The Panel also discussed whether the Council could build its own temporary accommodation and the Service's management arrangements. A number of suggestions were made in these regards.

The Panel then addressed each of the Facing the Future themes in turn. Members made suggestions for generating additional income and expressed their support for proposals for the use of the Council's own assets. It was also suggested that further consideration should be given to the way temporary accommodation was procured. In terms of demand management, the Panel was assured that the service had gone as far as possible with the implementation of initiatives for self service. Members have also discussed the opportunities that existed for Smart Investment.

A number of areas were challenged by the Panel. Members were of the opinion that the proposals for alternative service delivery arrangements should be given a different priority to that suggested and that consideration might be given to other options if this did not materialise. Members commented that the further efficiencies largely had already been incorporated within the Council's 'targeted savings'.

Arising from the discussion, it was suggested that the current arrangements for administrative support within the Authority

should be reviewed.

(b) Customer Services

The Executive Councillor for Customer Services introduced the Strategic Service Review template for Customer Services (a copy of which is appended in the annex to the Minute Book). During examination of the financial information, Members sought clarification of a number of areas and commented on the Service's performance against the budget in the preceding three years. Members were assured that all service areas that had experienced similar trends would be challenged to review their budget requirements in the forthcoming months. A number of questions were also raised with regard to service standards and performance.

Having commented on the service levels which were currently provided, Members indicated that they would not wish them to change. They then discussed a range of issues relating to the future delivery of the service which were outlined within the options presented. These included options for the Call Centre. A number of suggestions contained in the service template were endorsed. Further suggestions were made for extending its scope of operation.

The Panel considered future service provision in other areas of the District and suggested that the business case should be examined for the introduction of alternative customer service mechanisms in these areas. Differing views were expressed in this respect as a Strategy recently had been approved, which would obviate the need for them. In addition, further work was required on the Authority's website.

(c) Benefits

The Panel gave consideration to the Strategic Service Review template for the Benefits Service (a copy of which is appended in the annex to the Minute Book). Having been advised of the activities of this Service, Members were reminded that the majority of its workload was a statutory function and that the other activities were necessary to ensure that mistakes were not made in this complex area.

In considering the contents of the template, Members were mindful that, owing to changes brought about by the Government's Welfare Reform programme, the Benefits Section and Fraud Team were in a state of transition. This meant that the range of options in this area was limited. The Panel discussed the continued need for elements of the service.

The Panel discussed in turn each of the suggestions, which had been made for generating further efficiencies. The Panel was of the view that one of the proposals should be

withdrawn and that the priority of another should be changed to mitigate any risk to the Authority. Having been informed that a review of the Council Tax Support scheme was planned for 2015/16, it was suggested that any changes should be publicised well in advance of their implementation.

In terms of the other Facing the Future themes, the Panel received an update on the current position. However, some reservations were expressed about the preferred course of development.

(d) Local Taxation

With the aid of the Strategic Service Review template for the Local Taxation Service (a copy of which is appended in the annex to the Minute Book) Members were reminded that this was a predominantly statutory service and that the recent Council Tax technical reforms had affected the Authority's income. Their attention was also drawn to what the impact on the Council's income would be if there was a very minor reduction in the Council's collection rate.

The Panel received an explanation of current government policy on the collection and retention of National Non-Domestic Rates. Comment was then made on the service standards and the actual spending trends compared with the budget.

Suggestions had been made for further efficiencies including reducing the cost associated with the manual handling of cheques and improved use of Information Technology generally. Although it would be easy to achieve, Members suggested that there should be further analysis of the potential impact of the proposal for NNDR discretionary relief. Members also challenged the assumptions which had been made about externally obtaining services.

A discussion then ensued on the way in which the rateable value of a property was determined. Members were informed that this set by the Valuation Office and only changed when a property was sold or when a new valuation list was produced. The latter happened infrequently. A change here could generate significant income for the Authority.

Having been acquainted with the investigations that were being undertaken to identify potential savings for the service as a whole, Members expressed the view that the Council should seek to protect its current income levels and that this should not be put at risk as a consequence of trying to generate minor savings opportunities. A recommendation was, therefore, made about the priority that should be accorded to this work.

Chairman