

Decision Digest

Edition 140

Monthly summary of the decisions taken at meetings of the Council, Cabinet, Overview & Scrutiny and other Panels for the period 27th November to 20th December 2013.

FACING THE FUTURE 2013

The Overview and Scrutiny Panels have met on seven occasions in November and December to undertake the "Facing the Future" service reviews. Reviews have been carried out on the following areas:-

- ❖ Procurement
- ❖ Audit & Risk Management
- ❖ Accountancy
- ❖ Legal
- ❖ Democratic Services
- ❖ Elections & Land Charges;
- ❖ Licensing
- ❖ Document Centre
- ❖ Parks, Open Spaces and Countryside
- ❖ Car Parking and Street Rangers
- ❖ Environmental Health
- ❖ Estates
- ❖ Communications
- ❖ Corporate Office
- ❖ Community Health; and
- ❖ One Leisure.

The Panels have considered proposed priority areas for each service area and made a number of suggestions for further investigation.

Following the completion of the reviews, there will then be a process to organise the identified actions into a priority order. The priority list will be submitted to the Overview & Scrutiny Panels in February before being

presented to the Cabinet. It is intended that the Cabinet's decision will initiate a series of reports back to the Panels containing more detailed proposals for implementation.

EXTERNAL AUDITORS: ANNUAL AUDIT LETTER 2012/13

The Annual Audit Letter from the Council's External Auditors, Pricewaterhouse Cooper for 2012/13 has been formally received by the Corporate Governance Panel. As the report lacked any Officer response to the External Auditor's recommendations for strengthening the budgetary and financial planning process, the Panel has asked Officers to circulate information to them on the actions taken and planned by email.

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT, ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION REGULATIONS AND DATA PROTECTION ACT

Details of the number of requests received by the Council under the Freedom of Information Act, Environmental Information Regulations and Data Protection Act were noted by the Corporate Governance Panel. A high level of requests were for general information and alternative methods of making such data available to the public is being considered by Officers, including making maximum possible use of the Council's website.

CORPORATE BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLANNING

As part of a review of the Council's corporate business continuity arrangements, an exercise to test the robustness of the plan has been undertaken. The day was a great success and will become an annual event to help ensure that the Plan remains a "living" document.

In discussing the Council's continuity arrangements, the Panel has noted that agreement in principle has been reached with Huntingdon Library to provide alternative accommodation for face to face services if Pathfinder House Customer Services Centre was inaccessible.

ANNUAL REVIEW OF WHISTLEBLOWING POLICY AND PROCEDURE

Changes to the Council's Whistleblowing Policy and Guidance have been endorsed by the Corporate Governance Panel. The changes have arisen as a result of the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013 and relate to the definition of 'protected disclosure', 'personal liability' and 'good faith'.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANELS CO-OPTED MEMBERS

The Corporate Governance Panel has received a report detailing the outcome of a review of the involvement of external co-optees on the Overview and Scrutiny Panels. The review had concluded that instead of making permanent appointments to the Scrutiny Panels, there was merit in inviting individuals who had specialist knowledge or expertise to contribute to particular study areas. Having been advised that the proposal had received the support of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel Chairmen, the Panel

has recommended to Council that the requirement for the appointment of co-optees be removed from the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules contained in the Constitution.

INTERNAL AUDIT – PAY REVIEW

The Corporate Governance Panel has noted the conclusions of the Internal Audit Manager on the job evaluation and pay review process. It is his view that the job evaluation and moderation process has been undertaken thoroughly. However, the Panel has expressed concern about the basis for Inbucon's assertion that their scheme was equality compliant. In response, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services explained that Inbucon had considerable experience in such matters and had been engaged by the authority to provide a legally compliant scheme. In the event of any successful challenge to the adopted scheme, the Council would be able to seek redress from Inbucon.

OFFICER GOVERNANCE WORKING GROUPS

A proposal to introduce Officer Governance Working Groups to raise awareness of the importance of good governance throughout the authority was reported to the Corporate Governance Panel. The approach has been prepared by Chief Officer Management Team following concerns raised in the External Auditor's report over the lack of compliance in some areas.

In considering the main elements to be considered by the groups, the Panel has commented on the level of commitment expected from Officers and expressed concern that the groups will be led by a Head of Service or Service Manager who does not have responsibility for that service area as part of their normal role.

TRAINING OF PANEL MEMBERS

Suggestions for training for Members of the Corporate Governance Panel based on the anticipated work programme over the ensuing year have been noted. A presentation was requested on the various sections of the Council's Constitution.

NATIONAL NON DOMESTIC RATING – CHANGES TO DISCRETIONARY POLICY

The Government has introduced a temporary scheme to encourage local authorities to provide rate relief on certain newly-built empty properties for up to 18 months after they are completed.

Having considered the details of the proposals, the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has recommended that the Council's existing Discretionary Relief Policy should be amended so that fully qualifying newly built and unoccupied non domestic properties completed from 1st October 2013 to 30th September 2016 will be eligible for 100% discretionary rate relief for a maximum period of up to 18 months. The cost of any relief awarded by the Council will be reimbursed by the Government.

Having been advised of the Panel's view, the Cabinet has authorised the Head of Customer Services to award the rate relief.

TREASURY MANAGEMENT: 6 MONTHLY REVIEW OF PERFORMANCE

In order to fulfil its role of overseeing the management of the Council's financial investments and borrowing, both the Cabinet and the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) have reviewed the Council's treasury

management for the period 1st April to 30th September 2013. The Panel has recommended that the Cabinet should endorse the report for submission to the Council.

The Cabinet has, subsequently, approved the content of the report.

BUDGET UPDATE

The Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has reviewed the proposed variations to be included within the new Budget and MTP. And subject to:

- confirmation being received of the requirements in the stated timescale for item 1072 in Annex E – New Extra Costs; and
- the inclusion of information on the pay review, the senior management review and the Chancellors Autumn Statement;

the Panel has endorsed the report by the Assistant Director (Finance and Resources).

Having been advised of the Panel's views, the Cabinet has confirmed that provision will need to be made in the MTP for the potential redevelopment of the Wyton Airfield and that the outcome of the pay review and senior management review will need to be reflected in the final budget report to Council in February 2014. Having also referred to the need to explore ideas to recoup the cost of providing new wheeled bins and stressed the importance of all levels of authorities making efficiencies, the Cabinet has recommended the report to Council, as the basis for the development of the budget for 2014/15 and the revised Medium Term Plan 2015/2019.

DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT – APPLICATIONS AND ISSUES

At its December meeting, the Development Management Panel considered seven applications and of those, four were approved, two refused and one deferred for further clarification. Outline consent was given for the development of 160 dwellings and 2 hectares of employment land on the southern part of the former RAF Upwood site which currently is occupied by a derelict barracks area and Upwood Hill House (the former Station Commander's dwelling). The development will be subject to completion of a S106 Agreement which will secure affordable housing, open space and wheeled bins.

A Panel training day will be held early in the New Year and it was suggested that together with discussion on several pertinent and current issues, the opportunity could be taken to invite representatives of the statutory consultees to the session to better understand their approach to the planning process.

Looking ahead, the Panel has been advised that there will be several vacancies in the development management team at the end of March. Whilst details of the way in which the Team will adapt to the changes will be reported in January, the Panel has been assured that its Chairman and Vice Chairman and the Executive Councillor will continue to monitor the situation in the meantime.