

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) held in the CIVIC SUITE 0.1A, PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON PE29 3TN on Thursday, 6 March 2014.

PRESENT: Councillor T V Rogers – Chairman.

Councillors P L E Bucknell, G J Bull,
E R Butler, S Cawley, K J Churchill, Eacott,
S Greenall, R Harrison, P G Mitchell,
M F Shellens and A H Williams.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors J A Gray (Item 89), B S Chapman (Items 91 and 92) and R B Howe (Item 91).

85. MR S COUPER AND MS J BARBER

The Chairman reminded Members that the Assistant Director (Finance and Resources) would be retiring at the end of the month. The Panel expressed their appreciation of the assistance Mr S Couper had provided to them which had helped them to address the financial issues facing the Authority and wished him well for the future.

In noting that this was likely to be the last meeting that the Head of Customer Services would attend, the Panel also thanked Ms Julia Barber for her help and work for the Panel during her employment with the Council.

86. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 6th February 2014 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

87. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

88. 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 reminded that if they were interested in particular items they were able to attend the relevant meetings of the Social and Environmental Well-Being Panels at which they were considered.

The Scrutiny and Review Manager undertook to provide a copy of the Wind Turbines Supplementary Planning Document to Councillors P L E Bucknell and E R Butler directly when it became available.

89. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED

that the public be excluded from the meeting because the business to be transacted contains information relating to the financial or business affairs of a particular person (including the authority holding that information).

90. TRANSFER OF CREATIVEXCHANGE, LONGSANDS CAMPUS

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

With the assistance of a report by the Corporate Office (Estates) (a copy of which is appended in the annex to the Minute Book) the Panel considered a number of options for the future use and ownership of the Creativexchange in the Longsands Academy Campus. Following a brief introduction by the Executive Councillor for Resources and the Estates Strategic Assessment Manager, Members were informed that the current arrangements for the management of the building had now expired, which meant that consideration could be given to its future use and ownership.

The Panel discussed the original reasons for building the Creativexchange, occupancy levels and trends, the potential terms of a new arrangement with the existing management company, other options for the building and the Council's land within which the car park was sited. Reference was also made to the ongoing inefficiencies associated with continuing to operate the facility. In recognition of the fact that there were lessons which could be learnt from this exercise, Members suggested that a post project appraisal should be undertaken.

At the conclusion of the deliberations, the Panel agreed on its recommendations to the Cabinet and requested that a review be carried out on the lessons which had been learned from the Creativexchange project including the expenditure which had been incurred.

91. RE-ADMITTANCE OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED

that the public be re-admitted to the meeting.

92. LOVES FARM COMMUNITY CENTRE - UPDATE

(Councillors R B Howe, Executive Councillor for Healthy and Active Communities, and B S Chapman, elected Member for St Neots Priory Park, were in attendance for this item).

Councillor R B Howe, Executive Councillor for Healthy and Active Communities, addressed the Panel on the development of the Loves Farm Community Centre. He also referred to a number of the issues that the project had faced. A report on progress had been included on

the Agenda (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). Members were informed that an agreement had been made with Cambridgeshire County Council for the provision of a combined Community Building and a pre-school playgroup facility.

As part of the presentation, Members were provided with details of the site for the facility together with the proposed elevations and floor plans. Having been acquainted with the financial position of the original scheme, it was reported that £56K had been spent by the District Council on the initial proposal. Members were informed that the County Council would contribute £670K to the amended scheme. Attention was then drawn to the timetable for the completion of the facility, the next steps and the lessons which had been learnt from the exercise to-date.

Councillor B S Chapman, a local Member for Priory Park, thanked the Executive Councillor for drawing this project to a near conclusion. He stated that it would be an essential facility for the local community and the local Community Group, which would be managing the building, was keen to start running it. He expressed his appreciation of the County Council's financial contribution.

The Panel discussed the financial resources available to the Community Group, the opportunities available to it for securing grant funding and its framework and operating structure. Members were informed that it had recently adopted a more commercial approach.

In terms of the use of the facility, Members were informed that the building would be owned by the District Council and sub-let in two distinct parts: one to the Community Group and the other to the County Council and then to the playgroup. Having been advised that the Community Group would be responsible for generating income from the community part of the building, Members drew attention to the potential financial risk to the District Council if the Group was unsuccessful in generating sufficient income from the facility. A Member suggested that steps should be taken to ensure that it maintained sufficient reserves. With this in mind and having noted the views of the local Member that there was already demand for this type of facility in St Neots, Members suggested that the Community Group should be required to prepare a Business Plan and submit it to the District Council prior to any agreement being finalised.

In terms of the design and location of the proposed new building, the Panel suggested that the provision of only ten parking spaces was inadequate and could result in parking problems on the estate and also deter larger organisations from using the facility. In response, the local Member explained that the Community Centre was located in a strategic position within the development and the majority of users would have access to it on foot. However, Members were of the view that the facility could not be sustained by business generated solely from within the local community and parking should be considered as part of the Community Group's business plan. Having agreed that the Council could learn lessons from the project, it was

RESOLVED

It is recommended

- (a) that the Community Group, which will be responsible for the management of the Loves Farm Community Centre, be requested to prepare a Business Plan and submit it to the Council prior to any agreement being entered into; and
- (b) that, to enable lessons to be learnt, the project is audited.

93. CUSTOMER SERVICES MONITORING

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

The Panel gave consideration to the Customer Services Performance report for the period July to December 2013 (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). In introducing the report, Councillor Chapman reported that the Service was moving forward with the delivery of the new Customer Services Strategy and that the efforts which were being made to 'migrate' customers to alternative self-service options were starting to be successful. The Head of Customer Services explained that this was borne out by the data for the last quarter, which appeared to demonstrate that 'quick and easy' transactions were being completed through self-service and the more difficult transactions were being handled by Customer Services staff.

In considering the contents of the report, Members enquired why customers could on occasion be waiting up to 40 minutes at the Huntingdon Customer Services Centre. In response, the Customer Services Manager explained that this had occurred very infrequently and she undertook to circulate further details outside of the meeting. Whilst it was not always possible to control waiting times, management information was used to forecast when increases in demand might occur.

In discussing a possible future move of the Call Centre Team to Pathfinder House, the Panel queried what impact this might have on staff retention. Members were informed that initial enquiries had elicited positive responses with the majority of employees understanding the benefits of making this move. Having noted that two experienced members of the team had left to take up positions at a neighbouring authority, Members were informed that the differences in salaries between the Authorities had been addressed by the Pay Review Project. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report be noted.

94. BRIEFING ON NATIONAL NON DOMESTIC RATES

Pursuant to Minute No.13/61, the Panel received a presentation from the Head of Customer Services on National Non Domestic Rates (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). As part of the

presentation information was provided on the property valuation process, rateable values, empty property rates, the award of 'Mandatory' and 'Discretionary' reliefs and the rules relating to the Greater Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Enterprise Zone. Members were then advised of the budgetary impact of changes to the finance regime from April 2013 and the implications of the 2013 Autumn Statement on National Non Domestic Rates. The Head of Customer Services explained that the avoidance of payment of business rates was becoming a national issue.

Members asked a number of detailed questions, which were responded to by the Head of Customer Services. The Panel was reminded that a copy of the Rural Settlements list, which defined those areas where rural rate relief applied, could be found on the Council's website.

Members thanked the Head of Customer Services for an informative and useful presentation.

95. 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.

96. 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 on matters that had been previously discussed. Councillor P G Mitchell reported that he had received information on the Authority's gross expenditure in 2010/11 to 2013/14. A meeting of the Working Group looking at gross expenditure shortly would be convened.

With reference to the Facing the Future exercise, the Chairman suggested that the Panel should receive a monitoring report on those items which had been categorised as having 'limited service impact'. This suggestions was endorsed.

97. SCRUTINY

The Panel considered and noted the latest edition of the Decision Digest (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). With reference to the recent review of Fraud Investigation activity by the Corporate Governance Panel, Councillor E R Butler was asked to report back to the next meeting on the future of the Fraud Team within the Authority.

