

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the COUNCIL held in the Civic Suite, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon PE29 3TN on Wednesday, 24th September 2014.

PRESENT: Councillor P L E Bucknell - Vice-Chairman in the Chair.

Councillors J D Ablewhite, Mrs B E Boddington, G J Bull, E R Butler, R C Carter, S Cawley, B S Chapman, K J Churchill, Mrs S Conboy, S J Criswell, Mrs A D Curtis, I J Curtis, J W Davies, D B Dew, Mrs A Dickinson, R S Farrer, M Francis, R Fuller, J A Gray, A Hansard, A J Hardy, G J Harlock, R Harrison, D Harty, T Hayward, R B Howe, B Hyland, P Kadewere, Ms L Kadic, S M Van De Kerkhove, Mrs R E Mathews, J P Morris, M C Oliver, P D Reeve, Mrs D C Reynolds, T D Sanderson, M F Shellens, D M Tysoe and R J West.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors M G Baker, K M Baker, I C Bates, Mrs L A Duffy, Mrs P A Jordan, A J Mackender-Lawrence, P G Mitchell, R G Tuplin and P K Ursell.

26. PRAYER

The Reverend D Busk, Vicar of St Mary's Parish Church, Godmanchester opened the meeting with Prayer.

27. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

(a) The Late Councillor Mrs P J Longford

Members paid tribute to their late colleague Councillor Mrs P J Longford who had passed away after a short illness on 18th September 2014. The Vice Chairman, Councillor Bucknell made particular reference to Mrs Longford's contribution to the Development Management Panel, her work on the Local Plan through the Development Plan Policy Advisory Group and to her loyalty and commitment to Priory Park ward and St Neots. The Council then stood in silence for a few moments in memory of their former colleague.

(b) Chairman's Absence

The Vice Chairman, Councillor Bucknell advised the Council that the Chairman, Councillor Mackender Lawrence was now recovering at home having been taken ill suddenly over the previous weekend. The Council sent the Chairman their best wishes for a speedy recovery.

Councillor Bucknell described two recent events that he had attended in his capacity as Vice Chairman. These were events to commemorate Merchant Navy Day and the Battle of Britain.

(c) **Agenda Item No 4**

The Vice Chairman, Councillor Bucknell announced that the Council Debate scheduled for later on the agenda would require to be deferred as Chief Constable Simon Parr was feeling poorly and unable to attend the meeting.

28. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 30th July 2014 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

The new Corporate Director (Services) and Monitoring Officer, Mrs Julie Slatter introduced herself to the Council.

29. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No interests were declared by the Members present.

30. BY ELECTION - WARBOYS AND BURY WARD

The Vice Chairman introduced Councillor Mrs A Curtis who had been elected to the office of District Councillor for the Warboys and Bury Ward at a by election held on 7th August 2014.

The Executive Leader, Councillor J D Ablewhite thanked the Returning Officer and the Elections Team for the efficient and professional way in which they had conducted the by election.

31. COUNCIL DEBATE

As the Chief Constable was unable to attend the meeting due to sickness, the Council Debate was deferred to another occasion.

32. STATE OF THE DISTRICT 2014

In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 12, the Vice Chairman invited the Executive Leader, Councillor J D Ablewhite to address the Council on the State of the District. In support of his presentation, a summary of the Annual Report 2013/14 and salient facts had been laid on the table (a copy of which is reproduced in the Minute Book).

In general terms, Councillor Ablewhite reminded Members that it continued to be a significant challenge to deliver services within a decreasing budget. However, despite this position, the District Council had not increased Council Tax in the current year and intended to retain this position in the next financial year and aspire to freeze Council Tax for a four further years.

Although a difficult year, Councillor Ablewhite added that the Council had improved its financial position such that it was now better placed

to evaluate the options for the future having regard to feedback received during consultation with residents and businesses.

Having also mentioned the restructuring of the Senior Management Team and the business approach being taken towards management of One Leisure, Councillor Ablewhite proceeded to highlight the achievements of the Council in 2013/14 by reference to the key priorities – strong local economy, enabling sustainable growth, improved quality of life and working with our communities. (A copy of Councillor Ablewhite's full address is reproduced in the Minute Book.)

The Leader of the Principal Opposition, Councillor K J Churchill was invited to respond. Councillor Churchill acknowledged that the Council had enjoyed a good year despite losing several experienced Members of staff and receiving reduced levels of Government grant. He commended the Council's direction of travel making particular reference to zero based budgeting, the 'Facing the Future' exercise and control of expenditure on consultants. However, Councillor Churchill was of the view that District residents now received considerably less service than previously and whilst savings had emerged from change, these were not generally for the better. In terms of the budget, he looked forward to the Members' Seminar to be held in early October. Whilst welcoming the Council's approach, in principle, Councillor Churchill expressed concern that dedicated staff were being allowed to leave the authority to the detriment of the service, at the reduction of Democratic Services support and the number of Council meetings, the deletion of the opportunity for the opposition to lead the Council's debate, his perception of a less effective planning enforcement service and the decrease in the number of completed Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs).

In terms of proposals for the future, Councillor Churchill suggested that consideration should be given to a review of the number of Councillors so that one Councillor would represent one ward and to the opportunity to build accommodation for homeless people and reduce the amount spent on bed and breakfast accommodation. Councillor Churchill also raised his concern that the views of the Overview & Scrutiny Panels were largely ignored by the Cabinet. Despite the matters he had raised, Councillor Churchill agreed with the Executive Leader's assertion that Huntingdonshire was a good place to live but he contended that the District Council should seek to make it even better.

Councillor Ablewhite challenged Councillor Churchill's assertion that the number of completed DFGs had declined and argued that the Council's financial position was such that it could respond to whatever level of Government grant was allocated. He confirmed that town centre economies remained hugely important to the District and reaffirmed the level of investment that the Council had already committed to Huntingdon and St Neots. In terms of costs associated with bed and breakfast, Members were reminded that the Council had been proactive in setting up a joint scheme with Luminus to reduce the overall cost of bed and breakfast and were looking at other ways of reducing costs still further to avoid placing anyone in temporary accommodation. Councillor Ablewhite refuted the suggestion that the views of the Overview & Scrutiny Panels had not been taken into

account by the Cabinet and he specifically recalled instances which demonstrated that the Cabinet had listened. Finally, and in terms of DFGs, Councillor Ablewhite reminded the Council that the Cabinet had increased the budget year on year such that the Council now set aside £700,000 for the purpose.

Whilst looking forward to receiving the Executive Leader's address in writing, Councillor M F Shellens questioned how the District Council would continue to maintain expenditure on services with reduced resources.

In response to the latter, Councillor Ablewhite urged Members not to underestimate how much the Council could save by sharing services in neighbouring authorities, by looking at innovative and creative ways to undertake services and by managing its property portfolio more effectively.

33. EXECUTIVE COUNCILLOR PRESENTATIONS

(a) Councillor B S Chapman, Executive Councillor for Customer Services

Councillor B S Chapman, Executive Councillor for Customer Services described, in detail, the principal services within his portfolio namely – Housing Benefits, Council Tax Support, Local Taxation, Fraud, Housing Needs, the Customer Service Centre, Call Centre, Information Management and Parking Services. A copy of Councillor Chapman's PowerPoint presentation is appended in the Minute Book.

In response to a question from Councillor K J Churchill regarding car parking in St Neots, Councillor Chapman advised that it was his intention to simplify the parking arrangements in the District and streamline the systems for payment to improve the economic vitality of the towns, reduce running costs and contribute to the Council's savings. Councillor Chapman confirmed that he would not consider the removal of car parking charges in St Neots altogether but ensure that they were equitable across the District.

(b) Councillor T D Sanderson, Executive Councillor for Strategic Economic Development and Legal

Councillor Sanderson began his presentation by informing the Council that the Economic Development Team had recently transferred from the Corporate Office to the Planning Division. Activities relating to the Enterprise Zone and Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) were now undertaken by the Economic Development Manager. The Council was informed that the eastern region had been one of the first to recover from the economic recession and that the priority now was to relieve the 'labour pool pinch' that the District Council's local economic assessment had identified two years ago and deliver homes and higher valued employment opportunities. Making the successful delivery of Alconbury Weald the top priority had attracted grant

assistance from the DCLG specifically for Enterprise Zones. This grant would enable the delivery of the Zone to be advanced by three years and would transform the appearance of the site.

Councillor Sanderson also reported that the District Council was leading and coordinating the local authority contribution to development of the LEPs next bid for Growth Deal Funding. The case will include several potential transport and regeneration projects in St Neots and an enterprise centre in Ramsey. The District Council also has contributed towards four different bids for LEADER projects. If successful these will deliver grants and support to small and medium sized rural based businesses across the District. Other projects underway are – raising awareness of funding opportunities, local skills matching, business start-up programmes and contributing to Grassroots, which targets the long term unemployed in Huntingdon North.

Most impressive of all is the Transformation Change Award Funding that has been secured to support the development of the District Council's strategic partnership with South Cambridgeshire and other partners. Councillor Sanderson also updated the Council on the current position on the Loves Farm Community Building. It was noted that a tender for construction had been signed off by the District and County Councils and final works to discharge the planning conditions had been undertaken. A turf turning event to mark the award of the contract and commencement of the build would be arranged.

Councillor Sanderson gave notice of the introduction of the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policy Act 2014. The Act prescribes a range of activities that will need to be undertaken by both the District Council and partners. Lastly, Councillor Sanderson reported that community chest awards had amounted to £29,940 in the current year.

In response to a question from Councillor R J West, the Executive Councillor expressed a strong view that the District Council continued to have a significant role to play in encouraging growth in town centres.

(c) Questions to Other Members of the Cabinet

In response to a question from Councillor T F Hayward regarding the implications for Parish Councils of the Council's intention to freeze Council Tax in 2015/16 and for four years thereafter, Councillor Ablewhite reaffirmed that it was not the District Council's intention to transfer any functions to parish councils unless specifically approached by a parish council and persuaded that a local council had the skills and capacity to deliver a service more cost effectively.

Following the tragic drowning of a young boy in the river at

Hartford in July and in response to a question from Councillor P Kadewere, Councillor Ablewhite restated that the District Council, in conjunction with the appropriate agencies, would seek to identify land for the location of improved warning signs and would use the District Council's website to warn of the dangers of swimming in the river and to urge parents to be vigilant as to the whereabouts of their children. Councillor Ablewhite added that he would be honoured to attend any formal ceremony on the riverbank to unveil a new sign or memorial bench. On a similar subject and in response to a question from Councillor S M Van De Kerkhove regarding the creation of safe swimming areas in St Neots, Councillor Ablewhite stated that the Environment Agency was the lead organisation in this respect, that he would caution against swimming in the river for various reasons and that were the Councillor to look into this matter further he would appreciate a report back to a future meeting.

In response to a question from Councillors I Curtis and P D Reeve regarding the BBC news story featuring Luminus Group, Councillor Ablewhite informed Members that, following the news story, the Council had contacted the BBC and requested evidence to substantiate the complaints that had been made. Such evidence had not been forthcoming and nor had any complaints been received directly by the District Council. Councillor Ablewhite urged Members to encourage residents in their wards to come forward to express any concerns they might have in relation to Luminus Group and gave his assurance that any allegations would be investigated and acted upon if necessary. Councillor S J Criswell added that he was disappointed that the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Social Well Being) had not been invited to act on behalf of residents to look into the complaints and hold Luminus Group to account.

In response to a question from Councillor J P Morris regarding the opportunity to reduce the annual housing benefit budget by delivery of more affordable homes, Councillor Ablewhite assured the questioner that the District Council would take every opportunity to provide affordable housing and shared equity arrangements through larger developments. He admitted, however, that this was a challenge particularly as the District Council did not have sufficiently large landholdings itself to use in this way.

34. REPORTS OF THE CABINET, PANELS AND COMMITTEE

(a) Cabinet

Councillor J D Ablewhite, Executive Leader of the Council and Chairman of the Cabinet presented the Report of the meeting of the Cabinet held on 11th September 2014.

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In connection with Item No 23 and in response to a question from Councillor R D Farrer regarding the overall cost of the Green House Project since its inception and the benefits that had accrued to the District Council from the initiative, Councillor Ablewhite suggested that both properties had served their purposes, that educational use of the St Ives house had passed its peak and that the decision sell at this time had been supported by the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well Being) having regard to the improving housing market. Councillor D M Tysoe, Executive Councillor for the Environment undertook to provide information relating to the cost of the project to the questioner after the meeting.

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In connection with Item No 24 and in response to a question from Councillor P D Reeve regarding the Council's decision to sell the parcel of land opposite Pathfinder House, Councillor Ablewhite advised Members that various options had been considered for use of this land since the new headquarters had been occupied. However, the Cabinet had concluded that the Council would benefit most from the sale of the land. The Council would continue to review all land in its ownership and in this respect mention was made of a parcel of land in Earith which was to be used as a rural exception site for housing.

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Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Report of the meeting of the Cabinet held on 11th September 2014 be received and adopted.

35. DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT PANEL

Councillor Mrs B E Boddington presented the Report of the meetings of the Development Management Panel held on 18th August and 15th September 2014.

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Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Report of the meetings of the Development Management Panel held on 18th August and 15th September be received and adopted.

36. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING)

Councillor R Harrison presented the Report of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) held on 4th

September 2014.

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Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Report of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) held on 4th September 2014 be received and adopted.

37. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL (ENVIRONMENTAL WELL-BEING)

Councillor G J Bull presented the Report of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) held on 9th September 2014.

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Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Report of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) held on 9th September 2014 be received and adopted.

38. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (SOCIAL WELL-BEING)

Councillor S J Criswell presented the Report of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) held on 2nd September 2014.

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Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Report of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) held on 2nd September 2014 be received and adopted.

39. REPRESENTATION OF POLITICAL GROUPS ON DISTRICT COUNCIL PANELS, ETC

A report was submitted by the Corporate Team Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) relating to the principles of proportionality to be applied to the appointment of Panels and Committees following the recent by election in Warboys and Bury Ward. In accordance with Section 15 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 and Part II of the Local Government Act 2000, it was

RESOLVED

that the revised allocation of seats on Panels to political groups be determined as set out in the report now submitted.

40. VARIATION TO THE MEMBERSHIP OF COMMITTEES AND PANELS, ETC

Further to Minute No 39 ante, the Council

RESOLVED

that Councillor Mrs A Curtis be appointed to the membership of the Development Management and Overview & Scrutiny (Environmental) Well Being Panels.

The meeting concluded at 8.57pm.

Chairman