

Decision Digest

Edition 151

Monthly summary of the decisions taken at meetings of the Council, Cabinet, Overview & Scrutiny and other Panels for the period 24th November to 17th December 2014.

ANNUAL REVIEW OF WHISTLEBLOWING POLICY AND PROCEEDURE

A number of changes to the Council's Whistleblowing Policy and Guidance have been endorsed by the Corporate Governance Panel to reflect recent changes to the Authority's Management Structure.

Having been advised that 'Public Concern at Work' has issued a code of practice which provides practical guidance to employers, workers and their representatives and sets out arrangements for raising, handling, training and reviewing whistleblowing in the workplace, the Panel has recommended that the Council should sign up to the principles of the Code and be one of the first 100 signatories.

EXTERNAL AUDITORS: ANNUAL AUDIT LETTER 2013/14

The Corporate Governance Panel has formally received the Annual Audit Letter from the Council's External Auditors, PricewaterhouseCooper for 2013/14. The letter outlines the Auditor's findings, recommendations and fees for the work which has been undertaken during the year.

Having noted that the Auditors Final Fees have yet to be agreed with the Authority and the Audit Commission, the Panel has been assured that, if

appropriate the final level will be challenged by the Head of Resources.

ANNUAL REPORT ON THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (FOI) AND ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATIONS ACTS

Details of the number of requests received by the Council under the Freedom of Information (FOI) and Environment Regulations Acts have been provided to the Corporate Governance Panel.

Having noted that the number of requests has continued to rise in 2014 and that staffing vacancies within the Division has impacted on the target time for responses, Members have congratulated Officers on only receiving 3 complaints about the handling of FOI requests during this time. The Panel was pleased to note that performance is now meeting targets.

WHISTLEBLOWING CONCERNS RECEIVED

The Corporate Governance Panel has received and noted a summary of the 22 allegations received under the Council's Whistleblowing Policy during the period 1st January to 31st October 2014. Whilst one allegation with regard to personal social care has been referred to the County Council, the remaining concerns have all been appropriately investigated.

INTERNAL AUDIT SERVICE: INTERNAL PROGRESS REPORT

The Corporate Governance Panel was apprised of the work of the Internal Audit Service during the period 1st April to 31st October 2014, together with associated performance issues.

The Panel has discussed the impact of recent staffing changes in the Audit Team on the delivery of the Audit Plan for the remainder of the year. Having been advised that the Plan has been recast for the remainder of the year based upon current risks and the availability of resources, Members have been assured that should the Internal Audit and Risk Manager consider that he is not able to provide an adequate annual internal audit, he will raise the matter with the Chief Finance Officer and report back to the Panel.

The Panel was disappointed that only 49% of audit actions had been introduced on time against the target which had been set by the Corporate Management Team of 100%.

The Panel has also queried why the Service Delivery targets for the Internal Audit Team have not been met. Whilst there had been an improvement since March 2014, Members were reminded that responsibility for these actions was outside of the direct control of the Internal Audit Manager and lay with service managers. Because of their concerns, the Panel will continue to monitor progress in this area.

IMPLEMENTATION OF AUDIT ACTIONS

A report outlining the performance of Heads of Service in implementing agreed audit actions for the year ending 31st October 2014 has been presented to the Corporate Governance Panel. Members have expressed their continuing disappointment that, despite previous

assurances which had been given, this remained an issue for the Authority. The Panel has agreed that their concerns should be brought to the attention of the Managing Director.

Having noted the intention of the Council's Chief Finance Officer to give further consideration to the establishment of a mechanism by which Heads of Service will be more for the implementation of audit actions, Members have discussed the action which can be taken by the Panel to improve the situation. Accordingly, the Internal Audit and Risk Manager has been asked to submit a further report to the Panel's next meeting to provide an update on the current position and to identify trends in the implementation of actions. In the event, that there is no improvement in performance, a further discussion on the action which the Panel wishes to take to address the situation will take place at the next meeting.

VALUE FOR MONEY AT HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

The Corporate Governance Panel has considered the contents of the first annual report prepared by the Head of Resources on the Council's achievement of Value for Money (VfM). Value for Money is a term which is used to assess whether or not an organisation has obtained the maximum benefit from the goods and services which it acquires and provides, within the resources available to it. On this occasion, the report has been divided into two sections to identify value for money at the service delivery level and value for money in corporate activity.

In terms of the corporate activities, Members have looked at the failings which have been identified in the project to deliver the Huntingdon Multi-

Storey Car Park and the re-development of facilities at One Leisure, St Ives. The Panel has been reminded that following the 2012/13 external audit a number of measures were put in place to improve the Council's approach to project management and that the projects referred to had commenced prior to these new arrangements. Members were firmly of the opinion that this situation should not be allowed to re-occur.

Having noted that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel has established a Select Committee to investigate the Council's approach to project management and the issues which had emerged from the two specific projects outlined above, Members were of the opinion that the resulting report should be presented to the Corporate Governance Panel to enable Members to make an informed comment as part of the Annual Governance Statement. It has also been suggested that the Council's Procurement Manager should be invited to attend a future meeting of the Panel to provide his comments on the extent to which Council Officers are following procurement recommendations and the effectiveness of his role within the organisation.

Finally, the Panel has reviewed the outcome of a table top review of value for money which has been conducted at service delivery level. It was suggested that there may be potential to standardise the activities which are being undertaken in different service areas.

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DESIGN GUIDE

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) has previewed the new Huntingdonshire Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document. This sets out a number of design principles based on recognised best practice and outlines the key requirements that the Council will take

into consideration when assessing planning proposals. The need to update the Council's existing Design Guide was identified following a previous review by the Panel of the design principles for future developments. The new Design Guide will directly comply with national planning policy guidance and align with other documents currently being put in place by the District Council's Planning Team (i.e. the Council's Tree Strategy).

Although intended that the new Design Guide will be viewed primarily online, the Panel has congratulated Officers on its presentation and welcomed the use of 'Plain English'. However Members have expressed disappointment that some of the examples of good practice illustrated have been taken from outside of the District. The Panel has also emphasised the need to be consistent when referencing examples of good and bad practice throughout the Guide.

In terms of content, the Panel has discussed the continuing impact of on-street parking and the lack of private parking on the overall visual amenity of new developments. Whilst it was acknowledged that this still remained an issue, Members have welcomed the inclusion of a minimum size for garages within the Guide.

The Panel has discussed the need to ensure that the statements made with regard to on-street parking within the new Design Guide are supported by the County Council as the Highways Authority. Members have been advised that the County Council will be a consultee to the document and as such it will be possible to make these points to them directly. It is hoped that the new Guide will influence the County Council to impose requirements which are consistent with the new SPD and thus improve the design quality of new developments.

The Panel has been advised that a six week public consultation on the Huntingdonshire Design Guide will be take place between the 9th January and 20th February 2015. Having discussed the expectations of this exercise, Members have emphasised the need to promote the consultation and to give feedback to the public. The Panel will also have a further opportunity to make comments on the Design Guide during this time.

Finally, and having regard to the timetable for the adoption of the Guide as an SPD in March 2015, the Panel has emphasised the need to achieve a robust and sound document notwithstanding the timescale for its approval.

ENERGY MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) has received an update on the energy and cost savings which have been achieved through the Council's Carbon Management Plan since its adoption in 2009.

Members have been advised of plans to enter into a partnership with the County Council, Greater London Authority and Local Partnerships to access the RE:FIT procurement framework to assist with the identification and procurement of future projects. This will enable the Council to commission free desk top energy assessments of its nine main sites and to explore commissioning Investment Grade Proposals, where a business case for energy reduction is identified by the desk top assessment.

In considering the proposal, the Panel has discussed the costs associated with the RE:FIT programme and has noted there would be a charge in the region of £1,000 - £4,000 for the preparation of a full Investment Grade Proposal. These would be recovered by the partner

provider from the savings achieved by the Council in the first year.

In response to a question, the Environment Team Leader undertook to circulate to Members an update on the Green Deal Home Improvement Fund which had been re-launched this week. The Panel also have been advised that the £7.8m funding which had been secured from the 'Green Deal Communities Fund' for solid wall installation in Cambridgeshire does not have to be spent until 30th September 2015 which would give the Council more time to actively promote the scheme to residents and secure sign-up.

Having endorsed the proposals within the report, the Panel has requested that further updates on the progress with the identification and procurement of future projects through the RE:FIT procurement framework should be presented to future meetings of the Panel.

The Cabinet has reviewed the update on the energy and cost savings that have been made through the Council's Carbon Management Plan in 2009/14. In 2013/14 projects to the value of £183,000 have been implemented, saving the council an estimated £55,000 per annum. The progress in reducing the Council's energy use and carbon emissions from its buildings and fleet has been recognised.

As there is considerable scope to undertake further work, the Cabinet has supported the proposal to enter into a partnership with the County Council, the Greater London Authority and Local Partnerships to access the RE:FIT programme. Initially the Council will commission free desk top energy assessments of the Council's nine main sites and the Cabinet will be consulted before the subsequent stages of the programme are undertaken.

Executive Councillors have stressed that the revenue savings of such capital investments are reflected in future budgets.

PETITION

A petition relating to the Octagon, Station Road, St Ives containing 266 signatures has been presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being). Officers have been asked to prepare a report for a future meeting on the issues raised by the petition and the organiser (of the petition) has been invited to make a submission to the same meeting on suitable uses for the Octagon.

WELFARE REFORM AND THE IMPACT ON HUNTINGDONSHIRE

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has been acquainted with the effects of the Government's Welfare Reform programme and how it impacts upon households in Huntingdonshire in relation to Housing Benefits, Council Tax Support and homelessness. Members have examined the changes that are taking place in respect of social sector size criteria rules, Council Tax Support, the benefit cap, Universal Credit, migrants and discretionary housing payments.

The Panel has paid close attention to the position of tenants of Registered Providers who have rent arrears and the interventions undertaken by the District Council as a means of preventing them from becoming homeless. Members have discussed the approach adopted for discretionary housing payments and the affordability of private sector rented accommodation.

A further update will be provided when circumstances require it.

COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME 2015/16

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has recommended the Cabinet to approve a change to the local Council Tax Support scheme with effect from 1st April 2015. The change means the Council will disregard all child maintenance in its calculations, which will result in greater levels of Council Tax Support entitlement to those customers in receipt of this type of income.

The Cabinet has considered the proposed change to the Council Tax Support Scheme for 2015/2016. The change will affect approximately 350 households and will cost in the region of £2k. It will bring the Council into line with the majority of other Councils. Having requested the Social Well-Being Panel to carry out an evaluation of the overall scheme and, in particular, its effect on employment trends, the Cabinet has recommended the Council to approve the change to the local Council Tax Support scheme with effect from 1st April 2015.

ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR, CRIME AND POLICING ACT 2014

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) has supported the intention to delegate new powers to Officers to tackle anti-social behaviour. As previous legislation has been repealed, the Council currently has no powers in this area.

The Panel has commented that the introduction of the new Act is likely to create interest amongst the public in using the new powers, thereby placing greater demands on the Council. This could be exacerbated by the fact that the "test" of anti-social behaviour has been lowered, meaning that a larger range of activities can be classed as such. In addition, the Crown Prosecution Service will be able to refer cases directly to Councils to carry out

enforcement. While the level of demand placed on the Council is not yet known, the Scrutiny Panel has highlighted that, for these reasons, the service may need more resources.

The Cabinet has been acquainted with the implications for the Council of Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. It has been noted that the Act means enforcement will be streamlined and will give the Council more control over its enforcement activities. With the exception of the community trigger, which is a duty, all the provisions of the Act constitute powers so the Council only has to use them if they are appropriate.

Executive Councillors have expressed concerns that public space protection orders and dog control orders will expire if they are not reviewed and re-evidenced, thereby creating additional workloads. Members have drawn attention to the absence of available data on the likely benefits of the Act and on its objectives.

Comment has been made that the Act could cause resources to be diverted to activities that have less benefit for the public and that the Community Trigger could be used in a way for which it was not intended. It could also have unintended consequences. Various ways of managing its use have been discussed.

Having expressed their support for the delegations associated with the new powers created by the Act and with the creation and maintenance of policies and procedures, the Cabinet has requested Executive Councillors, Senior Officers and Overview and Scrutiny to look at how enforcement will be undertaken in conjunction with the police and to devise a draft scheme of thresholds for application to the Community Trigger.

FACING THE FUTURE – UPDATE

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has been acquainted with the status of the ideas identified through Facing the Future. Financial information on the ideas will be presented to Members in February/March 2015.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

A study template has been agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel for Economic Well-Being, which identifies the terms of reference for the Panel's Select Committee on Project Management. Specifically, the Committee will:

- review the Council's project management arrangements in the wake of the issues highlighted by the One Leisure St Ives and Huntingdon Multi-Storey Car Park Close Down Report;
- test the robustness of the Council's new project management toolkit and governance arrangements;
- consider how lessons learned have been addressed, and
- determine whether any further improvements are required.

At the meeting in December, the Panel received a demonstration of the Council's programme and project management toolkit and various aspects of it have been examined. Members received assurances that the tools contained safeguards to prevent unauthorised amendments to projects. These are now augmented by project boards and the Programme and Project Governance Group will oversee projects at different levels. The toolkit creates an audit trail, which will enable those who are responsible for decisions to be held to account. The Panel commented on the need for the toolkit to be flexible and to place emphasis on the financial implication of projects and

issues that prevent them being completed as planned. The Panel also welcomed the appointment of Laura Lock as Programme and Project Manager.

The Select Committee will refer to the information presented during the demonstration. It will also make recommendations on Members' involvement in project management.

ZERO BASED BUDGETING

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being) has received a detailed description of the Zero Based Budgeting (ZBB) process in preparation for setting the 2015/16 Budget and the Medium Term Financial Strategy. Through ZBB every service area will eventually be examined. To date, savings of £0.916m have been identified; however, this reduces to £0.196m when corporate costs are taken into account. The Panel has examined what these costs include and how they appear in the financial information they receive. Members also have discussed the discrepancy between the Establishment List maintained by Human Resources and the Salaries Budget. This is the result of posts being held vacant. Measures will be put in place to ensure the two are "in balance" in the future.

The Panel has discussed in detail the ZBB process in respect of One Leisure. A strategy has been developed for the service to breakeven next year and a target has been set to achieve a return of 5% by 2016. An important part of this is creating sound turnover and expenditure predictions. Members have been assured that there will be no loss of leisure service provision. On that subject, it is generally agreed that the Council cannot continue to do everything it always has and the way it does things also will change.

The Cabinet has decided to expedite the ZBB process. It will now be completed

two years earlier than originally planned. Additional temporary external resources will be required to achieve this. The Executive Councillor for Resources is confident that this will be cost effective as it will bring forward the efficiencies.

The Executive Councillor for Resources also has expressed the view that the ZBB process is robust, that Executive Councillors have been engaged and that it will help them better to understand their services. Overview and Scrutiny will then be in a position to scrutinise them on their services' operational and financial performance. The outputs and outcomes that will result from the ZBB process will be reported to the other Overview and Scrutiny Panels as appropriate.

The Panel has noted that some services have put considerable work into their Star Chamber appearances and have achieved savings that are reflected in budgets that will be put forward for adoption. Other services have been asked to carry out additional work and re-submit their budget proposals.

The main issue that has arisen during the process is the inability of the Council's information systems to produce management information. An action has been identified to address this.

In conclusion, Members are content with the ZBB process. They have noted the variance in the Establishment from the Salaries Budget and are satisfied that it has been recognised. The Employment Panel will monitor this going forward. The Panel looks forward to scrutinising Executive Councillors on ZBB shortly and will focus on the weaker areas.

The Panel supports the revised timetable and has requested

information on whether the decision to recruit additional temporary external resources achieves value for money.

The Cabinet has discussed progress of the (ZBB) programme, in which they have had considerable involvement. They are satisfied that the process has been robust and that much has been learned. There has been a mixed response from services, though this may partly be attributed to a lack of understanding about how the Council defines ZBB and what practical steps are required for the star chamber. The Corporate Management Team has been charged with robustly enforcing the Cabinet's view that cultural change should be adopted along ZBB principles.

The Cabinet has discussed the approaches of individual services to ZBB and their performance in the star chamber. All services have to do more work on their individual budgets. A draft budget is being prepared by Officers in conjunction with their respective Executive Councillors. There will be scope for further debate by Members and changes to be made before the budget is finalised in February.

Of the improvements that need to be made to the process, the most important is to develop the Council's systems to provide the necessary financial / management information to enable Officers to manage and monitor their services. In particular, the new systems will resolve what service budgets include and what are deemed to be corporate costs. In addition, the information will be independently verified. The Cabinet has asked for a plan for action that will be taken leading to the introduction of the new systems.

The Cabinet has received the comments of Members of the Economic Well-being Overview and Scrutiny Panel, who have welcomed the Cabinet's approach to working with them. The Panel has invited

all Executive Councillors to its meetings in the New Year to discuss their budget proposals and will undertake further scrutiny work on their performance throughout the year.

DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT APPLICATIONS

At its December meeting, the Development Management Panel considered five applications of which four were approved and one was delegated to the Head of Development to determine after further consultation.

UPDATE IN RELATION TO CHANGES TO THE DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT SERVICE

The Development Management Panel has updated the scheme of delegation to reflect changes to the establishment and has extended the existing powers to sign-off decisions. The Panel will receive further reports in the New Year on the scope of delegations on Development Management.