

Decision Digest

Edition 152

Monthly summary of the decisions taken at meetings of the Council, Cabinet, Overview & Scrutiny and other Panels for the period 1st January to 30th January 2015.

2015/16 DRAFT BUDGET AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (MTFS)

The Economic Well-Being Scrutiny Panel has welcomed the new format of the report and has supported the Executive Councillor for Resources' expression of gratitude for the work of the Resources section in preparing the Budget. Members have further recognised the significant milestone that producing a Budget surplus represents.

The Panel has questioned the Executive Councillors about the saving they have made, what their plans are for the future and what impact any changes will have on the public. They have noted:

- the portfolio for Customer Services has identified in the order of £500k in savings. This is in addition to £2m in savings in recent years. Further areas of potential savings are being investigated;
- the portfolio for Resources has identified approximately £450k in savings. This portfolio will make significant investments in the next few years to generate income, and
- the Executive Leader has referred to his intention to pursue an overall strategy of investment in assets to produce income coupled with a more commercial approach to appropriate services. He will challenge Officers to achieve savings targets earlier than indicated in the report and has stressed that, where changes are to be made to services, Overview

and Scrutiny will be involved in assessing their impact on residents.

The aim is for the Council to produce a surplus each year and capital investments are a key way that this will be achieved. Generally, it is expected that for every £13m invested, £1m of income will be produced. The Council could potentially borrow £60m and it is planned to introduce a framework to enable investment decisions to be made. The Economic Scrutiny Panel has supported this approach and has asked for regular monitoring reports on progress.

The Panel has been made aware that future government grant is likely to change if there is a change in Government. There is a possibility that the eligibility criteria will change from a performance basis to a needs basis. The Panel has noted that the District would still qualify for grant if the latter is introduced. The other way that income from the Government might vary is through changes to the New Homes Bonus. However, it is likely that if it is removed, this income will be received in another form.

All areas of the Council will be defining their service standards and levels over the next year. The Panel is of the view that the impact of any changes should be assessed. The comment has been made that benchmarking should take place; in which case, some areas could potentially experience an increase in their standards.

On the question of Council Tax, the Panel has noted that increasing it over the period of the MTFS would not achieve the order of savings the Council will have to make. Members have supported the alternative approach of investing in capital assets to produce a surplus so that the Council is self-reliant.

In summary, the Scrutiny Panel has:

- noted the information presented in the report by the Head of Resources;
- supported the general intention not to use reserves. Given future uncertainty, it is recommended that the position should be reviewed next year but that reserves should not fall below £3m. Their use should be justified by the value they achieve for the Council;
- endorsed the proposal to freeze Council Tax for 2015/16 and the intention to freeze Council Tax over the period of the MTFS, and
- recommended that the work to be undertaken over the coming year to define service levels and standards is subject to an assessment of the impact of any changes on the public

The Cabinet were advised of the conclusions of the Economic Well-Being Scrutiny Panel, as outlined above, and the Executive Councillor for Resources also reiterated the views expressed at their meeting. Members welcomed the new format of the budget and reporting style. An addendum to the report was circulated which contained details of a further proposed £650k reductions in the overall budget, largely attributable to the deletion of vacant posts and reduction in management costs. The Cabinet supported the general intention not to use reserves, together with the proposal to freeze Council Tax for 2015/16 and freeze over the period of the MTFS. Given the future uncertainty with Central Government funding, the Cabinet

endorsed the views of the Scrutiny Panel that reserves should not fall below £3m. The final draft budget will be presented to their next meeting prior to Council in February.

THE OCTAGON, STATION ROAD, ST IVES

Following receipt of a petition at the previous meeting the Social Well-Being Scrutiny Panel has received information on the options for the future use of the Octagon, Station Road, St Ives and on the issues raised by the petition relating to the building.

The Council is in the process of reviewing its estate and three proposals have been received relating to the Octagon but no decision has yet been made. The decision will be based on the business cases submitted. The Council will have to be satisfied that the successful bidder's proposal is financially viable.

A comment has been made that the building should be brought back into use but the Council should decide what is in the interests of the whole District. St Ives already has a number of community facilities. It has been confirmed that the Council is not seeking to dispose of the freehold of the building. The potential areas for negotiation and terms for an agreement have been noted.

Following consideration of a report, the Panel is satisfied with the process that the Council had established to determine the use to which the Octagon will be put in the future. Members have stressed that they support bringing the building into public use and the principle that it should provide good value for the tax-payer. In the circumstances, it has been that no further action needs to be taken in respect of the petition relating to the Octagon.

THE HEALTH ECONOMY

The Social Well-Being Scrutiny Panel has reviewed the potential priorities and scope of its work on the local health economy. The deliberations will inform the forthcoming Away Day.

The aim is to make Overview and Scrutiny more effective by broadening the debate on health matters. A primary concern is the way health related services respond to the growth in the population. Various themes have been put forward for investigation. The Panel discussed extensively community engagement and the role of Members. Financial austerity is expected to continue with local government having to accept a significant proportion of the cuts. The District Council will have to cease some of its activities and it is hoped to establish a new relationship with residents to enable them to identify what is important for them and how they will respond. Councillors will be integral to this process, which will promote community resilience. In order to encourage public participation, it will be necessary to make the process relevant to residents. The Communications section is in the process of carrying out research on the best ways of engaging communities. Comment has been made that the District Council's activities should form part of a single conversation involving all levels of local government.

Having considered other suggestions for inclusion in the Panel's work programme, it has been agreed to receive reports:

- on the current state of Neighbourhood Planning within the Council and how it was likely to develop and how it might promote community resilience;
- on community engagement, including examples of good practice;

- on the impact of Welfare Reforms, including fuel poverty and how it was defined;
- reviewing the Council's Equalities Impact Assessment arrangements, and
- on the impact of growth on GP surgeries, school places and hospital capacity.

The Panel has agreed to continue the discussion on the future work programme at the Away Day.

WORK PROGRAMME

The Social Well-Being Scrutiny Panel has agreed to undertake some preparatory work in advance of the visit by representatives of Hinchingsbrooke Hospital in April. With this in mind, Members have requested copies of the Care Quality Commission report following its recent inspection of the Hospital.

DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT APPLICATIONS

At its January meeting, the Development Management Panel considered five applications, all which were approved.

AMENDMENTS TO THE CONSTITUTION IN RELATION TO THE PLANNING SCHEME OF DELEGATION

The Development Management Panel has approved an amendment to the Constitution to delegate to Officers the determination of proposals for 10 or fewer dwellings in the smaller settlements where there is a conflict between national and local affordable housing policy.

DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT PROGRESS REPORT: 1ST JULY TO 30TH SEPTEMBER 2014

The Development Management Panel has received information on the performance of the Development Manager section and on measures being introduced to improve performance.

PUBLIC SPACE PROTECTION ORDER

Following a request from Cambridgeshire Constabulary and to address an increasing number of complaints about individual's street drinking and acting in an anti-social manner in the area, the Licensing & Protection Panel has approved a Public Space Protection Order for Huntingdon Town Centre for a three year period.

The Order will enable Police Officers, Police Community Support Officers and designated Local Authority Officers to have more powers to deal with the issues arising where individuals are in possession of open containers of alcohol and acting in a manner that causes alarm, harassment or distress.

Breaches of the Order will be a criminal offence and enforcement officers will be able to choose to issue a fixed penalty notice (FPN) or proceed with prosecution. Any income obtained, will be awarded to Huntingdonshire District Council.

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