
Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being)

Report of the meeting held on 11th June 2009

Matters for Information

1. CUSTOMER SERVICES MONITORING

The Panel has received the Customer Service Quarterly Performance Report for the period January to March 2009, which outlines the levels of performance and standards achieved by the Service. The Panel has been informed of the effect of economic trends on the Customer Service Centres and the Call Centre in terms of an increase in enquiries particularly for benefits and housing services. Despite this customer satisfaction levels have remained extremely high, though achieving this has put pressure on employees. In recognising that this is not sustainable in the long term, additional resources received from the Government for this purpose will be deployed to meet the additional demand.

In reviewing progress against the Customer Services Service Plan, Members have queried how it is intended to address an expected overspend. In response it has been reported that virement has been used as a short term measure but that further consideration will have to be given to how the Service's budget will be managed in the next financial year.

The Panel has discussed complaints handled by the Call Centre on behalf of service departments. Whilst they recognise that given the level of activity involved, especially by the Operations Division, the level of complaints received should be regarded as low, Members have endorsed the practice of close liaison between Customer Services staff and Operations to discuss areas where further improvements might be made.

An update also has been received on the Customer Service Centres in St Ives and St Neots. A launch is planned for a modernised office in St Ives from which an extended range of services will be available. In noting plans for customer service provision in St Neots, the Panel has been acquainted with proposed staffing arrangements and the measures taken to support the museum until November 2010 following the removal of the District Council office from its premises.

2. PERFORMANCE MONITORING

In conjunction with the Panels for Social and Environmental Well-Being, the Panel for Economic Well-Being has reviewed the Council's performance against the targets within the Corporate Plan "Growing Success" that fall within its remit.

In focussing on the targets that had not been achieved, the Panel has noted that income from hospitality at leisure centres continues to decline as bar trade suffers. The Corporate Plan Working Group has suggested that as Huntingdon Leisure Centre has seen an increase of 15% in this area, similar techniques to those used at Huntingdon should be implemented at the other leisure centres.

The percentage of bids which have successfully attracted external funding has significantly exceeded the target of 60% yet the target for producing an External Funding Strategy has only been partially met owing to redeployment of officer resources to work on a major funding bid. Although Members have discussed amending the target on obtaining external funding, in order effectively to monitor performance in this respect, it is considered to be preferable to retain the original target.

The Panel has been informed that in future the report will provide links to the Local Area Agreement indicators.

3. SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES ACT

The Panel has been acquainted with the background to the introduction of legislation under which the Council will be empowered to pursue local initiatives aimed at promoting the sustainability of local communities. At the invitation of the Secretary of State, proposals may be made under the Sustainable Communities Act but must be the subject of consultation with a representative sample of the local population and with affected agencies.

Having noted the process for the upward transmission of suggestions to the Government and the criteria against which proposals will be assessed, Members have been informed that only a limited number of Councils appear to be taking the opportunity to make suggestions following the first request for proposals by the Secretary of State. In that context and given the need for clarification of the way the process will operate, the Panel has concurred with a suggestion that procedures should be developed to generate and formulate ideas and proposals in conjunction with the implementation of neighbourhood panels.

4. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BUDGET WORKING GROUP

The Panel has received the final report of the Budget Working Group. Having commended the Group for the extent and depth of their work, Members have requested the Cabinet to take into account the report during the budget process.

5. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY – REMIT AND STUDIES

The Panel has reviewed its future programme of studies. Following completion of the Democratic Structure Review, out of which the new arrangements for overview and scrutiny had been devised, revised remits have been allocated to each of the panels. Members have been acquainted with precise details of their remit as they relate to the internal operation of the Council and they have been advised of the scope of extra duties that they have been allotted through scrutinising the Huntingdonshire Strategic Partnership and the Countywide Sustainable Community Strategy. With this information in mind, the Panel has noted that all the ongoing studies under its remit have reached or are nearing completion. As a result Members have decided to undertake an exercise outside of the meeting to identify potential study areas. In the meantime they have decided to initiate a study on the economic and other impacts of tourism on Huntingdonshire and the wider area.

Other Matters of Interest

5. FORWARD PLAN

The Panel has been acquainted with details of the Forward Plan of forthcoming decisions prepared by the Leader of the Council.

6. SCRUTINY

The Panel has considered the latest edition of the Decision Digest and discussed matters contained therein.

J D Ablewhite
Chairman