

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

28 NOVEMBER 2011 - 2.30PM



PRESENT: Councillor P Jolley (Chairman), Councillor J R Chambers (Vice-Chairman), Councillor M I Archer, Councillor G G R Booth, Councillor Mrs V M Bucknor, Councillor M Cornwell, Councillor J R Farmer, Councillor A Miscandlon, Councillor K G Peachey, Councillor R E Scrimshaw, Councillor D Stebbing.

A Pain - Corporate Director, D Horn - Head of Housing and Community Support, P Hughes - Head of Parks and Leisure, R Cassidy - Corporate Director, R Bridge - Corporate Director and Chief Finance Officer, I Hunt - Chief Solicitor and Deputy Monitoring Officer, C Gibbon - Economic Development Manager, V Whittingstall - Economic Development Officer Tourism and Culture, C Pilson - Head of Policy and Communications, S Smith - Member Services Officer

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Councillor Owen - Portfolio Holder Growth, Transport and March Affairs, Councillor Garratt - Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Whittlesey Affairs, Councillor Clark - Portfolio Holder for Quality Organisation, Councillor Butcher - Portfolio Holder for Rural Affairs and Wellbeing, Councillor Seaton - Portfolio Holder for Economy, C Smith - Managing Director of Roddons Housing Association,

OS19/11 PREVIOUS MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of 17 October 2011 were confirmed and signed, subject to the following amendments:

Minute number OS16/11

(Councillor Archer declared his personal interest in this item by virtue of being a member of Manea Parish Council)

(Councillor Cornwell declared his personal interest in this item by virtue of being a member of the Leisure Centre)

(Councillor Jolley declared his personal interest in this item by virtue of being Chairman of the Parkfield Sports Club and a member of Manea Parish Council)

*** FOR INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL ***

OS20/11 UPDATE FROM RODDONS HOUSING ASSOCIATION

Christopher Smith, Managing Director of Roddons Housing Association presented an update from Roddons Housing Association. Christopher Smith thanked members for the invitation and opportunity to update the Overview and Scrutiny Panel regarding the promises made by Roddons Housing Association within the five year period from 2007, following the transfer of housing stock from Fenland District Council to Roddons Housing Association. Members were informed that:

- the focus has been on new property development for 500 new affordable homes, recognising the future challenges and risks and the financial position;

- the delivery of home improvements has met the decent homes standards and property improvement work is still in progress;
- the wider environment is being improved by the provision of parking, fencing and off street parking;
- Sheltered Housing schemes have been reviewed resulting in the closure and redevelopment of Napier Court. North Witchford Lodge has been refurbished and the GP Surgery relocated. The next stage is to review Salem Court, Chatteris;
- service improvements focus on vulnerable adults, decorating services, assisted gardening scheme, a dedicated Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Coordinator and providing tenants with money and debt advice;
- a number of other services receive funding, Community House, NWES and the British Red Cross. C Smith agreed to provide a list of funded organisations for information;
- performance information shows two amber ratings in relation to disabled adaptations with an average waiting time of 8 weeks, the promise being 4 weeks, provision of additional resources are being considered to address the delay in waiting time;
- residents have been moved from The Dale following the decision to close the home in September 2010, there is one resident remaining at the present time;
- an annual budget of £30k is provided for Tenant Involvement providing an Independent Resident Scrutiny Panel with a training programme. Two areas are being scrutinised, lettings and disabled adaptations with a further plan to scrutinise neighbourhood estate services. This system has led to an award of national accreditation from the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) as a good practice landlord;
- due to the current economic environment the plan to deliver 500 new housing units has been extended from 5 to 8 years;
- Roddons is the best in the Circle Group for collecting rent arrears, with performance at an outstanding 1.8%;
- performance for reletting properties is 15.5 days, making Roddons the second best performing in the Circle Group;
- the Repairs Service is the highest performing in the Circle Group at 96.6%;
- Roddons is recognised as one of the largest employers in Fenland, investing in the National Apprenticeship Scheme;
- a Planning Application has been submitted to redevelop new schemes, for example The Dale;
- there is a strict financial plan for a 15% reduction, being supported by the Circle Funding Group, with an annual turnover of £322million per year;
- repairs are currently funded by loans at a successful rate of interest of 4.9%, currently outperforming budget assumptions, with any surplus funding being reinvested in the housing stock;

- the financial accounts can be viewed on the website www.circle.org.uk;
- the promises period is approaching its end and this period has defined Roddons identity since 2007. Roddons are beginning to reshape their services, they have met with residents to seek their views regarding future priorities;
- the Council as a lead partner will be subject to the consultation taking place with Members and officers over the next 12 month period;
- changes regarding fixed term tenancies and the new Tenancy Strategy will present future challenges due to proposed unprecedented changes over the last 12 months;
- pilots for a tenants cashback scheme will allow tenants to undertake their own repairs or to employ a repairer which could present new challenges;
- the reform of Welfare Benefits will bring in changes for under occupied properties ie a resident occupying a 3 bed property with 1 occupier will be penalised from 2013 with the reduction of Housing Benefit and 38% of the Roddons housing stock is underoccupied. A consolidation of benefits with money being paid direct to residents for rent may cause other problems which could affect the financial security of Roddons;
- Roddons is seeking to withdraw its Rent Collection Services from April 2012, reducing issues of Health and Safety for lone working staff in isolated rural locations. The cost to provide this service is high and Roddons have spoken to each individual customer, revealing that 89% of tenants have a current bank account that could be used for alternative methods of payment, and free up two members of staff who will be redeployed to administer the Welfare Benefits Services, providing a substitution strategy.

Members asked questions, made comments and received responses as follows:

- Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked how many of the milestone promises are left to be completed as part of Roddons five year plan. It was confirmed that some measure of work continues and promises will be delivered at the end of the 5 year promise period;
- C Smith agreed to provide telephone and email details for the dedicated Anti-Social Behaviour Co-ordinator;
- Councillor Mrs Bucknor made reference to the new laws regarding the Welfare and Benefit Reform and how this impacts on average households and residents on the minimum wage. C Smith confirmed that there is a commitment from Circle Anglia to provide residents with direct assistance and help from Fenland District Council for those receiving income based housing benefits. 66% of residents receive full or partial Housing Benefit, there will be challenges attributable to the changes in law;
- there are issues regarding under occupation of properties, where residents remain in properties where a spouse has died, children have moved out or are very elderly. This will be a challenge and an approach has been drawn up to tackle under occupation. Legislation will be introduced in April 2013 where residents living in under occupied properties will have their housing benefits penalised. Roddons are operating an easy move scheme for residents to move to a smaller property, however, Roddons have no mandatory powers to move residents and there are not many smaller properties to move them to. Residents in this position have been spoken to and would rather pay a penalty than move from their homes;

- Councillor Archer asked how fuel savings are being addressed regarding new properties in line with Sustainable Communities as a major part of residents outgoings are fuel related. Circle Anglia have made it a key priority on new build properties to build in fuel efficiency, including photovoltaic panels have been fitted as standard in Chatteris. Residents are being encouraged and educated to make a smarter use of energy. Councillor Archer asked if a rural consortia had been considered to buy in oil and it was confirmed that each case will be considered on its own merits to undertake own heating projects;
- Councillor Peachey asked if Roddons operated an apprenticeship scheme and provided employment at the end of the apprenticeships. C Smith confirmed that Roddons apprenticeships are a fully accredited programme for a 12 month term. As a result of the apprenticeship scheme 12 people have achieved permanent employment, with 1 person employed through the future jobs fund, however apprentices have to compete for vacancies. Since the period of housing transfer six building apprentices have been employed by Roddons;
- Councillor Jolley asked how Roddons intended to correct the waiting time for disabled adaptations from 8 weeks to the target of 4 weeks. C Smith confirmed that Roddons introduced an in depth process for occupational therapy assessments where all requests received a visit at home, providing a holistic approach as well as an assessment for adaptations. This combined with an increase in volume during the last 12 months, recording 30% of new residents needing adaptations and Roddons is considering doubling up occupational therapists, recognising that it is difficult to add new members of staff and confirmed that if the waiting time does not improve plans will be put in place to resource the service more effectively;
- Councillor Booth commented on government changes to the cost of photovoltaic installation and asked if it would prove financially viable if unit costs were reduced. C Smith confirmed that a new deal and reduction of photovoltaic systems made the programme unviable and has left the scheme with no provider;
- Councillor Booth commented on service quality of 89% and work carried out by Roddons and that it is more common to receive complaints regarding work carried out and good work is not always publicised. C Smith confirmed that 16,000 repairs are carried out per year, and heating and gas repairs are audited by an independent company plus Roddons own inspection group;
- Councillor Farmer asked what scope there is for Roddons to develop a scheme to allow tenants to supplement their income by taking in lodgers. C Smith confirmed that such a scheme requires the landlords permission and each case would need to be assessed on its own merits, to make sure that it does not become subletting. Roddons is currently talking to residents to encourage them to downsize if properties are available, advising them on scale of penalty and how it will affect them in the future;
- Councillor Farmer suggested that as Roddons were not averse to the development of a scheme for residents/lodgers would it be the intention of Roddons to develop an information pack to say residents have the option or may prefer to let a room in their property instead of moving. C Smith agreed that this is a constructive option and a positive suggestion and agreed to consider the scheme as a possibility;
- Councillor Booth pointed out that if residents were in receipt of housing benefit and made the decision to take in a lodger, who may be working, this could be a penalty as they could then become liable for the rent and this should be taken into consideration;

- Councillor Chambers asked if the rise of 6.1% in rent would take Roddons up to the 80% of the private rent sector. C Smith confirmed that 6.1% is the government level, with 80% levels in London and money raised has been used to fund 268 new units of accommodation.

Councillor Jolley thanked C Smith for his presentation and it was agreed that he would provide members with an electronic copy of the presentation. C Smith also provided members with a copy of the Roddons Annual Report.

(Councillor Booth declared a personal interest in this item, by virtue of being Chairman of Parson Drove Parish Council and by relationship to an exception site and as Vice-Chairman of Action for Youth receiving funding from Roddons)

(Councillor Scrimshaw declared a personal and prejudicial interest in this item, by virtue of his wife being employed by Roddons Housing Association, and retired from the meeting for the duration of the discussion and voting thereon)

OS21/11 LEISURE SERVICES FEES AND CHARGES 2012

Councillor Clark presented the proposals regarding Leisure Service Fees and Charges for 2012. Members were informed, asked questions, made comments and received responses as follows:

- Councillor Clark advised members that the setting of Leisure Fees and Charges is not an easy process, taking into consideration where the provisions within the market will stand an increase. It was decided not to increase the Ambassador rates due to renewal in January and the traditional increase. Despite the economic downturn Leisure Services are performing well and Councillor Clark requested that members of the Panel approve the proposed fees and charges contained in Appendix C;
- Councillor Garratt endorsed the proposed fees and charges, stating that Leisure Centre's are doing very well and praised both staff and users of the facilities. Major charges will remain the same and increases are proposed only where the market will stand the increase;
- Councillor Peachey asked what the implication would be on Leisure Services and the Council if there were no increase in charges. Councillor Clark confirmed that each individual service had been considered and services that were increased were those that could withstand a market increase. Councillor Clark confirmed that it costs more and more to run leisure services and consideration has been given to what can be charged to mitigate the loss of providing the services. The cost to provide leisure services in 2009/10 was £1,160million and work is ongoing to advance towards a breakeven status;
- Councillor Booth commented on the potential to incur loss and services could be used less if fees and charges are increased. Councillor Clark confirmed that most income comes from the Ambassador Membership and it was decided that increasing this would have a major impact on usage, hence Ambassador Membership was not increased;
- Councillor Archer commented that swimming is a major activity and he would like to see no increase in any of the fees to ensure continued attendance;
- Councillor Cornwell stated that the Council must take note of market forces, the difference between the proposed costs and private providers are marginal, price levels are close to outside providers and he supported the view of no increase in fees and charges. He stressed his confusion that on the one hand health and wellbeing is a big issue, swimming and physical activity being key to addressing this, versus the proposal to increase charges

and this will not encourage use of the facilities and he did not believe that this was the way forward;

- Councillor Mrs Bucknor supported the view of no increase and stated that whether 5 or 50 people used the swimming pool the cost to run the pool would still include heating and a lifeguard. She expressed the opinion that pre May 2011 the facilities were used by the Over 60's for free swimming when this ended this resulted in less people using the pool. She requested that it was just as important to look at health and wellbeing issues as well as financial benefits suggesting that figures for attendance in January in comparison to current usage were lower. Councillor Clark commented that the figures quoted did not support the argument presented, quoting an increase in income over the current year of £3,700;
- Councillor Mrs Bucknor commented that the variation in charges between the Council and the private sector are minimal, with the private sector making a profit and asked if this had been considered when looking at costs. Councillor Clark stated that it is costly to provide wetside facilities which are not provided by the private sector, it is not a statutory provision of the Council and a balance is required and he feels that this is a balanced approach;
- Councillor Peachey commented on the complexities of the pricing plan and asked if prices had been compared with other facilities or if the Council was in a monopoly position. It was confirmed that Appendix A illustrates what other facilities provide and their pricing plan and the Council is in line with these prices. The only other facilities that provide swimming facilities are the Empress at Chatteris and the Oliver Cromwell at March, other providers within the private sector do not as it is too expensive;
- Councillor Scrimshaw commented on increased prices leading to a decrease in revenue and asked why there are not more concessions in the evenings. Councillor Clark stated that increases are in line with what market forces can stand and commented that concessions for evenings are not required as they are well booked;
- Councillor Miscandlon commented on a 6.7% increase in GP Referrals and asked if the facilities are adequate for this purpose and if this can be justified. Councillor Clark commented that GP referrals are being administered and Councillor Garratt stated that if a referral is made by a GP a discussion is held with a member of the Leisure Centre staff and the outcome is dependent upon the referral and what activity is recommended. Each member of staff can give training to individual referrals and can monitor use and length of time taken to use the gym equipment;
- Councillor Booth questioned the use of the Mobile Gym, is it being used 100%, the provision of concessionary prices for rural areas and commented that it is fairly expensive to provide these facilities. Councillor Clark confirmed that the Mobile Gym is not used to its full capacity and the service is currently being reviewed;
- Councillor Archer stated that he believes that increased fees and charges targets those that are worse off financially and it is these people who will be affected by the proposed increases. Councillor Clark stated that the increases are minimal in his opinion, all services have to be paid for and funding has to be found and this is a balanced level of charging;
- Councillor Farmer commented on the cost of Swimming Pool Membership for an Annual Adult Swim being £252.80 and asked what scope there was for this to be a rounded up;

Councillor Jolley summarised that the Council does want to provide leisure facilities, whilst having to balance the books and felt that there was a general consensus from members that fees and charges should not be increased at all.

Councillor Booth stated that in light of economic pressures and the continued benefits to the residents the fees and charges should remain the same.

Councillor Archer proposed that Leisure Fees and Charges should not be increased for a period of 12 months and should remain as they are. This proposal was seconded by Councillor Scrimshaw.

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel recommended to Cabinet that Leisure Services Fees and Charges should remain the same with no increases included.

(Councillor Cornwell declared a personal interest in this application, by virtue of being an Ambassador membership holder at the Leisure Centre)

OS22/11 TOURISM STRATEGY AND DEVELOPMENT DRAFT REPORT FOR DISCUSSION

Councillor Jolley, the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel presented his findings following a review of the Council's current arrangements for supporting Tourism in the District, carried out at the request of the Leader of the Council.

Members were informed, asked questions, made comments and received responses as follows:

- the draft discussion report makes a number of recommendations to be presented to Cabinet on 15 December 2011;
- Councillor Cornwell commented that the report reflects the debate from a previous meeting and stated that the Council should be more proactive in encouraging tourism, there is a lack of infrastructure and this should be included, provide more information for hotels and coach parties and publicity for caravan sites and clubs is missing;
- Councillor Jolley commented that the framework for tourism should be included in the Core Strategy, the draft for this currently being in progress to support a more flexible approach to planning;
- Councillor Peachey commented on the promotion of attractions and events and this should not be overlooked and 'brown signs' are a crucial part of this process;
- Councillor Farmer stated that 'brown signs' are controlled by Cambridgeshire County Council and he was shocked that Stonea Camp as a local roman site did not have a 'brown sign';
- Councillor Mrs Bucknor made reference to point 3.8.2 in the report and asked how the Council plans to balance its officer resources and commitments to support the Tourism Group and Tourism Partnership in the future and asked if there would be just one rationalised group to push forward. Councillor Jolley confirmed that the Council will take the lead role with other Groups and Partnerships feeding into the process. The Leader has agreed that a group will be set up to focus on Tourism, set up by the Leader and Cabinet, ensuring that membership provides the expertise to push Tourism forward in Fenland, supported by a Cabinet post and officer support;
- Councillor Booth commented on 3.2 in the report and commented that this is an area of continual development and asked that previous discussions relating to Tourist Information Centres (TICs) and the Contact Centre be included in the report to note the work of the TIC, Contact Centre and the One Stop Shops (OSS) to provide a contact point for people coming into the district;
- Councillor Scrimshaw asked if knowledge of Tourism issues was being spread widely

among customer service staff. A Pain confirmed that training and development is being carried out as work develops, it has started at Wisbech OSS and will be rolled out across other One Stop shops as a first point of contact. The Wisbech TIC will focus on attractions in Fenland with information on other areas available;

- A Pain reported that proposed changes to the website in relation to Tourism were discussed at the last meeting of the Tourism Strategy and Development Sub-Committee and this is ready to 'go live' as soon as it is agreed by members, it is a continual work in progress;
- Councillor Farmer raised the point that there is no mention of the planning process and projects in the recommendations of the report and agreed that the Core Strategy is improving but projects and ideas should not be biased against providing tourist facilities outside the district Development Area Boundary (DAB). Councillor Archer agreed that such facilities could be considered in appropriate places;
- the list of recommendations will include greater consideration of Tourism in the District Wide Plan;
- Councillor Stebbing asked what membership of the proposed over-arching Tourism Board would be when it is set up as it is important that the links remain with those people on the Tourism and Culture Partnership and the Tourism Development Group to ensure knowledge is not lost. Councillor Jolley confirmed that a lead group is required to take forward Tourism in Fenland and positions on the committee could be advertised;
- Councillor Peachey asked if this would be the committee currently led by Councillor Farmer. Councillor Jolley stated that this would be a completely new committee.

Members agreed that:

1. **the list of recommendations in the report would be amended to reflect the discussion of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel;**
2. **Cabinet will decide the structure for the future committee for tourism;**
3. **A Pain will circulate a revised draft of the report with amended recommendations prior to submission to Cabinet.**

OS23/11 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered the Future Work Programme 2011/2012 for the Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

Members agreed the following items would be incorporated into the Work Programme:

5 December 2011

Call In of Cabinet decision in respect of LPSA Reward Grant Update

16 January 2011

Multi Agency Referral Unit (MARU) presentation by Chief Inspector of Cambridgeshire Constabulary

An Additional meeting to be scheduled for March 2012

To discuss unscheduled items:

Community Transport Provision within Fenland

Neighbourhood Boards and Forums

Highways - Area Joint Committee

Following a request from Councillor Booth the Chairman and members of the Panel agreed that some future meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel would be held later in the day to allow members to attend.

OS24/11 LITIGATION DECISION

Members received information regarding an urgent decision taken by Portfolio Holders with the consent of the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

This item of the meeting was introduced by Councillor Chambers, Vice-Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

Councillor Booth asked officers to explain why this item was being considered as Confidential. I Hunt, Chief Solicitor explained the reason for the confidentiality, how the situation had progressed and the options for future management of a property.

Councillor Chambers reminded members of the Confidentiality by reading out the wording of the Exempt Paragraph and advised members that they were being asked to note the urgent action that had been taken but not to scrutinise the decision.

I Hunt outlined the action that had been taken, the urgency of the timescale involved to make the decision and the emergency provisions followed to achieve the decision taken.

Members asked a number of questions in relation to the process and were reminded that it was the role of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel to consider and to note the urgent decision that had been made by the Portfolio Holder.

Councillor Booth raised concerns that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel would not be aware of the item being presented at a future meeting of Cabinet if considered as a confidential item. He was advised that if a further report were to be presented to Cabinet the Overview and Scrutiny Panel could apply the Call-in procedure.

Councillor Stebbing stated that he supported the action taken by the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel and proposed that the use of the urgency provisions and decision taken by the Chairman be noted and agreed. The proposal was seconded by Councillor Mrs Bucknor and agreed by the unanimous vote of the members of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

(Councillor Jolley declared a predetermined view on this item by virtue of comments he had expressed as Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel, and retired from the meeting for the duration of the discussion and voting thereon. As a consequence of this Councillor Chambers chaired this item)

(Members resolved to exclude the public from the meeting for this item of business on the grounds that it involved the disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972)