

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL



16 JANUARY 2012 - 2.30PM

PRESENT: Councillor P Jolley(Chairman), Councillor J R Chambers(Vice-Chairman), Councillors Archer, Mrs Bucknor, Cornwell, Miscandlon, Peachey, Scrimshaw and Stebbing.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Booth and Farmer

OTHER MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Butcher, Clark, Cotterell, Mrs French, Garratt, Melton, Murphy, Oliver and Seaton.

OBSERVERS: Councillor Sutton

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Jane Bailey, Rob Bridge, Richard Cassidy, Phil Hughes, Ian Hunt, Paul Medd, Alan Pain, Carol Pilson and Mark Saunders

OS26/11 PREVIOUS MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings which took place on 28 November 2011 and 5 December 2011 were confirmed and signed.

*** FOR INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL ***

OS27/11 CALL IN OF CABINET DECISION IN RESPECT OF AGENDA ITEM 9 ON 15 DECEMBER 2011 - LEISURE SERVICES FEES AND CHARGES

Members discussed the call in of the Cabinet decision from 15 December 2011 - in respect of Agenda Item 9 - Leisure Fees and Charges.

Councillor Archer stated that the reason that this decision was called in was that there was a strong steer from the Overview and Scrutiny Panel that the Leisure Fees and Charges should remain the same. He asked why Cabinet had not acted on their recommendation;

Councillor Clark stated that Fenland District Council was one of the top ten worst hit Councils when the budget cuts were announced, the Council is under pressure. Considerable savings have had to be made in the past few years and further savings are forecast for the future. There will never be a right time to increase prices, but there has not been a blanket increase, areas were targeted and increases are small. Many other Councils are moving their leisure facilities over to the private sector, but FDC subsidise their leisure centres and are under pressure to reduce the running costs so that they can continue to do so. A small number of Fenland residents use the leisure facilities and so other residents paying Council Tax are paying to subsidise a service that they do not use;

Councillor Archer asked if there was any further information that could have been presented at the time to give members a better idea of the bigger picture. Councillor Clark agreed that more information could have been made available to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel and in future they will endeavour to do this;

Councillor Archer questioned if the right areas had been targeted to increase. Would more income have been generated by increasing the annual membership? Councillor Clark stated that the

Ambassador Membership is collected by direct debit; a change in the amount to be collected would have required customers to contact their banks. This may have resulted in a loss of renewals. The prices have increased in areas that cost the Council the most money to run, swimming and wet side. The cost of pitch hire has been increased as it was anticipated that the cost would be shared amongst a team. The areas to increase were looked at very closely, a lot of thought was put into this process;

Councillor Archer stated that he understands how difficult the situation is, but that the increase that is to be generated by these changes in terms of the budget is very little, the perception on the other hand is much bigger;

Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that she has recently been swimming and there were 63 people swimming that day. She does not feel that a 20p increase for them to swim will necessarily put them off, but is concerned that the price charged to GP referral customers is increasing. As a Council we should be encouraging those people who have been referred by their GP's due to health reasons, not increasing the prices;

Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that she had asked people swimming that day where they had come from, to which she had several different responses, but people were travelling to use the leisure facilities within Fenland because they are good facilities. Councillor Mrs Bucknor congratulated the Council on this, but reiterated the fact that we should not be increasing fees for those referred by their GP's, as these are the people we need to attract;

Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that 2.1 of the report contradicts itself by saying 'The current economic climate makes an increase in prices unlikely to realise increased income'. If this is the situation why is the Council increasing these charges? Richard Cassidy stated that the vast majority are not increasing and that the rest of the report goes on to show the comparison of prices.

Councillor Jolley agreed that this section of the report is not clear. Richard Cassidy agreed and stated that the words 'In general' should have been added to the sentence;

Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that the training pool is always empty, and yet it is full of water and heated. We need to look at encouraging its use on a wider perspective; people often travel to Peterborough for this type of facility, due to the times that our pools are available. Councillor Clark stated that there is a Leisure Centre review coming up and that point will be taken into consideration;

Councillor Melton stated that the issue is that a balanced budget will need to be presented to Council. We have been told to keep the Council Tax increase as low as possible, and at the same time maintain good services. There was a comment made that £30,000 is not a lot of money, but it is about 0.5% of the Council Tax. The budget itself will be presented later in the year, and there will be the opportunity to scrutinise the finances as a whole at that stage. If these prices are not increased, then they will need to be increased somewhere else. We have a duty to provide first class services but this costs money;

Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if it would be more cost effective to cease the use of the Mobile Gym. Councillor Melton stated that Cabinet have agreed that the Mobile Gym provision will be discontinued later this year;

Councillor Cornwell stated that currently Overview and Scrutiny look at fees and charges for Leisure, fees and charges in general and then later, at the budget. We need to look at everything together as a package, so that we can see how small increases influence other areas of the overall situation. When we were looking at the leisure fees and charges we had restricted knowledge, and now that this has been explained further we have a better understanding. Richard Cassidy stated

that in the future much more information will be made available to the panel, so that they have the bigger picture;

Councillor Melton stated that the Council have to make decisions based on what they think will have minimal impact on the people of Fenland. If we do not make the increases here, they will have to be made in other areas.

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel decided to accept the decision made by Cabinet to increase the Leisure Fees and Charges for 2012. Councillor Archer requested that his vote against this decision be recorded.

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

OS28/11 DRAFT CORPORATE PLAN 2012 - 15

Councillor Melton and Paul Medd presented the Draft Corporate Plan to the Panel.

Councillors made comments asked questions and received responses as follows:

- Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that the report refers to customer feedback and asked how many people respond. Paul Medd stated that Fenland get very good feedback responses, but that the figures are not yet available for this consultation process;
- Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked how the Council intend to support Skills Training within Fenland. Councillor Melton stated that although the current financial situation is difficult, there are also many opportunities in which the Council can make a difference through attracting inward investment and making our own investments into projects that matter to local people. This includes exciting partnership projects like the Engineers Training School at Stainless Metal Craft in Chatteris. Paul Medd stated that the Leader and Portfolio Holders are keen that we continue to support local businesses in the area. A good example of this is the support that was recently given to Morrisons in Wisbech;
- Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that this country is desperately short of engineering skills. Councillor Seaton stated that this is one of the areas that we are looking to boost, we are working with COWA, and local businesses to produce a programme;
- Councillor Miscandlon stated that the companies and businesses should be encouraged to participate and those that support such a scheme should be applauded;
- Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked what the plans are with regards to tourism. Councillor Seaton stated that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel did a very indepth review of Tourism. There will be a working group put together very shortly, and the panel will be regularly updated on their work and progress;
- Councillor Archer asked if the Tourism Working Group will replace previous Tourism Groups. Councillor Seaton stated when this group is up and running these details will be discussed;
- Councillor Cornwell stated that we should encourage the development of tourism infrastructure. Councillor Seaton stated that the new working group will take that on board;
- Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked why the costs for bringing a ship into the Port at Wisbech had been increased. The more ships coming into to Wisbech means that less dredging will be needed which costs money. If it is cheaper to go to Sutton Bridge, why would you continue your journey onto Wisbech? Councillor Cotterell stated that marine services are changing. Fewer ships are coming in as they are larger, and carry more goods. Whatever we do we are going to struggle to increase the ships that come into Wisbech Port. Councillor Melton stated that there have been some high level discussions about this matter. We recently had to authorise £30,000 for dredging, and this was not due to the fact that there had not been many ships through the water, but because of a lack of rain. This is a cost that needs to be

covered as we are the Port Authority. We are working on some very exciting plans for the Port as the success of this area has a knock on effect for the whole of Fenland. It is difficult to trade at this time, but we will continue to ensure that our services in this area are second to none. Councillor Cotterell stated that we have increased the leisure side of the port industry, so as trade is going down in one area it is going up in another. We are working hard to cover the costs.

OS29/11 DRAFT MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY AND GENERAL FUND BUDGET **2012/13**

Councillor Clark presented the Draft Medium Term Financial Strategy and General Fund Budget 2012/13.

Councillor Melton stated that until such a time that we know we have the finances coming in, the council will not commit itself to any schemes. We will not spend any money until we have the asset sales or grants to cover the costs.

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

- Councillor Peachey asked for clarification of the £9.7 million balance, is this the only reserve, or is there still reserves from the sale of the housing stock? Rob Bridge stated that this is the only capital that the Council have, but there are other areas of reserves which can be used if required;
- Councillor Peachey stated that he was concerned that we will be spending our reserves. Rob Bridge stated that the Council have been in a good position due to the sale of the housing stock;
- Councillor Melton stated that one of the first things that he did when he became Leader was to a complete review of the Capital Programme. He believes that our capital has been well invested, The Boathouse and South Fens Business Centres are bringing in capital for the benefit of the people of Fenland. £500,000 was inserted into the rural areas, as this had been neglected in the past and we have contributed to skills development in the area. The council does have assets to sell, but we do not have to sell those assets for quick money, we can hold on to those assets and wait for the market to pick up;
- Councillor Peachey asked if Cabinet are prepared to cutback further if required. Councillor Melton agreed that Cabinet are prepared to cut back further if they need to. Rob Bridge stated that we do not have the same obligations on Capital Reserves, Officers are looking at this all the time and regularly take reports to Cabinet;
- Councillor Peachey asked if we are in a good position compared with other authorities. Rob Bridge confirmed that we are in a good position;
- Councillor Jolley asked if it possible to let villages know their financial situations as early we can, so that they have plenty of time to adjust precepts;
- Councillor Jolley stated that he hopes that the Council keep on taking the grants available to keep the Council tax Bills low, but to remember that they will not be there in the future. Councillor Clark confirmed that the Council are mindful of that, and are looking very closely at the situation;
- Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked what impact the changes in Business Rates are going to have. Rob Bridge stated that we are waiting for details from Central Government, but what we do know is that we are not going to have control about how much we charge. In the long run it is unlikely to make a huge difference financially;
- Councillor Jolley stated that Fenland is holding up very well at the moment.

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel agreed to accept the Draft Medium Term Strategy and General Fund Budget Report.

OS30/11 FEES AND CHARGES 2012

Councillor Clark presented the Review of Fees and Charges 2012/13.

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

- Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked why the wharf charges are higher to go to Wisbech than to Sutton Bridge, as this is making it less attractive to come to Wisbech. Gary Garford stated that we are only able to apply wharf charges at Wisbech as Sutton Bridge is a private port;
- Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that with all the activities taking place at the Wisbech Park, surely there will need to be toilet facilities. To take those toilets away and not replace them is going to be a serious health mistake. Councillor Mrs French stated that the Town Councils have had the opportunity to take the toilets on themselves. Councillor Murphy stated that the Council are taking one of the toilets in each Market Town and refurbishing it. The Council has to save money and the toilets are not a statutory requirement, this is a decision that has been made, and the Town Councils can take them over if they choose to;
- Councillor Cornwell asked why are the increases for Markets and Fairs being held at such low rates of increase. Councillor Clark stated that the Council do not want to damage relationship that they have with the Markets and Fairs as these events are good for the community;
- Councillor Cornwell asked why there have been no increases in the CCTV charges, and asked who pays these fees. Alan Pain stated that CCTV get viewing requests to view footage from many authorities including police and fire authorities, as these are mostly from public sector authorities we have chosen to freeze the prices;
- Councillor Cornwell asked if it would be possible to freeze the prices for public sector authorities and raise them for commercial organisations. Councillor Clark agreed that this is a good point, and will feedback the idea to see if it is viable;
- Councillor Jolley stated that ten years ago this Council said that it would go paperless, is it going to happen? Councillor Melton stated that he is concerned with the ever escalating costs of ICT as well as the amount of paper that we use at the Council, and is constantly asking if we are spending too much on this. FDC should follow other Councils lead and move towards becoming a paperless Council. Another authority have recently shown that they have made savings of £70,000 in a year as a result of being paperless. This is something that this council should seriously to look into.

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel agreed the Review of Fees and Charges 2012/13 Report.

Councillor Jolley thanks Councillor Melton and the Cabinet Members for attending the meeting today and answering the questions put to them. He also thanked staff involved for providing the information and reports. He stated that there are still going to be difficult times ahead.

Councillor Melton thanked the Chairman - Councillor Jolley for inviting the Cabinet Members to the meeting today. The idea of Scrutiny is to hold the administration to account, and anytime that you want to us to attend, we will be here, we are very happy to attend these meetings.

OS31/11 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered the Future Work Programme 2011/12 for the Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

Members agreed the Future Work Programme 2011/12.

4.05pm

Chairman