

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL



12 NOVEMBER 2012 - 2.30PM

PRESENT: Councillor J R Chambers (Chairman), Councillor A Miscandlon (Vice-Chairman), Councillors Booth, Mrs Bucknor, Cornwell, Hodgson, Scrimshaw and Sutton

CABINET MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Butcher, Clark, Jolley, Melton, Murphy, Oliver, Owen and Seaton.

APOLOGIES: Councillor Cotterell, Garratt and Stebbing

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Jane Bailey, Rob Bridge, Richard Cassidy, Gary Garford, Anna Goodall, Ian Hunt, Geoff Kent, Paul Medd, Alan Pain and Carol Pilson

OS20/12 MINUTES OF 22 OCTOBER 2012

The minutes of the meeting of 22 October 2012 were confirmed and signed subject to the following amendment:

- Minute number OS18/12, bullet point 4.

The first sentence should read, Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked do we still dredge.

Councillor Cornwell stated that minutes often swap between tenses and asked that officers check for grammatical errors. Officers agreed.

*** FOR INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL ***

OS21/12 ANNUAL MEETING WITH THE LEADER, DEPUTY LEADER AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE - INCORPORATING THE SCRUTINY OF THE QUALITY ORGANISATION CORPORATE PRIORITY

Councillor Melton presented the Annual Meeting item, incorporating the scrutiny of Quality Organisation Corporate Priority; he thanked the Overview and Scrutiny Panel for inviting him and his colleagues from Cabinet and CMT and stated that all questions that could not be answered during the meeting would be answered in writing following the meeting.

Councillor Melton stated that with regards to recent comments made by Middle Level Commissioners, if their comments regarding developments made more sense, they would have more credibility.

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

1. Councillor Chambers stated that members are frequently asking for more information to be included in reports. Councillor Melton stated that the Council operate an open and transparent culture. There are some issues with commercial and contractual detail that we will not discuss openly, as unfortunately there are members that will leak that information

onto the press or onto social media sites. He stated that officers no longer produce reports with reams of paper, but summarise the key points. Paul Medd stated that where possible, officers will ensure that members get associated detail to back up narrative statements within reports;

2. Councillor Chambers asked if the Leader was going to be looking at the issues with regards to representatives on Outside bodies. Councillor Melton stated that with everything else that is going on at the moment this is not a top priority, but it will be dealt with;
3. Councillor Booth stated that the report does not identify the challenges for next year. Councillor Melton stated that there have been a number of challenges this year and we have been able to meet the demands of those challenges. There will be significant challenges to come, but budget and growth are still the key priorities;
4. Councillor Miscandlon stated that the Leader has been busy with other matters as of late, and asked if this has affected the overall running of the Council. Councillor Melton agreed that he has taken his eye off the ball recently, but that he is doing something about it now. He stated that he is supported by a fantastic member and officer team at Fenland and for this reason the overall running of the Council has not been affected;
5. Councillor Miscandlon asked how FDC are dealing with the significant financial pressure at this time. Councillor Melton stated that the Council are facing budgetary issues, officers are having difficulty formulating budgets as the settlement figures are due to be released later than usual this year and there is a feeling that Local Government could be hit harder than ever. He explained that there is a misconception that District Councils are cash rich; this Council has been very prudent and any cash balances and reserves are needed should difficulties arise. There are no external finances available and we need to ensure that this Council is looking, thinking and planning ahead;
6. Councillor Miscandlon asked, with recent events in mind, if the leader was satisfied that members are adequately trained. Councillor Melton stated that he was not satisfied with the level of training. He believes that all members who want to sit on regulatory committees must be suitably trained to carry out that role and confirmed that he has asked the Chief Executive to draw up documentation to make changes to the constitution. Councillor Melton stated that his legacy to this Council will be training and professionalism amongst members and officers to ensure that the Council is well run and respected;
7. Councillor Chambers asked the leader what his opinion was of the use social media sites by members. Councillor Melton stated that social networking as method of communication, when used responsibly, can be a valuable tool. When social networking is not used well it can be destructive and damaging. Members must search their own conscience when making use of these tools, and use them responsibly;
8. Councillor Chambers stated that the constitution states that you are allowed 3 members of Cabinet to serve on the Planning Committee, and asked if there were any plans for Cabinet members to serve on this committee in the future. Councillor Melton confirmed that there are no plans to do this at the moment. He stated that he has not requested a constitutional change as there may be a time in the future that this will be necessary and the constitution states that the Council may have up to 3 Cabinet members on the Planning Committee. He stated that he feels that it is right to separate the executive from the planning function of this council, and with this view and following conversations with the Deputy Leader and other colleagues in the Cabinet, the decision has been taken that in the short term, Cabinet members will not serve on the Planning Committee.

Progress of Corporate Priorities April - October 2012

Neighbourhood Planning

1. Councillor Cornwell asked when individual Councillors will have the opportunity to feed into the Core Strategy. Councillor Melton stated that members will have the opportunity during briefing sessions to feed into the Core Strategy. Paul Medd confirmed that an all member briefing session regarding the Core Strategy has been arranged for 6 December;

2. Councillor Mrs Bucknor referred to a paragraph in the report that stated that successful partnership working throughout the year with key stakeholders means that the Core Strategy will deliver successful and sustainable communities. She stated that she was amazed at this statement and asked if members stood by this. Councillor Owen confirmed that in his opinion the statement was correct, he stated that this is a progressive document and it is growing and taking shape;
3. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked how can this be delivered successfully without transport and infrastructure. Councillor Owen stated that when the houses are built we will get the infrastructure in place;
4. Councillor Booth asked how many people responded to the consultation in relation to the development of March. Councillor Owen stated that a number of the responses returned were referring to the development of March, also a petition signed by 4 or 5 hundred people was received;
5. Councillor Booth stated that with the plans for development there is potential for gridlock in the town, and asked how this is being addressed. Councillor Owen stated that due to the road works currently taking place on the A141 there is temporarily heavy traffic through the town after 7pm. He stated that applications for development will take these issues into account. Councillor Melton stated that nobody is suddenly going to develop all the available land without putting adequate measures in place. Paul Medd stated that FDC are working very closely with the Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) and we are not aware of any significant transport issues at this time;
6. Councillor Cornwell stated that it is a difficult situation, we will not get the infrastructure in place until the development is in place, but we will not get the development without the infrastructure, everything has to be bolted together, it is a question of balance. Councillor Melton stated that one of the things to ensure is that the infrastructure is put into place at the right time, there is no money available to borrow against future developments to put the infrastructure in place first, and this does make it a very difficult situation. He stated that he would not expect the Planning Committee to agree a major development without a plan for infrastructure;
7. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that there has been an announcement by CCC that says there will be no transport infrastructure developments in this area, but that they will be developing Waterbeach. Councillor Owen stated that the information Councillor Mrs Bucknor is referring to came from a person who does not serve on the Transport Planning Forum. This forum understands the transport issues in this area and the interests of infrastructure in this area are well looked after. Councillor Clark stated that we could be guilty of not publicising enough information about future infrastructure and transport plans, but work in this area is ongoing;
8. Councillor Booth asked if the Council have considered using a Public Sector Loans Board. Councillor Melton stated that officers and members are looking at all ways to maximise the potential income and investments on behalf of the Council.

Localism

1. Councillor Miscandlon stated that a pawnbroker shop has recently opened in Whittlesey, money lending in Fenland is not a licensable activity, however in other areas it is. He asked if there were any plans to make this a licensable activity in Fenland in the future. Councillor Owen stated that the Council have highlighted the need to address the issues of illegal money lending at this time, and are in the process of setting up a co-operative to enable people to borrow money safely. The Financial Services Authority (FSA) regulate other financial establishments that are lending money such as pawnbrokers, and at this time Fenland are not planning to license these, however this is a good point and something that will be looked into.

Streets Ahead

1. Councillor Booth stated that the CrimeBUSter Bus is currently being renovated and asked when the bus will be back in use. Councillor Oliver stated that the information regarding the bus is currently being updated and that all members would receive a written update following the meeting;
2. Councillor Booth stated that the update with regards to Street Pride is brief and asked if there was any further information. Councillor Murphy stated that the Street Pride volunteers are putting in more hours than ever, and are doing a very good job. FDC now have a new Street Pride Coordinator, she is called Rebecca Robinett. Councillor Seaton stated that Rebecca Robinett is assisting the setting up of a new Street Pride group in Newton, and is planning to attend the Parish Council meeting;
3. Councillor Murphy stated that FDC have taken delivery of a new split bin refuse truck. This truck will be especially useful for collections in rural areas as it has bin lifts for blue and brown bin recycled waste, saving money on hours and fuel;
4. Councillor Booth stated that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel had previously received a report about the collection of extra plastics in the blue bins and asked if there had been an increase in dry recycling since. Councillor Murphy stated that there has been an increase of about 4.5%, he added that the collection of additional plastics has been publicised in the refuse collection calendars that have recently been distributed to all residents.

Open for Business

1. Councillor Cornwell stated that the last paragraph of OB4 in the report is incorrect. Councillor Seaton agreed that the report would be amended;
2. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that it is disappointing to see the occupancy rate at the Boathouse dropping further and asked if the Council are doing everything they can to promote these premises. Councillor Seaton stated that it is not always a bad thing when the occupancy rate goes down, the objective of this type of premises is that it gives fledgling businesses an affordable base, they are not expected to remain there for life, but that they grow and move onto bigger premises. The team are actively publicising and marketing but we are financially, in very difficult times, and we have had businesses that have had to go back to working from home for this reason. He stated that the conference bookings have been very successful. Gary Garford stated that the Council have a marketing campaign, and are currently targeting businesses that are run from homes. There have been very successful businesses that have grown out of the business units, and this is good news for Fenland. Councillor Seaton stated that the Business Pack is currently being updated and agreed to circulate the updated version to the panel when it is available;
3. Councillor Cornwell asked why the South Fens Enterprise Park has such a low target for occupancy. Councillor Seaton stated that we are living in an economic age where things are not going to happen overnight, this is a new development and the team are working very hard to promote the new units
4. Councillor Scrimshaw asked following the success of the Delamore skills centre project are there any more plans like this one. Councillor Seaton agreed that the Delamore skills centre is an exciting phase, he stated that The College of West Anglia (CWA) has introduced a course for Nestle Purina and there is an engineering course starting in Kings Lynn, these courses are aimed at businesses in the Fenland area. The Council are looking at funding opportunities to assist in all types of training and learning skills in the Fenland area;
5. Councillor Booth stated that at the launch of the Wisbech 2020 Vision project CCC said that the roads would be improved leading to the Boathouse and asked if this work had been completed. Councillor Seaton confirmed that the roads leading to the Boathouse have been completed and that work is now starting on the footways;
6. Councillor Melton stated that he is very proud that Delamore and the work that FDC have done with Delamore have been recognised nationally and we have been invited to the Horticultural Association to give a talk on this subject;

7. Paul Medd stated that the Leader and Portfolio Holder have been in talks with the National Institute of Agricultural Botany (NIAB) looking to provide business support within this business area;
8. Councillor Miscandlon asked that with reference to the earlier comment regarding the engineering course starting in Kings Lynn, why is this course not taking place in Wisbech. Councillor Seaton stated that there is not the capacity to run this course in Wisbech;
9. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that these opportunities are a big benefit to the community where engineering is concerned and asked what training opportunities will there be for engineers in this area. Councillor Seaton stated that there will be opportunities in renewable and marine engineering. He explained that in these economic times there needs to be enough numbers to ensure the course is viable, and jobs available after the courses have finished.

Quality Organisation

1. Councillor Booth stated that with regards to the staff survey, 84% of people are proud to work for FDC and asked what else the survey showed. Paul Medd stated that the staff survey was varied and covered a number of areas looking at the whole sense of staff well being. He stated that he is happy to share the results of the survey in more detail with Councillor Booth. Councillor Booth agreed. Paul Medd stated that the ratings of the number of people who are proud to work for FDC shows that the staff still have a high moral despite the significant challenges that the Council has faced;
2. Councillor Booth agreed that the results are good news, and asked if there is a programme in place to address any issues from the survey. Paul Medd confirmed that there is a programme in place. He stated that the staff survey would be a meaningless task without an action plan to work on. The key issues are looking at staff development;
3. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked what the staff turnover figures are. Rob Bridge stated that in the past 2 years the figures have fluctuated between 0 and 10%. Staff turnover of up to 15% can be deemed as healthy, staff changes can mean new blood coming into the organisation with new ideas;
4. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that with regards to equal opportunities, she is concerned that even though the situation has improved, it has not improved enough. Councillor Melton stated that this a very good point, but was not sure how to get more women into senior positions. He stated that people simply do not apply for the senior jobs and the same can be said for local government, he would like to see more people coming forward to reflect the whole community. Councillor Melton stated that there is a reluctance for people to come forward for these roles, and this is a shame. He stated that he does not agree with positive discrimination;
5. Councillor Scrimshaw asked what progress has been made on migrant population cohesion. Councillor Owen stated that FDC have endeavoured to contact minority groups and officers are continuously looking at new ways of keeping in touch and making contact. Paul Medd stated that the new arrivals pack helps to sign post new arrivals, this has been very successful. He agreed to summarise ongoing work and circulate to the panel;
6. Councillor Sutton asked that with regards to the £400,000 contribution made by FDC towards the arts space at the Thomas Clarkson Community College, are we involved in promoting this area to the wider community. Councillor Seaton stated that FDC made the £400,000 contribution towards the facility to enhance the area, it is not the role of FDC officers to run or market the venue;
7. Councillor Sutton stated that he is concerned that the facility is not being used to its full potential. Councillor Seaton stated that there is nowhere else in the area with the same facility so if it is marketed in the right way it will be used more often;
8. Councillor Hodgson stated that the school need to promote the venue correctly, it is all down to the cost of hire. Councillor Seaton stated that it is a facility for the school to use and to make the best use of, it is not for FDC to comment on or suggest how they run it;

9. Councillor Booth asked that if the Council are going to put that much money into a project, should officers not be looking to have much more of an input in the running. Councillor Seaton stated that the Council have an obligation to use the money in the best way for the people in Fenland and the investment was to enhance the area, to make the venue suitable for outside functions. It was never the intention to have an active role in the running or promotion of the venue. Paul Medd stated that at an officer level there is a team looking at the detail, the Council do have some input and it is in our interest that the venue is successful, but there is no expectation that we will run the venue for them;
10. Councillor Booth stated that he was not suggesting that the Council would take over the running of the venue, but simply that we would ensure that there is a valid business plan in place. Paul Medd stated that FDC do have some input behind the scenes, but there is no expectation that we will run the facility. At an officer level there is a project team looking at the details and there are a series of milestones and safeguards built into a project of this size;
11. Councillor Melton stated the Council's contribution of £400,000 as a one off capital grant was made to enhance the area as there was no substantial venue like this before. Thomas Clarkson Community College is now Thomas Clarkson Academy so they will need to look at ways to maximise their income from this venue, and market the facility correctly. They have been given a significant head-start and it is now up to them to maximise their potential income;
12. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that the report shows that the number of abandoned calls was well below target and asked for information as to why. Rob Bridge stated that this is not a resource issue, during busy times of the year teams work together to ensure that calls are covered. Paul Medd stated that this was a challenging target and if you compare these figures they are very competitive with the private sector.

Councillor Chambers thanked the Cabinet members and CMT officers for attending the meeting today.

(Councillor Jolley declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item, by virtue of the fact that he is a local developer)

OS22/12 DRAFT LOCAL COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT SCHEME

Councillor Miscandlon took over chairmanship for this item as the Chairman, Councillor Chambers declared a pecuniary interest and retired from the meeting for the duration of the item.

Councillor Melton presented The Draft Local Council Tax Benefit (CTB) Scheme Report. He informed members that FDC are faced with the localisation of CBT and have put a lot of thought and time into developing this scheme. The Council know that statutorily pensioners are protected and that this would dramatically increase the impact on others so unless a scheme involving the changes to Council Tax exemptions is put in place a default scheme would be imposed on us. FDC know that this is not going to be popular and it is going to affect many Fenland residents.

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

1. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that this is especially challenging with such a large pensioner group. She stated that she has spoken to residents about this and it is very stressful for families who will find it difficult to find the extra money. Rob Bridge stated that officers will keep members updated and can provide them with a graph to show the spectrum as this will give a feel of the full picture. He stated that this is something that members will get a lot of questions about, and officers will give as much information to support members;
2. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if this information been published for residents in other languages. Geoff Kent confirmed that this information has been published in other languages and stated that FDC have a Migrant Populations team member in the Wisbech

One Stop Shop. It is difficult to know where to target, but whenever we are aware of these details we will use appropriate publications;

3. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if it would be possible for FDC to use a QR Code (Quick response code) system by a flag on publications. Councillor Owen confirmed that if the system was economically viable and the need was enough the QR system could be looked into. Paul Medd stated that the Council are obligated to carry out a quality impact assessment to look at how the CBT changes will impact on the diverse groups in the area;
4. Councillor Hodgson thanked the officers for the presentation. He stated that he is concerned that the people who are going to lose benefits are families with children who are living in rented property, and that there is a chance that landlords will increase rents to cover the loss they are making with regards to the removal of Council Tax exemptions. Councillor Melton agreed that this is a concern and stated that the Council will need an early warning system in place to know exactly how this will affect residents. The Council are not yet in a position to finalise the scheme due to the late settlement date this year;
5. Councillor Mrs Bucknor agreed that this is a very significant point, and will be a worry for residents;
6. Councillor Miscandlon stated that looking at consultation responses it is disappointing that only 74 were received. He asked why the numbers were so low. Councillor Owen stated that he believes that people read the letter quickly and discard it as they think it will not apply to them, it is only when the bill arrives that they will react. Councillor Melton stated that the low response numbers are not unique to FDC, consultation responses are extremely low everywhere;
7. Councillor Miscandlon suggested that perhaps the original letter did not grab their attention, and that future correspondence required a clear headline. Rob Bridge confirmed that officers will be writing to people affected again and will take on board this feedback;
8. Councillor Booth asked for confirmation that people on benefits will be expected to pay something towards Council Tax following the introduction of this scheme. Rob Bridge confirmed that people in receipt of benefits will be expected to pay something but with the transition grant the scheme will have a lower impact than first anticipated;
9. Councillor Booth asked what research has been carried out to look at alternative ways of implementing the Local CTB. Rob Bridge confirmed that this has been looked at for some time, the Council could have left the scheme as it was and met the shortfall, but that would have meant adding the cost to Council Tax bills and that would not have been popular either. Councillor Melton stated that this would have involved increasing the council tax payments to subsidise benefits. It is a difficult situation and is a question of fairness;
10. Councillor Booth stated that the report refers to the fact that the DWP issued statistics that showed that they expect the demand for CTB to reduce and asked what the latest data in this area is telling us. Geoff Kent advised that the latest data shows a consistent 2% increase in claims;
11. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked how this increase compares to other areas. Geoff Kent stated that Fenland has virtually the same number of claimants as Huntingdon;
12. Councillor Booth asked why people affected by the removal of the Council Tax exemptions were not involved in the consultation process. Rob Bridge stated that the law is clear that the Council must consult with regards to the benefits, but there is no law that says the Council must consult with regards to the Council Tax exemptions. It is a difficult situation and we need to look at how this is taken forward. Councillor Owen stated that it would almost be a pointless exercise to consult with regards to the removal of exemptions as everyone who will lose their exemption will be unhappy. Councillor Melton stated that the moral argument is why should a person who pays their council tax in full every year for the property that they are living in have to subsidise somebody else's second property that is standing empty;

13. Councillor Booth asked if there was the potential for bringing in an extra band for Council Tax. Councillor Melton advised that the Council could not do this. Rob Bridge stated that if there was a decision made by Government then it is something that FDC would do, but not a decision this Council can make on its own. Geoff Kent stated that there are approximately 20 properties in this district that fall into this category so an extra band would not make a big difference.

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel note the progress of implementation of the Local CTB scheme for Fenland so far.

(Councillor Hodgson declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item, by virtue of the fact that a close family member claims CTB)

(Councillors Chambers, Scrimshaw and Sutton declared a pecuniary interest in this item, by virtue of owning multiple properties with the potential to let, and retired from the meeting for the duration of the item)

OS23/12 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered the Future Work Programme 2012/2013 for the Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

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

- Councillor Mrs Bucknor suggested that the Wisbech 2020 Vision action plan which is launched in January 2013 is added to the work programme. Councillor Melton agreed and stated that as soon as the report is available he will let Anna Goodall know. He also confirmed that he would be happy to attend a extraordinary meeting if there is not sufficient space on the current programme as this is a big issue.

Members agreed the Future Work Programme 2012/2013 for the Overview and Scrutiny Panel, subject to the amendments agreed above.

4.50pm

Chairman