

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

13 JANUARY 2014 - 2:30PM



PRESENT: Councillor Chambers (Chairman), Councillor Mrs French (Vice-Chairman), Councillors Broker, Mrs Bucknor, Hodgson, Miss Hoy and Sutton

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Butcher, Cornwell, Garratt, Humphrey, King (from 2.45pm), Melton and Murphy.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Jolley, Oliver, Seaton and Swan

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Jane Bailey, Rob Bridge, Richard Cassidy, Gary Garford, Anna Goodall, Dan Horn, Phil Hughes, Carol Pilson, Paul Medd and Mark Saunders

OSC21/13 TO SIGN AND CONFIRM THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF 25 NOVEMBER 2013.

The minutes of the meeting of the 25 November 2014 were agreed and signed.

Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that the panel have yet to receive an update with regards to transparency in relation to confidential report as minuted at the last meeting. Councillor Melton reassured Councillor Mrs Bucknor and the Panel that Councillor Seaton is looking at this issue, but unfortunately due to personal circumstances was unable to attend the meeting today, and unable to update another members with regards to this. He stated that the issue is in hand and members will be updated shortly.

OSC22/13 DRAFT CORPORATE PLAN 2014-17

Members considered the Draft Corporate Plan 2014 - 17 presented by Councillor Melton.

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

1. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked what the current situation is with regards to the A47. Councillor Butcher confirmed that there has been no further update, an agreement was made to carry out extensive works west of Yarmouth, and for all junctions to be updated within Cambridgeshire. He confirmed that a meeting scheduled for January has been postponed but that he hopes to have an update following that meeting;
2. Councillor Hodgson asked if he still had the opportunity to feed into the Wisbech 2020 project. Councillor Melton confirmed that Councillor Hodgson would still have the opportunity to feed into this project;
3. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked how funding from Government relating to HMO's will be used. Dan Horn stated that this funding will be used to fund specific aspects in terms of supporting Operation Pheasant. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if someone will be based here at FDC to oversee this work. Dan Horn confirmed that people would be based at FDC;
4. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked for clarification on the wording in the report which states that with regards Wisbech 2020, significant progress has been made in the past year, She asked if members had to wait for an update. Councillor Melton confirmed that all members will receive a report looking at the progress made in the past year to deliver against the Action Plan;

5. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that with regards to the priority - supporting our aging population and young people, she would like clarification on what is in place to support young people. Dan Horn confirmed that there have been various projects in place and an example of these were actions relating to achieving improved free school meal numbers;
6. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked for clarification and further details on how we are supporting young people. Dan Horn agreed to circulate a summary for members;
7. Councillor Miss Hoy stated that the report refers to delivering clean streets and public spaces and feels that this is a 'broad term' that can never be accomplished. She suggested that better wording for this would to say that we will strive to deliver clean streets and public spaces. Councillor Murphy confirmed that he was happy with the wording stating that the team will try their best and will keep them as clean as they possibly can;
8. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked that with regard to FENBAC, does this group work with the Safety Partnership and what are the results from this work and plans for the future. Councillor Chambers confirmed that there will be an opportunity to discuss these issues when the Crime Disorder and Reduction Partnership item comes to this meeting in June.

Members agreed the Draft Corporate Plan be considered by Council on 27 February 2014 incorporating feedback from the Overview and Scrutiny Panel and residents.

OSC23/13 DRAFT MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY AND GENERAL FUND BUDGET 2014/15

Councillor Humphrey presented the Draft Medium Term Financial Strategy and General Fund Budget 2014/15.

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

1. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if the panel approve this item, will there still be an opportunity for the panel to make recommendations on the Fees and Charges item. Councillor Melton confirmed that Cabinet will still consider any recommendations from this panel;
2. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked for clarification on the New Homes Bonus (NHB) figures detailed in table 2, page 71 and for the arrangements with regards to banding these properties. Rob Bridge confirmed that the table 3 on the next page (page 72) illustrates the NHB in more detail. He added that the amount the Council receives from the NHB is based on a national average band D for every property;
3. Councillor Mrs French asked for clarification on the savings identified for 2014/15 as detailed in table 4 in the report. Rob Bridge confirmed that the Council are looking into ways of saving money moving forward, but currently the majority of the savings being made are as a result of shared services;
4. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that the report refers to loss of revenue due to a rise in drainage boards (DB) levies and asked how this loss of income has been managed. Rob Bridge stated that this has been on-going for a number of years, the Council have to make an assumption of what we think the DB are going to come forward with and take account for this within the budget;
5. Councillor Sutton stated that the North Level Boundary Review in Whittlesey could result in the Council being levied an additional £20,000. Rob Bridge stated that we will have to wait to see what the outcome is of that review;
6. Councillor Mrs French asked for clarification with regards to £50,000 for George Campbell improvements. Councillor Melton confirmed that this is for general improvements to the leisure centre and there are discussions taking place with regards to some capital expenditure too;
7. Councillor Mrs French referred to an expenditure of £69,000 on the West End Park footpaths shown on the report, stating that she understood that there was a commitment from Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) towards this work. Rob Bridge confirmed that this table details the full cost of the work, and the income will be shown from CCC for their contribution towards this work;

8. Councillor Mrs French asked if new developments pay for their own street name plates Councillor Murphy confirmed that developers pay for and provide nameplates on new developments, however replacement (for damaged or missing) nameplates are provided by this Council;
9. Councillor Mrs French stated that a substantial amount is allocated to the Port. Councillor Melton stated that we have a statutory duty as the Port Authority but it never going to make a lot of profit;
10. Councillor Mrs French asked if the Council still has to pay to remove the silt from the Port. Councillor Melton confirmed that the Council do pay to remove the silt and that a contribution towards this is made by the Environment Agency;
11. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked for clarification of the fact that street lighting has been allocated a sum of money as she understood that this was the responsibility of CCC. Councillor Melton confirmed that in some villages the street lights, or some of them, belong to this Council. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if this has been spent and if not would the council consider funding new lights in areas that have been left in darkness by the updated street lighting put in by CCC. Rob Bridge confirmed that the team are investigating which lights require work urgently before the money is spent, but this money is for repair only not for new street lighting;
12. Councillor Melton suggested that where there is significant development there is an opportunity to submit a bid for S106 for street lighting;
13. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if all European funding opportunities have been investigated with regards to the Port. Councillor Melton confirmed that this has been investigated but that there is no money available, there are other areas deemed as more deserving;
14. Councillor Broker asked for clarification with regards to the sum for Job Stimulation - Boleness Road. Rob Bridge confirmed that this was to repair the road area;
15. Councillor Mrs French asked for clarification with regards to the sum of £900,000 for the Chatteris Leisure Facilities - Contingency. Councillor Melton confirmed that this is for the contribution for the provision of a swimming pool at some stage in the future. He explained that it has always been made very clear that this will not be built until there is funding in place for it;
16. Councillor Sutton asked why there is a provision for modernisation of public conveniences as this work has been completed. Councillor Murphy stated that this is the fund required to dispose of the old public conveniences and to make good the area;
17. Councillor Miss Hoy stated that with regards to the sale of the public conveniences to the Town Council, what was this money used for? Councillor Melton confirmed that this money was offset against the cost of the new facilities;
18. Councillor Broker asked for clarification with regards to the sum of £200,000 for Land Assembly/Business and Workforce Stimulation. Rob Bridge confirmed that this sum is linked to some regeneration work, he pointed out to the panel that this is money that we may spend not necessarily that we will spend;
19. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that the Council own buildings across the district that require maintaining and asked where this can be found in the budget. Rob Bridge confirmed that there will be an improvement line added to this document, and we can bring back any asset issues when they come up;
20. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if the Council are now in ownership of the Courthouse. Councillor Melton stated that terms have been agreed but the deal has not been finalised;
21. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that the Council own a number of assets i.e. the One Stop Shops and I am concerned with regards to the maintenance of these properties, or is there a plan to sell some of these assets? Councillor Melton confirmed that the Council do not own the One Stop Shops, they are leased. He stated that the Council have been good at entering into agreements, getting the very best value due to the way that the market has been. He added that when the market is right we will look at the possibility of selling, but only if it is right for this Council. We are relying on some asset sales as we will not spend money unless it is in the bank, therefore if we do not sell we will not move forward with some of those plans;

22. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated with regard to the properties on the asset register, how much does it cost to maintain each one? Councillor Melton stated that we have a planned programme for asset disposal. Paul Medd stated that with regards to the One Stop Shops, revenue savings have been made under the hub model and we are now pursuing similar arrangements in Whittlesey. He added that a lot of work is being undertaken to reduce the pressure off of spending;
23. Councillor Sutton stated that he was pleased to hear that that this Council will not spend money until they have the money in the bank. Councillor Melton stated that while we can still fund projects with existing funding, we do not borrow. He added that if there was an opportunity to borrow with an excellent return we might look at it, but there would be a risk factor to take into account. In all the projects that have been funded by this Council it is not just the monetary value, but the value to the community that are measured;
24. Councillor Sutton stated that the Council are already in debt for £8m. Councillor Melton stated that we are servicing that debt, we decided that we would put the money somewhere else, this is a good position to be in;
25. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that she is trying to see if there was anything in the capital programme identified for the Wisbech 2020 project. Councillor Melton stated that there was a capital programme and it was decided that it belonged to the people of Fenland. The money was divided up where it was of the best value. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that it is not identified on the budget where we are delivering this project. Paul Medd stated that for the first 12 months many of the actions are to be carried out by partners;
26. Councillor King confirmed that Cabinet have agreed to contribute some money into the Heritage Project, investing in the High Street area. It is important to remember that just because it is not specifically detailed on the budget it does not mean that it is not being looked into. He added his assurance that Cabinet is committed to implementing the Wisbech 2020 Vision;
27. Councillor Melton stated that where there is an opportunity to bring in funding towards a project the Council will always seriously consider investing;
28. Councillor Melton stated that the Council have been nominated for an Efficiency Award by the Local Government Chronicle (LGC), we are still delivering first class services, and it is important to celebrate this. He informed members that everyone is welcome to attend the ceremony in London, however they will have to buy their own ticket at £220 each, as the Council will not be paying for this;
29. Paul Medd stated that members should take a great deal of credit for this nomination, we are one of only 8 to be shortlisted. He added that this Council is not perfect, and there is still a lot to do financially, we recognise that the financial challenges will continue and are putting strategies in place to implement the necessary changes;
30. Councillor Chambers asked if the Leader would consider an approach from a fracking company. Councillor Melton confirmed that he would consider such an approach;
31. Councillor Chambers asked, looking at the situation long term, where do you see Fenland District Council in 5 years. Councillor Melton stated that in his opinion Fenland District Council will not exist as it does now and might well be part of a Unitary authority. He added that which-ever direction is taken by this Council, we are in the strongest position to move forward.

Members agreed that the draft budget proposals 2014/15 outlined in the report, the revised estimates for 2013/14 and the revised capital programme be considered by Cabinet taking into account any recommendations made by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel at this meeting.

OSC24/13 REVIEW OF FEES AND CHARGES 2014/15

Councillor Humphrey presented the Review of Fees and Charges 2014/15 Report.

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

1. Councillor Mrs French referring to 2.2 in the report, asked why the other charges are shown inclusive of VAT. Rob Bridge stated that the listing depends on the type of charge, we have to charge the user VAT, this is the schedule that people see and indicates to them what they have to pay;
2. Councillor Chambers asked what the impact might be on the future usage of Wisbech Port in light of the proposal to increase the fees by 5%. Gary Garford stated that setting fees is always a balance, we do benchmark against adjacent ports and have based our fee level on shipping outturn on figures similar to this year and felt that 5% was a reasonable increase;
3. Councillor Sutton asked for clarification with regards to the pension scheme. Gary Garford confirmed that this makes reference to the Pilots' National Pension Fund which was underfunded, the report details how we have built in some of those costs. Councillor Sutton stated that he understood this to be fully recovered. Rob Bridge confirmed that the pension has not been increasing, we negotiated a 16 year payback which is tapered, so the amount will increase but needs to be recovered;
4. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked how many people are employed at the ports. Gary Garford informed the panel that there are 9 Council marine service employees, but could not indicate the level of staffing at the 2 private ports;
5. Councillor Mrs Bucknor suggested that the wharfage dues be increased by 6% to Sutton Bridge and 4% to Wisbech instead of increasing both by 5%. This would encourage more ships into Wisbech, and reduce the cost to this Council to remove silt. Gary Garford confirmed that wharfage fees are only charged at Wisbech as we own that port, wharfage dues are charged directly to the ship owners by the owners of Port Sutton Bridge. We do liaise with other ports with regards to fees but it is left to them to make a decision;
6. Councillor Miss Hoy agreed with Councillor Mrs Bucknor stating that we should be encouraging people into the district. Gary Garford stated that the ports do not generally compete as they attract different cargoes/vessels, the Wisbech port cannot accommodate larger ships as they cannot turn. We are keen to encourage shipping to both ports as they both have an economic benefit to the Nene;
7. Councillor Miss Hoy stated that the fees are increasing by 5% but is worried about the cumulative effect of people using more than one service. She asked for clarification that each service is being increased. Gary Garford confirmed that users of the port very often use several services and the fees charged would have additional costs of around 5% on each service that they use;
8. Councillor Miss Hoy asked if our fees are competitive, as there are no comparisons shown, and what effect will this have on the future of the ports. Gary Garford confirmed that the fees are competitive. He stated that the number of ships that are being handled is falling, however we are looking at other ways to market this area of business, Wisbech port has links to windfarm activity and we are looking at opportunities for leisure repairs and the marine sector industry;
9. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked how our mooring costs compare against elsewhere in the Wash area. Gary Garford confirmed that we are competitive and are always looking at ways to market this area of business;
10. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if price comparisons have been made and asked what the figures with regards to the numbers of mooring are. Gary Garford confirmed that comparisons have been made and we compare favourably in terms of cost and services, he added that the pontoon moorings are 85% occupied;
11. Councillor Hodgson asked if more applications to FDC for windfarms would be welcomed. Gary Garford informed members that the windfarms detailed in the report are relating to offshore windfarms;

12. Councillor Chambers stated that he understands that the income from cemetery plot sales has fallen by £6,000 in the past 12 months, however there is a proposal to increase fees by 3.4% - 3.5%. He asked if this could be a risk of further income reduction. Councillor Murphy stated that he did not feel that this represented a risk for further income reduction, he added that some people buy their plots early and some people do not;
13. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if the fees and charges in relation to cemeteries generate a profit. Councillor Murphy confirmed that the service is cost neutral;
14. Councillor Mrs French stated that with regards to charging for the removal graffiti, there is an understanding that this service is a cost to the Council. She added that she is concerned that people are not going to be prepared to pay and asked what will happen in these cases. Councillor Murphy confirmed that we have to recover some the cost of the chemicals and the vehicles used. In cases where people are not prepared to pay we will need to consider the course of action case by case;
15. Councillor Mrs French stated that officers have been asked previously to provide leisure membership details broken down for each centre. Richard Cassidy stated that this cannot be accurately provided as when people sign up to an Ambassador Membership they are not tied to a centre but are a member of them all. Councillor Mrs French thanked the officer for this explanation but stated that she is disappointed that this has not been explained previously when this question has been asked;
16. Councillor Mrs French asked if it is cost effective to reduce the fees for daytime use of the leisure centres. Richard Cassidy stated that the memberships have been simplified and daytime users are offered an off peak concession, at the moment the leisure centres are not full during the daytime, and we hope this will encourage more users at this time of the day;
17. Councillor Mrs French asked if there are further concessions available for key workers. Richard Cassidy confirmed that there are no concessions for key workers as we feel the membership discounts on offer are sufficient;
18. Councillor Chambers stated that the report highlights that the running costs for the leisure centres has been reduced considerably. He asked for clarification on how the running costs have been reduced especially in light of the increased energy bills. Richard Cassidy stated that the costs are made up by a range of things. We have looked towards driving down our running costs and to increase income. We are looking at how we buy our energy, looking for more comprehensive packages and making the leisure centres more energy efficient;
19. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that she is concerned that we have a number of other gyms in the area and we have to compete, but they do not have to factor in swimming pool prices. Are attendances expected to increase as a result of the changes to the pricing structure. Richard Cassidy stated that we want people to understand the benefits of the new pricing structure and hope that this will encourage an increase of users to the leisure centres. He added that it is difficult for a centre with a pool to make a profit and is easier without the pool running costs;
20. Councillor Miss Hoy stated that the standard membership costs £40.50 which-ever leisure centre you choose to use. She suggested that this single price structure for all the gyms is not competitive with other gyms in the area. She informed members that Tesco are offering a gym membership in Wisbech for £15 a month, and feels that the leisure centres in each area should be competitively priced against other gyms in their areas. Richard Cassidy stated that it is difficult to compete directly against another gym who does not offer the services we have and therefore do not have the same overheads. We are offering a more than just the gym and are looking to attract users who are happy to pay a slightly higher price for that, it is about what we can do to differentiate our service from other local market competition;
21. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if we have data that shows which membership customers use the gym and which use the pool. Richard Cassidy stated that when customers swipe into the leisure centres we do not have complete data on which services they are using once they are in the building but with individual fitness programmes we encourage customers to use the wider range of products and services on offer to them;

22. Councillor Chambers asked what the justification is for the 11.1% increase for Hackney Carriage/Private Hire Licence fees. Dan Horn stated that the charges proposed are based on a full cost recovery basis. Taxi fares charged is a separate issue. Any request to increase taxi fares would need to come from the trade and would then be considered by the Licensing Committee. If Licensing Committee agreed to an increase the community would have an opportunity to comment and Licensing Committee would consider those comments;
23. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that this is an increase that cannot be passed on to their users and asked why it is being increased by so much. Dan Horn stated that this is not a charge that the Council can make a profit on and is based simply on cost recovery;
24. Councillor Sutton stated that in real terms the increase is just £8, he suggested that the data shown as a percentage looks far worse. Rob Bridge agreed that it would be possible to include a financial comparison in future;
25. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if this increase was necessary. Dan Horn confirmed that we need to ensure that the Council does not lose money delivering this service;
26. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that report refers to a charge of £35 for the return of stray dogs, however she knows of someone who was charged £65 to pick up their dog. Richard Cassidy confirmed that there are additional kennelling and admin costs which will change the amount charged depending on how long the dog is kept before the owners come forward;
27. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked about issues that have been experienced with regards to children's graves at Mount Pleasant Cemetery. Councillor Murphy agreed that this has been a sensitive issue. Families will often put lots of toys and things around children's graves, which is perfectly understandable, however staff have difficulty maintaining the area around the grave and have to move the personal items, this will sometimes result in a complaint about vandalism. This is a sensitive subject but we are considering the option whereby we have to say that there must be nothing on or around the grave at all. Councillor Sutton agreed that it is a sensitive issue but lots of other cemeteries have this rule in place;
28. Councillor Miss Hoy asked why the cost of the Wisbech Mart Fair is so high at £7000, this may have been understandable when the Council owned the Market Place, but cannot understand the high price now that the Market Place is owned by the Town Council. Councillor Humphrey agreed to investigate and update members following the meeting;
29. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that there are no financial details in the report for the Four Seasons Events, and that there have been no consultations with those mentioned. She asked if this is something that the Council want to be doing in the future. Rob Bridge stated that it is an option for the future and we will be consulting moving forward;
30. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that she is trying to understand the traveller's sites and homeless person's data in the report. She asked officers to confirm that there are no increases in charges for traveller's sites or hostels but there is an increase for temporary accommodation. Rob Bridge confirmed this data is correct;
31. Councillor Mrs French asked for confirmation that we charge £11 for an agenda. Rob Bridge confirmed this price is correct stating that we get very few requests;
32. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked about the stage of the purchase of the Wisbech Courthouse, she asked if payment has been made and for how much as there are no details about this on the budget. Councillor Melton confirmed that terms have been agreed but payment has not been made. Councillor Humphrey informed members that the budget is still not complete.

Members agreed the Fees and Charges 2014/15, and recommended to Cabinet that they be included in the final Budget proposals 2014/15 subject to consideration to the fees with regards to the Wisbech Mart Fair.

(Councillor Miss Hoy declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item by virtue of the fact that she is employed by a company who have an office at the South Fens Business Centre)

OSC25/13 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME 2013 - 2014

Members considered the Future Work Programme 2013/14 for the Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

Following discussion members agreed that :

- Planning Review verbal update to be scheduled in during May/June 2014.

Members agreed the Future Work Programme 2013/14 for the Overview and Scrutiny Panel, subject to the additional item detailed above.

4.45pm

Chairman