

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

24 FEBRUARY 2014 - 2.30PM



**PRESENT:** Councillor Chambers (Chairman), Councillor Mrs French (Vice-Chairman), Councillors Broker, Hodgson, Sutton and Swan

**OBSERVING:** Councillor Murphy

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:** Robert Hill (Treasurer - Middle Level Commissioners), Stephen Whittome (Chairman - Middle Level Commissioners), Christopher Smith (Regional Operations Director (East), Circle Housing Group) and Brenda Reynolds (Chairman of Roddons Board)

**APOLOGIES:** Councillors Mrs Bucknor, Miss Hoy and Stebbing

**OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:** Jane Bailey, Anna Goodall, Dan Horn and Alan Pain

### OSC28/13 PREVIOUS MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings of 13 January 2014 and 27 January 2014 were agreed and signed.

**\* FOR INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL \***

### OSC29/13 MIDDLE LEVEL DRAINAGE BOARD

Councillor Chambers introduced Robert Hill - Treasurer and Stephen Whittome - Chairman at Middle Level Commissioners who were attending the meeting for this item.

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

1. Councillor Chambers asked if Middle Level have set their precept yet. Robert Hill stated that the precept have not yet been set but are scheduled to be agreed at the meeting scheduled for 24 April. He confirmed that the commissioners will look to try to retain the rate and draft proposals have been drawn up to this effect, however the commissioners do not want to compromise the work that they carry out;
2. Councillor Chambers stated that if the rate increases the District Council precept over 2% it will trigger a referendum which will cost the Council thousands of pounds. Robert Hill stated that commissioners are aware of this and are trying to retain the rates. Stephen Whittome stated that Central Government are cutting finances back on lots of schemes and as a result the Commissioners have lost the funding bid at Salters Load, this amount was not factored into the budget but a half pence rate increase would cover this. The Commissioners have been able to hold the rate in the last 4 years but Central Government have made this very difficult. Robert Hill stated that built in with the Middle Level funding is the Environment Agency contribution, we have been made aware that they might struggle to fund and there is a potential for a 1p rate shortfall that could impact on the decisions made;

3. Councillor Chambers asked if Middle Level have looked at efficiency savings. Stephen Whittome confirmed that Middle Level have made significant efficiency savings including moving to the new offices in March, operating with less staff and replacing St Germans Pumping Station, we are always looking to run the facilities more efficiently, but need to balance the savings with the risks;
4. Councillor Chambers asked if the recent bad weather has caused any problems for Middle Level. Stephen Whittome confirmed that the recent bad weather had not caused any problems;
5. Councillor Mrs French stated that she had been very impressed at the recent pumping station visit and thanked Middle Level for the invitation. She asked that with regards to planning applications, although there is an understanding that Middle Level do not have the staff to look at all the applications submitted, when there is a large development we would appreciate it if these could be given some consideration. Stephen Whittome confirmed that the planning process allows us to feed into the large developments;
6. Councillor Mrs French stated that she is concerned with, and discussions have taken place at a March Town Council meeting about a new development. Robert Hill confirmed that the Drainage Boards did respond with issues in that area;
7. Councillor Broker asked how the introduction of charging for pre-application enquiries works with tight timescales. Robert Hill confirmed that this service is building, it is a long process and Middle Level were never allowed to charge for this service previously, but if we are going to offer this service we have to make it work. The pre-application advice timescales are driven by the applicants timescales;
8. Councillor Broker asked if a member of staff is dedicated to this work at Middle Level. Robert Hill confirmed that there is a dedicated member of staff for this work;
9. Councillor Chambers asked if some of the funding is reduced from the Environment Agency will this stop projects from taking place moving forward. Robert Hill confirmed that Middle Level will have to assess that at the appropriate time;
10. Councillor Chambers asked if Middle Level would have to subsidise ongoing projects themselves. Stephen Whittome confirmed that Middle Level have ongoing work which was spread out over several years that still needs to be completed such as bank raising;
11. Councillor Hodgson stated that the visit to the St Germans Pumping Station was an interesting visit and thanked Middle Level for the opportunity to have a look around. He asked if there is still more that needs to be done in this area. Robert Hill stated that Middle Level have an ongoing capital improvement programme and annual maintenance programme, he added that we have to continue what we do. Stephen Whittome confirmed that Middle Level are looking at possible rainfall patterns and planning on that basis;
12. Councillor Chambers stated that if Middle Level can cope with the weather that we have had lately then they are doing an excellent job, and this should be reassuring for the people living in this area;
13. Councillor Swan asked if there is any way to raise public awareness to make local people realise that we are not going to encounter the kind of issues that they have seen so heavily in the media. Stephen Whittome confirmed that there was a recent article in the local newspaper and we do try to re-assure the public in this way. There is an Environmental Officer who takes part in roadshows with information and it is getting across to the public that there is a system in place that works;
14. Councillor Chambers asked if anybody can have the opportunity to take the tour around the pumping station, as this was a rewarding visit and offered members a better understanding of how the system works. Stephen Whittome stated that groups of people are welcome to contact Middle Level to make an appointment to take a look around the facility in the same way that this committee did;
15. Robert Hill stated that at the previous meeting that Middle Level attended, there was a discussion about the possibility of displaying the breakdown of payments in the Council Tax booklet to show the contribution to Middle Level. Councillor Chambers agreed to investigate the possibility of this further, and if necessary make a recommendation to Cabinet to ask that it is included.

Councillor Chambers thanked Robert Hill and Stephen Whittome for attending the meeting today.

(Councillor Mrs French declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item by virtue of the fact that she is a District Council Representative on March Fifth IDB)

(Councillor Sutton declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item by virtue of the fact that he is a District Council Representative on Middle Level Board and Upwell IDB, and took no part in the discussion)

### **OSC30/13 UPDATE FROM RODDONS HOUSING ASSOCIATION**

Councillor Chambers introduced Christopher Smith - Regional Operations Director (East) Circle Housing Group and Brenda Reynolds - Chairman of the Roddons Board.

Christopher Smith made a presentation to the Panel.

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

1. Councillor Swan stated that with regards to the Service and Delivery and Performance data, it would be clearer displayed as numbers instead of percentages; he asked what the figures are with regards to complaints. Christopher Smith confirmed that this would equate to approximately 230 complaints and that 75-80% of those complaints would be repairs related;
2. Councillor Swan asked for clarification that 99% of complaints were dealt with at the investigations stage. Christopher Smith confirmed this. Brenda Reynolds confirmed that just 2 complaints were escalated to the board;
3. Christopher Smith agreed to convert the percentages detailed in the presentation into numbers to be circulated to the panel;
4. Councillor Mrs French stated that she often gets complaints from constituents about workmen not arriving when they are expected or missing appointments altogether, and asked if this is improving. Christopher Smith confirmed that a year ago 'failing to attend' was at the top of the list of dissatisfaction, however it has moved down the list to 3rd or 4th place;
5. Councillor Mrs French asked if following the welfare reform changes, there enough properties available for residents to downsize if they chose to. Christopher Smith confirmed that it has been a struggle but that Roddons are actively supporting people who want to move including offering a cash incentive, but overwhelmingly people are not moving, choosing to stay and pay;
6. Councillor Mrs French asked if Christopher Smith was aware that the 60 properties in Elliot Road are subject to potential flooding issues. Christopher Smith stated that we would rely on the primary authority to advise us about these issues and in this case that would be Anglian Water. He added that it would not be in the Circle Housing Groups interest to cause flooding either on their own site or for anyone else and we would not want to be seen as a contributor to any of these issues;
7. Councillor Mrs French asked if FDC Planning Officers have brought this to the attention of Roddons. Christopher Smith confirmed that he was not aware of the situation;
8. Councillor Mrs French confirmed that the report from Anglian Water came in after the decisions had been discharged. Christopher Smith stated that it is not something that has been directly brought to my attention. Alan Pain agreed to pick this issue up with Christopher Smith following the meeting today;

9. Councillor Hodgson stated that from a customer satisfaction point of view, the Roddons base in Wisbech is very successful especially with the extended opening hours. Christopher Smith confirmed that in addition to it being a base for residents in Wisbech, it is proving very successful as a base for staff to undertake visits from on foot, and is well on its way to paying for itself on mileage costs lone;
10. Councillor Hodgson stated that many residents come to him with minor issues that do not appear to be actioned very quickly. Christopher Smith stated that often people are reluctant to complain especially with regards to minor issues, however, there is an opportunity to express dissatisfaction rather than a full blown complaint. He agreed to look into the possibility of someone from the customer insight team attending the Resident Association meetings to look into some of the smaller issues highlighted at those meetings;
11. Councillor Broker stated that with regards to the site in Guyhirn, it had been encouraged that those properties should be made available for residents in or with connections to the village. He asked if this has happened. Christopher Smith confirmed that local preference was taken into consideration when drawing tenants for this site;
12. Councillor Sutton stated that the results are fairly impressive, but that he is keen to understand how they compare to other housing associations. Christopher Smith stated that the Circle Housing Group compare very favourably indeed, we benchmark nationally through HouseMark. Within the key indicators, across the scale Roddons are in the upper quartile of performers, in the top 10% of housing associations in the country;
13. Councillor Sutton agreed that this is impressive information and that it would be good in the presentation;
14. Councillor Sutton asked for clarification with regards to the Vermin Policy, he stated that he was aware that tenants were told that rats in the roof of their property were their problem. He added that he is confused that Roddons pass on the responsibility to the tenant, but then agree to repair any damage after that. Christopher Smith confirmed that this policy has been looked at, this issue is a clearly defined condition and clause of the tenancy agreement, and is not unique to Roddons. In most cases it points to an issue with the condition that the property is being kept in. We will make an exception if the customer has a level of vulnerability, and will look at each case on its own merits;
15. Councillor Sutton asked who would make that decision. Christopher Smith stated that the housing officer involved directly with the tenant would have the ability to make that decision, however it can go through the complaints route if the tenant disagreed with the outcome and then would go to a senior manager;
16. Councillor Sutton stated that he had visited the Wisbech shop and was very pleased to meet Anthony McFarlane, who was very positive and enthusiastic. Christopher Smith thanked the Councillor for his feedback and agreed to pass this on;

Councillor Chambers thanked Christopher Smith and Brenda Reynolds for attending the meeting. Christopher Smith thanked the panel for the opportunity to update the Council today.

*(Councillor Sutton declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item by virtue of the fact that he is a private landlord)*

*(Councillor Hodgson declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item by virtue of the fact that he attends the tenants and residents associations meetings in Wisbech)*

### **OSC31/13 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME**

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

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