

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

13 OCTOBER 2014 - 2.30PM



PRESENT: Councillor Mrs French (Chairman), Councillor Swan (Vice-Chairman), Councillors Broker, Mrs Bucknor, Sam Clark, Owen, Skoulding, Stebbing and Tunley

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Butcher, Clark, Cornwell, Murphy, Oliver, Seaton, Sutton and Yeulett.

APOLOGIES: Councillors King, Stebbing, Swan and Tanfield

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Jane Bailey (Member Service and Governance Officer), Jo Blackmore (Executive Officer), Rob Bridge (Corporate Director), John Carey (Press Officer), Richard Cassidy (Corporate Director), Gary Garford (Corporate Director), Anna Goodall (Head Legal and Governance), Paul Medd (Chief Executive), Alan Pain (Corporate Director) and Tash Stokes (Corporate Support Officer)

Councillor Mrs French informed everybody present that she had received notification that a photographer from The Cambs Times newspaper was in attendance at the meeting.

Councillor Mrs French welcomed Councillor Tunley on to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

OSC15/14 PREVIOUS MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of 1 September 2014 were agreed and signed.

*** FOR INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL ***

OSC16/14 ANNUAL MEETING WITH THE LEADER AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Councillor Clark, Leader of Fenland District Council presented the Annual Meeting with the Leader and Chief Executive Report and invited members to ask questions.

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

1. Councillor Mrs French stated that once again the report lacks clear data, figures and information, and reminded officers that this panel have been repeatedly asking for these details, she added that Councillor Murphy's portfolio is the only area in the report which has produced sufficient data;
2. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that with regards to page 11 of the report, supporting vulnerable members of the community, she asked why this Council is showing no consideration to vulnerable people and has decided to close Community House. Councillor Mrs French stated that this Council have not decided to close Community House but have decided to go out to consultation on this matter. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that she would like an understanding of how the Council will be consulting as the questionnaire has just 6 basic questions. Councillor Cornwell confirmed that the consultation with regards to

Community House asks some questions and provides a space for people to make any other comments that they may wish. Councillor Mrs French asked if the Oasis Centre had been included in the consultation. Councillor Cornwell confirmed that users and providers of services at Community House including the Oasis Centre had been included in the consultation;

3. Councillor Owen stated that the report refers to engagement with secondary schools in Fenland, and asked how does that accord with the reported decision to cut the funding to the Youth District Council (YDC). Councillor Cornwell confirmed that the reduction is a suggested amount in the grant funding that the YDC passes on to other groups and not a cut directly to the support given to the YDC themselves. He added that there was a view that the young people should understand the financial difficulties that this Council is going through and confirmed that this has not been decided but is also under consultation at the moment. Councillor Owen stated that the perception to the public is that we are cutting funding to the YDC. Councillor Cornwell stated that it is difficult to get the message across. Councillor Mrs French suggested that the Council should be getting a message out to people to explain what we have had to face financially. Councillor Sutton stated that we live in the real world, and for the young people who are members of the YDC to understand the real world they have also to understand that to continue to have the same level of grant funding may not be possible when the Council are faced with financial difficulties. Councillor Mrs French stated that if those financial difficulties were more widely publicised perhaps everyone would understand. Councillor Clark stated that we want to put the message across that we have huge savings to find, but we have to take care not to start scare mongering;
4. Councillor Tunley asked if we have an understanding of the number of empty private dwellings which have stood empty for 12 months or more and if we have a policy to deal with this issue. Councillor Sutton agreed to circulate the figures with regards to empty private dwellings and confirmed that the council tax reduction of exemptions has brought many of those properties back into use. Councillor Mrs French stated that previously this information was included in the report, she added that she is concerned that now we are getting council tax paid for those properties we no longer need to push to bring them back into use. Rob Bridge confirmed that a data return is due to government with regards to these issues at the end of the week, he agreed to forward this information to members following submission;
5. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that it would have been good to have figures with regards to bed and breakfast costs and information on how many families are prevented from becoming homeless each month. Officers agreed to circulate this information;
6. Councillor Owen stated that the report refers to the number of paid visits to New Vision Fitness and asked why this is a total visit number for all centres and not broken down. Councillor Mrs French stated that this panel have repeatedly asked for this data to be broken down in the past;
7. Councillor Mrs French asked following the PAS review how are you progressing with CIL and section 106. Councillor Clark confirmed that he circulated a note on CIL in July and since then we have completed a viability study and officers are evaluating the findings. He added that a Member Seminar has been arranged on the 23 October to keep members informed. With regards to S106, the findings of the PAS review are being implemented and we have 2 dedicated members of staff dealing with S106. Councillor Mrs French asked if the 2 dedicated staff members are Fenland employees, she also asked if town and parish councils will get an update of S106 monies due in their area. Gary Garford confirmed that the S106 Officers are employed by Peterborough City Council but are contracted to us, he agreed to send out regular updates to town and parish councils with regards to S106's within their areas;
8. Councillor Mrs Bucknor confirmed that the S106 updates are a good idea as the old Tesco site in Wisbech still had S106 money attached to it that had not been spent;

9. Councillor Mrs French asked how many planning applications which were submitted over 12 months ago are still to be determined. Councillor Sutton confirmed that the issues highlighted in the PAS review were being addressed and said the figure had now been reduced to around 10. He added that this figure could have been reduced further as he is awaiting an update. Councillor Mrs French stated that this is very good result, let's get those last few dealt with, so we can say we have none outstanding;
10. Councillor Tunley stated that the report refers to supporting the port operators in retaining existing and attracting new shipping traffic to the Nene Ports, he asked how Fenland District Council can do this. Councillor Yeulett stated that we have to ensure that we are operationally ready, adding that we are at the mercy of the economy. Councillor Tunley suggested that this is a throw away comment as there is actually nothing that we can do. Councillor Yeulett stated that we have to look at our rates and charges to ensure that they remain competitive. Councillor Tunley stated that if the number of ships reduce we would have no choice but to put the rates and charges up;
11. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that the report also refers to promoting the diversification into leisure, and asked how we are doing that. Councillor Yeulett stated that we are promoting with advertising and publicity, and agreed to provide more details;
12. Councillor Tunley stated that the statistics with regards to shipping offer no distinction between ships using the Port of Wisbech and the Port of Sutton Bridge and asked for a breakdown to be circulated;
13. Councillor Tunley stated that the statistics with regards to the Rapid Response and Street Scene Teams are impressive and asked if there is any independent information, or are the statistics only available from our own employees. Councillor Murphy explained that the statistics are taken from residents calling into the Council to report an issue;
14. Councillor Skoulding asked with regards to the Dial a Ride Service funding, does this Council ask for BT bills to back up the payments required. Councillor Butcher stated that it is his understanding that the £50,000 funding pays towards the bus passes. Gary Garford confirmed that any invoiced received are checked and verified before any payment is authorised;
15. Councillor Skoulding asked what advice we give to people who have been given notice to vacate their home, as the high court have the power to evict people immediately. Councillor Sutton confirmed that the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) work on our behalf offering advice, and there are a lot of people who have been saved from eviction using that service. Councillor Clark confirmed that although this Council holds none of its own housing stock we offer this advice from our one stop shops;
16. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that given the issues faced with regards to transport in this area, Wisbech has no dual carriageway and no train station and are also facing possible cuts to the bus services, and yet the report contains a small paragraph with regards to transport, this is not enough information;
17. Councillor Sutton confirmed that there is a new Planning Development Manager in post and he has lots of new ideas, he agreed to circulate to members his contact details and his functions within the Council. Councillor Mrs French stated that members used to receive an email informing them of new staff members and leavers. Councillor Owen stated that members previously received 'Hello/Goodbye Updates' and suggested that this should be reintroduced;
18. Councillor Broker stated that the report refers to the Coalwharf Road Design Competition, he asked which scheme was selected, have we received a planning application and are we heading in the right direction. Councillor Yeulett agreed to circulate an update. Gary Garford stated that we have had a successful competition winner, additional land was agreed so we increased the site and they are preparing a planning application as we speak;
19. Councillor Broker asked for clarification that the developer will purchase the land from FDC. Gary Garford confirmed that this is correct and that we are working with them;

20. Councillor Broker suggested that there should be more information included within the report with regards to dilapidated buildings, he asked if there is funding in place for these buildings. Councillor Oliver confirmed that we have a register of buildings of concern and we are looking at these properties;
21. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if the Phoenix Hotel building in Wisbech is included on the register. Councillor Oliver confirmed that the Phoenix Hotel is not included as the owner is not available. Gary Garford stated that we decided that as the Phoenix Hotel is relatively aesthetically pleasing it is not so high on the priorities, there are still attempts to engage with the owners, but these have still been unsuccessful to date;
22. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if the Council will engage with the mortgagee. Gary Garford confirmed that the Council has engaged with the mortgagee, but that the cost of the mortgage and our charges are more than the value of the property;
23. Councillor Mrs French stated that members previously received an updated list of these buildings to keep us up to date, and asked for officers to reintroduce this update;
24. Councillor Hodgson stated that with regards to the overpayment reclaimed in the 3C's summary, can the Council still reclaim if they get the information wrong. Rob Bridge stated that overpayment of Housing Benefit may occur as all details may not have been shared with us. There is a small percentage of errors that are acceptable to the auditors and so there is a focus to minimise the errors. He explained that this particular query is around someone making a complaint about the overpayment. Councillor Hodgson asked what happens if you do not have the means to pay back the overpayment. Rob Bridge confirmed that there are processes to follow and work through, the team are always happy to discuss any issues and come to an agreement for the overpayment to be repaid;
25. Councillor Mrs French asked for clarification with regards to the number of benefit fraud cases. Rob Bridge stated that the Council has publicised benefit fraud cases as a way of getting the message out to the public that we take this issue seriously. Councillor Mrs French stated that members would appreciate regular updates with regards to benefit fraud cases;
26. Councillor Hodgson asked for an update following the A47 workshop. Councillor Butcher stated that this work is still in phase one. The main junction is in Norfolk and different designs are being drawn up for the best result before the project can progress any further. Councillor Hodgson stated that the report refers to junctions in and around Wisbech. Gary Garford stated that we are looking at these junctions to ensure that they are not a block to developments in the future, we are looking at comprehensive traffic solutions around the town;
27. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that there is a lot happening around Coalwharf Lane and asked if there are any updates on the Courthouse site. Councillor Clark confirmed that an informal meeting took place but that no pre-application or planning application has been submitted at this time;
28. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that these developments will have further impact on the roads in the area. Councillor Clark stated that there is a willingness with the new owner of the Courthouse to work with us and I have no doubt that your concerns will be addressed;
29. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if members could have an update with regards to the Phoenix Hotel. Councillor Clark confirmed that the Chairman had already requested updates which have been agreed, he added that he fully understands members need to know more details;
30. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked what the current situation is with regards to Constantine House. Councillor Oliver confirmed that plans for Constantine House are that the first floor of the building will be developed back into flats and that a planning application will be submitted for retail units downstairs;

31. Councillor Owen asked for clarification with regards to community translation services, he asked if FDC employ translators when they are required and how much this service costs the Council. Rob Bridge confirmed that it is difficult to provide an exact figure for this service as the Council have members of staff based at the one stop shops to help with members of the migrant population. These staff members are paid on the same grade as the other staff in the one stop shops, and everybody works as part of the team. He agreed to put some costings together to demonstrate the cost of this service to the Council. Paul Medd stated that this Council is ever more stressed financially, and those costs are absorbed into the team, adding that this is about creating a staff structure to include staff with bilingual skills;
32. Councillor Owen stated that the report refers to seeking improvements to Wisbech Transport Issues adding that he understands that Stagecoach are looking at cutting the number 46 and 56 buses which are very popular services to local people. He asked what steps are being taken to ensure that we do not lose these important transport links for local people who currently use the buses to get to school and work. Councillor Butcher confirmed that he was not aware that these routes might be under threat stating that there is a meeting on Thursday, representatives from the bus companies will also be invited and these matters are discussed frequently. He added that we will say what the residents want and need in the area but ultimately this is a commercial decision;
33. Councillor Mrs Bucknor confirmed that the 2 major bus services are carrying out a consultation over the next couple of months. Councillor Butcher stated that previously where there has been a lot of responses to consultation the services have remained the same, so the bus companies will listen to the service users;
34. Councillor Mrs French asked for clarification with regards to the baseline number of memorial inspections completed, reported as 1091. Councillor Murphy confirmed that this is a baseline figure of inspections completed on an annual basis;
35. Councillor Mrs French asked if the plans to clean the March Memorial prior to the Remembrance Day Commemorations are on target. Councillor Murphy confirmed that the plans are on target;
36. Councillor Mrs French offered her congratulations to the Parks Team for the In Bloom awards that have been won this year. Councillor Murphy agreed, stating that the hard work and dedication by all the teams involved resulted in 33 awards in total;
37. Councillor Mrs French asked for an update with regards to the Individual Electoral Registration (IER). Anna Goodall stated that originally we had 7000 electors who did not match with the details held by the DWP. We have written out and the request for further information from electors has been fairly well received however there have been a number of genuine enquiries asking why we are requesting further information, which the team are responding to;
38. Councillor Mrs French informed members that she had attended the Fenland Business Awards, and that the evening was a fantastic event that she hopes this Council will continue to support. She stated that she would be disappointed if we removed our financial contribution to this event. Councillor Clark stated that he has asked for the data with regards to this funding as he is conscious that the Council should be looking at every pound that is spend. He confirmed that no decision has been made with regards to this funding and informed members that the final decision will be made by Cabinet when we have all the costings in place;
39. Councillor Owen stated that it is sad that we are having to attack public relations to save a few pounds;
40. Councillor Mrs French asked why the Design Awards has not taken place this year, as they normally take place in July. Alan Pain agreed to investigate and feedback to the panel;
41. Councillor Clark thanked the Overview and Scrutiny Panel members for the challenging questions they have asked Cabinet Members today, he added that there are going to be difficult decisions to be made moving forward but reassured members that the best decisions will be made for the residents of Fenland;

42. Councillor Mrs French thanked Cabinet and CMT members for their attendance at today's meeting.

Councillor Stebbing and Councillor Mrs Bucknor declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item by virtue of the fact that they are members of the Credit Union Steering Group.

Councillor Skoulding declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item by virtue of the fact that he has an interest in leisure facilities within the district.

Councillor Broker declared an interest in this item by virtue of the fact of his profession as an architectural agent.

OSC17/14 ACCOMMODATION REVIEW

This item was deferred to a later date to enable officers to provide more detailed information.

OSC18/14 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered the Future Work Programme 2014/15 for the Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

1. It was suggested that the Panel Pre-Brief prior to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel meeting to discuss the Accommodation Review should start one hour before the meeting, to allow the panel plenty more time for discussions. Members agreed;
2. Councillor Hodgson stated that he is concerned that about the accuracy of information in a leaflet from FDC about working from home, and asked if this is something that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel can look at. Councillor Mrs French confirmed that she would have a discussion with Councillor Sutton and Graham Nourse and get clarification on the facts, and if necessary the leaflet can be amended;
3. Members agreed to move the March Footbridge to the meeting scheduled in February;
4. Members agreed that there are 2 aspects of the Grass Cutting Review that needs to come forward, the first is to look at the specifications of the review and the second is to invite The Landscaping Group into a meeting, suggested November and January;
5. Councillor Broker suggested that the panel ask for a different format of reporting in the future as the report for this meeting is more than 100 pages long but actually contains very little clear data and information. Councillor Mrs French agreed that more data is required for this Panel to be able to scrutinise properly in the future.

Members agreed the Future Work Programme 2014/15 for the Overview and Scrutiny Panel subject to the amendments above.

4.35pm

Chairman