

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

24 NOVEMBER 2014 - 2.30PM



PRESENT: Councillor Mrs French (Chairman), Councillor Swan (Vice-Chairman), Councillors Broker, Mrs Bucknor, S Clark, Hodgson, King, Owen, Skoulding, Tierney and Tunley

ALSO IN ATTNDANCE: Councillors Murphy and Seaton

APOLOGIES: None

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Jane Bailey (Member Services and Governance Officer), Rob Bridge (Corporate Director), Richard Cassidy (Corporate Director), Anna Goodall (Head of Legal and Governance), Phil Hughes (Head of Leisure Services) and Geoff Kent (Head of Customer Services)

Councillor Mrs French welcomed Councillor King and Councillor Tierney to their first Overview and Scrutiny Meeting as members of the panel.

OSC19/14 PREVIOUS MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of 13 October 2014 were agreed and signed subject to the following amendments:

- Add Councillor Hodgson to the 'present list' as he attended the meeting but does not appear;
- Item no OSC15/14, at the end of the minutes for this item the interests appear, the first interest noted says Councillor Stebbing and this should read Councillor Hodgson.

Matters Arising

- Councillor Owen stated that referring to minute no. OSC15/14 bullet point 32, he was aware that the service was under consultation and had raised this at the meeting as he was hoping that FDC representatives would bring it up at the next Transport meeting;
- Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that referring to minute no. OSC15/14, bullet point 29, she has yet to receive an update with regards to The Phoenix Hotel;
- Councillor Tunley stated that referring to minute no. OSC15/14, bullet point 12, he has yet to receive the breakdown he requested with regards to ships using the Port of Wisbech and the Port of Sutton Bridge;
- Councillor Mrs French stated that she is unhappy with the current arrangements with regards to feedback following questions raised at the Overview and Scrutiny meetings, in future she would like the updates two weeks before the next meeting, instead of one and hard copies to be circulated too;
- Anna Goodall agreed to follow up the outstanding updates and to feedback the request for updates to be circulated two weeks before the next meeting.

Members discussed Councillor Mrs Bucknor suggestion that in future the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel should have the authority to refuse a report unless it contains sufficient data to be scrutinised effectively, as a lack of information will result in the item being deferred to the next meeting.

Members noted and supported the suggestion.

OSC20/14 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT - 2015/16 SCHEME

Councillor Seaton presented the Council Tax Support 2015/16 Scheme Report stating that each year the Council is required to review its Council Tax Support (CTS) Scheme. This report advises Overview and Scrutiny of the progress of the 2014 review and the resultant proposals for the CTS scheme to take effect from 1 April 2015.

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

1. Councillor Owen stated that 4.9 of the report refers to the fact that it is proposing to uprate some allowances and premiums, and asked what these allowances and premiums are, he added that there are several points throughout this report where we have not got appropriate information. Rob Bridge stated that this year we had a situation where the changes that we are making are minimal, the proposal is better for the communities and the changes are minor. He agreed that this could be made clearer in the report that goes to Cabinet and Council. Geoff Kent stated that DWP updates their benefits in January for April and what our scheme proposes to do is to bear those in mind, but those figures are not available today;
2. Councillor Tunley stated that the purpose of this Committee is to scrutinise, but without the details we cannot do this adequately, and are unable to carry out our responsibility. Rob Bridge, reiterated that the figures are not yet available, but agreed that officers could provide examples of what the figures are this year;
3. Councillor Mrs French stated that the panel could refuse to look at the report. Rob Bridge stated that this approach may cause a problem with the timetabled process for this. He reassured members that the report has not been written in such a way to stop them from having the information, but simply that the information is not available until the benefits have been set by the DWP. He explained that the figures and more detailed information are not so crucial at this point as we are looking at the scheme, we will use the data when it is provided as part of the calibration. This year it means that we will allow more income before we start charging more Council Tax as we are remaining at 14% which will mean that customers will be able to have a higher income before losing CTS;
4. Councillor Tunley explained that the concern is that we have to make a decision today. Rob Bridge confirmed that today's meeting is about feeding your input about the scheme onto Cabinet and then onto Council, we can be clear about what the 2014/15 values are but I personally do not believe that those values are crucial to your job today;
5. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that there are some fairly sweeping statements which might be valid but we have no figures to back them up, she suggested that the report for Council should include some examples to put some meaning to those statements;
6. Councillor Seaton stated that he had asked if it would be possible to have some examples, but officers explained that there are no standard people on CTS and I was advised that it would not be in anyone's interest. Rob Bridge confirmed that some examples could be put together as an appendix to the report, but these would just be an examples as it is not a 'one size fits all' scheme. He added that he takes on board the comments from members today, we have tried to show how we are seeing the numbers coming down and it is interesting to see that although we are seeing more reminders going out we are not seeing a bigger debt to this Council, this is a positive position to be in;
7. Councillor Swan thanked Rob Bridge for the clear explanation; he stated that members want good clear information and asked why the report does not explain it like this. Rob Bridge agreed to make sure the explanation is as explicit in the report to Cabinet and Council;

8. Councillor Tierney stated that he accepts that this is good news, he asked how much control this Council has, can the CTS only be based on income or can we expand how we use it. Geoff Kent stated that it is in our gift how we apply this; authorities are allowed to have control of this. He explained that disabled people are allowed to have a higher level of income, we have used the basis of the previous CTS and we have found that disabled people have higher outgoings as a result of their disability;
9. Councillor Tierney stated that this is an Overview and Scrutiny Panel, and there is an opportunity to look at these things in advance as part of the 'Overview' process and to feed in earlier. Rob Bridge stated that we have to remember that making changes to this scheme will also cost money and we are looking at efficiency, but if there are things that the panel would like to look at, we can work that into next year's build of the scheme;
10. Councillor Owen stated that 4.8 of the report says that the consultation includes other persons likely to have an interest; he asked who the other persons are. Rob Bridge confirmed that the others are precepting authorities, we have to consult with County Council, Police and the Fire Authority;
11. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that 5.5 of the report refers to reminders sent and asked if reminder letters are sent out to individual people who are in default or households. Geoff Kent confirmed that the figures that 5.5 refers to are individual incidences, so a household could receive more than one notice;
12. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that the team are very helpful when dealing with customers who default, but suggested that it is made clearer that when customers default they are then expected to clear the total balance and not just the outstanding months that have been defaulted on. Geoff Kent confirmed that the notices that are sent out does say that the whole amount is due if they default again;
13. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that each time she has spoken to a resident with regards to defaulting on Council Tax payments their understanding is that they just need to catch up with payments on months that they have missed. Geoff Kent stated that we have customers who repeatedly get into arrears and have lived within the district for a number of years who do understand that they will be expected to clear the whole balance, it is a challenging issue and difficult to separate the people who cannot pay and who will not pay. He added that part of this focus is to get customers to pay in instalments at a time of the month that suits them. Councillor Seaton thanked Councillor Mrs Bucknor for her suggestion stating that officers can look to make that point clearer on the letter in future;
14. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that it is more helpful that people are now able to pay weekly too; this must have made a lot of difference to collection rates. Rob Bridge confirmed that the weekly payment option has made a huge difference stating that the total collection rate has improved overall. Councillor Mrs French added that the ability to pay over 12 months has helped too;
15. Councillor Tierney asked if there is an online payment option too. Geoff Kent confirmed that customers can make debit card payments online and over the telephone.

Councillor Mrs French thanked Councillor Seaton, Rob Bridge and Geoff Kent for attending the meeting today.

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel AGREED to:

- **Note the Council Tax Support - 2015/16 Scheme;**
- **Recommend no changes to the approach being taken prior to Cabinet and Council determining the 2015 CTS at their meetings in December.**

OSC21/14 REVIEW OF GROUNDS MAINTENANCE GRASS CUTTING IN FENLAND

Councillor Murphy presented the Review of Grounds Maintenance Grass Cutting in Fenland Report and informed members of the following:

- there are 1,079,567 sq. metres of grass cut every round time of amenity grass (that is 16 cuts every 2 weeks) = 17,273,072 sq. metres a year;
- there are 194,402 sq. metres of Cemetery grass cut every round (that is 18 cuts every 2 weeks) = 3,499,236 sq. metres a year;
- also note that whilst this is going on all the other extensive works being done under The Landscape Group (TLG) contract;
- 4.2 of the report compares Fenland to other similar sized Councils like Babergh in Suffolk - A visit has been undertaken to Babergh to learn how they manage Grounds Maintenance there;
- 4.5.3 of the report refers to ownership of grassed areas, many complaints that come in are not about FDC land but still have to be investigated so as not to involve any extra unnecessary costs to FDC;
- 4.5.7 of the report refers to collection of grass clippings, to cut and collect would increase the cost by approximately £70,000 a year in cemeteries alone;
- The Grass Maintenance Specification shows that this is not just 'let's get the mowers out and cut here and there because it looks a bit untidy' it shows what a difficult time TLG face but I do believe that, all considered, they do a sterling job for Fenland.

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

1. Councillor Mrs French stated that she is very impressed with the content of the report and that it is the best report submitted to this panel for some time. She added that she hopes that other teams take note;
2. Councillor Owen agreed that the report is good and that he is happy with the contents, he added that he is pleased with the comparison results from 4.2 and appreciates the extra costs involved with regards to collecting clippings from cemeteries;
3. Councillor Sam Clark referred to a letter sent to TLG on 2 October 2014 regarding damage caused at Newton Parish Church, she stated that to date the Parish Council have had no response to that letter. Councillor Murphy agreed to discuss further following the meeting today;
4. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if officers can clarify on the maps, an area outside the Oasis Centre, as it is her understanding that County Council pay contractors via FDC to carry out grass cutting there 4 times a year, this area is heavily used and so the cuts have been increased. She asked how we can ensure that major areas like this are cut more often. Richard Cassidy stated that our grounds maintenance contract agreement with the County Council relates to highway verges in towns and villages only, and that the County Council also pay different contractors to look after other areas of land they own. The first step would be to look up the status of that piece of land and to take it from there, he agreed to investigate further following the meeting;
5. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that 4.2.2 of the report refers to the fact that FDC cuts the highway grass 16 times a year whilst only receiving payment for just 3 cuts of grass from the County Council. She asked if we are able to ask for additional payments. Councillor Murphy stated that the County Council will not pay any more towards this, we cut up to the town boundaries to ensure it is tidy, we do this to prevent complaints from residents;
6. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that 4.5.5 of the report refers to signage in cemeteries to ensure that customers are aware that wet grass cannot be removed from memorials, she suggested that there should be additional signs displayed near the water taps as customers drive straight in and could miss the signage at the entrance. Councillor Murphy agreed;

7. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that the rose garden in the interment area at Mount Pleasant cemetery is in a mess and asked if it would be possible to organise a promotion amongst local rose growers to improve the area. Councillor Murphy agreed that it could be something that is investigated further, he stated that Eastwood Cemetery has been tidied up and we are in the process of making improvements to the other cemeteries in the district too. Richard Cassidy stated that it is something that can be looked into but the maintenance costs are quite significant for rose gardens. He added that we might look at moving to the design at the Eastwood Cemetery, this type of design is much easier to maintain and keep tidy;
8. Councillor Tunley stated that it is a very good report, he asked for clarification with regards to the idea of moving some areas back to wilderness areas. Councillor Murphy confirmed that there are some areas in the district that could be good for this and we have been talking to other Councils where this has worked well;
9. Councillor Tunley stated that the report makes reference to transferring responsibility for grass maintenance to town and parish councils. Councillor Murphy stated that this is not something that we are considering at Fenland, it is an example of how other councils have reduced the cost of grounds maintenance;
10. Councillor Skoulding offered his congratulations to TLG for a difficult year; the grass has been growing very well. He stated that there is a football pitch on Gaul Road Recreation ground and when the grass was cut there were large clumps of grass left on the pitch which made it very difficult to play a football match. He asked if it would be possible to clear sports areas like this. Councillor Murphy confirmed that we can look into it but it would increase the overall cost;
11. Councillor Mrs French stated that the location list refers to Church Gardens in March and asked for clarification on its location. Richard Cassidy agreed to investigate and feedback;
12. Councillor Swan congratulated Councillor Murphy and the officers present for the informative report and agreed it would be a good idea to pass this around to other officers who are responsible for producing reports so they are clear what we want to see. He stated that he has been working with Phil Hughes, Andy Brown and volunteers with regards to improvements at Whittlesey Cemetery and this has been fantastic. Councillor Murphy agreed that groups like Friends of Cemeteries really can be a great help;
13. Councillor Swan stated that Anglian Water carried out some flood risk work at Station Road Recreation Ground and to this date that area has not been returned to a satisfactory standard, he asked if there was an agreement which said that they would have returned the area to its former glory. Councillor Murphy agreed that this area should have been put back into use. Richard Cassidy agreed to investigate further and feedback;
14. Councillor Swan stated that the Manor Field has long standing flood issues which result in the grass overgrowing as the cutters cannot get on to cut it. There are football pitches there too and matches are played but the grass is far too long. One of the pitches is currently totally under water and now it will be left until next year. He asked if something can be done to improve the situation there. Councillor Murphy agreed to investigate the issues there;
15. Councillor Broker agreed that the report is excellent. He stated that the report refers to additional work outside of the contract and asked who carries this additional work out. Councillor Murphy confirmed that the extra work is passed to TLG to carry out;
16. Councillor Broker stated that the report says that the Council expects to spend £40,600 on extra works and asked is this a contingency. Councillor Murphy agreed it is a contingency amount depending on work expected each year;
17. Councillor Broker explained that as a Councillor in a rural area he receives more complaints with regards to overhanging trees than he does on grass cutting and asked if this contingency amount might cover this type of extra works. Councillor Murphy stated that it would depend if the trees belonged to private land owners or highways, each case would need to be looked into individually;

18. Councillor King stated that it is an interesting idea to allow areas to revert back to a more natural state and asked if officers have given any thought to criteria to select these areas if we were going to do it. Richard Cassidy stated that we are working with the Portfolio Holders and local friends groups to identify certain areas that might be suitable. It is something that communities are quite interested in and we would be very much encouraging the engagement of community and wildlife groups to be involved;
19. Councillor Tierney agreed the wilderness areas are a good idea and suggested that a small sign in places that were identified would save a lot of money dealing with calls to say the area had not been tended to;
20. Councillor Tierney suggested that next time we consult with the public with regards to grounds maintenance we should ask if they would prefer the grass to be cut a little less often and the clippings collected or for the cuts to remain the same and the clippings to be left as this is an issue for local people;
21. Councillor Hodgson agreed that the quality of this report is much better and easier to understand. He congratulated Councillor Murphy and the Officers involved in preparing the report;
22. Councillor Mrs French asked if officers had an update on the hedges at City Road car park. Phil Hughes confirmed that the hedges near the lorry park at City Road are due to be cut soon;
23. Councillor Mrs Bucknor that 2.1.4 of the report refers to TLG staff inspecting, removing and disposing of litter, stones, branches and other debris. She suggested that cans be included in that list as the cans are of a particular annoyance and can be dangerous. Officers agreed.

Councillor Mrs French thanked Councillor Murphy, Richard Cassidy and Phil Hughes for attending the meeting today.

Richard Cassidy stated that representatives from TLG are on standby for the meeting in January 2015 and asked if the panel feel it is necessary for them to have to come into a meeting to be held to account if members are happy with the report today. Councillor Mrs French agreed and stated that members would discuss this during the next item and would update officers following the meeting.

OSC22/14 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

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

1. Panel members agreed that they are happy to remove TLG from the work programme for the meeting scheduled for 19 January 2015;
2. Councillor Mrs French requested that officers write to Councillor Stebbing to thank him for his work on the Overview and Scrutiny Panel;
3. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if FACT could be added to the Work Programme as all members have received information and she feels that they are duty bound to look into it. Councillor Mrs French agreed to discuss with officers and get back to members as she is unsure if this is something for this panel to be looking at when the police are involved. Anna Goodall agreed to discuss with the Legal Team;
4. Councillor Swan confirmed that Whittlesey Town Council is waiting to meet with Gary Garford with regards to the Allotments issues. Anna Goodall agreed to follow this up;
5. Members of the Review Group are waiting for feedback from Trevor Watson with regards to March Footbridge. Anna Goodall agreed to follow this up;

6. Councillor Broker asked members if they felt, due to the seriousness of the Accommodation Review Item at the next meeting, it would be beneficial for their pre-meeting to be held a few days before the meeting, so that we can decide between us if there is enough information in the report. This would give officers time to come back with any missing details. Councillor Swan agreed and stated that we cannot scrutinise this item properly if we do not have the correct information. Members decided that Anna Goodall would email all members of the panel when the report has been despatched to ascertain if they have any further questions or comments for officers prior to the meeting;
7. Councillor Tierney stated that he feels that an overview of this plan in the earlier stages would have been a good idea. Councillor Mrs French stated that this was 'sprung on them' and this is why we have scheduled an additional meeting.

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

4.00pm

Chairman