

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

**19 JANUARY 2015 - 2.30PM**



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

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

**APOLOGIES:** Councillors Sam Clark, Hodgson and Tanfield

**OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:** Jane Bailey (Member Services and Governance Officer), Rob Bridge (Corporate Director and Chief Finance Officer), Richard Cassidy (Corporate Director), Gary Garford (Corporate Director), Anna Goodall (Head of Legal and Governance), Dan Horn (Head of Housing and Neighbourhood Services), Paul Medd (Chief Executive), Alan Pain (Corporate Director), Carol Pilson (Corporate Director) and Mark Saunders (Chief Accountant)

### **OSC26/14 PREVIOUS MINUTES**

The minutes of the meetings of 24 November 2014 and 15 December 2014 were agreed and signed.

#### Matters Arising:

1. Councillor Tunley asked with regards to the Grounds Maintenance Item discussed at the meeting which took place on 24 November 2014, why were members not informed that there was a tender process taking place for the Grounds Maintenance Contract. No mention of this was made at the meeting or indeed the possible inclusion of Street Cleansing into that contract. Councillor Murphy stated that details were not finalised at that time. Councillor Mrs French stated that it might have been nice to have informed the panel at that meeting that consultants were looking at that contract;
2. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked for further clarification stating that consultants were brought in 2 months before the discussion took place at that meeting, at a cost of approximately £26,000, but none of this was brought to the attention of the panel. Councillor Murphy reiterated that there was no information at that time. Councillor Mrs French added that it would have been nice at that time to have been told that you were looking at the contract, even if you had no further details to pass on. Councillor Murphy stated that no decisions have been made and the final decision will be made by the full Council. Councillor Tunley stated that a decision was made to incur a cost of £26,000, someone must have taken the view that it was reasonable to take this route, and we are just saying that it might have been reasonable to have alerted this panel to that information;
3. Councillor Tierney stated that the point is that the panel was looking at this as part of their Scrutiny role and therefore he would not have expected that information to be included. He suggested that more use is made of the Overview role of the panel in the future.

**OSC27/14 DRAFT CORPORATE PLAN 2015 - 2018**

Members considered the Draft Corporate Plan 2015 - 2018 presented by Councillor Clark.

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

1. Councillor Mrs French stated that the report refers to the fact that savings have been made exploring new ways of working and asked what savings have been made with the introduction of the new Whittlesey Hub. Rob Bridge stated that £50,000 will be saved in the running costs alone and there will be further savings made in the future as initially we need to put more staff in to help people with the changes to processes carried out there. Overall it is working well;
2. Councillor Swan stated that he has had lots of feedback with regards to the Whittlesey Hub, including issues that there is not enough staff available at busy times; people not understanding how the new processes work and library staff unable to assist. He added is concerned that customers have not taken to the changes, but understands that there will be teething problems and that he has passed all feedback onto Geoff Kent. Rob Bridge stated that the Chatteris Hub took time to settle, customers took some time to understand how the new processes worked. Library staff at the Chatteris site took time to understand how everything worked and are now able to offer assistance to customers if they are required to. Feedback is helpful and we will work through the teething problems to make it a success. Councillor Butcher agreed, stating that he was at the opening of the Whittlesey Hub and has visited several times since. Customers are getting used to the new arrangements and understand why the changes have been made;
3. Councillor Mrs French stated that the report refers to supporting residents to do more for themselves, and asked what this means. Councillor Clark stated that this is what we have been talking about with regards to the Whittlesey Hub, customers are encouraged to access things like the payments systems available there;
4. Councillor Owen asked if the staff joining ARP are still employed by FDC. Rob Bridge stated that mainly everyone is still employed by FDC, where restructures have taken place some staff may have moved over to ARP but in the main staff stayed on FDC Terms and Conditions;
5. Councillor Tunley stated that this Council is committed to maintaining the current level of frontline services and asked that given the degree of cuts that are expected are we confident that we can or is there a risk that these will suffer. Councillor Clark stated that we do not see that happening at the moment, we will look at all ways of delivering a service the most cost effective way that we can. Paul Medd stated that the resources that we have will be less, officers are looking at what members have said are their highest priorities, but there will be more difficult decisions to be made in the future;
6. Councillor Tunley stated that he encourages the rail links between Wisbech and Cambridge but is concerned about the rail crossing at Station Road as we know there will be an increase in rail traffic. When proposals are being put forward consideration needs to be given to that crossing;
7. Councillor Tunley stated that he does not have confidence in the fact that the newly adopted Neighbourhood Plan will improve infrastructure. He added that the document is weak and does not give a holistic view to future infrastructure;
8. Councillor King asked for clarification with regards to promoting health and wellbeing. Councillor Cornwell stated that we are looking at developing our own draft health and wellbeing strategy. There is an understanding that no one service has the control, but that if they all work together they will achieve, and the message is getting through. People are now realising that we have to work with others and this is the best approach;

9. Councillor King stated that he feels the main problem is that he does not sense the desire on their part to work with us. Councillor Cornwell confirmed that there is a realisation that the health service cannot do everything on their own and will have to rely on the wider aspects of local Government. Many different partners are linked into this and all will have an important role to play. The effects of working together on the health services are huge. It is very early days but the message is getting through;
10. Councillor King stated that he is unsure what the statutory minimum is costing and how much we have spent. Councillor Cornwell confirmed that we have a statutory responsibility to look after residents. Paul Medd stated that there is duty to co-operate, the financial contribution to multidisciplinary working is built in to existing resources. Councillor King stated that he is concerned that we are not going to see progress with this. Councillor Cornwell reiterated that it is still early days;
11. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that she appreciates that this project is challenging but is concerned that there is just a general explanation in the report. She asked if there is a set programme or a timetable that could be shared with the panel. Councillor Cornwell stated that the Local Health Partnership Update is scheduled on the Overview and Scrutiny work programme for 23 February, he suggested that the question should be asked at that meeting;
12. Councillor Mrs French stated that the report refers to exploring the use of external delivery to promote and develop our business premises and asked if this will require external consultants. Paul Medd confirmed that in the past members have raised the point of low occupancy rates at the business centres. We continually review how we can improve our occupancy levels, following the previous work we did with Tinfish. We would not naturally go to external support as we have staff resources in-house, but if we felt that there was an area that we did not have expertise in and in an exceptional circumstances we might, if we felt that there was a cost effective intervention, be open minded to external support;
13. Councillor Owen stated that the report refers to promoting Fenland as a tourism and visitor destination, and asked if we still have a Tourism Team at FDC. He added that he had previously asked for staff leavers and arrivals information to be shared with members. Councillor Clark stated that Councillor Tanfield is the Chairman of the Tourism Board, but was unable to attend today's meeting, but she would circulate an update if it was required;
14. Councillor Owen asked for clarification with regards to staff in that team. Alan Pain stated that Vicki Whittingstall is the Tourism Officer and leads the Tourism Board with Councillor Tanfield who is the Chairman. The Tourism Board meet every month;
15. Councillor Mrs French asked why members have not been updated with staff leavers and new arrivals. Councillor Clark agreed stating that members were once included in these updates. Anna Goodall stated that HR have confirmed that they will provide updates on staffing to be circulated to members, but that the member of staff they are referring to is a very recent update;
16. Councillor Mrs French stated that the report refers to surplus assets and asked what surplus assets this Council has. Rob Bridge confirmed that the Council has an assets register and this is checked by the auditors each year, a surplus asset is an asset that we feel can be sold, if and when the time is right to do that;
17. Councillor Swan stated that the report refers to enforcement; we have an ever increasing problem in the district with dog fouling. Street Scene Officers do their best with regards to this issue, but I would have liked to have seen this highlighted within the report. He asked how many people have received enforcements with regards to dog fouling. Councillor Murphy stated that there is a press release today with regards to this issue of dog fouling on the football pitch at the Sportsman in Chatteris; the pitch had to be cleared and cleaned before a match could take place. It is and always has been a very difficult issue to enforce and is even more so with the dark mornings and evenings. Sadly it is very irresponsible dog owners that leave the mess;

18. Councillor Swan stated that he understands that it is difficult but people are asking what we are doing about it. From a public perception we should publicise when we do prosecute for this offence. Councillor Murphy agreed;
19. Councillor Tierney stated that in his opinion every penny that is spent on this is a waste of money as it is virtually impossible to enforce, the money would be better spent on a hard hitting publicity campaign. Officers are doing an impossible job; we need to look at it in a new way. Councillor Murphy confirmed that they have tried publicity campaigns in the past and there are posters and signs up at hot spots.

## **OSC28/14 DRAFT MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY AND GENERAL FUND BUDGET 2015/16**

Members considered the Draft Medium Term Financial Strategy and General Fund Budget presented by Councillor Seaton.

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

1. Councillor Tunley stated that he would like to reiterate the question he asked earlier with regards to services and costs, there must be a breaking point, are we aware what that breaking point is and how far away from it are we? Paul Medd stated that these are unprecedented times and while we do not have all the figures confirmed for the future it is likely that we will see continued pressure. There is a lot of work to be done moving forward, but there is no doubt that this Council will continue to be viable. There will be some difficult decisions to be made in the future, and the areas that members have chosen to prioritise will inevitably be impacted in line with some of those decisions. We will continue to engage with members to look at what the priorities are moving forward;
2. Councillor Tierney stated that the financial handling at FDC is excellent. He added that the report is written in such a way that it looks like the 1.9% increase to Council Tax has already been agreed, but if it is possible the freeze to Council Tax should also be investigated and we should be looking at that option too as there are families struggling financially. Councillor Seaton confirmed that the increase has not been decided and pointed out that the document that the panel are looking at today is a draft; this budget is not set in stone. He added that he had made the point of saying at the introduction to the item that he would welcome comments from the panel that would be taken into account at the Cabinet meeting;
3. Councillor Mrs French stated that she did not want to open a debate about the Estover Road Playing Fields but asked if the money for Estover had been identified in the Capital Programme for 2015/18. Councillor Clark stated that he had discussed the matter with the Chief Executive and Councillor Seaton as Portfolio Holder for finance, but the expenditure would be subject to members approval
4. Councillor King asked for clarification that there would be an opportunity for Government Funding for a freeze on Council Tax. Rob Bridge confirmed that it is the same offer that has been in place for the last few years, we would be offered a grant;
5. Councillor Mrs French stated that with regards to the Tesco sites at Cromwell Road and at Chatteris how much additional NDR will that bring in. Councillor Clark stated that we have been trying to set up a meeting with regards to the Chatteris site and this has now been arranged for the 30 January. The final rates are decided by the Valuation Office and they have not yet completed, we hope to have an answer and are trying to push it forward. Paul Medd confirmed that we are doing everything we can to compel the Valuation Office to apply business rates. Rob Bridge stated that we will check that the business premises are complete, the announcements that we have made have said that we will be issuing a completion notice in 3 months and 5 days, this will be looked at and we expect it to be challenged. We are doing everything that we can to put pressure to get the facility filled, as this is clearly the best outcome. The Cromwell Road old site was bringing in £600,000 - £700,000 in NDR, but the new site in comparison is bringing in closer to £1m. This additional money through growth in the area is having a positive impact financially on this Council;

6. Councillor Owen asked for clarification, we have a purpose built supermarket, but it has not been completed, and therefore they will not be required to pay NDR. Rob Bridge confirmed that there is no air conditioning and the inside has not been fitted out. Paul Medd stated that officers share the members' frustration and we are doing everything that we can do. We will be pushing to find out that everything is being done to secure a new tenant for the site. Councillor Clark agreed and stated that he too shares the frustration of members today, the underpass and children's play area has not been completed and there are questions to be asked with regards to the CCTV too;
7. Councillor Swan stated that we still have an active planning permission in Whittlesey, Tesco say that they are not taking it on but are still building. We do not want this site to be in the same position as the one in Chatteris. Councillor Clark confirmed that these are questions that will be asked at the meeting at the end of the month;
8. Councillor Broker stated that the report says that there is still £1.730m of savings to be identified and asked for a broad overview of how this would be done, he also asked if officers are confident that this level of savings is achievable. Paul Medd stated that those figures are a forecast but consideration is being made to where those savings will come from. The findings from the review by the LGA suggested a number of things that this Council might want to consider after the election. Decisions that will need to be made to find these savings may be thought provoking and sensitive but I am confident that we will be able to deliver them;
9. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that she is concerned at the proposal of not allocating inflation to budgets. Rob Bridge stated that we have said that not all budget headings will increase automatically, however if there is a contractual arrangement that will be built into the budget;
10. Councillor Tunley asked for clarification of ongoing disposal of assets. Rob Bridge stated that the Council has an assets register and we have an identification of assets to be released, disposal is only considered when it is the right time to sell;
11. Councillor Tunley stated that he is concerned that borrowing is mentioned in the report. Rob Bridge stated that prudential borrowing is one option and we are clear that the Council do not want to borrow at this time, but it would be a consideration for members to decide. When current outstanding loans mature they will be paid off as there are financial penalties if they are paid early;
12. Councillor Swan asked if the £250,000 contribution towards parish street lights is enough. Councillor Seaton stated that he is not sure if Parishes will ever agree that is enough. We have put that contribution in place to repair/replace the category 1 lights, but how and if we contribute to the category 2 lights is still out for consultation and we have had varying degrees of responses. I cannot see how this Council can take on the whole cost of the street lighting, the lights are not our asset and this is already a generous offer;
13. Councillor Mrs French asked for clarification of the £15,000 contribution towards the Chatteris Underpass CCTV as she believed that the figure was £45,000. Paul Medd confirmed that is a reflection of part of the overall payment, and that the final figure is £45,000. Councillor Oliver confirmed that the £15,000 detailed in this part of the report is the cost of the cameras only;
14. Councillor Mrs French asked for clarification on the £75,000 for Tourism. Councillor Seaton confirmed that this a contingency;
15. Councillor King asked what the advantages would be to transferring £500,000 into the Capital Reserves and Management of Change Reserves. Councillor Seaton stated that he would not like to see the reserves go below £2.3m. We have to be aware that we are a financially secure Council and do not want any of those reserves taken away post-election, this proposal gives us the ability to move this amount over;
16. Councillor King stated that he has no problem with the proposal, but he does not agree that this Council should pay towards the category 2 lighting, we have to draw the line somewhere and the parishes should have been putting some money aside to deal with this issue. Councillor Seaton thanked Councillor King for his comments;

17. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked for clarification on the £339,000 for vehicles and plant. Councillor Murphy stated that this is for all the vehicles of the Council, but a large amount of it is for refuse;
18. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if this amount includes the street sweeper. Councillor Murphy confirmed that there is already a new street sweeper;
19. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked about the cost of mooring and asked if it is offset by income. Rob Bridge confirmed that we are making a contribution to the area of mooring that we own only;
20. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked for clarification of the £75,000 for ICT. Rob Bridge stated that Cabinet agreed an ICT modernisation Programme, changing the way that we deliver ICT across the Council;
21. Councillor King suggested that the panel should recommend that Cabinet agree to the 1.9% increase in Council Tax;
22. Councillor Tunley stated that the panel need to have a better understanding of the impact that this decision would have on future years;
23. Councillor Tierney stated that he would like to go for the freeze on Council Tax, but agreed that the panel need to have a better understanding moving forward;
24. Councillor Tunley stated that there is already extreme pressure on this Council and for this reason we have to move forward with the 1.9% increase on Council Tax;
25. Councillor Tierney suggested that there should be 2 sets of figures to compare the 2 options. Rob Bridge circulated further information to compare the 2 options;

**The Overview and Scrutiny Panel agreed the following:**

- **to recommend that Cabinet seeks to increase Council Tax by 1.9% for 2015/16;**
- **to support the draft budget proposals for 2015/16 outlined in the report;**
- **to recommend the transfer of £500,000 of the General Fund Balance to the Capital Contribution Reserve (£250,000) and the Management of Change Reserve (£250,000).**

**OSC29/14 REVIEW OF FEES AND CHARGES 2015/16**

Members considered the Review of Fees and Charges presented by Councillor Seaton.

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

1. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that with reference to harbour charges, we charge for 24 hours and not for a short stays which is understandable, but how do these charges compare. Gary Garford confirmed that these fees have been benchmarked against fees at other authorities and we are competitive compared to those;
2. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that she has been 'bombarded' by taxi drivers with regards to the 31% increase in licence fees. Councillor Oliver confirmed that for taxi drivers that already have their licenses the increase will be just 1.5%, for new taxi drivers the costs will be at the higher rate as this reflects the actual costs;
3. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that the higher rate will also apply to current licence holders if they change their vehicle. Councillor Oliver confirmed that this increase represents the actual cost to the Council;
4. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked how this compares to other authorities. Rob Bridge confirmed that neighbouring authorities have a different process to us so it is not directly comparable;
5. Councillor Tierney thanked Councillor Oliver and Rob Bridge for the explanation, he confirmed that he has also had a lot of queries about this matter but is happy to go back with that response;

6. Councillor Mrs French queried the contents of the table on page 49 stating that there were no figures included for Fenland 2014/15. Rob Bridge confirmed that they are set out in the more detailed document on page 72. Councillor Mrs French stated that it would have been good for this to have been included in the first table to make the comparisons clear;
7. Councillor Broker stated that he is concerned about the response to the commercial waste survey; the report says that 250 customers were asked, but only 21 responded. Richard Cassidy stated that responses to consultations with the commercial sector are always lower than with residents;
8. Councillor Tierney asked who is responsible for paying the increased rents on homeless accommodation. Rob Bridge confirmed that this would depend on the homeless persons personal situation;
9. Councillor Mrs French stated that the report refers to introducing pre-application charges and asked how far this has been looked into. Alan Pain stated that we have been comparing this approach with neighbouring authorities, and we will consult with members when we have those comparisons in place;
10. Councillor Owen stated that he was under the impression that if people wanted help with their applications they went to 'pre-app' but is now not sure that is the correct process. Gary Garford confirmed that the Technical Team validate applications;
11. Councillor Mrs French asked who decided that we should charge and how many people have been charged. Alan Pain agreed to investigate and feedback;
12. Councillor King thanked officers for the quality of financial information and advice within today's report and thanked all the other officers involved in the fees and charges review;

**The Overview and Scrutiny Panel considered the proposals contained in the report and at appendix A and agreed to recommend to Cabinet the Fees and Charges to be included in the final Budget proposals for 2015/16.**

#### **OSC30/14 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME**

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

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

4.35pm

Chairman