

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

9 FEBRUARY 2015 - 2:30PM



PRESENT: Councillor Mrs J French (Chairman), Councillors Broker, Mrs Bucknor, Sam Clark, Hodgson, King, Owen, Skoulding and Tierney.

APOLOGIES: Councillor Swan and Tunley

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Butcher and Oliver

OBSERVING: Councillor Murphy

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Jane Bailey (Member Services and Governance), Jo Blackmore (Executive Officer), Richard Cassidy (Corporate Director), Gary Garford (Corporate Director), Dan Horn (Head of Housing and Community Support) and Carol Pilson (Corporate Director)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Anne Brighton (Managing Director - Circle Housing Roddons)

*** FOR INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL ***

OSC31/14 CIRCLE HOUSING - RODDONS UPDATE

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel considered the Circle Housing - Roddons Update presented by Anne Brighton - Managing Director.

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

1. Councillor Mrs French asked for clarification regarding the additional information circulated 'Roddons - Towards the 500' as this information states that only 253 units have been completed despite having an additional 2 years to complete. She also asked if all development sites are included as the Gaul Road site is not detailed on the report. Anne Brighton confirmed that the Gaul Road site is not managed Circle but by Sanctuary Group. She added that there have been external issues with regards to delivery of the promise but that Circle have always been open and transparent with regards to these issues;
2. Councillor King stated that there was a commitment to build that has not yet been met and asked whose fault this was; he asked if there was anything that this authority could do moving forward. Anne Brighton stated that we had an extension on that promise and there have been some external matters that meant it was difficult to deliver. She added that Circle has a healthy development programme for new homes and sees this as a positive for the Fenland area in the future;
3. Councillor King asked what the timescales are for delivering the outstanding units. Anne Brighton confirmed that the delivery timescales are detailed on the information circulated. She added that there were some planning issues with regards to the Tydd St Giles site and a new site is to be found. Circle have heavily subsidised projects in this area as grants from Government have reduced;

4. Councillor Tierney thanked Anne Brighton for the presentation. He stated that he has had many tenants complaining about damp issues in their properties and asked if Circle are actively dealing with this problem. Anne Brighton confirmed that she is aware of some recent issues, stating that this issue has been linked in to some recent insulation work on some estates. She asked Councillor Tierney to give her further details following the meeting so that she could investigate further ;
5. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that she often liaises with Roddons and is very happy with the service; she added that she is delighted with the improvements made to the garages. She stated that the focus of issues reported to her over the past few months has been with regards to insulation of older properties. The age of the properties mean that the insulation is not effective, so the heating is on and the utility bills are very high. This is a serious issue, and she asked if there will be a focus on this moving forward. Anne Brighton confirmed that we recognise that this is an issue and is a priority for Circle, we are awaiting a final decisions on planned maintenance programmes;
6. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that she was surprised that there were no additional modern ways of reducing utility bills at the new dwellings on Acacia Avenue. Anne Brighton confirmed that it is something that Circle are looking into, but stated that there is a challenge as the levels of subsidy from Government for new homes has reduced, it is a balancing act;
7. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that the Rainbow Saver Credit Union supports customers with a 'Jam Jar' account and asked if the Leeds Credit Union will be offering the same. Anne Brighton confirmed that the Leeds Credit Union offers a 'Jam Jar' account too;
8. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked how many people are on the housing waiting list, and how many has it increased by in the last year. Anne Brighton confirmed that she does not have those figures to hand but agreed to circulate following the meeting;
9. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked with regards to Chips Trainees, how many do Roddons have and do you focus on recruiting them from the young people that live in your properties. Anne Brighton confirmed that there are 2 chip apprentices at the moment and 5 more apprentices in the main office. The vacancies are publicised on the residents newsletters and on the Facebook page to target young people;
10. Councillor Owen thanked Anne Brighton for the presentation, he stated that a lot of the units have yet to be built and asked if any are waiting for planning permission from FDC. Anne Brighton confirmed that there have been some planning difficulties with some sites, but we are making positive progress on this matter. There have been various challenges and Circle has been transparent about delays. There have been challenges but we are overcoming them and being honest about our expectations;
11. Councillor Owen asked if Roddons were involved in Rainbow Savers at the beginning of the project. Anne Brighton confirmed that Circle were not involved. Councillor King stated that there was some initial interest from Roddons but they did not become involved;
12. Councillor Owen asked if customers might get confused with 2 credit unions. Anne Brighton stated that Circle Housing Roddons will continue to promote both credit unions, there is an element of choice for customers;
13. Councillor Owen asked what is being done about the 15 outstanding gas safety services. Anne Brighton stated that we get weekly update reports with regards to customers not allowing us access, we actively door knock at various times of the day to ensure we have tried everything we can to gain access, failing this we will follow the legal route and gain access with a court order;
14. Councillor Skoulding stated that Elliot Road has a lot of pot holes and mud due to the building site and asked Circle Housing Roddons to repair and clean up the damage after the work has been completed. Anne Brighton agreed to feed back this issue when she returned to the office;
15. Councillor Mrs French stated that there were residents' complaints around the Elliot Road site, she thanked and congratulated Circle Housing Roddons for holding residents meetings to alleviate the issues and added that the 4 weekly updates via a newsletter are also very helpful. She asked that it be noted that Fishermans Drive should also be included in the clean up as they are suffering too as a result of the site;

16. Councillor Hodgson stated that he attends the residents association meetings and appreciates what you are doing for the residents;
17. Councillor Hodgson stated that there was a rough sleeping area off of Stow Road, the rough sleepers have been removed and Community Payback have cleared the area and removed the trees and bushes. The problem now is that the rear fences of the properties being have been knocked down and people can gain access to back gardens. He stated that that Roddons have responded to a request to replace the fencing by saying that they have no budget left this year for wooden fences, and only have a budget for wire fencing. Anne Brighton stated that as part of next year's budget she is hoping to give neighbourhood officers a small budget for small projects, like this one, in their area that would make a big difference to people's lives;
18. Councillor Hodgson stated that there is an area of anti-social behaviour as people walk through John F Kennedy Court from the school to town;
19. Councillor Mrs French asked if the Elliot Road site is still on schedule for completion in May. Anne Brighton confirmed that the work is on schedule;
20. Councillor Mrs French asked if tenants have been allocated to these properties. Anne Brighton confirmed that no tenants have been allocated at this stage, the properties would be advertised closer to completion of the site;
21. Councillor Mrs French stated that there have been some concerns with regards to the Grounds Maintenance contract that Circle Housing Roddons will be taking on from November. Anne Brighton stated that they are conscious that there has been an excellent grounds maintenance service through the partnership and are planning to maintain that level of service so that customers do not notice a difference;
22. Councillor Mrs French asked if it would be possible for more rubbish bins to be installed in Somerville play area. Anne Brighton agreed to feedback;
23. Councillor Mrs Bucknor passed photographs to Anne Brighton; she explained that an urgent issue was raised in November 2014 with regards to the passage ways off of Beechwood Road. The passage ways need house number signage as this is a big issue for emergency services, and has been raised at police forum meetings. Anne Brighton agreed to speak to the Neighbourhood Officer;
24. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that one of the bungalows at the bottom of Gloucester Road had been hit by a vehicle which damaged the railings. The railings are unsightly and need replacing. Anne Brighton agreed to speak to the Neighbourhood Officer;
25. Councillor King asked for clarification with regards to the Performance Indicators (PI's) showing as red and amber. Anne Brighton stated that in relation to Sheltered Homes we already acknowledge that there has been a reduction in customer satisfaction and have made this a priority moving forward. Officers will go out to visit all sheltered schemes and will ask customers how we can improve our services to them;
26. Councillor King asked for clarification with regards to the current tenant arrears showing as red on the PI table. Anne Brighton stated that Circle Housing Roddons are proactive with regards to the collection of rent, but at the same time aware of the difficulties and offer financial support and advice to residents;
27. Councillor King asked that with regards to the Grounds Maintenance contract will Circle Housing Roddons be developing some PI's around this work that they will share with this panel in the future. Anne Brighton confirmed that they will be developing PI's with regards to the new contract and would be happy to share this data in the future;
28. Councillor King asked what plans Circle Housing Roddons have to improve tenant engagement consultations. Anne Brighton stated that we need to review tenant engagement and be more creative about how we interact and get feedback, we currently get feedback by various methods and need to ensure that we tie all this feedback together. We do not always need to hold formal meetings to engage with tenants and we are beginning to realise this and look at better ways of engaging.

Councillor Mrs French thanked Anne Brighton, on behalf of the panel, for attending the meeting today.

Anne Brighton responded by thanking the panel for the invitation.

(Councillor Hodgson declared a Non-Pecuniary interest in this item by virtue of the fact that he attends Circle Housing Roddons Tenants Association Meetings)

Councillor Broker declared a Non-Pecuniary interest in this item by virtue of the fact that he is a private landlord)

OSC32/14 WISBECH 2020 VISION UPDATE

Members considered the Wisbech 2020 Vision Update presented by Councillor Butcher.

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

1. Councillor Mrs French stated that she had been concerned about the contribution of £400,000 from FDC towards the Thomas Clarkson Academy Theatre, but has been satisfied that milestones have been met and that the community is making good use of this facility;
2. Councillor Tierney referring to page 95 of the agenda pack he asked for clarification on the action to create a town master plan, he stated that the town already has quite a few plans and believes that £100,000 would be better spent on something else. Gary Garford stated that there are several plans in Wisbech and we are using these documents to cover the master plan, so it will be a combination of the plans already in place and under development. He confirmed that part of the funding will go to the town council for other projects and agreed to circulate the details to the panel (Update - there is a joint Community Contribution of £54,090.91 for WST and FDC to agree appropriate projects);
3. Councillor Mrs French confirmed that she was a member of the Planning Committee when the Tesco application was going through and remembers that there was a commitment to install touchscreen tourist information points, she asked for clarification that this was still going ahead. Gary Garford confirmed that the touch screen proposal is still going ahead, technology has moved on and we are looking at web based equipment, Vicki Whittingstall and Tesco are currently looking into this;
4. Councillor King stated that he understood that there would be a touchscreen point at the former Tesco site. Gary Garford confirmed that the touchscreens are to be installed at the former Tesco site;
5. Councillor Mrs French stated that a shuttle bus was also part of the agreement. Gary Garford confirmed that the bus service had just been tendered, he added that Norfolk Green had won that tender;
6. Councillor King stated that there should have been a bus shelter built on the new site. Gary Garford confirmed that a bus stop is provided and agreed to investigate further with regards to the shelter;
7. Councillor King stated that if we are serious about encouraging people to make use of public transport we need to have a bus shelter, the addition of a bus shelter is what will encourage people;
8. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that there is £800,000 in unclaimed free school meals and this concerns me. She added that she understood that there would be a greater focus on this and asked which officer is leading on this. Councillor Butcher stated that this is led by the County Council as applications for free meals go there. He added that in some cases there is still a stigma attached to applying for free school meals, but a lot of work is going into removing the stigma as receipt of free school meals is better for the child and better for the school;
9. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked which FDC officer is supporting this focus. Councillor Oliver confirmed that Dan Horn is leading from FDC;

10. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked for an update to be circulated to members. Gary Garford directed Councillor Mrs Bucknor to an update with regards to free school meals on page 53 of the agenda pack;
11. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked what the situation is with regards to the Coalwharf Road site. Gary Garford confirmed that there is an update with regards to the Coalwharf Road competition on page 49 of the agenda pack. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked when the work would be expected to start. Gary Garford explained that the designer has asked for the site to include additional land to make more space in their design, at this stage the County Council have agreed in principal;
12. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked for an update with regards to Constantine House, is the work on target to finish on time. Councillor Oliver stated that the deadline is in the middle of March and the work is on schedule to be completed on time, he confirmed that we are in talks with regards to the retail space on the ground floor of the property. Gary Garford confirmed that the target is to get that building to Section 215 standard, that is to a visually acceptable level;
13. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked for an update on Phoenix House. Gary Garford stated that this is not such a visually unattractive site as other areas of the town, and the focus is to concentrate on the High Street area, but we continue to explore how to bring forward proposals for this site;
14. Councillor Hodgson stated that he appreciates what is happening with regards to the Wisbech 2020 Vision. He thanked Gary Garford for the presentation made at the Town Council meeting, but what came up that night was that this needed to be publicised amongst local businesses and people. Gary Garford confirmed that a presentation to local businesses has now been arranged;
15. Councillor Hodgson stated that page 58 of the agenda pack says that it was not possible to link with the Arts Festival this year due to timing and suggested that it might be possible to get them involved next year;
16. Councillor King stated that with regards to page 32 of the agenda pack, College of West Anglia in Wisbech, one of the things not being addressed is the lack of electrical engineering skills and we are 'missing a trick' by not focussing on this in Fenland. Councillor Butcher stated that a meeting took place some months ago where we talked a lot about the skills needed by local businesses, but the college sets its syllabus and its courses where they think that they will get good take up. Councillor King added that FDC made a large contribution to the Engineering Block at the college to ensure that those opportunities remained in Wisbech; he asked where else students can learn these skills in the area and how many are on this type of course. Gary Garford stated that skills are on the agenda at the Wisbech 2020 Vision Summit next month, there is a plan to contact the top 20 businesses in the area to ask them what they need. We will then have a cohesive link between the business needs and the college and that will ensure that we will have students finishing with the skills required;
17. Councillor King asked with regards to the A47, is this Council pushing as hard as we should be. Councillor Butcher confirmed that we are pushing as hard as we can with the resources that we have available;
18. Councillor Owen stated that he is sceptical about this work. He added that he has never seen a problem with the Guyhirn roundabout. Councillor Butcher stated that he is not an engineer but that the reports say there is a pinch point there; he added that at a recent update we were informed that they have overpriced the roundabout. Councillor Owen responded stating that the pinch point is further along at the Elm roundabout. Councillor Butcher stated that he understands that they are now looking at that;
19. Councillor King agreed with Councillor Owen's comments and suggested that this Council contact the Highways Agency to express our concerns on the amount of money being spent on the Guyhirn roundabout;
20. Councillor King complimented Gary Garford on completing the deal with County Council with regards to the Coalwharf Road site. Gary Garford stated that the deal is not yet finalised but we are getting there;

21. Councillor Broker stated that as a rural ward member he commends the Wisbech 2020 Vision and the importance of attracting people into Wisbech. Referring to business improvement on page 33 of the agenda pack, the Old Market Square has hardly any street lighting and when you drive through at night it is dark and unwelcoming. He added that there has been a change to the direction of traffic in the town centre and the streets that access the town centre causing confusion amongst local people. Councillor Oliver confirmed that the change to the direction of traffic is an 18 month experimental order to improve the movement of vehicles through the Market Place. He agreed there have been some issues but stated that people do not always read the road signs, the police have stepped back a little to give people a chance. He added that hopefully when people get used to the new arrangements the issues will be less and we will start to see a significant improvement;
22. Councillor Broker stated that we want to encourage people into the town but nearly all of the alley ways and passages are being used as public toilets. One organisation has access on to Ghost Passage and has 10 visitors a month, this area is frequently being used as a place to urinate, and he asked what can be done about this issue. Councillor Oliver confirmed that this has been highlighted at the Community Safety Partnership meetings as an anti-social behaviour issue; he suggested that the simple answer is to gate them off. Councillor Broker asked if it is an issue that can be dealt with by the police. Councillor Oliver confirmed that it is a police issue, but is a difficult issue to prove as someone has to be caught. He added that we have gated a passage way off before and this was successful, however, the problem moved elsewhere. Councillor Mrs French suggested that this issue should be taken up by the Wisbech Town Council;
23. Councillor Owen agreed with Councillor Broker's comments, he stated that previously we put gates up for a 6 month experiment, they worked, so the simple answer would be to leave the gates in place;
24. Councillor Owen stated that someone is doing a very good job to get the dilapidated properties sorted out and offered congratulations for this work;
25. Councillor Tierney stated that future aspirations for Wisbech include a cycle route through the town, he suggested that particular attention should be paid to South Brink as there are a number of issues that could be resolved along there;
26. Councillor Owen asked if members have had or can get a copy of the 'Visit Cambridgeshire Fens' brochure. Anna Goodall agreed to check that the brochure is circulated to members, and if there are any more copies available. Councillor Oliver informed members that they can access the link online.

Councillor Mrs French thanked Officers and Members for attending the meeting today.

4:20pm

Chairman