

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

**12 OCTOBER 2015 - 2:30PM**



**PRESENT:** Councillor Yeulett (Chairman), Councillor A Hay (Vice-Chairman), Councillors Mrs Bucknor, Buckton, Mrs Davis, Garratt, Miss Hoy, Humphrey and Pugh

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:** Councillor Clark (Leader), Councillor Sutton (Deputy Leader, Councillors Butcher, Cornwell, King, Murphy, Oliver, Seaton and Tanfield.

**OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:** Jane Bailey (Member Services and Governance Officer), Jo Blackmore (Executive Officer), Rob Bridge (Corporate Director), Richard Cassidy (Corporate Director), Tom Lewis (Deputy Monitoring Officer) and Paul Medd (Chief Executive)

### **OSC17/15 PREVIOUS MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of 7 September 2015 were agreed and signed.

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

### **OSC18/15 ANNUAL MEETING WITH THE LEADER, DEPUTY LEADER AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

Councillor Yeulett introduced the item, he stated that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel had a discussion at their pre-meeting a week earlier, there it was decided that they did not want a presentation from the Chief Executive and Leader, but the opportunity to ask them some questions about areas which the panel had decided they would focus on. He asked if, as an introduction they could round up, as a Council, where we have come from, where we are now and where we are going.

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

1. Councillor Clark stated that the story so far is that the savings have been achieved to date, but there are more to find moving forward. He added that the biggest headline in the future is that of devolution and combined authorities, also the announcement from the chancellor with regards to the business rate retention, there is not a lot of detail around this at the moment, but it will be big moving forward;
2. Paul Medd stated that over the past 5 years we have delivered £8m savings and that is a significant amount. We have tried to protect frontline services, continuing, for the most part, to deliver high quality services, but that will become more challenging moving forward. 18 months ago we reviewed the planning services and have moved forward with recommendations from that review, we have to maintain the quality of the service delivery and keep our focus on economy and growth, we are building effective working partnerships to ensure that we get the best outcome from this arrangement. He stated that when we identify, through the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR), the changes that will be made to the budget we will need to keep a close eye on central government announcements as there is going to be more to follow, in particular with regards to the business rates;

3. Councillor Miss Hoy stated that she thought that the announcements with regards to the business rates was quite exciting moving forward, she asked why the Leader and Chief Executive seemed to be surprised by this when Cambridgeshire was part of the pilot for this scheme. Paul Medd confirmed that Cambridgeshire secured a unique deal to retain business rates, and on the face of it if we are to secure growth on that level we will retain 100%. He added that he shares the enthusiasm but that it is worth bearing in mind that if we do retain 100% it would mitigate the revenue support grants. We are waiting to hear what the government will do with regards to the new homes bonus moving forward;
4. Councillor Miss Hoy stated that if the Council have known about this for some time what work has been done to prepare. Paul Medd stated that we have put together a proposal to Government to secure the principal of the scheme and that will continue to run until the changes are announced. Until the details come forward we cannot fully understand the impact that it will have on this Council. He added that there is a reference made in George Osborne's statement that new responsibilities will have an impact on the Council, but without the full details we do not know at what level this will affect us. Councillor Sutton stated that during the politics show recently, Brandon Lewis was also unable to answer this question;
5. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked what has been the cost of sending out the public consultation survey to 40,000 homes. Councillor Clark stated that the cost has been around £7,000 to £8,000;
6. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if a cost to responses received ratio was carried out and what the current response rate is. Councillor Clark stated he understands that the level of responses coming in is encouraging. He explained that the consultation was discussed at an informal Cabinet meeting; he added that he had wanted the general public to be involved and that he and Cabinet colleagues had discussed options of how best they should do this. They decided that at this stage too much detail might mean that people would throw it away and so tried to keep it quite simple at this stage with the intention of engaging as many members of the public as possible. It is hoped that people completing the survey will give their email addresses and we would then involve them in the next stage of questions;
7. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that Fenland District Council have been criticised as some of the consultation questionnaires have been delivered to addresses in Norfolk and other non-Fenland residents, she asked if we know how many were delivered to non-Fenland residents and if they respond will they be discounted. Councillor Clark stated that he was dismayed to see that the surveys had been delivered to the non-Fenland addresses, but has been reassured that there was not a significant number and that these addresses are on split district boarder streets. He agreed to investigate whether it is possible and cost effective to discount the non-Fenland addresses if they respond;
8. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that all Councillors were asked their opinions on the survey and many Councillors have asked why costings were not included, she pointed out that County Council have sent their consultation with costings. Councillor Clark stated that the County Council got the consultation idea from us, but are in a different position to this council, he added that Cabinet members agreed at an informal Cabinet meeting that if too much detail were to be included at this stage many of the surveys might end up in the bin and the plan is that more details would be included in the next stage of the survey;
9. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if only residents that have completed the survey will be invited to the complete the next stage of the survey. Councillor Clark stated that at the moment it depends how many responses are received and how they respond;
10. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked if a decision has been made yet about how the survey will be evaluated, especially if for example we receive just a 1% response rate. Councillor Clark stated that statistics show 4-5% as a good response, but if the response rate is as low as 1% we will have to discuss the way forward. Councillors are facing difficult decisions and the responses from this survey enable those decisions to be influenced by the residents, so we hope that many people take the opportunity to complete it;

11. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel want to be a critical friend and that she feels that it would have been helpful to have involved the panel when making decisions with regards to the public consultations. Councillor Clark agreed that he is happy to make better use of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel in the future;
12. Councillor Mrs Hay asked if the £7,000 - £8,000 spent on the consultation was for all 3 stages or just for the first stage and therefore would the next stages incur further costs. Councillor Clark confirmed that the £7,000 - £8,000 already spent was for every household to receive the first stage of the consultation, he reassured the panel that other options were investigated and they were considerably more expensive. He stated that the next stage is yet to be decided, but the plans are to contact residents via email during this stage and therefore this would not incur a cost;
13. Paul Medd stated that we do need to include more detail with regards to budgets and confirmed that we will start to build business cases to inform members once the initial survey analysis and CSR process is completed. He stated that this Council took the decision to provide all fenland residents the opportunity to make comment at the first stage of this consultation, once the responses are back we will undertake some work to analyse those responses and this information will enable members and officers to work out proposals and make informed decisions moving forward;
14. Councillor Sutton stated that with regards to the issue of surveys being delivered to non-fenland residents, this is not unique, and is simply a postcode overlap;
15. Councillor Mrs Davis asked if it is possible to identify those addresses would they be removed from the results analysis. Councillor Clark confirmed that if that is possible they would be removed. Paul Medd stated that the plan is to engage as many of our residents as possible, therefore if it is possible to remove these responses we will do;
16. Councillor Yeulett stated that he is pleased to hear that the results from the consultation will contribute to the decisions made by councillors and are not cast in stone. Councillor Clark stated that the responses from this consultation are there to help members to make a decision;
17. Councillor Garratt stated that previously this council have consulted residents on decisions that could affect them, such as corporate priorities. These consultations were undertaken face to face at one stop shops and leisure centres etc. and therefore we did not incur a cost to send them out to residents. He asked if this was something that was considered when making a decision to send the surveys out on this occasion. Councillor Clark confirmed that this was an option that was considered but it was felt that we would not get the level of responses that we are hoping to get back, and that this way the survey was available to all. He added that this is a possible way to carry out part of the next stage of questions and has not been ruled out. He stated that whatever decision was made to move forward with the survey would have been criticised, but this was agreed as we wanted to contact as many people as possible and give everyone the opportunity to feed into this. The decisions that members will need to make are tough and serious and will affect the residents living in Fenland;
18. Councillor Mrs Hay stated that we understand that no decisions will be made until the responses from the survey have been analysed but asked where the Chief Executive and Leader feel that the savings can be made. Councillor Clark stated that there are no easy answers to this and no easy solutions, he explained that the Council are looking at invest to save however this will take time. He stated that he feels that 2 areas members may want to consider are with regards to charging for brown bin collections and parking. He added that car park charges have been investigated in the past; we could look to offer the first hour or so free so that local shops and shoppers are not hit by charges if they want to pop into their local shops. He explained that money is spent to maintain the carparks every year and if the car park charges were enough to cover just that cost then that would be a saving. Looking to charge only the users of a service like parking and brown bin collections are charges that other councils have moved to recently too. He stated that there will always be someone that will be uncomfortable with the decisions that will be made. He added that the Chief Executive and his team are looking at savings from the back office, looking at freezing posts

as they become available as that is a savings opportunity, and we are having to look at every opportunity as it comes along;

19. Paul Medd stated that it is difficult to offer an opinion here today; we have an idea of the choices that will be available to members and will ensure that we undertake a full business case to inform them fully moving forward. He added that no decisions will be taken until the completion of the CSR, but we have to have a balanced budget for 2016/17 and already working on those savings now. These include projects such as the shared planning proposals which will all feed into the savings to ensure that the position at the end of March 2016 is balanced. The savings as a result of the comprehensive spending review will feed into 2017/18 and beyond;
20. Councillor Yeulett stated that the peer review told us that we are doing things that we do not have to in order to have gold plated services and asked if any of these can be changed to make savings. Paul Medd stated that we have always had the mind-set at Fenland that we can look at something and improve on it and with this in mind we invited a LGA Peer Review Team to come in. Their final feedback included a number of things that they challenged and with the financial pressures we have had to look at those things. They were bold in their feedback and asked us about issues such as parking, brown bins and pre-application charges for planning, and these are all areas that we are considering now. He added that with regards to gold plated services we have focussed on some areas such as the one stop shops and the contact centre and looked at how they were being run, we have scaled back the opening times, paying attention to when they were being used most often. This has enabled us to continue to offer a good level of service despite the scaled back hours. Councillor Clark stated that even areas that are not our responsibility are coming under pressure, like transport, FACT is a worthwhile group and we currently make a contribution to them, as the service they deliver is important to the residents in Fenland. He stated that he does not want to see companies like FACT losing funding, but we are being backed into a corner and have some very difficult decisions to make. The back office cannot save any more money, it is not going to be easy;
21. Councillor Mrs Bucknor asked for clarification as some of the services that the survey refers to are statutory services. Councillor Clark stated that even statutory services are subject to savings, it is about the level at which you produce the service ensuring of course that the level of risk is balanced;
22. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that one of the options on the survey is in relation to offering grants and pointed out that the organisation lost a staff member who looked at grant funding, she asked how much of a loss that is to the Council, as if we still had that expertise we could access some funding. Councillor Clark stated that it is important to remember that many of those funding streams are no longer available. Paul Medd stated that in an ideal world we would have a dedicated funding officer, but he pointed out that many authorities no longer have one. Many of the funding opportunities no longer exist, but even without a funding officer we are still pursuing funding whenever possible;
23. Councillor Yeulett stated that he would like to think that we look at what other authorities are doing too, and are sharing information in this way;
24. Councillor Buckton asked how the Leader and Chief Executive work together to provide direction and drive performance for the Council. Councillor Clark stated that he has been in the role of Leader for 18 months, he believes that you get the best from people if you work together, and has a good working relationship with CMT. He added that with regards to Cabinet, informal meetings give us the chance to meet and gather our thoughts, we all have an equal voice, and get an overview of everything and he believes that the system is working well;
25. Councillor Buckton stated that it is good to hear that the Leader works well with Cabinet but how do the Leader and Chief Executive work together. Councillor Clark stated that they have a good open, honest working relationship, discussing issues as and when they arise on the phone and more formally when they meet. Paul Medd stated that he and the Leader have a fluid working relationship with formal scheduled catch up meetings and regular phone contact for updates. He added that the relationship is robust we challenge one and

other to find the best outcomes for the people of Fenland. He stated that he has respect for Councillor Clark's point of view but will ask questions if he feels they need to be asked, it is a healthy working relationship and always should be regardless of who is in these 2 roles;

26. Councillor Buckton asked about the role of Cabinet members. Councillor Clark stated that he does not interfere with the day to day business of the portfolio holders, but meets regularly to discuss issues that are coming up, we have a good working relationship and can see the best way forward for this Council;
27. Councillor Buckton asked how the Leader knows that his Cabinet are doing a good job. Councillor Clark stated that he often sits in on meetings and go through reports, he added that portfolio holders are often scrutinised by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel and added that he is sure this panel would let him know if there were any problems. There are a number of ways that I would know if Cabinet members were not doing a good job;
28. Councillor Buckton asked if the leader has anything in place to identify development needs of Cabinet members. Councillor Clark stated that not just for Cabinet members but for all members, any members can ask for training, the Cabinet are all fairly well trained and this Council was lucky with the calibre of Councillors that put their name forward for portfolio holder roles. He added that we have a lot of new excellent Councillors too that will take on these roles in the future. Overview and Scrutiny is a good learning opportunity as new councillors get to see a lot of different things at these meetings and it gives them a broad knowledge of the Council's business;
29. Councillor Yeulett stated that there is a lot of business coming to council and cabinet, he asked how much of that business is generated by legislation and how much of it is political. Paul Medd stated that it is a mixture, some we must do by law or we would be compromising the Council's position and some generated by the political agenda. Councillor Yeulett asked if generally elected members bring enough forward at Council meetings. Paul Medd stated that this Council is lucky to have fantastic members who are very committed and want the very best for their constituents, there is a healthy appetite for discussion and members are community focussed;
30. Councillor Mrs Davis stated that with regards to the spending review, it is as much about cost saving as it is about quality of service. She asked what other areas we could look at with this in mind. Councillor Clark stated that Cabinet could and should work more closely with Overview and Scrutiny members; the CSR is one area that we could have worked more closely together on. As part of that review we are looking at invest to save projects, and are in the early stages of looking at land at Wisbech. There are discussions taking place about the possibility of building houses on that land, with a business plan to sell some and to rent some, generate some income and move on to the next plot, but that is not a fix in the short term. There are other projects like the shared planning proposals, officers have negotiated excellent terms and this has given us better quality ideas moving forward. Paul Medd agreed stating that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel have a vital role to play, and we should have been sharper at making better use of this panel when looking at the planning proposals. Overview and Scrutiny should be involved in these key decisions much earlier. He added that over the past 5 years we have reviewed and changed services 3 or 4 times, refining and changing delivery, and moving forward we can look at areas such as HR, audit and legal services, we have worked hard to rationalise their budgets, but there is only so much you can squeeze their services. Discussions with regards to back office functions are ongoing and we are always challenging this;
31. Councillor Mrs Bucknor stated that she is concerned that in order to make these savings we are now cutting into the bone, the staff still want to do a good job, but i am concerned at how far we have had to cut back office staff. Councillor Clark agreed stating that he is also concerned, we are beginning to cut to the bone, we have got to deal with what we are being faced with, we are a majority conservative council and the conservatives want to balance the budget, we will have to reduce our services to live within our means;

32. Councillor Buckton asked if shared services will be one of the options explored following the CSR. Councillor Clark stated that we have already had talks looking at where we can work more closely with each other. Paul Medd stated that it is a false economy to cut so far that you experience detriment to the Council and the services that it offers. We always robustly test that a team that can continue to deliver despite the cuts that have taken place, we spend a lot of time scrutinising that point. With regards to shared services he is encouraged by members approach to this subject. Members recognise that the world is changing and have opened their minds to the principals of shared services. We have had dialogue with members to ensure that everyone fully understands the business cases behind the ideas that are being put forward. From a professional point of view we are ultimately driven to look for service delivery in the most cost effective ways. We ask ourselves if a) the service arrangements deliver a saving, and b) what assurances can we reasonably obtain that the service will be carried out. So far the shared services arrangements that this Council have entered into are working well;
33. Councillor Sutton stated that whether we replace staff who leave or freeze a post to realise a saving is always a question we ask ourselves. He referred to the fact that when the Economic Development Officer left the Council, it could have been seen as an ideal opportunity to make a saving, but having looked at this and discussed the issues, we decided that we felt the role was so important we needed to fill the post. This is an example of not just banking the savings but investing to save;
34. Councillor Pugh asked how the Leader and Chief Executive plan for the impact that these savings may have. Councillor Clark stated that the impact is evaluated as part of the decision making process around cuts. He added that until members have decided where the cuts will be made it is difficult to answer this question more specifically;
35. Councillor Pugh stated that the panel want to feel confident that officers are mindful of planning for that impact when you can see who or what the decision will affect. Councillor Clark stated that this may be something for the Overview and Scrutiny Panel to look more closely at when we have a better understanding around the areas that will have the most impact;
36. Paul Medd stated that as part of the whole process we will factor in risk assessments and quality impact assessments to look at the overall impact. Inevitably there will be an impact on staff and we will maintain good employment practices to support staff that are effected;
37. Councillor Garratt stated that he is in support of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel being involved in more forward looking issues, adding that it is too late with regards to the Consultation that has been sent out, he suggested that an all member workshop should be organised to update all members on the progress. Councillor Clark confirmed that an all member update has been programmed in and reiterated that no decisions will be made before this. Paul Medd stated that member workshops have been arranged for Monday 16 and Wednesday 18 November, he advised that invitations would be circulated imminently;
38. Councillor Pugh stated that with regards to the Corporate Plan 2015/18, there are many areas that are still 'to be developed', he asked for clarification on this as he feels that at this stage they should already be developed. Paul Medd stated that in essence the Corporate Plan is what you are going to do. The world is evolving and many of these issues are complex and are evolving too, when we are bringing some of those things forward we recognise and identify a piece of work that we will need to develop to align with those changes;
39. Councillor Pugh asked if a cost is incurred as that is not part of the plan. Paul Medd stated that would be part of the future business plan and accounted for in the budgetary framework;
40. Councillor Buckton stated that the need to improve engagement had been mentioned, and asked for clarification on this point. Paul Medd stated that in the spirit of continued improvement we have been looking at how we can engage with a wider member audience than we once did. This includes All Member Seminars and also looking at how we will better engage with this Panel moving forward, these are both engagement issues that we have realised that we can improve on. There is a real commitment to work more closely with this

panel in the future;

41. Councillor Sutton stated that when Councillor Clark invited Cabinet colleagues to come along to today's meeting, they all came, and that shows their commitment and support. He added that he had previously been a panel member of Overview and Scrutiny and had noticed that it was all about 'scrutiny', but that he is pleased to see now, what he had wanted to see then, and that is an enthusiasm to work with us moving forward, and looking at the 'overview' too, he thanked the panel for this;
42. Councillor Yeulett stated that panel members had received some training, and during discussions decided that they would designate some members to come to talk to Cabinet members about what the panel are trying to achieve, with a view to working better together. Councillor Clark agreed, stating that Cabinet members would welcome this approach too.

Councillor Yeulett thanked the Leader, Deputy Leader and Chief Executive for attending the meeting today along with the Cabinet members that were present too. He stated that the panel are looking forward to hearing more about business rates, devolution, the Comprehensive Spending Review and the future of the land at Wisbech and we hope to add some value to all of these things moving forward. We realise the difficulties you face with the restrictions that are in place and wish you every success. We appreciate getting an insight and thank you for answering the questions put to you this afternoon by the panel.

As a result of today's meeting, members recommended to Cabinet the following:

- Overview and Scrutiny members are to be consulted and updated on the next stages of:
  - the Comprehensive Spending Review, including the impact cuts will have;
  - Proposals with regards to the Land at Wisbech.
- As with staff, Cabinet members should have a performance review, looking at individuals gaps in knowledge, with the possibility of a mentor or buddy system to support new Cabinet members. When a portfolio comes before the Overview and Scrutiny Panel we are looking at that portfolio and not the performance of the Cabinet member and therefore Cabinet members should have formal appraisals or 1-2-1's.

## **OSC19/15 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME**

Members considered the Future Work Programme 2015/16 for the Overview and Scrutiny Panel making the following comments:

- In order to focus on items at the next meeting it was decided that some items would need to be scheduled into other meetings. Officers to look at this following the meeting and to agree with the Chairman what would be rescheduled.

**The Overview and Scrutiny Panel agreed their future work programme 2015/16 subject to the amendments discussed.**

4.45pm

Chairman