

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

FRIDAY, 12 JULY 2024 - 10.00 AM



PRESENT: Councillor Mrs M Davis (Chairman), Councillor E Sennitt Clough (Vice-Chairman), Councillor B Barber, Councillor G Booth, Councillor L Foice-Beard, Councillor R Gerstner, Councillor A Gowler, Councillor S Imafidon, Councillor Dr H Nawaz, Councillor D Roy and Councillor Woollard

APOLOGIES: Councillor J Carney and Councillor A Hay

Officers in attendance: Amy Brown (Assistant Director) and Helen Moore (Member Services and Governance Officer)

OSC1/24 APPOINTMENT OF THE CHAIRMAN FOR THE MUNICIPAL YEAR

Proposed by Councillor Nawaz, seconded by Councillor Gowler and resolved that Councillor Mrs Davis be elected Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the Municipal Year.

OSC2/24 APPOINTMENT OF THE VICE CHAIRMAN FOR THE MUNICIPAL YEAR

Proposed by Councillor Mrs Davis, seconded by Councillor Nawaz that Councillor Sennitt Clough be elected Vice-Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the Municipal Year.

It was further proposed by Councillor Booth, seconded by Councillor Roy that Councillor Gerstner be elected Vice-Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the Municipal Year.

Following a vote, Councillor Sennitt Clough was elected as Vice-Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the Municipal Year.

OSC3/24 PREVIOUS MINUTES.

The minutes of the meeting of 4 March 2024 were confirmed and signed.

OSC4/24 UPDATE ON PREVIOUS ACTIONS.

Members considered the update on previous actions.

Councillor Booth requested time to read through the answer given to the Clarion question before commenting further.

OSC5/24 FREEDOM LEISURE - REVIEW

Councillor Mrs Davis welcomed Matt Wickham, Andy Harris and, Dan Palframan from Freedom Leisure together with Phil Hughes and Councillor Miscandlon to the meeting.

Members considered the Freedom Leisure Operating Contract Annual Report which was shared in the form of a presentation.

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

- Councillor Sennitt Clough asked based on the current operational model and the hopefully positive impact of improvements across the three Leisure Centres, how confident are they of the financial viability of the centres going forward? Matt Wicken responded now that the company has come through Covid there has been support from Fenland District Council, Sport England and through Central Government's general support funds phase one for swimming pools, which was received last year, which has put Freedom Leisure into a position above the forecast shown on the presentation just given. He stated that this has put the company on track on an annual basis which gives a positive platform to work on, there is always opportunities to do things better and opportunities for growth which are being looked at as the figures still show there is a drop in membership compared to the figures pre-Covid, with there being lots of reasons for that, people are walking and running in open air more now as this was something they could do during the Covid period and there is a lot more competition that has opened up with personal trainers offering one-to-one services. Matt Wicken added there are opportunities arising in the company looking at GP referrals, which is a market which is relatively untapped, corporately there has recently appointed a Head of Healthy Communities and her focus will be working on those harder to reach groups as studies show only a certain amount of the population commit to physical activity which can add up to 80% of the population to reach out to. He continued that there is a budget in place which shows some contracts are working well but equally some contracts do need addressing but corporately and locally the company is confident with the financial position.
- Councillor Mrs Davis stated she would like to pick up on the comment about not being back to the pre-Covid level of membership for the gym, which does feel concerning as many other private gyms are stating their businesses are doing well, and asked is there an overall theory on why this is? Matt Wicken responded since Covid there has been a lot more personal trainers starting up their own business, offering personal training sessions for customers that potentially do not want to come into a big environment anymore, and there are many more online opportunities than before Covid, but the fitness side of the business is only one third of the wheel, with swimming being the other third and other activities offered making up the rest, so when looking at the overall wheel when one area is not succeeding there is an opportunity to overachieve in the other areas and for Freedom Leisure swimming is one of those areas and this shows there is an above average membership compared to pre-Covid figures.
- Councillor Sennitt Clough asked how much involvement does Freedom have in the consultancy process, does it have an established relationship with Alliance, for example and is it satisfied with the plans for the leisure centres this far? Matt Wicken responded in terms of Alliance, a project has just been finished with them in Brighton which was a £650,000 squash court conversion into a soft play area which has proved successful and is exceeding number already. He stated that there has also been an operation carried out in Somerset which was an Alliance build in partnership with the Council and Freedom Leisure were there as operating partners, so in terms of a relationship with Alliance there is a very good working relationship and a model that is working well for all concerned. Dan Palframan stated in terms of local plans, Phil Hughes and himself have an open dialogue with the plans, whether that be provisional or whether they are just a concept and needing an honest discussion, with the operational team being consulted to look at what has been presented and the data information to see if what has been proposed will work specifically within Freedom Leisure and are there any other examples of the proposal working in other areas. Matt Wicken added Freedom Leisure has worked with a number of local authorities with over 200 million pounds of capital projects across other estates including Fenland. Councillor Sennitt Clough requested clarification that there is a good relationship with Freedom Leisure, Alliance and Fenland working in collaboration, talking to each other about the broad plans going forward. Matt Wicken confirmed this to be the case.
- Councillor Sennitt Clough asked Matt Wicken how he feels about the provision of space within the centres that they run for community group use on both a free-of-charge basis and a rental basis? Matt Wicken responded that all space needs to be accessed on its own merit

and there will be some opportunity, the free-of-charge option is not something that is used very often because the company needs to make a surplus that can be reinvested, however, there is engagement with community groups, and some do have a subsidised rate. He continued that as a concept the centres could be better used as a health hub which is being seen a lot more around the UK where leisure centres are one part of the facility with bolt on to GP surgeries and health referrals, an example of this is a facility which has been opened up in Gloucestershire with a range of health services and the opportunity to engage in leisure activities but this does need to be done on a site by site basis and will need to be part of a wider plan County wide and District wide. Councillor Sennitt Clough agreed the shared model is a very productive way forward based on the individual circumstances. She asked how the centres determine who pays for the facilities and who can get them for free? Matt Wicken responded it is very much on a needs analysis basis, the majority can access funding which is something Freedom Leisure can help with so while it is free for the customer there is still funding coming into the centre which can be of benefit to the local community groups and mental health projects.

- Councillor Nawaz stated he observed from the presentation given that 25% of staff are not taking pride in working for Freedom Leisure, he asked how many female staff are there and how many work within the management structure of Freedom Leisure? Councillor Nawaz added he felt it frustrating that when other gyms are doing well Freedom Leisure are still blaming the effects of Covid and suggested looking at the quality of their advertising. He also suggested working with ICS and Health and Wellbeing groups to help with the ongoing obesity and the diabetes crisis. Matt Wicken responded that 75% of their employees are proud to work for Freedom Leisure and this was a survey taken across all 6000 people that are employed by the company, of which 4000 responses came back, there are a number of casual and contract workers within those figures and this can have an impact, once these figures are collated they are broken down into two groups, which are local and corporate, then within these groups discussions take place as to what can be improved, how can staff be rewarded better, and what are the training and development needs. He added that year on year when these surveys are taken the results are on par which means that the company is holding its own which is a positive result and a good base to build on. Matt Wicken stated in terms of the breakdown of male/female, 50% staff are female and a high proportion of females are higher earners, however, the company is conscious that at a very senior level there are not enough females which is a focus but equally it is more important to employ the right person for the job role regardless of gender. Andy Harris added regarding the three senior roles that have recently been recruited for two out of the three roles are females which form part of the leadership team. Matt Wicken acknowledged the suggestion given by Councillor Nawaz around marketing and agreed there is always more to be undertaken in this area. Dan Palframan referred to Whittlesey and confirmed numbers for gym memberships are growing at the Manor Leisure Centre and it has become one of the quickest to grow across the district and is now one of the highest earners with the Fenland area because of the housing growth and the marketing success in the area. He continued that Public Health and Freedom Leisure are developing a learning partnership which can be lifted and used as a model to strengthen the health community and serve as an opportunity for growth within the area.
- Councillor Gowler asked regarding the statistics contained within the report, do they relate to Freedom staff across all leisure centres or just Fenland? Dan Palframan responded the statistics shown cover the whole area which are all three partnerships under his care, there are individual statistics for the Fenland area which is being used to target improvement plans. Councillor Booth asked if there are statistics on Fenland and what does that show against the presentation given? Dan Palframan answered largely as said in the presentation instead of 24% overall the breakdown shows Fenland at 18% but this does vary from venue to venue which can be provided. Councillor Booth agreed quite a sizable improvement.
- Councillor Gowler asked if any benchmarking exercises are carried out on the private sector to obtain a bigger picture? Matt Wicken responded Freedom Leisure benchmark internally but not with competitors, the question asked internally never changes and this can create a

better picture for progress and change year on year.

- Councillor Roy asked what is the training budget and what succession planning are they undertaking with the staff they currently employ to make sure that they have plenty of skilled people for the duration of FDC's contract? Matt Wicken responded in terms of development since Covid there is a two phase development plan in place which encourages staff to work up to duty manager level then from there progressing to centre managers or area managers, there is a desire to promote from within and the next step is to build a clear picture of who out of the staff would like a progression career within Freedom Leisure which would work within the individuals training programme so their needs are met in whichever path they choose within leisure. He continued that he did not have the percentage figures to hand for investment in training, however, as an organisation there is an amount to pay into the apprentice levy which is around £140,000 per year which is drawn down for training, there are about 100 apprentices across the business and this side is growing, aside from that there is a multitude of inhouse training courses on offer plus there is an online portal which every member of staff has access to with around 79 different courses to choose from. Councillor Roy referred to the mention 'since Covid', and asked how far down the development route is all the training or is some of it still at the early development stages and how much of it is local employment plus how many apprentices are within the Fenland area? Matt Wicken replied he would send out the exact figure of apprentices within the Fenland area after the meeting, as far as the development of the training this is in its early stages and the bulk of the plan has been modernised and updated and delivered in a slightly different way.
- Councillor Barber stated she was pleased to note that there has been a reduction in spending on gas and electricity at the Hudson Leisure Centre, however, she continued to receive complaints about the temperature of the swimming pool and asked if this could be an impact? Dan Palframan responded that due to the energy crisis the parameters were reset which did take temperatures down and there were a few comments made, however, the parameters have since been adjusted and are back within a normal range for the size of tank at the Hudson Leisure Centre. Councillor Barber commented that she had noted that the comments from the public shared on the presentation were complimentary but one comment did suggest opening at 6am instead at 6.30am is this something that has been considered? Dan Palframan confirmed this was something that is being reviewed at present.
- Councillor Booth made the point that last year as a committee they asked that a more detailed list of complaints was shared so the panel could look at the changes that have been made year on year, however, this was never shared which is concerning and he questioned whether Freedom is taking on board the feedback from these meeting? Matt Wicken apologised for not previously sending over the data and made a commitment to send the data to the panel via Phil Hughes and he will happily take questions at the next meeting. Councillor Booth welcomed this and stressed that as councillors they get many complaints from the public about various issues and it would help them to have the data so they can give the sufficient answers when asked.
- Councillor Nawaz asked for an update on the Manor Leisure Centre. Phil Hughes responded that the company is working with Alliance Leisure and they have visited the three larger leisure centres which have swimming pools, some draft plans have been sent away, once the information comes back it will be discussed with CMT and brought to Cabinet in September or October.
- Councillor Roy stated given that Freedom Leisure is allowing sub-contractors into buildings owned by Fenland District Council, what are their procedures for vetting and selecting contractors to come and do the work, whilst they may have undertaken a risk assessment, they may not have had training, so what are the policies and procedures for vetting the sub-contractors to do the works that are required? Matt Wicken responded there was an incident at the Manor concerning a sub-contractor which has now been dealt with, as far as the procedure stands, every process is checked to make sure the right information is in place when taking on contractors and sub-contractors.

- Councillor Imafidon stated it was mentioned in the presentation that the company would like to work more closely with GP's and asked what arrangements are in place for primary care providers or is this a future plan, and if so when will this be brought into practice? Dan Palframan replied there are a small number of contacts through GP's which are referred to Freedom Leisure, but there are some future plans in place that are growing which is as a result of a neighbouring district, their model will be lifted and tweaked to work in the Fenland area to work closely with medical practitioners and building on relationships and processes to build this opportunity and he is hopefully going to be talking about this more at the next meeting. Andy Harris added a national agreement has been signed with Elixir Health who are a UK wide organisation who are set up purely for health referrals and this is related to a swimming project that is currently being developed.

Members noted the Freedom Leisure report for information.

(Councillor Gerstner left the meeting during this item)

OSC6/24 OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT

Members considered the draft Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2023-2024 presented by Councillor Mrs Davis.

Councillor Mrs Davis recognised the work the Overview and Scrutiny panel had undertaken during the year.

Members made comments as follows:

- Councillor Booth stated under 5.3 regarding the task and finish group and the new data, he would like to see a line added that the panel will be monitoring this progress to help with the work of the committee.
- Councillor Nawaz stated under 4.2 the table of topic and issues, he recognised the good work of the committee, and he suggested fuller presentation from Public Health in the future. Councillor Booth commented this would be an action when looking at the Future Work Programme going forward, and he also suggested inviting the Director of Public Health. Councillor Mrs Davis agreed but also stated there were not enough questions asked by the committee at the last meeting and she would like more questions when Public Health are due to visit in March 2025, there will also be a discussion before the March meeting so the appropriate people are invited.

Members approved the draft Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report for forwarding to Council.

OSC7/24 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered and noted the future work programme.

Members made the following comments:

- Councillor Booth stated that he would like to see a tracking system in place to work alongside the scheduled meetings so the committee could keep up to date on progress once the meeting has finished and keep a track of information that have been asked for during meetings. Councillor Mrs Davis agreed and suggested when the committee are coming up to a meeting they need to backtrack through the minutes of the last time that body was invited to an Overview and Scrutiny meeting, as a refresher and to use as a reference for any work unfinished. Councillor Booth added by using a tracker system the key points would be easier and quicker to see as sometimes information can get lost in the full minutes. The committee agreed.
- Councillor Roy stated he has noticed that Clarion have not been included on the work

programme, at the last meeting Clarion did suggest that everything was being dealt with but he is still receiving a number of repeated complaints from local Clarion residents and he feels that the main issues that were spoken about in the last meeting have not been addressed and feels that a meeting with Clarion would be beneficial. Councillor Mrs Davis stressed that if there are some issues that are not being dealt with since the last meeting contact can be made to follow this up with Clarion. Councillor Booth asked if Clarion are going to be invited back? Amy Brown stated that the Forward Plan has been reviewed and it was discussed which topics could be biannual and which ones would be annual, and the focus was on looking at the Council's core priorities and making sure as an organisation those functions are covered, with Clarion being looked at as being biannual but if there are problems emerging as have been raised in this meeting, there is space within the Forward Plan to invite them back sooner but the thought was to invite new topics towards the end of the year but this can be looked at. Councillor Booth did not agree that Clarion should be biannual and that they need to be invited annually due to the number of problems arising, other councillors agreed. Councillor Mrs Davis agreed to review the Forward Plan with Amy Brown.

- Councillor Sennitt Clough stated there is a distinction between Clarion and Clarion Futures and would like it made clear who the committee are referring too. She continued to make the point that given their reputation and the fact that they are fronting a not insignificant amount of money to match fund with the Arts Council and the Arts Council are part of the Future Work Programme, how this would play out within the public consciousness regarding complaints and was wondering if there was scope to have both parties in on the same day. Councillor Mrs Davis expressed the view that it was better to keep both parties separate. Councillor Booth recommended inviting Clarion Futures in for the Arts Council as opposed to the whole of Clarion to concentrate on that particular element. Councillor Foice Beard felt it would not be a good idea to invite Clarion Futures if the committee are just going to be talking about housing issues as these are two separate areas.
- Councillor Booth made the observation that at the meeting on the 20 January is the draft Budget and Fees and Charges and he feels that the fees and charges needs to roll into the budget because if anything need changing this needs to be discussed. This was agreed by Councillor Mrs Davis.

Members AGREED to the inclusion of the discussed topics to the work programme.

11.30 am

Chairman