

# OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 20 JANUARY 2025 - 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 A Hay, Councillor P Hicks and Councillor D Roy.

**APOLOGIES:** Councillor J Carney, Councillor S Imafidon, Councillor Dr H Nawaz and Councillor A Woollard

Other Members in Attendance: Councillors Boden, Mrs French, Hoy, Miscandlon, Murphy, Tierney and Seaton.

Officers in attendance: Paul Medd (Chief Executive), Peter Catchpole (Corporate Director), Carol Pilon (Corporate Director), Amy Brown (Assistant Director), Dan Horn (Assistant Director), Mark Saunders (Chief Accountant), David Wright (Head of Policy and Communications) and Helen Moore (Member Services and Governance Officer).

## **OSC25/23 PREVIOUS MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of 2 December 2024 were confirmed and signed.

## **OSC26/23 UPDATE ON PREVIOUS ACTIONS**

Members considered the update on previous actions.

Councillor Booth asked about the business plan from Anglian Water and the upgrade of pipes in the rural areas which remains unanswered. Councillor Davis agreed to get this actioned.

## **OSC27/23 REVIEW OF FEES AND CHARGES 2025/26**

Members considered the review of Fees and Charges 2025/26 report presented by Councillor Boden.

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

- Councillor Barber referred to 3.1 in the presentation, The Port of Wisbech Authority, and the 10% increase on statutory fees seems high after the 25% increase last year. She asked is this because the Council has been substantially undercharging in the past as all the other charges are 5% or less and might this have the effect of less usage of the Council's facilities and, therefore, a lower income over the year? Councillor Boden responded that in 2024/25 there was a proposal for the increase in fees particularly around the pilotage, boarding and landing due fees in relation to Sutton Bridge of 25%, but after discussions with the Port of Sutton Bridge during the course of 2024 and given how price sensitive the fees are in relation to the volume of business that goes through the port, it was agreed that the 25% would be reduced in December 2024 by 12% giving a net increase of 10% on the previous years figures. He stated that it is planned that there will be a further 10% increase which is likely to take place in December 2025 and not in April 2025, with the matter currently being looked into and will be reported at the next Cabinet meeting to determine.
- Councillor Booth asked when the review for the Wisbech Harbour is to be completed as the issue concerning funding was raised several years ago and there appears to still be no firm decision on the Port which does impact the decisions made on what fees and charges

should be made. He recalled having the same conversation last year and it appears that nothing has changed, potentially there is £50 million pounds of capital expenditure needed, and he feels a decision needs to be made so it does not keep being delayed year on year. Councillor Boden agreed with Councillor Booth that this is an urgent matter and confirmed that meetings are taking place on a weekly basis to progress on how to move forward and when any changes are made a report will be shared at Cabinet and Council. Councillor Booth asked when the target date is for getting the decision made and how long will the process take afterwards to implement the decision? Councillor Boden replied the target date is 'to progress with this as quickly as possible', when and if the Council are able to move forward then it depends upon the nature of any agreements which may be reached, but the timescale in terms of the final position could take as long as three years, depending upon whether Parliamentary approval is required.

- Councillor Sennitt Clough stated that as part of the Growth and Infrastructure she felt The Boathouse, South Fens and Fenland Hall were not marketed well enough to get bookings, especially The Boathouse at weekends due to staff not being available and wondered if the use of these buildings could be maximized with engagement from partner organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses. Councillor Boden responded the reason weekend booking can be difficult is because the Council does not have the staff available to cover this, staff can be made available using overtime, but this is not compulsory for staff. He added that the plan is to maintain and improve the amount of usage there is in the various locations which have been mentioned but it is not easily cost effective for the Council to have a dedicated weekend facility available because there is not the demand for weekend usage.
- Councillor Booth stated that on 3.2 of the presentation it mentions the increases in fees for South Fens Business Centre of 18%, it has been much discussed in previous meetings that the intention of this centre being an incubator unit to encourage businesses to start up and then hopefully move on when established and asked, by increasing the cost by such a large amount, is that not contrary to the policy and aspiration to help with these start-up businesses. He stated the Council does need to ensure the costs and charges that are made are to a significant extent if not wholly able to cover the cost the Council incurs in various areas. Councillor Booth added that this was a different picture to the one originally given concerning helping new businesses start-up and supporting them to move to new premises where in the long term the Council would benefit from the business rates paid on other properties which would add as a profit for the Council. He reflected that the figures do not add up as suggested because ultimately the national non-domestic rate is showing as a zero gain because if people are moving out, they are moving to other premises which are already rated and to the best of his knowledge no new premises are being built in Chatteris to accommodate any business which are moving out of the business park. Councillor Booth continued if the Council were in a position of having a shortage of supply of units or rooms available for new businesses the Council would need to change its policy, but the Council is not looking to put a time limit on the amount of time a new business stays in the business park.
- Councillor Roy stated he noted the increase to the bulky household waste collection and is concerned this would have an impact on fly tipping as there are lots of issues around the district. He asked if there is any evidence that this is a fair increase and he would also like to understand why vans are being turned away at recycling centres, is this for personal reasons rather than business reasons? Councillor Boden confirmed that the recycling centres are run by Cambridgeshire County Council and not Fenland District Council and the Council has no control on what happens at these sites. Councillor Murphy stated the household waste collection is running well but to achieve this the prices have to be put up and will likely need to go up again next year due to inflation.
- Councillor Barber expressed the view that the bulky waste collection was exceptionally good for the price of up to 5 articles and the fact that residents and neighbours can combine their articles for one pick-up price is excellent when compared to what private companies are charging.

- Councillor Booth agreed the service was good but did not feel Councillor Roy's question was answered which was will the price increase effect fly tipping in the local area as this is a massive problem in the villages and must cost the Council more money to clear the fly tipping. He also added that he felt the brown bin should be free of charge.
- Councillor Davis asked if there was anyway the Council could liaise with Cambridgeshire County Council as there have been reports of people being turned away who own big trucks or very large vehicles as their daily vehicle and the recycling centre is assuming they are a business and not allowing them to enter the site which she feels is encouraging fly tipping. Paul Medd stated if there are people who are not operating as a business but turn up to the recycling centre in what looks to be a commercial vehicle, they can apply for an exemption which will allow access to the tip. Councillor Davis stated that this does not seem to be the case. Councillor Murphy added that if they apply for an exemption, they will be issued with paperwork to allow them on site legally. Councillor Booth added he believed the process was to apply online and this can be repeated up to 10 times a year to take a commercial vehicle or trailers to the site, but feels the public are not fully aware of system in place and it comes down to knowledge which is an area which could be streamlined.
- Councillor Murphy addressed the question regarding free brown bins, stating that at the end of last year 24,500 people paid subscriptions to have their brown bins emptied, this saved the Council increasing Council Tax by £1.25 million pounds. Councillor Booth responded that this was a backdoor Council Tax increase for Council Tax payers because they would be forced to have to pay for it unless there are other means to dispose of their garden waste, which equates to about a 10% Council Tax rise for having to pay for a brown bin. Councillor Murphy responded he felt that people who use the brown bin service like the service and it is down to personal choice.
- Councillor Hay stated she felt it necessary to let the public know that the staff at the recycling centres are Cambridgeshire County Council and not Fenland District Council staff.
- Councillor Hay stated the Council have recently issued a revised set of fees and charges for taxis and she has picked up that in the original paperwork Hackney Carriages and Private Hire all had charges around 2% and one at 4%. She asked what the reasoning was for the revised Fees and Charges to all read zero increases now? Councillor Hoy responded that she had asked for the prices to be held, as the thought was to not give the taxi drivers any extra burden given how few there are at present plus the Council are investigating how the process can be streamlined.
- Councillor Tierney stated that he would like to address some of the issues Councillor Booth raised in regard to collections at the recycling centres, he agreed it was getting harder to drop things off and this is creating an increase in fly tipping, but those decisions are not made by this Council, but the County Council and the pressure should be directed at them. Councillor Booth responded his question was about the increase in price for bulky waste collection from household waste which this Council provides which could lead to people fly tipping because they will not want to pay the increased charge. Councillor Tierney referred to Cambridgeshire County Council and its commercial waste. Councillor Booth referred back to his original question. Councillor Boden stated there needs to be a balance drawn between the cost to the Council and the service which is provided to people and that it is good value for money compared with the alternatives. Councillor Murphy added that some of the issue behind the fly tipping is Facebook, as there are a lot of people now asking for household goods to be removed from their houses or driveway, which is being carried out by people with a van, but as a Council there is no way of telling where these household goods are ending up and there has been evidence of items being fly tipped elsewhere.
- Councillor Sennitt Clough recognised that the discussion was focused on FDC waste but did not believe the two could be separated because fly tipping is a drain on FDC staff resources. She continued that she would like to address the bureaucracy around these tips as on the one hand there is a lot of bureaucracy and on the other hand the people who work at these sites are selling the good which raises all kinds of issues in terms of if they are selling on white goods as they may not be checked and may have electrical faults etc. Councillor Hicks questioned if anything is purchased at the tip it is always cash and where

does that cash go? Councillor Davis stated that reflects what was said earlier that this is a County Council issue and not a Fenland District Council issue and all that can be achieved is for the Council to keep raising these issues with the County Council. Councillor Booth recommended that a letter be sent to Cambridgeshire County Council from the committee raising the concerns around the bureaucratic process for residents to drop off bulky items and could they please look at that process again.

**Members agreed to recommend that Cabinet include the proposed fees and charges in the budget for 2025/26.**

### **OSC28/23 DRAFT BUSINESS PLAN 2025/26**

Members considered the Draft Business Plan 2025/26 report presented by Councillor Boden.

Councillor Davis stated that items 7 and 8 have been impacted by the pending Local Government reorganisation and the Leader, Councillor Boden, would like to take this time to share the significant changes that may arise relevant to these agenda items. She proposed items 7 and 8 be considered before raising any specific questions for members and officers.

Councillor Boden informed members that:

- the Council has had for six years or more a consistent policy which has been followed in about how to move forward, prudently, cautiously and carefully looking after the assets of the Council and at the same time making sure the burden on the Council Taxpayer is kept as low as possible, and when things have to change policies have to change, too.
- the Council has experienced a significant change in the last month, a week before Christmas the Government issued a White Paper which was called 'Devolution' which informed the Council that it was going to create Mayoral Combined Authorities across the whole of England, and it was going to institute Local Government reform such that all of the Councils which currently are two tier authorities together with some of the neighbouring smaller unitary authorities would all be subject to a reorganisation so that there would be a consistent pattern of unitaries right across the Country
- the Government advised that these unitaries would have a population of between 500,000 and 1 million each, with District Councils such as Fenland being abolished, the County Council such as Cambridgeshire would be abolished, and the timescale involved is that it would be in two phases, one phase involved the changes taking place on the 1 April 2027 and the second phase on the 1 April 2028.
- County Councils were asked which of the two tranches they wish to go in, the County Councils were meant to consult with their District Councils, but that process of consultation has not worked particularly well in several areas of the Country. Nevertheless some 16 of the 21 County Councils gave notice by the 10 January that they wish to cancel their election this year and to proceed in the first tranche of changes.
- in addition to those 16 Councils two unitary authorities, Thurrock and the Isle of Wight, also gave notice that they wish to cancel their elections this year and move towards the fast track of being part of the new Unitary Authorities.
- a great deal of conversation has taken place between Council Leaders and between Chief Executives of various Councils all around the Country and there has been particular concern that the Councils do not know the rules of the game as far as how these changes are going to take place.
- Cambridgeshire decided because of the uncertainties involved and because there is already a Mayoral Combined Authority, there was no advantage to move to the quicker first tranche and that the second tranche was more appropriate which is why the County Council elections will be taking place.
- the incentive that Central Government gave towards Councils to move more quickly was that if they got their Mayoral Combined Authorities in place quickly then they would get more funding at an earlier stage which a lot of County Councils across the Country have taken

advantage of.

- Fenland District Council are now facing a situation where this Council will cease to exist on 31 March 2028. The policies that the Council has been following for the past few years have always been much longer term than just the next two or three years and the Council has always looked at the very long term in relation to the interest of the Fenland people and now this timetable has changed and the Council has a very different timetable to work upon and the implications of which way the Government is doing this is such that there are dangers to the interest of the people of Fenland which, in his opinion, is the Council's job to mitigate as far as possible.
- he is not advocating the Council campaigns against what the Government is doing as they have a large majority in Parliament and even though this was not part of their manifesto and just a couple of months before they made the announcement at the Local Government Association Conference which Paul Medd attended on the Councils behalf, the Secretary of State gave no inkling that this was in the offing but despite all of that it is clear that they are putting a large amount of political capital into this set of changes and they are not going to change their minds.
- Local Government reform does not happen very often but it can give the opportunity to make fundamental changes where it is appropriate to do so, however, the way Government is doing this does not allow those fundamental changes to take place because it is being rushed, which will affect Fenland because those authorities which are going to have their elections cancelled this year and are going forward for the first tranche of changes will not be able to work with those authorities which are in the second tranche in order to look at opportunities which may exist across current County boundaries.
- it is not merely the two-tier areas which are involved in this Government has said that those smaller unitaries which have a boundary with the two-tier areas are also part of the potential change and can also come into the calculations which are involved, and Government says that they have come to the opinion that smaller unitaries may not have the financial standing to be able to be sustainable and it is known that several smaller unitaries have had financial difficulties in recent times, with most local to Fenland has been Peterborough, which is why Government has said those unitaries under 500,000 population may also be part of this reorganisation and be part of the calculation when it comes to the establishment of new Unitary Authorities.
- it has not been made clear what the decision-making process is for this but it will be the Government Ministers that will decide what the new Unitary Authorities will look like, what they have asked for is for existing Counties, existing Districts and the existing neighbouring Unitary Authorities with small populations to talk to each other to come to some sort of consensus about what is appropriate for their areas.
- within Cambridgeshire and Peterborough that process has taken place on an entirely non-party political basis, the Chief Executives and the Leaders have come together and have talked about this issue, looking at the interests of the people that they represent and looking at the interests of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough as a whole.
- it has been agreed that no local council wants to see a Unitary Authority which covers the whole of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough as it would mean that Local Government would be massively removed from the individuals it is meant to serve.
- when studying what the Government originally stated in terms of its population size targets for unitaries where it said that a new Unitary Authority should have between 500,000 and 1 million population given that the whole of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough has a population of 903,000 then technically the only option the Council has would be to have a single Unitary Authority covering the whole of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough which none of the political parties or Leaders of local councils want to see a council as remote as that, however, it would be necessary for at least one of any two Unitary Authorities to be significantly under that 500,000 figure.
- Central Government did say in a Ministerial webinar that in exceptional circumstances there would be some flexibility on the 500,000 figure, and the flexibility mentioned could be as low as 450,000 having said that it is just not known what is going to happen as the vital details

have not been shared yet.

- all Councils are expecting to receive a letter by the end of this month (January) giving more details to allow Councils to make firm recommendations when it comes to decision making, but ultimately the Government can do what it wishes.
- when looking at the economic geography of the area and the functional geography of the area it is largely based around Peterborough but extends into Lincolnshire, South Holland, all of Rutland and some of the Huntingdon area.
- the Government have said they would entertain consensus locally even if they do cross traditional County boundaries, which is not the preference, but a possibility and not impossible that the existing District Councils may be able to be split between two Unitary Authorities.
- local lines of communication have been established between the local authorities while waiting for a decision to be made.
- Lincolnshire has chosen to take the fast-track route and if accepted then Fenland District Council will not be part of that despite any logic for Peterborough to be a functional economic area for the Unitary Authority, this should be announced by the 24 February 2025 along with the rest of the 16 counties across the Country who will be cancelling their elections and in the first tranche.
- if Fenland are in a new Unitary Authority all of its assets and liabilities will be transferred on 1 April 2028 to the new Unitary Authority and depending on the size of the Unitary Authority Fenland will constitute between 10% and 20% of the population of that new Unitary Authority, giving an example of how this could look if 15% of Fenland was in the Unitary Authority then 85% will effectively be for the benefit of people outside Fenland rather than inside Fenland and if a neighbouring authority which Fenland is merged into has a large amount of loans outstanding which it has taken out, effectively Fenland will inherit 15% of those loans shares within the whole new Unitary Authority which he feels will create some problems.
- there are already great pressures on Social Services finances and what will happen in the new Unitary Authorities takeover is those financial pressures concerning Adults, Children and SEND will be squeezed out because of the desperate need to make sure the statutory requirements to look after adults, to look after Children and to accommodate the SEND provision, with those statutory provisions being all encompassing.
- the Council now faces a situation where as a Council it has been prudent over a long period of time, there are reserves which have built up over a number of different ways and there was a plan in place and some of those plans were scheduled to come to the next Cabinet meeting, but now the Council faces a situation that if some of those plans were to take place this now needs to be actioned quickly rather than waiting otherwise all of the Unitary Authority with all of the concentration on adults, children and SEND and the nice things the Council thinks should happen are not going to be available.
- this is not because the Unitary Authority will discriminate against Fenland, it is that the new Unitary Authority will not have the resources to be able to look at those sorts of things, particularly, Sports and Leisure, and Heritage and the Built Environment which are the two areas the Council is aware of that will be affected and affect local residents.
- as it stands presently there are significant issues with the three Leisure Centres and a long standing ambition within Chatteris to have a swimming pool, the Council also know that throughout the area but particularly in March there is an under provision of sports facilities, as far as this Council can influence that as local Councillors the opportunities to achieve this is now limited to the 31 March 2028.
- this is similar to Heritage and the Built Environment, if this Council does not ensure that some of the things planned are not achieved by 31 March 2028 then sadly they will not happen.
- everything that has been shared today shows the whole outlook both in terms of the Business Plan 2025/26 and in terms of the Budget 2025/26 and beyond, the whole method of thinking is having to change, there have been lengthy conversations with the Chief Executive over the past few weeks about how this needs to be planned for, which means

the Business Plan is going to need to be changed significantly for the year 2025/26 and the same goes for the Budget as well.

- the changes will need to happen in two different ways, the first being to bring in the desired capital expenditure the Council wishes to see over the course of the next three years but also to ensure that on the revenue side that the revenue cost the Council has are reduced where possible and if the Council can increase revenue where possible whilst at the same time providing the basic services that need to be provided for this Council and for the residents of the Fenland area.
- this is more difficult than it might sound because whilst in some areas there will be no problem at all and there will be a seamless transition, with Fenland staff being moved over on 1 April 2028 to the new Unitary Authority and residents will not notice any difference from the week before to the week after. In other places he was sorry to say other members of staff may look for more assured employment and there may be a pressure from losing staff in some key areas, which may mean some difficulties in maintaining the basic services that the Council wants to maintain, and these are problems that will affect every County and District Council across the Country.
- that the existing Budget and draft Business Plan has changed fundamentally in the last four weeks and as a Council, Fenland need to make the best of it for the Fenland residents which is the most important thing.

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

- Councillor Hay asked if the Capital Projects the Council are already committed to are safe? Councillor Boden responded at this point no they are not safe until the Capital Programme is re-evaluated and given that there may be different priorities now it may be that some things take over from other things, but this will be re-evaluated based on the re-prioritisation this Council needs to do.
- Councillor Hay stated within the Business Plan it mentioned that transformation continued to be at the heart of the Business Plan, considering that in some cases transformation meant re-organisation of staff and re-organisation of buildings how will this be affected by this announcement? Councillor Boden responded fundamentally everything that this Council has done and everything the Council has been planning has been for the medium to long term with a view of any changes made having a payback period which has now gone out of the window as Fenland District Council will cease to exist in three years and two months' time so there has to be a fundamental re-evaluation of what will happen within transformation and accommodation including all the land assets the Council owns and the move to Hereward Hall as there is now no longer a future to plan for.
- Councillor Sennitt Clough asked how the Town and Parish Councils fit into the proposed centralisation and what their future relationships will look like with the new Unitary Authority? Councillor Boden responded the White Paper did mention that Local Councils in some cases could take on some responsibilities, but in practical terms he could not see this working because the Town and Parish Councils do not carry the infrastructure or the sustainability, expertise or knowledge if significant powers were transferred as they would have to employ a lot more people, they would have to spend a lot more money and they would have to levy a lot more in their precept.
- Councillor Booth stated there has been plenty of announcements regarding Local Government over the time he has been a councillor, and they do not always come to fruition on the dates that have been indicated and he would propose they are not definite dates which have been spoken about at this time and could change after the consultation. He continued the main point he wanted to address today was the Business Plan because that is the main agenda item and Councillor Boden has stated that that is going to have to change quite substantially, is this from next year onwards or is he stating that there will need to be substantial changes before it goes out as a final item for this year? Councillor Boden responded it has been reported that there is not going to be any local consultation but the Government will organise public consultations itself at a national level on these changes, but that consultation will not allow anyone to challenge the principles behind what

is being proposed it will be a matter of how what the Government wants will be implemented not whether it should be implemented. He continued as far as this not taking place the Government is investing an enormous amount of political capital into this change, and he believes this will be pushed through regardless of unforeseen hurdles as Central Government has stated that in the longer term there will be a savings made but he feels in the short term over four years the costs will be substantial. Councillor Boden referred to the question on the Business Plan and it will need a significant change before it is finally agreed, and discussions are ongoing. Councillor Booth responded based on that answer is there any point in members considering this if it is going to all be changed as he assumed it would have to go to Full Council to discuss the final version. Councillor Boden responded that this is part of the reason the Chairman asked for an explanation to take place at today's meeting, so members knew how things stand now and what the fundamental changes are for the future of Fenland District Council

- Councillor Hicks stated that 2027 is going to be very close to a General Election bearing in mind what has happened so far this may all be forgotten about as a point of interest. Councillor Boden stated that Councillor Booth mentioned earlier that there has often been talk about Local Government reorganisations which often came to nothing at all and since the major organisations which took place in the 1880s the vast majority of the initiatives which have been started have not come to fruition for exactly the reason Councillor Hicks has just been mentioning that the electoral timetable at a national level has derailed any suggestions that people have had but there have been changes which have taken place successfully, like the changes which took place in 1963 in London and the changes which took place in 1974 and the 1972 act. He added that the Government has already addressed this issue, and it is specifically stated that because its mandate runs until 2029 that it is determined to complete this whole exercise at least a year before its mandate comes to an end. Paul Medd commented that Councillor Boden's overview is helpful and is word perfect in terms of everything that happened today, there are many unanswered questions that will start to evolve from this point forward probably starting with the Ministerial letter which the Council is due to receive by the end of the month and in terms of where the Council is now Councillor Boden has covered everything. He reinforced a couple of points that Councillor Boden mentioned, that any consultation will be undertaken by Central Government that is correct, when that came up in a conversation with Ministers and Senior Civil Servants they made it very clear that the consultation should not be seen as a referendum as to whether a move to unitarization is something the public will be asked to give feedback on. Paul Medd added that Councillor Booth is correct in the past when Government have set out timetables or time targets, they do various things and often they have not been met but again Senior Ministers and Senior Civil Servants have made it very clear that it is their expectation that a model of unitarization will exist across all existing two-tier areas before the end of this Parliament.
- Councillor Booth referred to the current Business Plan making the point that one of the comments he makes every year is that not enough effort is made on the rural areas and villages and looking at the draft plan for today it makes one reference to the rural area and one reference to the villages and there is no substance throughout the rest of the document as to where the objectives are. He feels if this document is going to be looked at again could the Council please give some consideration to the rural areas and villages as he keeps asking every year and every year he is assured that this will be looked into. Councillor Boden responded that thinking in the longer term in relation to Councillor Booth's question in relation to the boundaries pre-1 April 1974 and how that discussion and what the then rural District Councils might think about what happened after the change to Fenland District Council, how that might reflect what the Fenland of today might think in terms of what happens after unitarization so with caution the Council has to understand that many of the services which Fenland provide are provided in the towns and utilised by people not just from the towns but also from the villages and that there are some particularly local requirements in the parish areas rather than the towns which must not be ignored. He continued that there has to be a balance and maybe some of the bigger ticket items are

going to be in the towns because they do service the whole of Fenland but that's not to say the Council ignores the parish areas and there will be areas within the re-prioritisation that will relate to specific needs.

- Councillor Hay asked if the newly written Business Plan will be re-submitted before Cabinet and Council? Councillor Boden responded that there will be significant revisions to the paper ready for the Cabinet and Council meeting next month.
- Councillor Sennitt Clough stated that this draft Business Plan sets out the priorities for the next 12 months but clearly those priorities may shift based on the information that Councillor Boden has just provided and it is her view that while the committee could ask questions priorities are shifting and it is an ever changing set of circumstances and suggested that this is something the committee revisit after Cabinet has met. Councillor Boden emphasised while there will be a significant re-prioritisation in view of the termination of this Council over the course of the next three years and two months and the Council must continue to need to provide services to residents and to continue to ensure that those services are provided as efficiently and effectively as possible up to the very last day of the existence of this Council, but over and above that the Council has to consider the re-prioritisation in light of the changes which will take place on the 1 April 2028.

**Members noted the information reported.**

**OSC29/23 REVISED GENERAL FUND BUDGET AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2024/25; DRAFT GENERAL FUND BUDGET ESTIMATES 2025/26 AND DRAFT MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (MTFS) 2025/26 TO 2029/30; CAPITAL PROGRAMMES 2025/26-2027/28**

Members consider the Revised Budget and Capital Programme 2025/26 report presented by Councillor Chris Boden

Councillor Boden paid tribute to the work undertaken by Mark Saunders stating his expertise and knowledge is second to none and made reference to the White Paper and the future plans of the Council.

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

- Councillor Hicks stated that in light of the information shared in the budget plan it shows that over the next two years there will be a £2.5 million pound deficit, and he would like to know how this was going to be addressed and how will the shortfall be made up in the time the Council has left? Councillor Boden responded the Council has to be aware of the revenue accounts position, the revenue savings that were made and the reserves created, specifically the budget equalisation reserve, all of these things will need to be taken into account in the new balance that the Council will create between the different priorities that the Council will be putting forward for next year and for the years following up until 2028.
- Councillor Booth raised a point on the budget that it does appear that the Council are getting into a worse position and asked if the Council should not be a little more cautious particularly with the point around Council Tax given that it will be around £5 million in deficit before this Council ceases to exist and obviously the Council as it is right now does not want to be seen as not providing the best governance for the Fenland residents. Councillor Boden responded there needs to be a definition between dept and revenue deficit and agreed the Council has to bear in mind the revenue account and it needs to look at the expenditure that it was going to occur which now may no longer be appropriate to do, some of that is on the capital side which would have had revenue implication. He stated that it is difficult to overstate just how fundamental the change of mindset has to be as a result of what has now been announced which means the Council now has to look out for the best interests for the longer term of the people of Fenland and the services this Council provides at a standard that the Fenland people expect right up until the 31 March 2028 with the Council needing to be prudent with the resources on the Council Tax side and on the assets

side in the Council with the resources which belong to Fenland which should be used for the benefit of the people of Fenland. Councillor Boden continued there is an interesting set of choices to make between priorities to achieve the best outcome that is possible for the people of Fenland when Fenland District Council becomes 15% of a new Unitary Authority on 1 April 2028.

- Councillor Roy stated given the amount of work that goes into the Business Plan and the Budget and that the Council are heading into so many unknowns and is in a state of flux, he felt it needed to be applauded the work that officers have put in up to this stage as it must be a tremendous ask to get to this point not knowing what lies in the future.

**Members considered and noted the draft budget proposals for 2025/26 and the updated capital programme.**

### **OSC30/23 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME**

Members consider and note the Future Work Programme.

Councillor Davis stated that the members are still working to the proposed timetable at present and ahead of the next meeting arrangements will be made to incorporate meeting dates for 2025/26 once they have been finalised, and with what has been heard today, this will have an impact on what comes before Overview and Scrutiny and a few items may need to be moved around throughout the year.

12.05 pm

Chairman