

COUNCIL



FRIDAY, 7 NOVEMBER 2025 - 4.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor B Barber (Chairman), Councillor S Clark (Vice-Chairman), Councillor I Benney, Councillor C Boden, Councillor J Carney, Councillor G Christy, Councillor J Clark, Councillor S Count, Councillor D Cutler, Councillor Mrs M Davis, Councillor L Foice-Beard, Councillor Mrs J French, Councillor G S Gill, Councillor R Gerstner, Councillor A Hay, Councillor P Hicks, Councillor Miss S Hoy, Councillor S Imafidon, Councillor Mrs D Laws, Councillor N Meekins, Councillor A Miscandlon, Councillor P Murphy, Councillor Dr H Nawaz, Councillor D Patrick, Councillor M Purser, Councillor B Rackley, Councillor D Roy, Councillor C Seaton, Councillor M Summers, Councillor T Taylor, Councillor S Tierney, Councillor S Wallwork and Councillor A Woollard

APOLOGIES: Councillor G Booth, Councillor A Branton, Councillor D Connor, Councillor K French, Councillor M Humphrey and Councillor D Oliver

C35/25 LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION - SUBMISSION TO GOVERNMENT

Members considered the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) progress update and which one of the five options to advise Cabinet to submit to Government to reorganise local government in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, presented by Councillor Boden. Councillor Boden stated that this is probably the most important debate that members have because it will impact upon how Fenland's area and its residents are going to be governed in at least the next decade ahead. He reminded members that this came about in December last year when Government without any forewarning produced a white paper, which they called devolution but that is a matter of opinion, and in that they said that within England all of the areas which have two tier local government would be unitarized.

Councillor Boden stated that this announcement came out of the blue and it is not as though local government reform is not needed as structural reform is required but for them to do this in the way that the Government has done it, in his view, is really counterproductive because the one thing which is certain about this across the country is that there will be a worst structure after this reorganisation process than there is now but Government is intent on pushing it through and forwards. He predicts that within 10 years the whole process will be undertaken again because what is being created just will not work.

Councillor Boden expressed the view that it is difficult to reform local government as over the last 190 years there have been at least 7 big attempts to change local government and those attempts have largely failed because it is such a difficult process to go through. He added that almost the major comprehensive changes to local government in England that have taken place have occurred after a royal commission has been established to go through the whole process of examining all the evidence to look at the alternatives and to come up with recommendations to Government.

Councillor Boden stated that long serving members of this Council may recall after the great reform act which changed the Parliamentary elections, a royal commission was set up to reform local government and that reform resulted in the landmark Municipal Corporation Act 1835 which was the first time really that local government was set up in an elected way and the way that people are used to. He continued that this basic structure lasted for about 50 years until the local government acts of 1888 and 1894 came in and they fundamentally changed local government again and after

many years of discussion and of consideration about how change should take place and that itself lasted another 50-60 years until the changes came in 1965 for London and in 1974 for the rest of England under the Local Government Act 1972, which provides the structure that exists now.

Councillor Boden expressed the opinion that this proposal by Government to unitarize everyone has been rushed through and there are so many missed opportunities and there will be boundaries that will be suboptimal because of the way in which Government set this out from the beginning, which cannot be changed and Government is insistent on pushing it through and it looks like they will go through with it even though it is inefficient, ineffective and ultimately counterproductive. He stated that within Cambridgeshire and Peterborough after a lot of conversations that have taken place within the Leaders and Chief Executives five options have been produced, all of which have been circulated and some which have already been discussed.

Councillor Boden stated that in Appendix 3 he is recommending to Council that it is recommended to Cabinet that Option D is put forward, with Option D consisting of Fenland becoming part of a unitary authority with East Cambridgeshire and East and Southern Huntingdonshire, and the reasons he is putting this forward is because Fenland would be in a local authority where it would be one of a number of equals. He continued it would be made up almost exclusively of market towns and their rural hinterlands and it would be internally consistent as opposed to all the other options where Fenland would end up just being part of Greater Peterborough and if Fenland was part of a greater Peterborough, Peterborough would control the money, decisions and Fenland would be an afterthought.

Councillor Boden expressed the view that Option D is the only option where Fenland would not just be absorbed by Peterborough and members might wonder why should it participate in this flawed process at all, which is justified as it could end up with something much worse, but there is one opportunity to make Fenland's voice heard so that the least bad choice is made and he would far rather end up in a unitary authority with East Cambridgeshire and the rural parts of Huntingdonshire than being a subsidiary part of the new Greater Peterborough. He suggested that the authority under Option D would be named the Cambridgeshire Fens Unitary Authority and it would be a very coherent and consistent area, however, without a good amount of cooperation with the other parts of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough which will be in different unitary authorities the whole system would not work well and, in his view, if the Government had tried to push up into a larger area those things that need to be dealt with on a regional or sub-regional basis and push down to a lower area, such as Fenland, those things which should be dealt with more locally members would be talking about something which is potentially sensible instead of the least bad option as far as the new boundaries are concerned.

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

- Councillor Gerstner made the point that Cambridgeshire County Council have put forward a different proposal and asked how much influence does this have on the decision being made today? Councillor Boden responded that each of the existing authorities have the right to put forward what they think is the best or least worst option for their area. He continued that the Government have said they will only consider proposals put forward by local authorities for the area and one proposal each but it is not very likely to be a decision that is followed by Government as Cambridgeshire County Council are the only one to put forward a proposal which is outside the Cambridge area linking in East Cambridgeshire with South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge City and the Government is keen to see a Cambridge growth area moving forward. Councillor Boden stated that it is not known for certain what option the other local authorities are going to choose but Fenland should do what it thinks is the best for the residents of Fenland.
- Councillor Patrick asked if there had been discussions with the other local authorities? Councillor Boden responded there has been lots of discussion with authorities in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, with dozens of meetings with the Leaders, Chief Executives and Section 151 Officers and the amount of money that has already been spent

has run into seven figures just in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, mainly by the County Council. He stated that a lot of money and time has been spent to just get to this stage and the authorities in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough have cooperated better than other parts of the country, with there being one joint letter from all of the authorities showing the separate recommendations of the different authorities but also showing that the authorities are working on a joint evidence base.

- Councillor Tierney stated that he is uncomfortable today because he does not support this and it is not often that he does not support the Leader, having huge respect for the Leader. He continued that when he first became a councillor, localism was talked about and taking the power to the people and this proposal is the opposite of this, it is moving power from local to the highest, largest most remote council they can make, which, in his view, is a terrible proposal from the Government that he cannot support. He expressed the opinion that none of the options are good, nothing is perfect but local government does not need to be reformed, it works well and he does not agree with what all the councils do because there are different parties at play but they are just reflecting a local flavour of what the people voted for. Councillor Tierney expressed the view that LGR is going to be hugely expensive and things like free parking, not raising Council Tax and a good bin service are going to disappear as a big council cannot do these things if $\frac{3}{4}$ of the area is doing something different. He stated that the main reasons he does not support LGR is that he does not think anyone thinks it is a good idea and the Government could not care less what Fenland District Council thinks, it does not matter what option is voted for as they will not care and will do whatever they want, however, the public are watching us and if members vote today for one of these options members are saying their Council is rubbish, is not doing a good job, including its officers and councillors and whilst no one is perfect, this Council does work hard for its residents. Councillor Tierney stated that these are not acceptable options, he wants members to face up to Government and say that no option will be chosen as it is a terrible thing to do.
- Councillor Taylor expressed the opinion that this is being led by the unleadable and a major proof is what Keir Starmer is doing at the moment regarding Net Zero. He feels the Council is being instructed as to what it is going to do and this is a rural area that knows rural issues and it must stick to its identity. Councillor Taylor expressed the view that this is a big con and is being undertaken to gain voters for the future and he suggests that LGR be shoved 'where the sun does not shine' and the Council gets on with doing what it has done well for years.
- Councillor Cutler stated that previously there were only three options, A-C, and she favoured C to allow Fenland to remain the most local to deliver services, with the general feeling at the previous meeting being that councillors did not want to be in a unitary with Peterborough because its needs are different. She continued that Peterborough is now in 4 options, with Option D being the only option that does not include Fenland with Peterborough and whilst she agrees with the other members who have spoken and does not want LGR, there is no choice and an option needs to be selected. Councillor Cutler expressed the opinion that Option D is the best choice and whilst she is disappointed about this ill thought-out proposal by the Government, there is no choice but to choose and submit an option and she will support Option D.
- Councillor Summers made the point that the business cases with each proposal were very detailed so there is a lot to read and digest, acknowledging and thanking those that contributed to these, including the Leader. He stated that as everyone has acknowledged, it is apparent that there is not a lot of choice and LGR is going ahead and if he was to put himself in the place of the person receiving the letters he would be more inclined to support the proposals that were more collaborative and positive and whether that is the true feeling or not the process has to be embraced as best it can to get as much out of it. Councillor Summers made the point that Option D is a new option and makes sense for all of the reasons the Leader has put forward in his opening remarks but the thing that jumps out to him is the financial element, it appears that Option D makes the least sense from a financial perspective and Option B makes the most sense, although he acknowledged that he was

not an expert on the matter and is relying on the officers who have produced the business cases to be objective and truthful. He continued that Option D does not strictly meet all the criteria that has been set out but Option B does as far as he can see so his proposal would be that Option B is put forward. Councillor Summers stated that if members believe there are issues with the way the Government has gone about this it should be pointed out in a collaborative way offering solutions and highlighting solutions in a tone which they will be receptive to.

- Councillor Hay stated that previously when LGR was discussed she was very much in favour of Option C, although she prefers if LGR does not go ahead but not choosing an option is not an option in her view. She continued that she does not like being joined with Peterborough, but it is most equitable in number of divisions whereas Option B is 55 divisions versus 26 divisions, which is, in her view, unfair, and Option B has 322,000 residents for Cambridgeshire and the area that Fenland would be in would have 612,000 residents. Councillor Hay stated that she has concerns over Option D as, although the area is one she favours, looking at the figures the net annual savings are lower and the costs and the payback period are higher so feels Government will reject it so she is still favouring Option C.
- Councillor Nawaz stated that his fundamental position remains the same as the last meeting and he agrees with Councillor Tierney that this is a ridiculous idea, lacking any imagination, has not been thought through and is using a one size fits all position, with the only measure being used is 500,000 to 1,000,000 residents and that does not take into account the cultural differences and geographical boundaries. He made the point that, although he disagrees with this process, he does not feel that the Council should 'leave the arena' and let the other authorities walk over Fenland, the Government will probably do what they want any way and his experience of consultations is that they are a tick box, paper exercise. Councillor Nawaz expressed the view that he does know which way two of the other councils are going to vote but this is tentative and he does know when push comes to shove which option Fenland should choose, with Fenland being a large rural area, having particular culture, political and social requirements and is being compared to a densely populated urban area which also happens to have a lot of debt, which would be carried forward. He continued that Fenland currently has free parking, it is an excellent Council, well-run, has a committed team of officers and councillors who are knowledgeable and passionate about their areas and if it is enlarged it will become more remote, be outvoted with councillors in North Bretton having a decisive vote on issues in Pondersbridge, Turves or Coates, which is why he would not support Options B or C. Councillor Nawaz reiterated that Fenland has free parking and in the more urban areas there is a £2.50 charge for ½ hour of parking in the town centre and Council Tax has been kept the same for the last 8 years, which would have to be increased if the debt of Peterborough is carried forward. He made the point that the Council is efficiently run and it should not be diluted by the less well run councils who are not able to make any decisions, when there is political stability, a responsible opposition who put forward constructive, mature, sensible suggestions and work together well whereas other councils are constantly at each others throats, are polarised and divisive. Councillor Nawaz expressed the opinion that he cannot see why the business case for Option D will not work and, as an option needs to be picked that Option D should be the preferred option.
- Councillor Meekins stated that Councillor Tierney has put forward his feeling very eloquently, however, does fear that if an option is not chosen today Fenland is excluding itself from any debate going forward. He stated that he was going to support Option D as the best option but is now not sure whether he can vote for any options.
- Councillor Count expressed the view that members are being asked to put an endorsement to something the Labour Government has put forward, likening it to an early Christmas present that has to be wrapped with minimal provisions so whatever is undertaken to move it forward is going to be botched job and this is not the way that LGR should have gone forward and not the pain that should have been inflicted on residents by a Government that is trying to pursue its own regional ideas with no respect whatsoever for the local voice,

which will be lost if this moves ahead. He made the point that members did not stand to be MPs in the last election, the people voted for this Government, who is in charge and this cannot be overturned today and however abhorrent members find what they are doing it has to engage the best it can on behalf of the residents, which is why he agrees that one of the options needs to be put forward. Councillor Count stated that he has looked at the options and does believe that there are 6 options not 5, with the other option being none of the above which has been put forward by Councillor Tierney and his preference is for Option D. He made the point that many people have already spoken about rurality and there are similarity between the people who live in and get represented in small rural areas that is completely different to the urban areas of Peterborough City and Cambridgeshire County Council. Councillor Count expressed the view that, as a backdrop as to why he feels that one is better than another, whilst there might be some evidence in front of members the financials do not stack up and he has no confidence in these financials, whilst he knows they have been produced by competent people sitting in offices with their spreadsheets working on information that they have in front of them. He provided an example in the case of Option D on highways maintenance, highways lengths are not available at district level so they have apportioned highways lengths on population and assumed it is roughly the same for every district and it has led them to come to a conclusion. Councillor Count referred to Highways and the impact of dissolving and reforming a new unitary, with Fenland currently coming under Cambridgeshire County Council and at the last time he remembers a report being undertaken on the backlog of repairs in Cambridgeshire, there was a backlog of £420 million pounds and you could think that 5 areas that roughly is a bit each which might be fair for someone sitting at a desktop without the information that members have but actually it is made up of two elements, there is £300 million of backlog on the Fen type roads and £120 million apportioned roughly the same and out of that £300 million the vast majority is in Fenland and the rest is in East Cambridgeshire or West Huntingdonshire, the ones that he would prefer joining up with. He continued that if this is not dealt with separate to the finances in front of members then the new unitary will start off with a £300 million plus liability that nobody else has got so whilst these reports are useful there will be a serious discussion to be had afterwards to say stop working things out this way. Councillor Count stated that another example would be the asset base of Cambridgeshire County Council, it has a lot of farmland and a lot of the more valuable farmland is in the south, one particular site could be worth £500 million pounds on its own and is that simply to go to South Cambridgeshire after the devolution because he is a Cambridgeshire County Council resident and he pays his rates like everyone to the County Council so he is entitled to his share of the ownership of that land and entitled to say that those people who do not live in Fenland should be made pay for their debts to its roads and none of that is encapsulated in the financial planning. He feels there is another argument about the size of the adult social care burden and saying whether you are too small or too big as it is seen up and down the country when there is someone too small they have trusts or partnerships where they join up to a larger base. Councillor Count expressed the opinion that despite all the money spent and all the competent people who worked out the finances he does not believe that can be relied upon and the ideas must be based on who Fenland thinks it has the most in common with and who will suit it best so he will support the letter that goes to the Government saying what a terrible idea this is and Option D hoping to show Government that Fenland is engaging.

- Councillor Hicks asked that when a vote is taken on the 5 options that a vote is also taken on none of these options.
- Councillor Hoy expressed the view that East Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire do not want Option D so why would members vote for an option that other authorities do not want and members are here to make a decision for Fenland and looking at the options on the table Option D is the only one that does not include it being merged with Peterborough, which would be the worst possible thing to happen to Fenland. She stated that she would like Fenland to have been bold to go on its own and is frustrated hearing other councillors say it is a waste of time, in her view, Labour are not Fenland's friend, they are not listening

to us and they are not going to care about a letter written by us as they do not care about Fenland and her preference would be to do nothing. Councillor Hoy made the point that there used to be borough councils local to the areas before the 1972 Act came into being and they were amalgamated to create Fenland, she questioned whether this is better as she does not know but surely if you are able to go to your local area and make your local reports, how could that not have been better than now as you cannot get into Fenland Hall as there is no one working in the one stop shop and every time things are moved higher up the chain it becomes less accessible. She feels that the Council should be fighting back, but it is not, it is just a letter with a few words at the start which is unhelpful referring to an analogy that Councillor Tierney used that if someone is going to punch you, you do not say please do not punch me it is going to hurt but given that you are please do it quickly and just because someone is proposing something horrible you do not say I am going to say something angry as it make the Council sound so resigned. Councillor Hoy referred to the first paragraph of the letter where it says LGR is desirable and questioned whether it was as she does not think so, there are a number of tiers referring to the Combined Authority where members were told they had to be part of the process or have it done to us, feeling sometimes that the Council goes along with things without thinking. She expressed the opinion that whatever Fenland says, the Government will not listen, officers work hard to deliver the priorities and Council Tax has not been increased, there is free parking, no asylum seekers and what is being said is this Council will not go into battle for its officers and residents. Councillor Hoy made the point that the Government did not listen to the nine district councils in Surrey so why are they going to listen to Fenland and she cannot look people in the eye in the future when things increase and free parking is lost and they cannot complain to the Council because they are one of 6,000 residents and she does not want to be part of any decision that is bad for the taxpayer. She finished by stating that people might think that Fenland is weak and feeble but it has the heart of a tiger and rather than having the Government dishonour its members should say no, no, no.

- Councillor Mrs Davies stated that like Councillor Tierney she does not like any of the options and would have preferred two more, an Option F and Option O! She expressed the opinion that the Government does not care about the electorate and there is proof of this every day. Councillor Mrs Davies stated that she would ask the Leader in his summing up what would happen if members went down the route of none but suspects he would say Fenland could end up worse so feels that members are being forced if Fenland has to have a seat anywhere at the table and to be involved in the decision making. She fears that she would have to choose Option D but is still wavering as it is one of the most difficult decisions that members have had to discuss and make.
- Councillor Rackley expressed the opinion that Fenland is a well-run Council and he was going to support Option D but after hearing from Councillors Tierney and Hoy he agrees with both of them and feels that members are 'stuck between a rock and a hard place' and would like to have gone away and thought about it. He feels that if he has to vote he would vote for Option D.
- Councillor Gerstner made the point that it is a very emotive and emotional debate, with all four market towns in Fenland being unique and having their own identities delivering good results back to the electorate. He stated that demographically for many years in Whittlesey its further education, its health facilities, retail facilities, job opportunities and transport have been in Peterborough and voting on this will not alter this, however, Peterborough has ongoing debt and is a prime example of a failed unitary authority.
- Councillor Mrs Laws thanked the Leader for his presentation, she has been around the Council for over 30 years and feels it has been a healthy debate and would agree with the comments of Councillors Count and Nawaz and to a degree Councillor Gerstner. She expressed the opinion that to do nothing would be the wrong approach, Fenland does need to register its vote today and her support would be for Option D as this Council is unique with its market towns and villages and more aligned to Option D. Councillor Mrs Laws expressed the opinion that moving towards Peterborough or any of the other options would mean Fenland would lose its identity and take on debt, but nothing would change with

Option D. She made the point that from a Whittlesey perspective and at the recent by-election, residents were horrified to think that Fenland would be disbanding, although they were informed that the town and parish councils would not be, but Fenland is a well-run Council and many residents had moved out of Peterborough to get away from the city. She thinks that it does need to be registered that the Council is not happy and are being forced to make a decision, feeling it will be forced on Fenland anyway, but her preference is Option D.

- Councillor Boden in summing up stated that it has been an interesting and lively debate and agrees that Government is not very likely to listen to Fenland on past performance and his heart would definitely be with Councillor Tierney in suggesting to them what they could do with LGR. He continued that what members do today can make a difference as Government has set out that each authority is allowed to put forward one suggested arrangement for the new unitary authorities and Government has said they will pick one of those options and he is recommending Option D for a host of reasons. Councillor Boden referred to Councillor Tierney questioning whether members want to lose free parking and keep Council Tax freezes, making the point that if Fenland were with East Cambridgeshire, who have got exactly the same, and a small part of Huntingdonshire they would have the whip hand on subject such as this, whereas if under Peterborough control Fenland would not. He continued that, as said by Councillor Taylor, Fenland is a rural area and ideally would want to stay in a rural or largely rural unitary authority but why would what Fenland say make any difference, there are 5 options on the table and not all of those 5 options are going to be submitted to Government and it is not known how every other authority in the area is going to vote but it is known that if any of the other local authorities is going to vote for Option D it would be Peterborough but they are not guaranteed to do so. Councillor Boden made the point that Peterborough City Council is hopelessly split politically and personally on the council and what they will support he does not know but what happened when they took this to Scrutiny a couple of weeks ago was that options A and D were recommended to be considered for what Peterborough put forward and if Peterborough do decide to put forward Option A and Fenland does not put forward Option D then Option D cannot be considered and if Option D cannot be considered then Fenland would join with Peterborough and it is only if Option D is on the table that it is even possible for Fenland not to be taken over by Peterborough. He made the point that it is the Government minister that will make the choice ultimately but they will be susceptible to pressure put on them by MPs and to the best of his knowledge he understands that 4 of the areas MPs, Andrew Parkes, Daniel Zeichner, Sam Carling and Steve Barclay, are going to also support Option D so if ministers listen to what local MPs are saying there is a reasonable chance that Fenland will be in a more rural unitary authority with people who share Fenland's ideals and policies and that is the power that members have today, however much members dislike the whole process if Fenland has to plump for anything it plumps for Option D as the least worst of the 5 options and at least it is on the table and there is a chance of the people of Fenland being controlled by Peterborough. Councillor Boden referred to Councillor Meekins asking what will happen if members do not vote for an option does Fenland exclude ourselves from future debate but this is the one chance that members have to put an option on the table and if Option D is not put on the table and if Peterborough in their chaotic state go for Option A then despite the fact that 4 local MPs support Option D the Government cannot consider and recommend that and it condemns Fenland to becoming part of Greater Peterborough. He made the point that Peterborough do not want Fenland, they want the high growth areas that are currently part of Huntingdonshire and in many cases Fenland does not want Peterborough, but the power is in members hands today but he is not suggesting that Government will listen to Fenland but they have set a process up and by Fenland supporting Option D it gives a chance that Fenland will end up in an authority that is with similar authorities and he encouraged members, however much they dislike the process, to vote with their heads rather than their hearts and to vote for Option D rather than say nothing at all. Councillor Boden added that none of the options meet the criteria set by Government and none of the options that he has seen so far in other parts of the country

meet the criteria either because Government is setting objectives for this process which will not be achieved, which is why whatever settlement this area ends up he feels will only last 10 years because it will be harmful to local government and local residents but the area is going to have to live with the consequences and he would rather be in a unitary authority with East Cambridgeshire and the rural part of Huntingdonshire

Proposed by Councillor Boden, seconded by Councillor Mrs Laws and AGREED, whilst not supporting LGR and following a vote on all five options and a do nothing option, that Council advise Cabinet that:

- **the preference is for Option D be submitted as the option of Fenland District Council; and**
- **delegation be authorised to the Leader and Chief Executive for the submission on behalf of the Council to MHCLG in regard to electoral arrangements for the new Unitary Authorities, with a view to minimising electoral inequality within each new Unitary Authority.**

(The Monitoring Officer exercised her delegated constitutional authority to grant a dispensation in relation to the debate and voting on LGR to enable all Members to speak freely on this important subject)

5.19 pm

Chairman