

COUNCIL



MONDAY, 24 FEBRUARY 2025 - 4.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor N Meekins (Chairman), Councillor B Barber (Vice-Chairman), Councillor I Benney, Councillor C Boden, Councillor G Booth, Councillor J Carney, Councillor G Christy, Councillor J Clark, Councillor S Clark, Councillor D Cutler, Councillor Mrs M Davis, Councillor L Foice-Beard, Councillor Mrs J French, Councillor K French, Councillor A Gowler, Councillor P Hicks, Councillor Miss S Hoy, Councillor M Humphrey, Councillor S Imafidon, Councillor Mrs D Laws, Councillor C Marks, Councillor A Miscandlon, Councillor J Mockett, Councillor P Murphy, Councillor Dr H Nawaz, Councillor D Patrick, Councillor M Purser, Councillor D Roy, Councillor C Seaton, Councillor E Sennitt Clough, Councillor M Summers, Councillor T Taylor, Councillor S Tierney and Councillor A Woollard

APOLOGIES: Councillor S Count, Councillor R Gerstner, Councillor G S Gill, Councillor S Harris, Councillor D Oliver and Councillor S Wallwork

C41/24 **PREVIOUS MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of 16 December 2024 were confirmed and signed.

C42/24 **CIVIC ENGAGEMENTS UPDATE.**

Councillor Meekins drew members' attention to the civic activities undertaken by himself and the Vice-Chairman in the weeks preceding full Council.

C43/24 **TO RECEIVE ANY ANNOUNCEMENTS FROM THE CHAIRMAN OF THE COUNCIL AND/OR THE HEAD OF PAID SERVICE.**

There were no announcements from the Chairman or Chief Executive on this occasion.

C44/24 **TO RECEIVE QUESTIONS FROM, AND PROVIDE ANSWERS TO, COUNCILLORS IN RELATION TO MATTERS WHICH, IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIRMAN, ACCORD WITH THE PROVISIONS OF PROCEDURE RULES 8.4 AND 8.6.**

The Chairman stated that no written questions had been received under Procedure Rule 8.6. Councillor Booth, as Leader of the Opposition, asked the following questions under Procedure Rule 8.4:

- What is the update on Local Government Reorganisation, assuming that is why the extraordinary Council meeting has been called on 14th March? Councillor Boden advised that discussions are ongoing with the leaders and chief executives of various local authorities. He confirmed that LGO is the reason why the meeting has been called but at this stage he cannot say what the options are being put forward. However, the Council has little choice in the process, it will put forward the best possible case for Fenland residents but ultimately it will be for Government to decide, and they may ignore what is put forward.
- Why is the extraordinary meeting planned for a Friday evening and not the normal meeting time on a Monday afternoon? Councillor Booth expressed his concern that he will be unable to attend due to his work pattern saying that members plan their schedules around regular

meeting times. He also asked why the last meeting of Audit and Risk Management Committee was moved at short notice. Councillor Boden apologised to Councillor Booth for the inconvenience of these changes. Careful consideration had been given to the best date to hold an extraordinary meeting given the constraint of having to make a submission to Government by a specific date in March, hence a Friday was deemed most practical as it clashed least with other meetings. In future, he will do his utmost to ensure that dates are not changed but sometimes it is unavoidable. Audit and Risk Management Committee had been moved on that occasion due to availability of the external auditors. Councillor Booth thanked Councillor Boden for his response and for giving assurances about future meetings. He added for the record that he believes four tiers of local government are unnecessary and reorganisation is badly needed in Cambridgeshire.

C45/24 **TO RECEIVE REPORTS FROM AND ASK QUESTIONS OF CABINET MEMBERS WITH PORTFOLIO HOLDER RESPONSIBILITIES, IN ACCORDANCE WITH PROCEDURE RULES 8.1 AND 8.2.**

Members asked questions of Portfolio Holders in accordance with Procure Rules 8.1 and 8.2 as follows:

- Councillor Nawaz stated he had made several presentations to the Leader along with a 632-name petition, regarding the Station Road recreation ground in Whittlesey. He asked if Councillor Boden could support the wishes of residents to save the facility. Councillor Boden replied that last year Cabinet had considered this piece of land surplus to requirements and its disposal a potential means to finance the substantial and costly works needed to improve the Manor Leisure Centre. However, now that Government have announced this authority will not exist in three years' time, the Council's approach to the financing of capital projects has changed. He thanked Councillor Nawaz for his work on this, but he can confirm that the Station Road recreation ground will not be sold by Fenland District Council.
- Councillor Patrick said he is aware that MVV are starting work regarding the Wisbech incinerator which will include compulsory purchase orders, some of which will include FDC land. He would like to know if this authority has received any CPOs from MVV. Councillor Benney responded there had been no approaches at this time.
- Councillor Tierney spoke of escalating and frequent anti-social behaviour occurring in Wisbech. A group of young men on electric scooters are terrorising and intimidating business owners and customers and engaging in vandalism for the sake of causing trouble. He said that the police have been called on many occasions and whilst he is sure they are doing all they can, much of which may be going on behind the scenes that people are unaware of, both he and Wisbech residents are very unhappy that nobody seems to be dealing with this serious issue. Town centres are struggling to survive, and there cannot exist a situation where people are being scared away, and business owners cannot afford to keep replacing their smashed windows. Councillor Tierney also expressed his concern that before too long people will take the law into their own hands. He would therefore request that the Leader have officers write to the police to demand intervention as a serious priority and to invite a senior member of the police to visit the Council to answer questions about their approach. Furthermore, he would like officers to bring a paper to Cabinet to look at options regarding this prolific behaviour, which may ultimately help some people from going down a road from which they cannot escape. Councillor Boden agreed that the situation is disgraceful, saying the police are relied upon to keep order and it is disappointing that this situation has not been nipped in the bud. He will ask the Chief Executive to write to the police to ask them to provide an urgent response to this matter. Public safety is vital, and this behaviour cannot and must not be allowed to continue.
- Councillor Purser said he understands there are plans to close the Sixth Form at Neale Wade and asked if the Council could provide any assistance to prevent this. Councillor Boden responded that it is not a function of this authority to deal with education provision, but he is concerned with the issue of how to ensure the skills levels of local children and adults are improved, particularly as historically Fenland's skills levels are among the worst in the country.

Although regrettably there is little that this Council can do to prevent the closure, he notes that the MP is undertaking a campaign to persuade the relevant authority to make the change on this.

- Councillor Hoy expressed her concern that the new community diagnostic centre in Wisbech seems not to be in use. It is not available for booking, GPs are not referring patients there, and the MRI scanner has been removed. Wisbech residents are having to go to Ely, Peterborough or Kings Lynn for routine appointments. It is a waste of money to have built a brand-new building and then not use it. Councillor Hoy asked if the Care Quality Commission could be invited to the next Overview & Scrutiny Panel meeting to discuss this. Councillor Boden responded that whilst health care is not the direct responsibility of this Council, it does have a role to play in promoting local health, and he was astonished to hear of this story. Fenland in general, and particularly Wisbech, is an area of significant health underachievement and there is more health deprivation here than the rest of the county. The community diagnostic centre should be there to make it easier for residents to get tested and receive quick and effective treatment to help improve these health inequalities. The ICB claim they are taking action to reduce health inequalities but their actions in not giving patients the chance to use this facility, or returning the MRI scanner, are the opposite so it is essential they are made aware of this Council's grave concern regarding this. It is not for him to say who should be invited to the Overview & Scrutiny Panel meetings but the Chairman, Councillor Mrs Davis, will have heard this. The situation is disgraceful, and he will ask the Chief Executive to write to the ICB to express their joint concern about the situation and would welcome it if the O&S panel decide it appropriate to invite the ICB to attend a meeting to discuss the diagnostic centre. If the diagnostic centre remains massively underused, the next step will be to close it, so it is essential to make as big a fuss about this as possible.
- Councillor Taylor said the farmers and related industries mental health programme, valued at £10m a year, has been withdrawn by Government. He asked if there is anyone within the Council who can deal with agricultural and industrial mental health issues. Councillor Boden responded that he is not aware of anyone employed by Fenland District Council qualified to do that, but it is an important and relevant question given the increasing pressures on the agricultural community. Again, he will ask the Chief Executive to raise this issue with the ICB, but as it is also a matter for County Council as a public health matter, Councillor Boden said he will personally seek to have the matter included on the agenda of a forthcoming meeting of the County Council's Health Committee.
- Councillor Hicks said he sympathised with Councillor Tierney's earlier comments regarding the youths in Wisbech as there have also been issues in March. Some months ago, he met with police community officers who explained how they work to a set procedure using a traffic light system, so whilst they are aware of the situations in Wisbech and March, it can take time to see results. Councillor Mrs Davis commented that there is also the option to invite the police to attend an Overview & Scrutiny Panel meeting to which portfolio holders can be invited.
- Councillor Booth thanked Councillor Mrs Laws for her update on the local plan but there are no deadlines for the next stage. He would like to know when engagement with members and the second public consultation will take place. Councillor Mrs Laws responded that in light of the new NPPF, and now due to local government reorganisation, a review is ongoing and there will be an update at the Council meeting in May.

C46/24 **BUSINESS PLAN 2025/26**

Members considered the Final Business Plan 2025/26 report presented by Councillor Tierney.

Councillor Tierney advised Fenland has always been a financially sensible council with strong leadership and has provided good services whilst freezing FDC's portion of council tax. Unfortunately, due to local government reorganisation, this Council may potentially be amalgamated with authorities that have not been so financially prudent. It is therefore imperative that Fenland residents, who have funded this Council, get a legacy for the future, hence the Business Plan has been changed to include the Fenland Inspire! Project.

Councillor Boden agreed that the key part of the Plan has changed because it is necessary to consider the best interests of local people whilst FDC still exists. As a second-tier authority this Council gets to spend money on pleasant things such as leisure services and leisure centres, but most local government expenditure is on children's and adult social services, as well as SEND provision, all currently delivered by county council. All upper tier authorities are already under immense pressure in those three areas. Following reorganisation, FDC will become part of a unitary authority and the priority will be on those services to the detriment of everything else. The danger is that a new unitary authority will not want to spend money on improving leisure centres so they will just close them. This is why the Fenland Inspire! Project has come about, as an insurance policy so that the new unitary authority has modernised facilities secured for Fenland residents for the long-term. The Business Plan has therefore been changed to emphasise what needs to be done now so residents have decent facilities for decades to come.

Councillor Booth said he had previously raised at Overview & Scrutiny a lack of emphasis on rural areas in the Plan, and he would have expected to have seen details of the consultation responses but accepts that the landscape will change dramatically over the next few years.

In summing up, Councillor Tierney commented that he believes local government reorganisation will lead to a loss of localism and the ability to try unusual things such as free parking will disappear. However, if Fenland Inspire! can be delivered for the people of Fenland as a legacy for the future, members can say they did everything they could.

Proposed by Councillor Tierney, seconded by Councillor Boden and AGREED to approve the Business Plan 2025/26.

C47/24 CORPORATE BUDGET 2025/26

Members considered the Corporate Budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy report presented by Councillor Boden.

Councillor Boden thanked officers within the Finance Team for their work in this most difficult budget process, particularly given the news about local government reorganisation. As a result, the figures produced are vastly different to those set out in December because the Council now faces a fundamental change. Many projects that the Council would once have aspired to undertake gradually when they could have been afforded, have now been incorporated into the new Fenland Inspire! Project. Without this project all these opportunities will be lost because they will not happen under a new unitary authority, and furthermore some of the things that currently exist, such as the leisure centres, will be lost if no action is taken now. Much of the money put forward for inclusion in the project is for leisure facilities, specifically the four leisure centres. It is essential to ensure they are in the best possible condition physically and financially to protect their existence when they are taken over by the new authority. Fenland Inspire! is therefore a massive commitment and Councillor Boden proceeded to run through the list of proposed projects. He thanked members and portfolio holders who had provided him with a list of suggestions of what could be included, particularly Councillor Sennitt Clough who put forward a list of arts and culture schemes and Councillor Hay who lobbied strongly for a swimming pool in Chatteris.

Councillor Sennitt Clough thanked Councillor Boden for taking forward members' suggestions.

Councillor Tierney said this is a sensible and prudent response given the situation the Council is in. He has always argued that it is up to the Council to take difficult decisions and not pass them onto the public, it is an idea that all members share. Residents are already taxed enough and this is good news.

Councillor Nawaz said he was grateful to hear that the Station Road recreation ground has been spared and thanked the residents of Whittlesey who generated the petition and spread the message. He asked if more provision could be made for children's play equipment in local parks as open spaces are needed for physical and mental well-being.

Councillor Booth stated that he supports the proposals and is glad to hear that there will be a review of playground equipment, having asked for this back in 2019. Along with other rural areas, Murrow is in dire need for an upgrade and time is now of the essence. His concern is the Medium-Term financial forecast and future years deficits and would like assurances that these will be dealt with considering this Council still has three years of existence and it is a legal requirement to have a balanced budget.

Councillor Miscandlon said he supports the project; this is future proofing and will benefit all the residents of Fenland.

Councillor Boden thanked members for their comments and agreed the value of play areas in rural areas, noting that towns do tend to have more facilities. He added that the Medium-Term Financial Strategy shows the challenge ahead, but he would be disappointed if the outturn does not show a better figure.

Proposed by Councillor Boden, seconded by Councillor Miscandlon and AGREED that:

- (i) the General Fund revenue budget for 2025/26 as set out in Section 9 of the report and Appendix A be approved.**
- (ii) the Medium-Term Financial Strategy as outlined in the report and Appendix B be adopted.**
- (iii) the Capital Programme and funding statement as set out in Appendix D be approved.**
- (iv) the adoption of the additional Business Rates Relief measures as detailed in Section 7 using Discretionary Relief Powers be approved.**
- (v) the expenses detailed in Section 12 be approved to be treated as general expenses for 2025/26.**
- (vi) the Port Health levy for 2025/26 be set out as shown in Section 13.**
- (vii) the current working age Council Tax Support Scheme be adopted with effect from 1 April 2025 as set out in Section 15, with appropriate changes to the prescribed pensioner scheme as determined by regulations.**
- (viii) the Treasury Management Strategy Statement, Minimum Revenue Provision Policy (including amending the MRP calculation to be based on the 'Annuity method' from 2024/25 onwards), Treasury Investment Strategy, Prudential and Treasury Indicators for 2025/26 and Capital Strategy 2025/26 as set out in Section 16 and Appendix E be approved.**
- (ix) the Band D Council Tax level for Fenland District Council services for 2025/26 be set at £254.79, no change on the current year.**

The Local Authorities (Standing Orders) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2014 impose an obligation on Local Authorities (after 25 February 2014) to record all votes on decisions on budget and council tax, with this in mind Members voted on this item as follows:

In favour of the proposal: Councillors Barber, Benney, Boden, Booth, Carney, Christy, J Clark, S Clark, Cutler, Mrs Davis, Foice-Beard, Mrs J French, K French, Gowler, Hicks, Hoy, Humphrey, Imafidon, Mrs Laws, Marks, Meekins, Miscandlon, Mockett, Murphy, Nawaz, Patrick, Purser, Roy, Seaton, Sennitt Clough, Summers, Taylor, Tierney, Woollard

Against the proposal: None

Abstentions: None

C48/24 COUNCIL TAX RESOLUTION 2025/26

Members considered the Council Tax Resolution 2025/26 report presented by Councillor Boden.

Councillor Boden pointed out that there will need to be a unification of council tax levels across the new unitary authority. It is a matter of great gratitude that officers have not needed to raise council tax over the last eight years.

Proposed by Councillor Boden, seconded by Councillor Mrs French and AGREED the resolution set out in the report for the Council Tax requirement to be approved.

The Local Authorities (Standing Orders) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2014 impose an obligation on Local Authorities (after 25 February 2014) to record all votes on decisions on budget and council tax, with this in mind Members voted on this item as follows:

In favour of the proposal: Councillors Barber, Benney, Boden, Booth, Carney, Christy, J Clark, S Clark, Cutler, Mrs Davis, Foice-Beard, Mrs J French, K French, Gowler, Hicks, Hoy, Humphrey, Imafidon, Mrs Laws, Marks, Meekins, Miscandlon, Mockett, Murphy, Nawaz, Patrick, Purser, Roy, Seaton, Sennitt Clough, Summers, Taylor, Tierney, Woollard

Against the proposal: None

Abstentions: None

(Councillor Sennitt Clough declared an interest in this item by virtue that her husband has a visiting forces exemption for council tax but she will remain open minded).

(Councillor Nawaz advised he has tenanted properties in Peterborough where there may be issues with tenants, but he personally does not owe any council tax).

C49/24 FENLAND WASTE STRATEGY

Members considered the Fenland Waste Strategy report proposed by Councillor Tierney.

Proposed by Councillor Tierney, seconded by Councillor Murphy and Council AGREED to:

- **approve Fenland's updated Waste Service Standards as set out in appendix 1 of the report,**
- **approve the updated TEEP statement as set out in appendix 2 in line with Simpler Recycling and Environment Act 2021 requirements,**
- **approve the suggested amendment to the waste strategy as set out in appendix 4 to allow for the required weekly food waste collections to commence from 30 March 2026, and**
- **note the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Waste Partnership are working on an update to the current area-based waste strategy approved by Council in 2008. This will be**

presented for member consideration later in 2025.

C50/24 SENIOR MANAGER PAY POLICY STATEMENT

Members considered the Senior Manager Pay Policy report presented by Councillor Boden.

Proposed by Councillor Boden, seconded by Councillor Nawaz and AGREED to adopt the Senior Managers Pay Policy Statement for 2024/25.

C51/24 ARTICLE 4 DIRECTION - HMO'S IN WISBECH (WITH CONFIDENTIAL APPENDIX)

Members considered the Article 4 Direction – HMOs in Wisbech report presented by Councillor Mrs Laws.

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

- Councillor Booth voiced his concern about the unintended consequence for the rest of Fenland. He questioned why the Article 4 Direction was written only for Wisbech rather than the entire district as the problem would likely spread.
- Councillor Tierney said members should represent the views of the people who vote for them and the behaviour in some HMOs is something that he is regularly approached about. Whilst many HMOs are run very well, there are problematic ones. Until now, anybody could open an HMO housing up to six unrelated people without planning permission so this will provide an additional check and balance to ensure everything is done properly to prevent problems for neighbours.
- Councillor Nawaz commented that there is more to it than social issues, there are also safety measures involved. For example, properly licensed premises will follow legal requirements regarding fire safety and HMO operators will have to fulfil conditions to maintain the comfort and safety of their tenants and for this reason he supports this.
- Councillor Hoy referred to Councillor Booth's comment and said this is not something that can be brought in across the whole district because it needs to be evidence based and there is no evidence currently that this is a problem elsewhere. In response to comments about behaviours, she said this is not about combating antisocial behaviour as there are already powers to deal with this. This is solely a planning matter to stop smaller properties being used to house additional people inappropriately where planning permission is not currently required. Wisbech is saturated with HMOs, and this is a good proposal to contain the number available. Councillor Hoy added that she often finds an element of snobbery regarding HMOs which is unfair and unjustified as generally they are an affordable and respectable way for single people to live, however there is sometimes an element of justification because there are those that do cause problems and some streets are almost entirely made up of HMOs and this needs to stop.

Proposed by Councillor Mrs Laws, seconded by Councillor Hoy and AGREED to:

- **Approve the making of a direction under article 4(1) of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 (as amended) having non-immediate effect for Wisbech Town apart from the excluded areas (the excluded areas being Wisbech Riverside and Wisbech South wards) withdrawing the permitted development right to change use from a dwelling house (Class C3) to a small HMO (Class C4) use as set out in Schedule 1.**
- **Approve the making of a direction under article 4(1) of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 (as amended) having immediate effect for the area of Wisbech Riverside and Wisbech South wards withdrawing the permitted development right to change use from a dwelling house (Class C3) to a small HMO (Class C4) use as set out in Schedule 2.**

- **Delegate the implementation of the consultation process and final approval of the Immediate and Non-Immediate Article 4 Directions to the Corporate Director & Monitoring Officer in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing & Licensing and the Portfolio Holder for Planning & Flooding**
- **Endorse of the production of additional guidance on to ensure that the planning policy approach for assessing planning applications from Class C3 to C4 is clearly set out.**

5.56 pm

Chairman