

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 18 MARCH 2019 - 2.30 PM



PRESENT: Councillor C Boden (Chairman), Councillor G Booth, Councillor S Clark, Councillor D Hodgson, Councillor K Owen, Councillor Mrs K Mayor and Councillor S Tierney

APOLOGIES: Councillor M Humphrey (Vice-Chairman) and Councillor S Count

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Linda Albon (Member Services & Governance Officer), Sam Anthony (Head of HR and OD), Peter Catchpole (Corporate Director and Chief Finance Officer), Gary Garford (Corporate Director), Dan Horn (Head of Housing & Neighbourhood Services), Neil Krajewski (Deputy Chief Accountant), Paul Medd (Chief Executive) and Justin Wingfield (Head of Business & Economy)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor Mrs J French, Councillor Mrs D Laws, Councillor P Murphy, Councillor D Oliver and Councillor C Seaton

GUESTS: Clarion Housing: Ian Christmas (Head of New Projects, East), Fiona Coulson (Head of New Business, East Region), Matt Parsonage (Head of Communities, Clarion Futures) and Sue Stavers (Head of Operations, East)

OSC43/18 PREVIOUS MINUTES.

The minutes of the meeting of 18 February 2019 were confirmed and signed.

OSC44/18 MATTERS ARISING - UPDATE ON PREVIOUS ACTIONS.

Members were provided with an update on the status of actions raised at previous meetings of the Committee.

1. Contact Centre call statistics have yet to be shared and it is anticipated they will be circulated by the end of the week.
2. Sam Anthony circulated the ARP complaints details to members. Councillor Booth asked for an explanation why the committee had previously been told there were no complaints when the data showed 78 complaints received to February 2019, with 103 received the previous year. Councillor Boden advised the question had originally been interpreted as relating to the number of complaints involving enforcement proceedings, of which there were none, when it was actually the number of general complaints that had been of interest. Councillor Booth commented that he would still expect to see some complaints regarding enforcement as it is a contentious area. He further stated that it would be good governance practice to examine the statistics to see if there are any particular areas of concern. Councillor Boden agreed it would be helpful next year to ask for a greater background to the complaints and feedback from ARP so that any mistakes can be learned from.

OSC45/18 ANNUAL UPDATE FROM CLARION.

Attendees from Clarion Housing Group introduced themselves to the Committee before presenting their annual update.

The presentation included details of partnership working, an overview of community investment in Fenland, including the creation of opportunities and work undertaken to tackle hardship, and an update on housing need and new developments.

Councillor Boden thanked Clarion for an interesting and comprehensive report.

Councillor Boden advised that Councillor Mrs French had expressed a wish to ask a question at the meeting about Lake Close and, with the permission of the panel, invited her to speak. He added that the question must be general in nature as it would be inappropriate to discuss an individual case or property. Councillor Mrs French thanked Councillor Boden and asked Clarion for a definitive answer as to when the roads and footpaths in Lake Close will be completed as residents have been waiting for three years. Ian Christmas responded, explaining that the circumstances surrounding Lake Close had been relatively unique and he provided a comprehensive overview of the reasons for the delay to completion of the road surface, which are dependent on completion of sub surface drainage. He was pleased to report however that just this morning, Anglian Water has finally given approval to the works. Although he cannot provide a definitive date, Cambridgeshire County Council Highways Authority will conduct their inspection once the drainage works are completed and he hoped that the road work be finished by mid to late summer 2019. Councillor Boden thanked Ian Christmas for his comprehensive answer.

(Councillor Tierney left the meeting).

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

1. Councillor Owen asked for more detail concerning development being undertaken by Clarion. Namely, where are they building or intending to build, and how many properties will be built on each site? Fiona Coulson advised that this varies; there is a history in Fenland of building small exception sites of around 12 units but Clarion is looking at working jointly with the local authority and larger developers at bringing forward master planning of big sites across the district. The general focus is on affordable houses rather than flats, and always a mixture of affordable rented homes and shared ownership. They are looking to secure 400 units over the next two to three years, with terms agreed on over 100 units on two sites at Springfield Avenue and Gaul Road. They are also in discussions with landowners and developers at different sites. Councillor Boden stated that members had been told in the presentation that 422 units were in the pipeline on five sites across the district so each one of those are, presumably, quite large. Fiona Coulson agreed that they are looking at some large sites but was not currently in a position to tell the committee where they are, apart from the two sites mentioned which have already been agreed, as this is commercially sensitive.
2. Councillor Booth recalled that one of Clarion's policies in a previous development at Parson Drove was to design a house for life, therefore working on larger units. However, with the advent of bedroom tax people did not want to pay for spare rooms and were requesting smaller units. Therefore has their approach to design changed? Fiona Coulson responded that Clarion tend to design for housing needs in a specific area, and will build around demand. A local housing needs survey identifies people living locally or with local connections and looks at what they require; Sue Stavers also knows who is waiting for housing in a given area.
3. Councillor Owen asked for the resolution timescales for heating issues depending on the severity of the problem, in view of the issues experienced by residents last year. Sue Stavers advised that a 24-hour response is standard to no heating or hot water issues and service vans are now better stocked. Where instant repairs cannot be done, alternative sources of heating will be provided, and the customer will receive a follow-on visit within five days. Standard non-urgent repairs can take 28 days.
4. Councillor Owen asked if a reimbursement scheme exists for customers provided with electric heating as a temporary measure due to the extra costs incurred. Sue Stavers advised that it is quite rare that timescales are not fulfilled and will only look to compensate customers if Clarion

act outside of their timescales. Complaints are reviewed and compensation provided where Clarion fail to attend an appointment. If additional costs are incurred, the customer needs to demonstrate those costs. However, Clarion will always try to take a balanced approach of what they think the additional cost is.

5. Councillor Booth advised reference was made to gas boilers in the presentation. In Fenland many properties are on either oil heating systems or air source heat pumps, which have a different contractor. He asked how Clarion manages that relationship as he has heard there are more issues with this heating source than with gas repairs. Sue Stavers advised that repairs are not a big problem in Fenland as there are so few of them compared to people having issues with gas heating but the challenge is getting the expertise to fix them. However, they do have a contractor in place based in Thetford and are also working to upskill engineers on the technology. Councillor Booth asked who the contractor is and if the reporting of those repairs is tracked through Clarion or the contractors. Sue Stavers advised that the contractor is Ecolution but Clarion manages and tracks the issues. Councillor Booth requested that in the future, information be given about oil and air source heating issues as well as gas.
6. Councillor Mrs Mayor stated that a number of local residents in privately owned properties have contacted her raising concerns that some Clarion-owned hedges and green spaces bordering their properties are not maintained to expected standards. She asked if these properties could be added to any grounds maintenance programme to ensure these areas are maintained regularly. Sue Stavers advised that as they are currently undertaking a procurement process, contractors are currently working to a basic contract, with Clarion staff inspecting in the intervening period. A new, more detailed contract will be in place around September/October; however private areas will not be added. Sue Stavers advised that anywhere a communal area on the contract is not being maintained, then please let Clarion know. Councillor Mrs Laws advised that the particular issue Councillor Mrs Mayor was referring to has since been resolved. Sue Stavers advised that areas have been re-mapped and new locations added.
7. Councillor Booth asked how the new contract will be monitored. Sue Stavers responded that extra time will be given to this and part of the reason the new contract will commence in September will be to give the contractors time to embed during the non-growing season.
8. Councillor Clark requested that the residents of Roman Court be kept informed of what is going on there. Sue Stavers confirmed another letter would be going out this week explaining the current situation.
9. Councillor Clark asked on behalf of Councillor Tierney how Clarion deal with antisocial behaviour in their properties. Sue Stavers advised that customer complaints are forwarded to a team of neighbourhood officers who have responsibility for general antisocial behaviour. They operate a triage service, threats are passed to the police and there is a team of three tenancy specialists who can and will take enforcement action where necessary.
10. Councillor Hodgson advised he is on the committee of the Wisbech Access Strategy and asked if they had contacted Clarion about the strategy. There have been a lot of road changes in Wisbech and he feels Clarion should know that the one change that may affect them is on Elm Road. The residents living on Elm Road are Clarion residents and they disagree with what is happening in that area. At the moment drivers can get in and out of Elm Road to Weasenham Lane but in the future they will be unable to get out and parking on that road may also be a problem. Fiona Coulson was not aware of any contact with them but will look into this.
11. Councillor Booth asked for the timescale for implementation of the 422 homes mentioned earlier. Fiona Coulson advised that this would depend on the success of the negotiations. One of the current challenges is that costs for both building works and land are still high and they cannot build something for more than it is worth. Values are not what they could be further south. Overall, regional targets are to deliver up to 680 units a year with a national target of 50,000 units over ten years. Clarion is investing and in this region Fenland is the focus of investment as a tier 1 local authority, i.e. a top priority area.
12. Councillor Booth noted that Clarion is refreshing the Fenland housing register and, assuming this exercise is to ascertain if individuals still have a housing need, asked what the preliminary finding is. If delivering 400 homes over five years, there will be a shortfall of over 2000 homes based on the number of residents on the list. Sue Stavers confirmed that although people are

coming off the register, more people are joining but of the 2672 on the list, only 252 of these are Band A so there are people registered who do not have such an urgent housing need.

13. Councillor Booth asked what Clarion is doing with the Combined Authority (CA) to try and get additional funding. Fiona Coulson confirmed Clarion is one of the registered providers on the board of Homes for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, a collective of housing providers across the region looking to develop using the CA's funding. Clarion is in dialogue with the CA and has shown them the sites they are seeking to develop in Fenland.
14. Councillor Booth asked Clarion not to forget about development within the villages, not just the four market towns.
15. Councillor Boden stated that he found the information provided on antisocial behaviour and tenancy fraud numbers interesting. In most cases, certainly the closure orders and evictions, this involved antisocial behaviour. Anecdotally members hear there is a significant amount of improper behaviour as far as tenancies are concerned, with sub-tenants improperly put in place and asked if this is a genuine problem which is not being properly addressed. Sue Stavers advised that there have only been two proven instances of tenancy fraud. If someone alleges tenancy fraud, they should be able to provide an address for Clarion to investigate and if not, then the validity of the claim is in question. In the main, investigations of alleged tenancy fraud turn out not involve Clarion properties as there is often confusion around ownership due to the Right to Buy and the numbers remain low. However, they encourage any reports of tenancy fraud continue to be passed to them for investigation as customers are their eyes and ears. Councillor Boden thanked Sue Stavers for this information, adding this is a message that could do with being more widely publicised as he gets the impression that people feel that reporting to Clarion would not have any effect.
16. Councillor Boden asked what are the medium to long term challenges for Clarion and how will they be addressed. Sue Stavers advised their top priority is both customer confidence and satisfaction; people tend to remember their last interaction. Unfortunately the heating problems of last year had knocked confidence and so restoring that is a priority. Ensuring repairs and maintenance issues are dealt with promptly forms part of restoring that confidence. Working within local communities dealing with issues such as deprivation and low attainment is where the Communities Team is investing. Fire safety is not a huge issue in Fenland but as an organisation owning multi storey blocks, this does need to be addressed. Building new homes is an ongoing challenge as previously discussed. Matt Parsonage added that whilst these were challenges faced by the housing management side, he thinks in terms of what is going on in the outside world. He mentioned current research being undertaken around the concept of communities being left behind. Using various data sources such as deprivation indices and people satisfaction, a list has been formed of the top 25-left behind communities in the country. Waterlees is included on the list and although this research has not yet been officially published, it will help towards how Clarion plans. Councillor Boden stated that members would like to be made aware when the research is published as it can potentially be used to assist with regeneration in the district, Waterlees in particular. Matt Parsonage offered to forward what is available currently.

Councillor Boden thanked Clarion again for their attendance and for addressing the questions that had been asked.

(Councillor Mrs Laws, Dan Horn and the officers from Clarion left the meeting).

OSC46/18 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT MEMBER-LED REVIEW GROUP FINDINGS.

Members considered the findings of the Economic Development Member-Led Review Group in the form of a draft report.

Councillor Boden thanked the officers for the thorough job they had done in producing the draft report, stating it was unfortunate that due to the tight timescale, there had not been the time for the Review Group to read through for their final comments prior to this meeting.

Members discussed and suggested some of the amendments they would like to see to the draft report before it is finalised. Councillor Boden asked that officers publish the revised version of the report and thanked members of the Economic Development Review Group, together with officers who provided tremendous support and organised the meetings extremely well. There was a limited amount of time to do this work but a large amount of evidence was collated. Councillor Boden added that the way he measures the value and success of the review is the fact that conclusions were drawn that were not expected, which shows that members listened and learned.

Members agreed to accept the report as amended and to refer it to Cabinet.

OSC47/18 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME.

Councillor Boden felt that as many members present at the meeting will not be members of the Overview & Scrutiny Panel next year, he did not see a requirement to change anything on the Future Work Programme. This would be for the new panel to continue.

Councillor Boden closed the meeting by thanking the Overview & Scrutiny Panel, stating it has been a pleasure to work with everyone over the last 12 months.

4.28 pm

Chairman