

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

28 NOVEMBER 2016 - 2.30PM



PRESENT: Councillor Yeulett (Chairman), Councillor Mrs Hay (Vice-Chairman), Councillors Booth, Mrs Laws and Mrs Mayor

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Butcher, King, Seaton and Sutton

APOLOGIES: Councillors Buckton, Mrs Davis and Mason

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Jane Bailey (Member Services and Governance), Rob Bridge (Corporate Director), Gary Garford (Corporate Director), Nick Harding (Head of Shared Planning), Geoff Kent (Head of Customer Services) and Carol Pilson (Corporate Director)

OSC23/16 PREVIOUS MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of 3 October 2017 were confirmed and signed subject to the following comment.

- Councillor Booth stated that at bullet point 2 he had recommended that the decision should be referred back to Cabinet.

The minutes of the meeting of 17 October 2017 were confirmed and signed.

Councillor Mrs Hay stated that Councillor Buckton asked if priorities discussed at a group meeting could be made public, Councillor Clark stated that he would discuss further; she asked if any decisions have been made about this yet. Councillor Clark stated that he would come back to the panel when that decision was made.

Councillor Booth stated that Paul Medd agreed to confirm if the Indices of Multiple Deprivation data includes rural villages, but has not yet confirmed this.

Councillor Yeulett explained that in response to some comments with regards to the Planning Service Rob Bridge would like to provide a brief update for members.

Rob Bridge thanked members for the points raised with regards to planning, he stated that the delivery of the planning service is important, and therefore so is the feedback; he encouraged members to let him know if there have been real examples so that those circumstances can be investigated further. He confirmed that he and Nick Harding have had discussions with the team around certain aspects, and there is recognition that there are challenges with regards to capacity of the team and the higher number of planning applications we are receiving and we have put some extra resources in to help with that. The team have some useful things that they can now look at to improve how we perform moving forward. He added that the Shared Planning Service is on the work programme for February and this will give members the opportunity to get a better understanding about what is going well and where the challenges have been.

OSC24/16 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT - 2017 SCHEME

Members considered the Council Tax Support - 2017 Scheme presented by Councillor Seaton.

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

1. Councillor Booth raised concerns with regards to the low response rate to the consultation, but stated that this is a pragmatic approach and that he endorses the recommendation to retain a 14% reduction and supports the proposal;
2. Councillor Mrs Hay asked if officers considered a lower percentage increase. Councillor Seaton confirmed that this had been considered but when you are only making £15,000 on 20% to reduce it further it makes even less financial sense, even though the risk might be smaller;
3. Rob Bridge confirmed that with regards to the consultation we say it met our expectations, and maybe our expectations are low, but our experience over the past few years is that we have had little engagement despite trying various ways to improve this. we will endeavour to consider how we can further engage with our community as it is an important element of this policy;
4. Councillor Booth stated that people have the perception that you do not take into account what they are saying from previous exercises, but this is an example that you can highlight through a press release, that we have taken consultation responses on board and are not going to increase the charges. Councillor Seaton stated that this is a valid point;
5. Rob Bridge stated that this will be considered at Council on 15 December 2016 and if members agree we can have a press release around the decision highlighting the community feedback.

Councillor Yeulett thanked members and officers for their attendance today.

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel AGREED:

- **to note the report;**
- **that they have no further recommendations and endorse the officers recommendations that a 14% reduction is retained for 2017-18.**

OSC25/16 PROGRESS IN DELIVERING THE ECONOMY BUSINESS PLAN OBJECTIVES 2016-2017

Members considered the Progress in Delivering the Economy Business Plan Objectives 2016-2017 Report presented by Councillor Butcher.

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

1. Councillor Yeulett stated that the Panel have referred to the minutes for this item last year, he asked how Councillor Butcher's first year in this role has been. Councillor Butcher stated that this is a joint effort between other Portfolio Holder colleagues and Officers. He confirmed that the Council is moving forward with regards to the disposal of assets and the development of the Nene Waterfront, but there are many more decisions still to be made;
2. Councillor Mrs Hay stated that MMUK in Chatteris were discussed at the previous meeting as it looked like they might move out of the area, she asked what dialogue has taken place with them and if they do move what effect this will have on the Business Rates. Councillor Butcher confirmed that part of the business is staying and part is moving. Gary Garford confirmed that officers have been in contact with MMUK and meetings set up, but they have cancelled previously for various reasons and a new meeting is set for January 2017. Rob Bridge confirmed that there are clear rules around Business Rates and they would still be liable as an empty business so this would not have an immediate effect to the Council financially;

3. Councillor Mrs Hay stated that MMUK employ many overseas workers and asked what efforts are made to encourage local businesses to offer jobs to local people. Gary Garford confirmed that they offer jobs locally too, there is equal access to the job opportunities there. The food industry are concerned that Brexit may affect the future local resource for that industry. Councillor Butcher stated that we have been working with schools and colleges to ensure that the curriculum looks at the skills for the jobs that are available in these industries;
4. Councillor Mrs Hay stated that the last report referred to the development of an Agri-tech skills centre in Chatteris, she asked why this is now going to Ely. Councillor Yeulett asked what benefits are we getting from the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and what can we look forward to moving forward. Gary Garford confirmed that the Ely Agri-tech is a separate project; the Chatteris Agri-tech is being taken forward by Produce World. The LEP have taken forward the negotiations to create more of a virtual Agri-tech approach which will mean that the work will happen across Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire and Fenland and will meet in different facilities rather than building a special facility. He confirmed that it has changed direction but is going ahead and agreed to update members when more details come through;
5. Councillor King stated that the LEP is a very useful source of funding. £359,000 was provided by the LEP for feasibility studies for Whittlesea and Manea Stations and in addition the Wisbech access study funding also came from the LEP;
6. Councillor Booth agreed that we have had money for feasibility studies and understands that there are processes to follow but would like to see some tangible results now. A lot of money being is being spent on bureaucracy and this authority should be pushing harder to get best value for public money. Councillor Yeulett agreed stating that there is a lot of work going on but when we will see something viable from these studies?
7. Councillor King confirmed that these studies look at ways in which can enable growth in Wisbech, until we resolve the access issues in Wisbech we cannot deliver our local plan. Network Rail demand that these studies are carried out. Councillor Booth asked if we have engaged with Steve Barclay to lobby for changes with regards to the Network Rail processes. Councillor King confirmed that we have;
8. Councillor Mrs Laws asked for an update with regards to the Whittlesey Station platform and security lighting. She stated that she had attended a Hereward Community Rail Partnership meeting, but did not feel that the administration at that meeting was adequate. Councillor King confirmed that the Hereward Community Rail Partnership is the delivery vehicle for railway improvements in this area. He added that at the open meeting, which Mrs Laws attended, minutes were taken and actions were agreed which should have been circulated. He confirmed that he was in the process of arranging a meeting to look at improving the lighting and stated that long term he is convinced that the proposals with regards to the platform would go ahead in the future;
9. Gary Garford clarified that the works taking place are not feasibility studies, but are technical assessments and in terms of a rail scheme we are taking it from a conception idea to a design idea that can be put forward as a scheme. He agreed it is a lot of money but that there is a lot of work involved looking at many facilities to come up with a proposal. The technical assessment is an essential part of the process set by the Department of Transport and Network Rail to any rail project and we would not get the funding for scheme delivery if we did not go through this stage;
10. Gary Garford stated that there are other benefits from our involvement with the LEP, for example, we are working with the LEP to raise aspirations and skills in Fenland, some of the skills funding can be directed to improve attainment and to link skills to the businesses in Fenland. We have submitted 5 bids for Growth Funding which will be announced early 2017. He added that if we are successful with the business case for Wisbech there is £10.5m allocated to deliver some of the projects, the access studies have to have been completed to move forward with this which is why they are essential. Councillor Yeulett stated that he is looking forward to something being delivered from this, but realises that the cases need to be developed and this does not happen overnight;

11. Councillor Mrs Hay referring to the previous meeting asked if a meeting had been arranged with David Wright to discuss the 3C's process. Rob Bridge confirmed that a 1-2-1 took place but could not confirm that the information was circulated. Councillor Sutton stated that he would be happy to add this to an All Member Seminar;
12. Councillor Yeulett asked if the projects designed to help with deprivation are making a difference and if not what else can we do. Councillor Sutton stated that despite putting a lot of money into these issues in the past it has clearly not made a difference and the index is going in the wrong direction. We now need to look at deprivation in other ways, moving forward we will look at improving housing conditions as these have a big impact on people's lives affecting aspirations and education attainment;
13. Councillor Yeulett asked about the improvements that have come out of the Wisbech 2020 Vision project. Gary Garford stated that the Wisbech 2020 Vision was developed from trying to address deprivation. There have been some visual successes such as, improvements to the High Street and other properties around the town and the Nene Waterfront development. He confirmed that Wisbech 2020 was re-launched to focus on education and health as well as infrastructure and economy; this will be presented to members in January. He stated we have been engaging with lots of partners and a meeting took place to meet the head teacher at Thomas Clarkson to discuss how we can help her to achieve better education attainment, looking at teacher recruitment and marketing the district, raising the profile of the area and improving connectivity;
14. Councillor Booth stated that Fenland Links put a lot of money in but a lot was wasted on administration, there were numerous courses that were run by Fenland Links that lasted 3 or 6 months but no real long term benefits. We need to ensure that the money is spent as effectively as possible and that it is not wasted. The key thing to improve deprivation is to give people skills and opportunities, once these are overcome their aspirations improve;
15. Councillor Butcher stated that rural areas have deprivation too as they face issues with regards to connectivity and access to education and employment;
16. Councillor Mrs Laws agreed rural transport links are not adequate in many cases. She stated that there is a huge marketing and sales opportunity, the land is cheap in Fenland and there are links to London;
17. Rob Bridge highlighted some initiatives that have been successful and will have an impact on improving deprivation; the HLF bid which will improve the area; the apprenticeship levy which will develop opportunities to work with schools and local employers in the area; Devolution and The Garden Town project will look to improve infrastructure in the area and finally investment made into Leisure facilities will improve health and well-being;
18. Councillor Yeulett stated that the Government are criticising local authorities with regards to being proactive with regards to affordable housing and asked how we are addressing this and are developers holding on to land. Councillor Sutton stated that there are no shortage of planning applications in Fenland and the system is not holding up development, we sent out a brochure to all developers and house builders to promote the area. Unlike most other local authorities we have remained at one affordable house for a development of over five, when many have moved to ten, because we recognise that we need affordable housing in this area;
19. Councillor Yeulett asked Councillor Sutton what the biggest challenge is. Councillor Sutton stated that the biggest challenge is getting builders to build;
20. Rob Bridge stated that the Devolution deal offers £100m for affordable housing which will unlock money for infrastructure and move the processes forward with regards to feasibility studies which are holding up some developments. Gary Garford stated that house buyers want to know what we have to offer, they want good education opportunities, good shops and infrastructure. He added that he believes that some land owners are sitting on their land waiting for better times before they are willing to sell, but is not sure that those better times will come, we need to educate all parts of the chain to improve housing viability;

21. Councillor Mrs Laws stated that she is concerned about piecemeal developments to avoid contributing to affordable housing. Gary Garford confirmed that our policy does not allow that, a developer cannot sub-split a site. Nick Harding confirmed that they do everything they can to prevent the sub-division of sites;
22. Councillor Mrs Laws asked if we can consider contributions for affordable housing being ring-fenced for the same area that they were contributed. Nick Harding stated that we have not devised a system to ring-fence affordable housing contribution and would not recommend this as there is a risk that the money would have to be paid back if it is not used within 10 years. There would need to be a realistic prospect that a housing would be delivered in that one area within that timeframe;
23. Councillor Booth asked that as the Economic Strategy covers so many different areas should we have a more defined strategy with an overarching Economic Strategy and referring to the outcomes from the peer review are we doing too much? Councillor Sutton stated that members and officers have been criticised in the past for not providing enough detail in reports, it is about striking a balance between providing enough detail and ensuring the Panel have all the information they need. Councillor Booth confirmed that it is about delivering our priorities and having a clear goal. Gary Garford confirmed that we are reporting on your business plan, if members are asking for that report to be more smarter then we will look to provide a more focussed approach to the report moving forward;
24. Councillor Mrs Mayor stated that 10 sites were identified as part of the Council's assets review and that 8 sites have been sold, she asked if there is a possibility for FDC to build our own affordable housing on some of these sites. Councillor Butcher confirmed that these sites were discussed fully by Cabinet and visited; he stated that in his opinion these were not suitable for affordable housing. He agreed that when any future sites that came forward the local member for the area would be notified so that they can have an input. Rob Bridge stated that we have to be balanced about building affordable housing as if we build more than 50 we would need to become a housing authority;
25. Gary Garford stated that we have an Asset Management Plan that says we want to get the most out of our assets, we have had some sites to address including difficult sites that we put through auction, we would not auction saleable sites and all sites are categorised before they are disposed of;
26. Councillor Booth asked as we sold off our housing stock does that mean that we are unable to use reserves for housing developments. Rob Bridge stated that our capital programme it is as tight as it can be and the only way that we would have more in our capital pot is by releasing assets that we own like the plots at the Nene. We need to decide if we would be better to develop those. If we were going to look to develop housing we would have to borrow money to do that as it would not be something that our resources could cover. We have borrowed from ourselves for the Leisure proposals which minimises the cost to the Council and as interest rates from banks and building societies are low it seems appropriate to use it in that way;
27. Councillor Yeulett stated that he knows the Wisbech Garden Town project is in its infancy but asked what affect this could have on the rest of the district. Councillor Sutton confirmed that this project is in its infancy but there is an aspiration to make it happen along with all the benefits we think it will bring which we have been talking about today. It has a long way to go and there is lots of work to do to get there. Councillor Butcher stated that he believes that a project as large as this could take around 20 years from start to finish because it is so vast but it could benefit the whole of Fenland;
28. Councillor King stated that housing growth is connected to transport improvements, and the thing that will deliver the transport improvements is the housing growth so we need to be committed to this, but working with partners is not always easy. Councillor Clark has made a huge success with the Devolution deal and will strive to make a success of this too;

29. Gary Garford stated that this is Fenland being bold and being aspirational, traditional Garden Towns soak up known growth to help the London market; this is the first Garden Town that is trying to drive the market to improve deprivation by growth and is why this project is capturing the attention of Government. If we can raise the average wage in Wisbech to that of Cambridgeshire we can reduce welfare payments and increase additional tax revenue, and by raising deprivation levels we can save significant money on other services such as health. We are tasked by Government to show what paybacks we can bring to the public purse;
30. Councillor Booth stated that he is unsure that this something that the public are fully aware of and suggested that we start to build on some of the existing infrastructure before we talk about building further as the existing road systems will not cope. Gary Garford agreed and confirmed that there are major infrastructure plans included in the project;
31. Councillor Yeulett asked if the Wisbech Port is an asset? Councillor Butcher confirmed that we own the Wisbech Port and therefore it is an asset. The working port is breaking even, there is more that we can do and we are looking at that at the moment. Gary Garford stated that the port brings in an income of £750,000 per year that has been static but we are looking at how we can get more from this asset. We have a statutory responsibility to deliver the services with regards to shipping. He confirmed that a report to look at the port services will be coming to Overview and Scrutiny as part of the CSR programme;
32. Councillor Yeulett asked if there are any other positive examples that portfolio holders can give. Councillor Butcher stated that both South Fens in Chatteris and The Boathouse in Wisbech are doing well and capacity is up on this time last year;
33. Councillor Mrs Hay stated that there are references made to reports and plans within the report and asked that the links be included in the future so that members may access them. Gary Garford agreed;
34. Councillor Mrs Laws asked for an update on the King's Dyke Bridge. Councillor Butcher stated that the project is not moving as quickly as planned, completion was scheduled for Spring 2017 but we are now looking at late 2018 mainly due to issues trying to access to the land which is now being addressed. Councillor Mrs Laws asked if the delays can be publicised to reassure people that the project is still going ahead. Gary Garford agreed to speak to County Council colleagues as this is their project so they should generate the information for a press release;
35. Councillor King stated that referring to rural isolation issues, there was a proposal to withdraw bus services, we were the only council to submit our concerns and the committee unanimously declined to remove all of the bus services from this area, this was a major achievement for us. He added that we are fortunate to have a successful community transport organisation and that it has been a lifeline for people living in rural areas and provides a valuable service;
36. Councillor Mrs Hay stated that she was surprised that Councillor King would refer community transport, particularly as they were under investigation. Councillor King stated that he was not commenting because of the investigation just pointing out that they provide a valuable service and in his view are a very well run organisation;
37. Councillor Booth agreed stating that people living in rural areas really do highly recommend the service; it is a lifeline for those people and that should be recognised;
38. Councillor Sutton thanked the Overview and Scrutiny Panel for their questions today, stating that the Panel is better than it has ever been and is doing some very valuable work under Councillor Yeulett's Leadership.

Councillor Yeulett thanked everybody for their responses to questions from the panel today.

(Councillor Butcher declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item by virtue of the fact that he is a member of the FACT board)

OSC26/16 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Councillor Mrs Hay updated members on a recent meeting to review the paperless project and informed them that the review group discussed and agreed the following:

- to circulate questionnaires to members asking for feedback;
- to investigate training offered, uptake and future training needs;
- to investigate the committee management system to offer better support to members;
- to investigate the likelihood of Officers also being paperless at meetings;
- to reassess the decision to provide x6 printed copies of the agenda packs for the public at meetings as they are rarely used;
- to look at the savings made so far;
- talk to colleagues at other authorities to learn from their paperless experiences.

The review group are planning to meet again in the new year.

Members considered the Future Work Programme 2016/17 for the Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

Councillor Yeulett explained that the panel have a very busy work programme.

Carol Pilson explained that we are looking to include an additional meeting on 6 March 2017, due to the amount of business to consider, she read through the proposed work programme. Officers agreed to circulate the updated Work Programme to the panel members.

Councillor Booth questioned if the Sewage Works needs to come to this Panel. Carol Pilson agreed to investigate further.

Councillor Booth asked if it would be appropriate to discuss the Wisbech 2020 project during Purdah. Carol Pilson explained that we are okay to be talking about the work of the County Council but not about any individual Councillor who might be standing for the election, she agreed to look at this matter closer to the time.

Members agreed the Future Work Programme 2016/17 for the Overview and Scrutiny Panel, subject to the discussion above.

4.32pm

Chairman