

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 7 SEPTEMBER 2020 - 1.30 PM



PRESENT: Councillor D Mason (Chairman), Councillor A Miscandlon (Vice-Chairman), Councillor G Booth, Councillor D Connor, Councillor M Cornwell, Councillor M Humphrey, Councillor Mrs K Mayor (*substitute for Councillor Purser*), Councillor R Skoulding, Councillor Wicks and Councillor F Yeulett

APOLOGIES: Councillor S Count, Councillor M Purser and Councillor D Topgood

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Anna Goodall (Head of Governance and Customer Services) and Dan Horn (Head of Housing and Community Support)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor S Clark, Councillor S Hoy, Councillor Mrs J French, Councillor C Seaton and Councillor S Tierney

GUESTS: Clarion Housing: Sally Greetham (Head of Operations), Yvonne Ogden (Clarion Futures – Community Development) and Daniel Read (Clarion development)

Councillor Mason welcomed members of the public and press watching the livestream of the Overview & Scrutiny meeting via YouTube due to Government guidance on social distancing. The meeting was held in accordance with the provision set out in the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 and with Fenland District Council's Virtual Meeting Protocol.

OSC9/20 PREVIOUS MINUTES.

The minutes of the meeting of 13 July 2020 were confirmed.

OSC10/20 UPDATE ON PREVIOUS ACTIONS.

Councillor Mason advised members that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel had agreed earlier in the year to set up a sub committee to review the Anglia Revenue Partnership, this was under the Chairmanship of Councillor Anne Hay and she will be presenting the findings to the Committee in December.

OSC11/20 ANNUAL UPDATE FROM CLARION

Councillor Mason welcomed Sally Greetham, Daniel Read and Yvonne Ogden from Clarion Housing and thanked them for their attendance at today's meeting.

Colleagues from Clarion provided a presentation to Members, outlining the various key projects and their work programme over the past year and looking forward.

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

1. Councillor Skoulding asked Daniel Read whether he was aware of the unfinished road in Lake Close in March, which commenced 6 years ago and made the point that following a

previous Overview and Scrutiny meeting, assurances had been given that Anglian Water had approved the work and Cambridgeshire Highways would then be in a position to look at the road, with the works to be completed by Summer 2019, but to date have not yet started. Councillor Skoulding stated that he is aware that there has been damage caused to cars and there have also been instances of children becoming injured. He added that letters have been sent to residents advising them that the delay is due to the Highway Authority and he would ask that a follow up letter is sent to all the residents giving them an update of when the works will commence. Daniel Read stated that he is happy for a response to be circulated following the meeting.

2. Councillor Connor questioned why Clarion does not seem able to respond to issues such as neighbour disputes in a timely manner, referring to an issue which was only resolved when the Environmental Health Team and Dan Horn intervened. Councillor Connor requested that elected members be provided with a direct contact number and dedicated person to be able to report issues and concerns to. Sally Greetham stated that it is always disappointing to hear when customers have received poor levels of service, the operating model that Clarion uses has slightly changed and there is now a central contact centre where issues are reported to, which should mean that the lower level anti-social behaviour cases should be passed to the local teams for quicker intervention. She added that there is also a dedicated email address for member enquiries. Councillor Connor agreed to contact Sally Greetham outside of the meeting.
3. Councillor Miscandlon expressed the view that whilst he is pleased to hear that Clarion have an online service, consideration needs to be given to those customers who do not have access to a computer, or good IT literacy. Sally Greetham agreed with Councillor Miscandlon's comments and said that customers do still have the option to contact them by phone.
4. Councillor Miscandlon referred to a customer complaint last year, concerning an area of overgrown vegetation and fallen detritus, with the customer trying on numerous occasions to contact Clarion and being advised that the contractor had been to the location and cleared the area. Councillor Miscandlon asked whether follow up inspections are carried out to verify whether works have been carried out following a complaint? Sally Greetham advised that inspections are carried out in communal areas, both internal and external, and the time between these inspections span between weekly and six weekly dependent on their location. She added that the inspections are carried out by their Community Wardens, whose role is to ascertain whether there are any health and safety issues and also to check that the contractor is undertaking work to a satisfactory standard.
5. Councillor Wicks asked for clarification with regard to the Military Covenant Scheme and whether an individual is vetted by the Council before their details are passed to Clarion or whether the person needs to be genuinely homeless before an application can be made? Sally Greetham confirmed that anybody can apply to be added to the housing register and added that their band may change as their situation changes. Dan Horn agreed to circulate the specific references in local policy that Fenland has with regard to the armed forces and affordable housing.
6. Councillor Wicks asked what the timescales are for bringing long term void properties back into use? Sally Greetham stated that there are different categories of property once they become void, some require little work to make them habitable again and some may require further works. She added that it is the interest of Clarion to get properties re-let as quickly as possible.
7. Councillor Wicks asked for confirmation regarding procedures associated with any work required for the maintenance of communal trees. Sally Greetham advised Councillor Wicks that Clarion have a dedicated arboreal contractor who checks the trees in communal areas regularly and they are also checked as part of the grounds maintenance contract.
8. Councillor Booth referred to last year's update from Clarion, where he made the point that not all Clarion tenant's properties are serviced by gas, as many of the properties are situated in a more rural location and are reliant on oil fired heating or air sourced heating systems, and that he requested an update at that time, but this has not been received to

date. Councillor Booth stated that over previous years, there have been residents who have not been able to get their heating systems repaired as their heating systems are more specialised and he asked for further information to be provided to members as it is an area of concern. Sally Greetham stated that the servicing of the specialist heating systems sits with different contractors and have different compliance requirements as opposed to those properties with gas heating and she agreed to provide members with further information.

9. Councillor Booth stated that he has been made aware that when residents have contacted Clarion to report maintenance issues, they have been advised that it is the householders responsibility to repair certain items themselves and added that the residents have challenged the response after checking their tenancy agreements. He stated that he is concerned that as a registered social housing provider, Clarion are trying to pass the onus back to the resident to address certain aspects of maintenance and questioned whether it is because Fenland has different contracts compared to other areas. Sally Greetham stated that there is not anything unique to the Fenland area and added that the contractors are the same as elsewhere. Councillor Booth stated that the issue appears to be arising when the householder first registers an issue with the Clarion contact centre, and the issue is only addressed once it is followed up in writing.
10. Councillor Booth asked for clarity with regard to the status of large established trees within a tenant's garden who has been advised it is their responsibility to maintain it. Sally Greetham stated that it can be a grey area, as the tenancy agreements state that residents are responsible for their garden, which would usually include trees. However, there could be certain circumstances where Clarion would look to carry out works dependent on the nature of the enquiry.
11. Councillor Booth asked for an update with regard to the information which was provided last year with regard to the provision of 422 houses proposed to be delivered over a 5 year period. Daniel Read stated that he will look into this further and provide the information to members through Dan Horn.
12. Councillor Humphrey asked for an update with regard to the situation at Roman Court in Leverington and asked for clarity with regard to what the plans are for the site? Sally Greetham stated that it will not be sold for private sale and be replaced with affordable housing, but it is likely not to include sheltered accommodation as there is a reduced demand for this type of accommodation. She added that the initial plan was for a set of 1, 2 and 3 bedroomed affordable housing, but final details are yet to be determined. Councillor Humphrey expressed the view that the response appears to be vague, as the site is being vacated without Clarion having any firm plans for it. Sally Greetham stated that a situation arose where tenants were asking for an explanation with regard to their home going forward and, therefore, the decision was taken to offer the tenants the home loss payment far quicker than would normally be the case. Councillor Humphrey asked what the situation will be for the two residents who are still living at Roman Court. Sally Greetham stated that a final decision will have to be made and discussions will take place with the residents to discuss the next steps.
13. Councillor Yeulett asked how Clarion deal with accommodation requests for larger families? Sally Greetham stated that they do hold larger units for bigger families and whenever there is a vacancy then the housing register is checked. She added that on rare occasions properties can be adapted to make them suitable for larger families and stressed that there is not a large amount of bigger properties, so it can be a challenge.
14. Councillor Cornwell asked whether the play area in Russell Avenue, which has been taken out of use, can be reinstated? Sally Greetham agreed to look into this further.

(Councillor Skoulding and Councillor Humphrey left the meeting following this item).

OSC12/20 PROGRESS OF CORPORATE PRIORITY - COMMUNITIES

Members considered the progress of the Corporate Priority, Communities, presented by Councillor Hoy.

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

1. Councillor Miscandlon stated that in the report it states that officers have worked with 79 landlords, which appears to be a limited number, given the scale of the private rented properties in the district, and he would like an understanding of the work carried out with unregistered landlords to encourage them to register and to ensure good sound rental housing, which impacts on the health and wellbeing of their tenants. Councillor Hoy expressed the view that the numbers are low, compared to last year when the number was 95, but that it is for a much shorter period, and that due to Covid 19, formal inspections on properties has not been able to take place. She stated that with regard to registration, there is no formal landlord registration scheme or any licensing type of scheme in place apart from houses in multiple occupancy (HMO), however, the Landlord Forum which took place in early March, which was used to explain the new enforcement approach, appears to be working well and landlords seem to be taking action. Councillor Hoy stated that the mandatory HMO licensing which was introduced last year, initially meant that people were slow to sign up, however, because they now realise there are penalties if they do not register, there has been an increase in the number of registrations. She expressed the opinion that it has been successful and will be reviewed pre-budget time and she hopes that this approach will focus on the bad landlords.
2. Councillor Miscandlon asked what action is being taken to bring the empty properties across the district back into use? Councillor Hoy stated that an officer is now in post to address this issue, which has proved to be successful. She stated that there were 400 properties across the districts which have been empty for over 6 months and since the officer has been in post, 52 of those empty properties have been brought back into use.
3. Councillor Cornwell asked for clarification with regard to the figures at the bottom of page 3 of the report in connection with private sector housing. Councillor Hoy provided an explanation to members with regard to the meaning of the income and expenditure listed and also outlined the various processes that are in place in order for monies to be paid to the Council.
4. Councillor Wicks asked what enforcement takes place with regard to dog fouling? Carol Pilson stated that this issue would fall within Councillor Murphy's portfolio for environment, but she would be happy to give an overview. She stated that the Council is keen to promote responsible dog ownership; it has recently carried out some consultation with regard to its Public Spaces Protection Orders, where an overwhelming response was received from the public who wanted to retain them going forward, and the Council also promotes the Green Dog Walkers Initiative, where there are over 150 volunteers who promote the scheme to impress amongst others about how to behave responsibly with their dogs. She stated that seven additional dispensers for dog fouling bags have also been installed within hot spot areas in the District and the Street Cleansing service, which operates a 7 day a week service, will respond to any reports of fouling to be cleared. The Street Scene Team also patrol in a number of areas and they have the powers to issue fines of £75 if they witness any fouling, which is not cleared up by the owner and three of these fines have been issued in the last year. Carol Pilson concluded by stating that it does remain a priority for the Council as it is a such a concern for the public and we regularly update our social media and website campaigns. Councillor Wicks asked whether there are any anti fouling posters in existence that can be displayed? Carol Pilson stated that she will raise this proposal with Councillor Murphy.
5. Councillor Booth stated that the Street Scene Team do have anti-fouling stickers and will come out and display them if requested.
6. Councillor Booth asked Councillor Hoy whether she was confident that all empty properties have been identified across the District via the Council Tax database? Councillor Hoy stated that the Anglia Revenues Partnership database is utilised, however, if Councillor Booth has a property which he is aware may be an empty property then he can email the officers for it to be investigated further. Councillor Booth stated that if a resident is trying to get a property

back into circulation, but needs assistance, is advice and guidance available? Councillor Hoy responded that yes advice is available and she would encourage the residents to make contact.

7. Councillor Mrs Mayor said that during the COVID 19 pandemic and associated lockdown there appears to be an increase in vandalism. She added that in Whittlesey there has been a property in the grounds of the Manor Leisure Centre, which has been so badly vandalised it now needs to be removed, and she asked what deterrent can be put in place to stop the vandals? Councillor Hoy stated that she will ask Councillor Wallwork to respond to this question.
8. Councillor Mrs Mayor referred to page 25 of the report where it mentions Vivacity handing back their contract to Peterborough City Council and also refers to a smaller trust doing a similar thing further south, asking for further details regarding this. Councillor Clark stated that it was in Southern England and was a company called Adur Leisure Centres and she would send Councillor Mrs Mayor the newspaper link to it.
9. Councillor Cornwell referred to a comment in the report in relation to Groundwork East concerning a community tree planting scheme and asked whether members were going to be kept informed of any proposed tree planting. He was also keen to understand if the community would be involved and how the organisation decides where any works are to take place? Councillor Clark responded that Groundwork East have recently been awarded an Environmental Education contract to run a number of tree planting days. The project is in its initial stages and is currently looking for potential sites, with the intention to engage with community groups and land owners. Once sites are identified and plans are in place, ward councillors will be notified and receive updates on the project.
10. Councillor Cornwell stated that apart from the Covid pandemic there is nothing contained within the report with regard to health services and he would like to have an update going forward.
11. Councillor Cornwell asked for an explanation with regard to the 'I Love Wisbech' project. Dan Horn advised that it is an initiative which has created collaboration between the community and voluntary sector in conjunction with the public sector, with various objectives and a set of principles. He added that moving forward funding opportunities will be investigated and submissions of bids for funding will be worked on to move forward with projects.
12. Councillor Cornwell asked for an update regarding Civil Enforcement parking ideas which have been discussed over time. Councillor Mrs French stated that this was first discussed last year, however, there have been delays due to Covid. She added that she has since had a meeting with officers and the intention is to bring a report to the Cabinet meeting in October, which will outline how the project can be funded.
13. Councillor Mason asked Councillor Hoy to outline what the plans are for rough sleepers following the Covid pandemic and asked whether the current level of funding is going to be sustainable? Councillor Hoy stated that the funding is not sustainable, however, the Council has banded rough sleepers with regard to their level of need and possible solutions and interventions are being investigated to assist these individuals going forward. She added that additional funding has been requested from Central Government, to assist with accommodation placements for our rough sleepers and it is hoped that the Council will be successful with its bid as it is the wish that rough sleeping is ended by 2023.

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel agreed to note the progress made by the Council in delivering the Communities corporate objectives in the Business Plan.

OSC13/20 LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN ANNUAL REVIEW OF COMPLAINTS

Councillor Tierney presented the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) Annual Review of Complaints report to members.

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

1. Councillor Booth asked in future can the report provide a breakdown to identify what service areas receive complaints, so that members can have a better understanding of the type of complaints that are received.

Members agreed to note the report.

OSC14/20 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered the Future Work Programme.

Councillor Mason reminded members that officers had been tasked with ascertaining if representatives from Anglian Water would be willing to attend a future meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel. Confirmation has now been received that representatives are willing to attend a future meeting the date of which has yet to be confirmed. He stated that Anna Goodall is compiling a list of questions which have been submitted by members to put to Anglian Water.

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

1. Councillor Miscandlon stated that it would be helpful if a list of those questions submitted by members could be circulated to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel to ensure that there is no duplication in questions. Anna Goodall agreed to circulate the list and stated that, if members were in agreement, then all other members would be invited to submit questions that the Panel could put forward to Anglian Water.

OSC15/20 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME

Councillor Mason reminded members that, during the Overview and Scrutiny Panel meeting on 13th July, the Council Tax Support scheme was discussed, with the report seeking a recommendation from the Overview and Scrutiny Panel regarding whether any proposed changes to the Council Tax Support Scheme should be considered.

Councillor Mason stated that any recommendation arising from the Overview and Scrutiny Panel discussions would subsequently be considered by Cabinet as part of their decision making regarding any consultation proposals for the scheme and any proposed changes to the Council Tax Support Scheme would have to be subject to a statutory public consultation period prior to any final decisions being implemented in 2021/22.

Councillor Mason stated that the Council Tax Support Scheme was not included on the Forward Plan as it was not clear if any changes to the Council Tax Support Scheme would be proposed. In order for Cabinet to consider the Overview and Scrutiny recommendations he was asked to utilise the urgency powers delegated to him as the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel, which subsequently require consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel to ensure effective transparency regarding decision making. He added that it is also worthy of note that Cabinet have not made any final decisions in relation to the Council Tax Support Scheme, but have decided what should be included as part of the statutory consultation in relation to the scheme.

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

1. Councillor Booth stated that members should note that it is a statutory requirement that items are placed on the Forward Plan at least 28 days in advance of consideration and that is why the Chairman was required to use his urgent powers of delegation on this occasion.

(The Chairman agreed to this item being discussed as a matter of urgency to avoid undue delay in the Panel being updated)