

# OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 8 MARCH 2021 - 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 M Purser, Councillor D Topgood, Councillor R Wicks and Councillor F Yeulett

**APOLOGIES:** Councillor S Count and Councillor R Skoulding

**OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:** Peter Catchpole (Corporate Director and Chief Finance Officer), Anna Goodall (Head of Transformation, Customer Services & Democracy) and Justin Wingfield (Head of Business & Economy)

**GUESTS:** Councillor I Benney, Councillor C Boden, Councillor P Murphy, Councillor S Tierney, Paul Webster (CPCA) and Alan Downton (International Investment Service)

## **OSC44/20 PREVIOUS MINUTES.**

Councillor Mason pointed out an error on the agenda in that the previous minutes to be approved should read 8 February 2021 and not 11 January 2021.

The minutes of the meeting of 8 February 2021 were confirmed subject to the following minor amendment:

- OS40/20 (top of page 4). Councillor Booth said Dan Horn had confirmed the number of pitches at Turf Fen travellers site were reduced from 8 to 4 some years ago which is why some people believed it was not in full occupancy.

## **OSC45/20 UPDATE ON PREVIOUS ACTIONS.**

Members were provided with an update on the status of actions raised at previous meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

1. Councillor Connor stated his disappointment that Clarion have not got back to him regarding issues with premises at Doddington, which are still ongoing. He asked if Anna Goodall could contact Clarion on his behalf for them to contact him by telephone as soon as possible.
2. Councillor Connor still wants an answer in respect of future planning applications and how additional surface water is going to be dealt with. Anglian Water have said they do not plan to update infrastructure in the next five years so when will this be done? Local people are saying there is nowhere for additional surface water to go.
3. Councillor Booth said that he was still waiting for young driver accident statistics from Matt Staton. Also, he was waiting for information on when the Friday Bridge pumping station was likely to be refurbished and what is its design life expectancy?
4. Councillor Miscandlon said he had previously thanked Briony Tuthill from Anglian Water for attending a panel meeting, but we need to meet with someone who has more technical knowledge. As previously stated by Councillor Connor and Councillor Booth, we need to know about an infrastructure replacement programme as there clearly needs to be one due to the problems in the whole district. Councillor Mason confirmed that work is in hand to bring Anglian Water back to a future meeting and he will update the panel when he has more information.

5. Councillor Cornwell asked that as there are still many unresolved items we formally move these to the outstanding actions list so that they are not forgotten.

## **OSC46/20 UPDATE ON CPCA GROWTH SERVICE AND IMPACT ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN FENLAND**

Councillor Mason welcomed Councillor Ian Benney, Justin Wingfield and external guests, Alan Downton from the Combined Authority (CPCA) and Paul Webster from the International Investment Service to the meeting.

The Update on CPCA Growth Service and Impact on Economic Development in Fenland report was presented in two parts. Councillor Benney gave a broad overview of the activity between FDC and the CPCA, followed by a presentation by Paul Webster and Alan Downton.

Councillor Mason thanked both Paul Webster and Alan Downton for their interesting presentation.

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

1. Councillor Miscandlon also thanked Paul Webster and Alan Downton for their presentation, saying that as a former apprentice himself he was pleased to see emphasis on the importance of apprenticeships, of which he is an advocate, and looks forward to an exciting time ahead for that programme.
2. Councillor Wicks said it would be good for councillors to know more about grants available for small businesses to be able to promote them. He said that whilst he favours apprenticeships there are limited opportunities within Fenland for these as we only have three local further education hubs. He questioned whether they are conducting the courses that we will need to grow businesses within this area as he noted that engineering, business administration and business management were not available. Alan Downton replied that the CPCA needs to work with FDC to assess future requirements; not all courses are in place at the moment and there is still work to be done, but working together these issues can be addressed. Paul Webster added that there is a training allocation funding pot within the CPCA that can be accessed to develop new learning pathways as required. They will be demand-led in terms of what businesses are asking for to ensure a work force for the future. Their own programme is looking to have two local apprentices in the in the field of business management and business administration so they will also need access to that form of education as mentioned by Councillor Wicks.
3. Councillor Benney advised that the funding schemes change as the funds are available, however they tend to be oversubscribed very quickly but he will ensure Councillor Wicks is notified about them as they arise. Addressing Councillor Wicks' comments about suitable apprenticeships he pointed out that Chatteris has been awarded some £3.2m for an engineering training college. Furthermore, we have a delivery of homes within Fenland that we are not achieving because there is not the labour force here to deliver it. Too many young people are going to university when there are good, well-paid jobs available locally if we can get young people interested in building trade jobs such as quantity surveyors, electricians, plumbers etc. that require a whole range of skills that we can train young people in. He has pushed hard to encourage training centres to get apprenticeships within the building trade because there is a need and jobs are available at the end of it.
4. Councillor Wicks said that while he accepts the exceptional opportunities available in Chatteris there is a whole wealth of area within Fenland that needs to be developed on all skills, but training opportunities are very limited. It is the actual business sites that we are not blessed with so what is being done to develop a pool of business sites that can become available for development? Alan Downton said he would go back to the CPCA as he does not know what is happening on a local basis.
5. Councillor Booth asked Councillor Benney what the CPCA is doing specifically about apprenticeships as the presentation is looking at the future and the initiatives within it, such as the Kickstart scheme, are government-led. He had supported the inception of the CPCA

because it was envisaged that it would provide educational funding but four years later it seems we are only just now starting to put in place plans for the future. Regarding the fact that many courses on offer are not appropriate, we were told two years ago that it was recognised that many of the adult education courses on offer did not serve a purpose as they were not vocational training, with many more suited to hobbies. This is the main issue that we need to speak up on; we are missing opportunities here. Councillor Benney said he was under the impression that the funding towards apprenticeships was coming through the CPCA and he would investigate this further and get back to Councillor Booth. Paul Webster confirmed that Kickstart is a national programme for 18-24-year olds registered on universal credit but the CPCA has been working with schools, helping students to understand their development and career opportunities along with pathways to education and discussing the merits of apprenticeships versus a university education. There is also a team of business engagement advisors operating across the region; the CPCA complements them and helps by investing in the digital platform to make it more accessible to people wherever they are located and they are looking to scale up that work. Alan Downton said that the CPCA have appointed two new SROs and will ensure that they can inform what is happening immediately when the workshops commence. Councillor Booth said he still feels that opportunities are being missed and we need to ramp up the speed of delivery.

6. Councillor Booth said in terms of grant funding there seems to have been no progress in the last few years of investment into Agri-tech. We were told that the Fens, with its strong agricultural economy and community, would be ideal to see investment in this area. Why are we not looking to invest more in this area as we should be leading the nation on this considering our position.
7. Councillor Benney responded that although he agrees with Councillor Booth's comments, people do need to come forward with applications in the first place. However, we now have additional FDC staff in the Economic Growth team and a list of businesses that they can start targeting to advise that there is funding available and encourage these applications. Unfortunately, the onset of COVID-19 had previously held up this work.
8. Councillor Cornwell asked how the CPCA intends to work with the emerging university in respect of skills education to identify how it will cover some of the technical shortages that businesses are having or expect to have, as he understands it will be more technical than academic, Paul Webster advised that although broad funding pots are available from the CPCA to create new learning pathways, to include digital skills and the traditional trade supply, it is up to the university to deliver their own plan and run from their own perspective. However, they have reached out and are waiting to engage with the university on their intentions in advance of its launch in about 15 months. We do have our own ability to change learning pathways without the university, however we are here to collaborate and work with strategic partners.
9. Councillor Cornwell said in effect the CPCA has appointed Anglia Ruskin to produce the university so surely they will have a say in what courses are needed; if not where is the linkage? Alan Downton said he has been working with Anglia Ruskin, and they have been undertaking workshops with businesses to ensure it is demand-led and this has informed the content and structure of courses going forward. Councillor Cornwell said he just wants to ensure that the money invested across the district and the work is being delivered in a coordinated manner to get best value from all the operations. Alan Downton said that he is heavily involved with the working groups and could assure Councillor Cornwell that the work undertaken is joined up.
10. Councillor Yeulett said the presentation was very interesting with a lot of information provided. The biggest challenge to our area is that of access and infrastructure. The north of the district has the most needs and deprivation and he would like to see a focus and improvement in the area with these proposals. Alan Downton said although he does not know the specific details about infrastructure in the area, he could confirm that the CPCA are looking at the bigger picture.
11. Councillor Benney agreed that infrastructure is a major problem for the whole of Fenland and a priority, particularly for Whittlesey as an artery into Fenland.
12. Councillor Miscandlon said the Skills Panel for the CPCA have previously been made aware

that not everybody wants a career, desk or computer job and agreed with Councillor Benney that jobs in the building trade are extremely important and skilled in their own right and can be extremely rewarding.

13. Councillor Topgood said his concern is that the scheme could stall and to ensure it does not would suggest regular updates and scrutiny of the results.
14. Councillor Cornwell said that we have a maritime centre in Wisbech and made a plea that this area be considered for further development in the future. Councillor Benney said the port is his area of responsibility and he has already looked to see what can be done there. Although Crab Marsh boat yard is full, it is being utilised and short of spending a lot of money on the quay there are restrictions because of the tides. However, he would be happy to discuss further with Councillor Cornwell.
15. Councillor Wicks wanted to make the point in referring to apprenticeships that everyone learns in a different way; not everyone is academically gifted, and this should not be forgotten that some people take longer than others to learn their skills.
16. Councillor Booth asked that it be added to the recommendation that members of CPCA and Cabinet take away the comments made this afternoon and ensure that the issues and concerns raised are addressed. Alan Downton said he had a note of all the comments.

Councillor Mason thanked Alan Downton and Paul Webster for their time.

**The Overview and Scrutiny Panel considered the contents of the presentation and progress made in relation to Economic Growth activities between the CPCA and FDC and the impact of CPCA's Growth Service on Economic Growth in Fenland.**

*(Alan Downton and Paul Webster left the meeting).*

## **OSC47/20 INVESTMENT BOARD ANNUAL REPORT**

Councillor Mason welcomed Councillor Boden to the meeting to present the first Investment Board Annual Report

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

1. Councillor Booth recognised that there has not been the opportunity for the Investment Board to get fully up and running given the constraints of COVID-19 and suggested that we not wait for an update in a year's time. He noted that one of the aims of the Board is to invest in residential development and he asked what the approach is going to be regarding delivery of social housing. Councillor Boden said it is the Board's intention to be commercial and will be unlikely to pursue social housing unless legislation dictates it; the objective of Fenland Future Limited is to operate as any commercial developer in order to achieve a return.
2. Councillor Yeulett said the report referred to the Investment Board being created to be more 'fleet of foot' and asked what that meant. Councillor Boden said it refers to the need to move quickly i.e. with a speed greater than usual at local government level, to compete for investment opportunities with private businesses.
3. Councillor Miscandlon said whilst it is desirable to keep investment within the geographical area would the Board consider opportunities outside of Fenland. Councillor Boden said if the opportunity arose, it would not be ruled out but most of our real opportunities will lie within or close to Fenland.
4. Councillor Miscandlon said that Fenland owns some land, some of which is up for sale, therefore would it be in our interest to apply for planning permission to increase its intrinsic value, so that when sold we profit further. He also asked if there was a possibility of building our own houses although, bearing in mind that we transferred our housing stock, would it be the intention to go back into social housing and how would this affect our stock partner

Clarion? Councillor Boden said in respect of our smaller plots of land, although it would not be economically viable for us to build on these ourselves, it would be prudent to at least apply outline planning permission and or have a clawback provision within the sale so that if speculative development was achieved then we would get some recompense for that. For larger areas of land, we have to consider that we do not have the expertise to develop ourselves but look to work in partnership with a developer to build and cooperate with us. In any development we undertake there will be some obligation to have affordable housing, it may not be in the form of social housing, and it is not our intention to build social housing as there will not be the return, but it not our intention to reintroduce the social housing stock.

5. Councillor Mason said members would be interested to know what assets are placed on loan security or earmarked for that purpose. Councillor Boden said no further borrowing has taken place and therefore no assets are being used as security but if we were to borrow for future schemes this would be from internal borrowing or through the public works loan board.
6. Councillor Booth asked if we have been using clawback clauses and if we have been doing that on all the sites we have been selling to date as standard practice. Councillor Boden said it is standard practice but not on every site as that is dependent on the nature of the site itself.
7. Councillor Mason thanked Councillor Boden for his report and said given that the Board is newly formed, he looks forward to a larger report next year.

**The Overview and Scrutiny Panel noted the Annual Report of the Investment Board.**

#### **OSC48/20 TRANSFORMATION & COMMUNICATIONS PORTFOLIO HOLDER UPDATE**

Councillor Mason welcomed Councillor Tierney to the meeting to present the Transformation & Communications Portfolio Holder update.

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

- Councillor Miscandlon said he feels we should encompass a broader method of communication than mentioned within the report, such as local radio. Not everybody has access to a computer or social media, and he asked what the Council could do about this. Councillor Tierney said the normal approach is to send out press releases, but the suggestion of including radio is something officers can take on board to ensure the maximum number of people hear the good news that FDC is doing, and so we will include as many forms of media that we can. The press team work hard but new ideas are always welcome.
- Councillor Boden advised that Fenland Youth Radio has just been added to FDC's publicity and press release list.
- Councillor Booth asked for clarification as to why some of the items on the list of projects were on the transformation programme as he thought they were things we would deliver naturally. He asked if it is the intention that the transformation programme overlooks all projects delivered across the district as opposed to more innovative projects. Councillor Tierney said his portfolio role is to act as a strategic lead on transformation and not to interfere with the work of other portfolio holders or committees; he will just ensure that loose ends are tied up. It does not matter that there are some additional projects in there, he will merely guide the overall direction of travel that we are taking.
- Councillor Booth raised the issue of complaints. He has commented many times before that a good quality organisation takes complaints as an opportunity to learn and improve as an organisation. He has previously asked for a breakdown of the nature of complaints as opposed to just the number. He asked for a commitment to provide this information going forward, i.e. broad themes and what action will be delivered to counteract further similar complaints. Councillor Tierney agreed it is important to look for patterns in the nature of complaints and to

identify any gaps in service delivery; he agreed that this can be done going forward but also giving regard to confidentiality where required.

- Councillor Cornwell suggested a weekly newsletter could be emailed to people who interact with their local authority. It will particularly keep the majority of more rural customers aware of what is going on. Less people now read newspapers and a large number of our residents do not get a local newspaper so often press releases are not seen. Councillor Tierney thanked Councillor Cornwell for the idea. He said part of his role is to stay ahead and not leave anyone behind. When we have new ideas, we can look at it but with a view to seeing if the amount of additional officer time makes it worthwhile. He pointed out that press releases do not just go to papers, but also to social media channels, which are growing fast. However, he will take away the idea of an opt-in mailing list and perhaps talk about it again at a later meeting.
- Councillor Booth asked what controls are in place to ensure that what we deliver engages everyone and that nothing falls in the gaps, and that we do not fall foul of our legislative responsibilities. Councillor Tierney responded that firstly officers have all the processes in place in respect of existing business and secondly it is the job of elected members and committees such as this to scrutinise and look for things that may be coming up and make officers aware of them. All the existing measures are there but it is incumbent on us all to ensure that nobody is left behind as he appreciates that technology is not for everyone and everybody should have equal access to the council.
- Councillor Booth asked that with the scale of change we are proposing does that not mean we should be considering additional layers of oversight to ensure nothing falls between the cracks. There is a cultural aspect we need to address to ensure that people come along with us and are not afraid to raise concerns.
- Councillor Tierney said he feels confident with existing systems but if there is anything that he is missing or not capturing he is open to hearing a specific example and seeing what can be done with that.
- Councillor Booth expressed concern that we have the correct culture for staff to be able to raise concerns or report issues on changes that are being delivered. The role of members is to set policy and they may have the oversight on democracy but are not seeing what officers are dealing with at the coalface on a daily basis. Councillor Tierney said there is a system for staff to report issues and raise concerns in a neutral way, but senior officers can check and see that system is robust.

Councillor Mason thanked Councillor Tierney for his time this afternoon.

**The Overview & Scrutiny Panel considered the progress made in delivering the Transformation and Communication Portfolio during 2020 - 2021.**

#### **OSC49/20 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME**

Councillor Mason pointed out that members commented at the February meeting that a rolling 12-month Future Work Programme be developed. This work is underway and will be circulated for comment prior to being brought back to the panel at the next formal meeting.

3.37 pm

Chairman