

# OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 12 JULY 2021 - 1.30 PM



**PRESENT:** Councillor D Mason, Councillor A Miscandlon, Councillor G Booth, Councillor M Cornwell, Councillor A Hay, Councillor Mrs K Mayor, Councillor M Purser, Councillor R Skoulding, Councillor R Wicks and Councillor F Yeulett

**APOLOGIES:** Councillor D Connor, Councillor S Count, Councillor M Humphrey and Councillor D Topgood

**OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:** Linda Albon (Member Services & Governance Officer), Peter Catchpole (Corporate Director and Chief Finance Officer), Anna Goodall (Head of Transformation, Customer Services & Democracy), Paul Medd (Chief Executive) and Carol Pilson (Corporate Director and Monitoring Officer)

## **OSC1/21    APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN FOR THE MUNICIPAL YEAR**

It was proposed by Councillor Miscandlon, seconded by Councillor Purser and resolved that Councillor Mason be elected Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the Municipal Year.

## **OSC2/21    APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN FOR THE MUNICIPAL YEAR**

It was proposed by Councillor Mason, seconded by Councillor Purser and resolved that Councillor Miscandlon be elected Vice-Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the Municipal Year.

## **OSC3/21    PREVIOUS MINUTES.**

The minutes of the meeting of 8 March 2021 were confirmed and signed subject to the following comments:

- Councillor Cornwell referred to the update on previous actions and said the panel had resolved to transfer to this list all unresolved items from a previous Anglian Water (AW) presentation and he asked if that had been done. Anna Goodall responded that AW have agreed to attend another O&S meeting as requested by members, and she is currently in discussions regarding a suitable date, when these items will be addressed. However, we are keen that some of those can be resolved before then and members will receive updates as soon as possible. Councillor Cornwell said members were concerned they were not getting updates from AW and did not want any item overlooked hence the request for items to be added to the action plan. Anna Goodall confirmed that she will ensure they are added to provide reassurance that these items will not be overlooked.
- Councillor Cornwell referred to item 14 in the minutes regarding the update on the CPCA Growth Service, which included a discussion around the Anglia University and skills etc. which he had found very interesting. The minutes suggested he was questioning why we do not have a marine centre in Wisbech, whereas he had in fact raised the point that the marine centres in Wisbech are currently underused. Suggestions had been made around trying to reintroduce skills such as boat maintenance. We have trawlers arriving from the eastern region for maintenance and the skills that are required come in with them and he was therefore trying to get that skillset requirement into the university. He is still waiting for a response from Councillor Benney in this matter and so would like this chased up.

- Councillor Cornwell also mentioned that under the Transformation and Communications Portfolio Holder update he had raised the possibility of having an opt-in mailing list for something like a regular newsletter for distribution. Councillor Tierney was going to look at that so he would also appreciate a chase up on this for a response.
- Councillor Booth referred to Councillor Cornwell's comments regarding AW. He said that many of the actions have been captured to some degree in Item 6 of the actual action plan but there are still several items of which we are waiting for more technical information, such as the Friday Bridge pumping station. We were told there had been no plans to refurbish it in the next five years, but we are still suffering issues with the water pressure. He suggested we update item 6 on the actual plan and take it forward, but we need to keep it at the top of the agenda. Councillor Mason said we are endeavouring to bring a more engineering-based person from AW to a later meeting as mentioned by Anna Goodall in order to address those problems.
- Councillor Booth stated that in item 5 of the minutes, he had raised concerns regarding apprenticeships. The presentation had reiterated what the government schemes were, but he had asked specifically what the CPCA was doing about apprenticeships. Councillor Benney was going to provide some information about that, but he has not received this. However, he feels this is urgent given that the CPCA has now been running for four years and little action appears to have been taken in that area so he would appreciate action on that.
- Councillor Wicks referred to item 4 in the minutes regarding the CPCA Growth Update. He said that Mr Downton was going to come back to advise what is happening with a pool of business sites within our local area and would like an update.

#### **OSC4/21 UPDATE ON PREVIOUS ACTIONS**

Members considered the update on previous actions and made the following comments:

- Councillor Mason said that members had now received an update on young driver accident statistics as requested by Councillor Booth.
- Councillor Miscandlon said he would like to see these statistics broken down to show more detail, i.e., the number of accidents showing contributory factors such as where drink, drugs or speeding were involved and the number of no-fault accidents. Councillor Wicks asked if it was also possible to take into consideration when these accidents occurred, for example in the small hours, as tiredness could be a contributory factor.
- Councillor Booth said he had asked for the information because for several years Fenland was second or third in the number of highest fatalities in young drivers but one of the main reasons was because of crashes into dykes and ditches around the Fens. There have been many campaigns on these issues over the years.
- Councillor Miscandlon wondered how many of those accidents involved local drivers; it could be that some are new to the area and do not know our roads. He would like some form of monitoring on the decibel level of noisy exhaust systems. There is an antisocial behaviour issue with the revving of engines in particular; the police have told us they have the equipment to do this, and it has already been used in some areas.

#### **OSC5/21 DRAFT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2020-2021**

Member considered the draft Overview & Scrutiny Annual Report for 2020-21.

Councillor Mason thanked all members of the panel for their hard work over the last year under trying circumstances. Although technology is a wonderful thing, it is great to be meeting in person today. Regarding the report, he wanted to highlight the member-led review of the Anglia Revenue Partnership, with which he was particularly delighted; it was a very worthwhile exercise, and he stated his gratitude to Anna Goodall, officers and particularly Councillor Anne Hay for her Chairmanship of that review.

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

- Councillor Cornwell said the report is very comprehensive and reflects all that has been done.
- Councillor Boden thanked all members of the panel for their work over the last, difficult year. He finds the work done by O&S to be very constructive to ensure that the Council does things better and has its finger on the pulse. The panel also contributes to policy development and he welcomes all that was done last year and looks forward to the next.
- Councillor Booth stated that were several occasions during the year where the urgency decision making powers were utilised and he said the report does not capture that this was not a normal set of circumstances. Due to COVID-19, these issues had to be agreed rapidly; it is not usual to use these and in all the years he has been on panel, it is the only time O&S has had to use them. He thinks this comment should be captured within the report.
- Cllr Miscandlon said he endorsed the report but agreed with Councillor Booth's comment. The urgency decision making powers should be used sparingly and in these instances they were taken with great thought and under extreme circumstances.

**The Overview and Scrutiny Panel AGREED to approve the annual report for forwarding to Council.**

### **OSC6/21 COUNCIL RESPONSE TO COVID-19 - FUTURE IMPLICATIONS**

Members considered the Council Response to COVID-19 – Future Implications Report.

Paul Medd confirmed the report had been circulated as a presentation in advance of the meeting and invited questions from the O&S Panel.

- Councillor Booth referred to the rollout of virtual council meetings and asked what the intention is going forward. Are we going to be a prudent authority and still have measures in place or go back to how things were? We need to lead by example.
- Councillor Boden responded that this was an appropriate question and he had been deeply disappointed that the opportunity to continue to have virtual meetings until such time we were all confident that it was safe to have unregulated meetings in person was not taken. He felt this to be a mistake by central Government, but we must abide by their decision and the legal situation. However, it is not a satisfactory position, and officers have been very careful to follow regulations. They have been able to find different locations to undertake larger meetings, but it has been very difficult. His understanding is that many of the legal restrictions will be lifted after 19 July. They may or may not relate to guidance about local government and their meetings in buildings, but our intention is to err on the side of caution whilst recognising the legal position.
- Paul Medd confirmed that we must undertake a pragmatic balance between meeting as normal but also seeking to uphold safety wherever possible. Any decisions will be kept under close review as we move forward.
- Councillor Yeulett asked about the work with the 57 rough sleepers as noted in the report. He asked if they have been embedded within society or as the pandemic becomes less severe will they return to homelessness going forward? He also asked what the plans are for the winter. Furthermore, has there been a surge in domestic violence within Fenland? Nationally people are talking about the effect on children, so do we have a handle on that? Also, what are the effects on our finances generally?
- Councillor Boden responded that there was great success 12 months ago in getting all rough sleepers off the streets, however that involves spending a lot of money which came from central Government. That funding is now not available so we cannot sustain this position. However, there are many initiatives to ensure that rough sleeping continues to be addressed; the problem generally is not one of housing but other issues. He cannot say how many of those 57 are still rough sleeping as he does not have access to their records.
- Councillor Boden confirmed that sadly there has been an increase in the nationwide reporting

of domestic violence. There has been some increase so far as requirements for intervention for children, but we have not seen an increase in the number projected. He is surprised that it has not been as great a problem with more prominence as he was expecting but he does not have the specific numbers in front of him. However, one case is one too many. We understand that there has been greater pressure upon many households over the last 15 months, and regrettably that pressure has resulted in violence. Even pre-COVID-19 the number of cases of domestic violence in Cambridgeshire and Fenland is appallingly high and grossly underreported

- Councillor Boden advised that in respect of the financial impact, we provide monthly reports to the HMCLG about the effect that COVID-19 has had. Those effects have been highly negative to us; however, they have largely been offset by funding available from HMCLG. He added that regarding winter plans, we have learned much in the last 15 months and we will use what we have learned to be more prepared in the future to act as quickly as possible within the confines of the law.
- Paul Medd added that financially the ongoing legacy issues around COVID-19 are not yet fully known but we will continue to monitor that position closely to be ahead of any financial challenges it might present. However, on a positive note, there are signs of recovery; society is starting to reopen. A good example of where we are seeing recovery in our income stream is in leisure. Positively, statistics from Freedom Leisure reflect that customers are returning to using the leisure centres. Generally, the pandemic came about when the Government were looking to review local government finance with fairer funding, business rates retention and the new homes bonus for example, so we continue to work with the Leader on being aware of and understanding any central government policy changes that will influence our budget and medium-term financial strategy. In respect of winter, he advised Councillor Yeulett that if there are any changes to central government policy, we will swiftly act upon those to ensure we are fully legally compliant. We will continue to support and work closely with partners to ensure the vaccination programme rollout because scientifically it has been proved to have a positive bearing and we do recognise there are certain residents or communities that are hesitant. We will continue to work with partner agencies to reach out to encourage as many of those as possible to engage with the process in the coming autumn and winter months. For office-based staff, we are looking at a future way of working for the Council and whether there is an opportunity to become more efficient by creating a form of agile working. Reviewing our accommodation needs is something we are looking at as a result and we will engage more broadly with members when it is appropriate to do so.
- Councillor Yeulett thanked both Councillor Boden and Paul Medd for their very comprehensive replies.
- Councillor Miscandlon thanked officers, the Corporate Management Team, Member Services, and all staff for their prompt reaction to Government legislation changes and their ability to adapt to that new legislation. He said they have done an excellent job and he applauded them. He added that some years ago, chaired by Councillor Hoy and in conjunction with Cambridgeshire County Council and Huntingdon District Council, FDC produced a report on domestic violence which at the time was applauded and presented to the then Home Secretary, Theresa May. He believes we should look at producing a further report with some of the other local councils as this is a problem faced nationwide to raise awareness with the public in the proper way.
- Councillor Booth referred to the issue of homelessness and Councillor Boden's comments. The local press were indicating that homeless numbers were on the increase again, particularly in Wisbech. The point had been made that sometimes simply housing people did not resolve the matter. He said that partly people become homeless because of a myriad of bureaucracy, paperwork and rules and regulations that get in the way of helping people out in the first place. A lot of this creates a barrier to putting people on the waiting list and getting them housed; we need to be more proactive in future regarding that. There are two sides to the story.
- Councillor Boden thanked Councillor Booth for his point. It was correct but there is a difference between rough sleeping and homelessness. FDC officers work very hard, and in his opinion go above and beyond, to ensure people do not get lost in the system or buried by the bureaucracy

that must exist to manage the process; they do this exceptionally well in respect of homelessness. However, there are very few cases where people end up rough sleeping because of bureaucracy and the system which exists. In many instances it is a lifestyle choice, but each case is individual; behind every rough sleeper there is a separate story.

- Carol Pilson added that we are also reliant on other organisations to help provide support to individuals, for example in mental health. Often providing a set of keys is not the answer, there must be a whole package of assistance in place. We also have different age ranges to consider. Furthermore, all agencies are facing budget constraints and the thresholds for support are getting higher in terms of access to services. We do have a close-knit partnership with many organisations, not all of them statutory, we are heavily reliant on the goodwill of the voluntary and community sector.
- Councillor Cornwell said the NHS is very important in this and they are in a very difficult position currently. He asked if we are still engaged with the NHS locally regarding the services they are engaged in and are we in a position to influence and increase the service provision in areas such as mental health?
- Councillor Boden responded that we liaise with others in a multidisciplinary way to address the problems that individual rough sleepers may have. However, as far as mental health is concerned, the Government recently introduced the concept of parity of esteem. Under that concept health bodies were meant to give equal weight to both physical and mental problems. He does not think the parity has yet been fully achieved. This is an NHS matter and is overseen by the County Council but the impression he has is that officers have found the multidisciplinary approach works, it has been possible to engage with relevant bodies within the NHS structures on that issue. However, this is not enough and unfortunately waiting lists have increased and the danger is that mental problems continue to be invisible and out of mind. He stated that Councillor Cornwell's comment was a good example of the O&S Panel being helpful in trying to influence policy agenda, for which he is grateful for the comment. He added that this was an opportune moment to thank the Chairman of O&S for the support and flexibility he has shown over the last 15 months in dealing with the four requests for urgent action that did not go through the normal process and needed his support. These requests were rightly questioned by the Panel and in response to Councillor Booth's earlier comment that it be noted this is not the usual way of doing things; these were exceptional circumstances that we all hope will never occur again and we will do our best to ensure that no further such requests are made.
- Councillor Wicks said he has a meeting next week with an NHS mental health prescriber regarding an initiative that is being rolled out in the Whittlesey area to support ex-servicemen with mental health issues. He will engage with Fenland officers and will report progress back to the panel.
- Councillor Booth referred to the part of the report highlighting the number of requests to the community hub. The weekly update shows a reduction in requests to the hub so is this an appropriate time to end singling out these requests and incorporate them into general customer services call data. Councillor Boden said as much as he agreed, unfortunately we are facing an increase in transmission of infection rates and now is probably not the time to do this.
- Paul Medd added that many residents are still likely to face ongoing issues, for example with furlough coming to an end, therefore the community hub will continue to be a vital function for some time. As a council committed to supporting residents affected by the pandemic, it would be responsible and prudent to keep that dedicated community hub offer live for the foreseeable future.
- Councillor Booth agreed that under the circumstances it would be prudent for the hub to carry on. However, as a member of a community group, he cannot recall the last communication received from the hub so he would suggest that be looked at. Many people are setting up their own support network now and so, unlike a year ago, not necessarily in need of the community groups either, but we do need to think about whether we should re-engage with those groups again given the messages we are getting from Government.
- Paul Medd responded that it was accepted that communication and engagement are important. Councillor Booth's observation is correct that since the start of the pandemic the amount of community resilience has strengthened daily and is almost embedded in our communities, so

the number of calls has reduced. However, one of the roles of the hub seen throughout is one of signposting, therefore it is still a useful point of contact.

Councillor Mason thanked the Leader and officers for their presentation. He also echoed Councillor Miscandlon's earlier comments; he would like to thank and congratulate every officer and member of staff in producing services to a very high standard in such challenging circumstances.

Paul Medd said part of the effectiveness of this Council's response is the support received from all members, who, rightly so, have been appropriately challenging where necessary and equally the exceptional support received from the Leader in such extreme times. It truly defines effective one team working. Councillor Mason thanked Paul Medd.

## **OSC7/21    FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME**

Members considered the Future Work Programme.

- Councillor Mason said there has been concern in the past about the performance of Clarion and therefore the panel would like to bring forward the item on Clarion from March 2022 to December 2021; particularly with winter coming up.
- Councillor Booth endorsed Councillor Mason's comment, particularly in response to feedback from residents. He also asked if the number of items covered at each panel meeting could be spread more evenly throughout the year, with no more than three main topics at each meeting. He suggested the Planned Shared Service Review be moved from September, which has four substantive items, to the October meeting, which currently only has one substantive item. He also suggested the Culture Strategy item be moved to the December meeting.
- Anna Goodall confirmed that residents from Clarion have confirmed they will attend the December meeting.
- Councillor Boden said he noted the council tax support scheme had been deferred from today's meeting to September. He asked for this item not to be deferred beyond July in future as the timetable, if there is to be significant change, requires a period of consultation and the decision must be made in December before being brought about in April. Anna Goodall replied that she could reassure members after discussion with Peter Catchpole that if we deferred the item to September, it would still allow time to consult on minor changes.

2.47 pm

Chairman