

# OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 5 DECEMBER 2022 - 1.30 PM



**PRESENT:** Councillor D Mason (Chairman), Councillor A Miscandlon (Vice-Chairman), Councillor G Booth, Councillor A Hay and Councillor M Humphrey

**APOLOGIES:** Councillor D Connor, Councillor M Purser, Councillor R Wicks and Councillor F Yeulett

**OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:** Amy Brown (Assistant Director), Dan Horn (Assistant Director) and Linda Albon (Member Services & Governance Officer)

**GUESTS:** Sally Greetham (Head of Operations, Clarion Housing), Yvonne Ogden (Neighbourhood Investment Manager, Clarion Housing), Daniel Read (Clarion, Director of Partnerships – East and Central), John Ferman (Clarion Regional Director of Housing), and Tim Bellamy (Interim Head of Transport, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority)

## **OSC14/22 PREVIOUS MINUTES.**

The minutes of the meeting of 10 October 2022 were confirmed and signed.

## **OSC15/22 UPDATE ON PREVIOUS ACTIONS.**

Councillor Miscandlon asked if there was an update on the availability of someone from the Combined Authority whilst Mayor Johnson is currently indisposed. Councillor Mason said unfortunately the Deputy Mayor is not available presently, but an invitation request has been made for a future date and that is being followed up.

## **OSC16/22 REVIEW OF CLARION**

Councillor Mason welcomed Sally Greetham, Yvonne Ogden, Dan Read and John Ferman to the meeting.

Members received a comprehensive presentation which gave an overview of Clarion's work and development, and an update of the charitable foundation of Clarion Housing Group, Clarion Futures.

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

1. Councillor Hay noted that whilst Clarion Futures is doing good work with youth provision and the funding of food hubs in Wisbech, March and Whittlesey, she would like to know why no mention has been made of Chatteris. She would also like to know the average waiting time for people on the housing register and if are they all local or include people wanting to move into the area. Furthermore, Councillor Hay noted mention of the empty properties in sheltered housing and said she hears from residents that one of the attractions in the past was the reassurance that there was a live-in warden always available on site, but now there is only one warden available by telephone or who drops in occasionally. Councillor Hay suggested that could possibly be the reason why people are opting not to go into sheltered housing. Lastly, there is no explanation as to what the priority bands A, B, C and D relate to, and Councillor Hay

said she would like an explanation of these.

2. Yvonne Ogden replied that Clarion does work in Chatteris and apologised that this did not come across within the report. Councillor Hay requested that this be addressed in future reports so that the public are aware of what is happening in Chatteris.
3. Dan Horn stated that the HomeLink allocation policy is administered by Clarion on the Council's behalf, and he will work with them to provide some statistics regarding the average waiting time as it is recognised as an issue. He will also circulate a link to the Council policy so members can see the different priorities which lead to the bandings, people in Band A being in the most urgent need and those in Band D being in the least urgent need. He added that there is an increasing pattern of more people in Band A, but a rising shortage of available family accommodation is providing difficulty for the Council in meeting its homelessness responsibilities and Clarion is helping with the growing number of people in temporary accommodation.
4. Yvonne Ogden advised that the model has changed for sheltered accommodation, which is replicated across this housing type with other providers, as they were starting to see demand tail off for accommodation that had on-site wardens. It has been remodelled so that customers have daily contact with a member of the LiveSmart team and members of that team will be on site every day. Having said that, they do realise that the system is not delivering what it needs to, which is why they want to look at the model and see if they can deliver in a different way.
5. Councillor Miscandlon congratulated the team for their well-presented presentation, but he had several questions and comments as follows:
  - What has been done to correct the situation that occurred a few years ago when a winter emergency occurred, and Clarion engineers could not get spares from their suppliers due to monies owed?
  - How many people are on the waiting list for Clarion properties in Fenland?
  - Clarion made it clear some years ago that they had no interest in small sites of four or five properties. Have they now changed their policy?
  - What is meant by enhanced training in the response to damp and mould, and how does the new reporting system work? Councillor Miscandlon had read that Clarion were revisiting all properties that had reported damp or mould in the last two years, but he believed they should revisit any property that reported this over the last five or ten years.
  - He read in the report of 91.4% in terms of gas repairs and asked why this was not 100% as gas is a lethal substance and leaks should not be tolerated under any circumstances.
  - Is Clarion supporting the food hub in Whittlesey?
  - A workshop programme has taken place within the secondary schools in March and Wisbech, but no mention has been made of the Cromwell in Chatteris or Sir Harry Smith in Whittlesey.
6. Yvonne Ogden responded that she agreed there had been some problems about four years ago with Clarion's gas contractor at that time. However, a lot had been learned from that experience and Clarion are very happy with their current contractor and customer satisfaction is high. Discussions began in late summer as to how the contractor would manage the winter period, so they do now have a winter action plan for emergencies. In respect of the customer satisfaction rate quoted, the compliance figure is 99.74%. The issue that prevents it being 100% is normally lack of access given by customers and occasionally Clarion needs to take customers to court to get injunctions to get the access required to undertake gas checks. John Ferman said that the 91.4% figure quoted relates to customer satisfaction in the work of the contractor, which equates to a 9/10 and this is a rate that Clarion are happy with.
7. Sally Greetham responded that there are currently 1568 people on the HomeLink register as of September. This covers all social housing in Fenland and the figure is steadily increasing.
8. Sally Greetham stated that in respect of damp and training, Clarion are looking at various types of data to get a good picture of where they need to focus their efforts. They are looking back at their history of repairs to see what they have previously done in any case where there has been a mention of damp or mould, however little. John Ferman stated it is a matter of prioritising; two years is the priority with the resources they have, but their intention is to get into every property eventually. Sally Greetham added that they are contacting customers so they know what signs

to look out for and there will be a dedicated contact line to report problems plus further advice available on their website. John Ferman said that in respect of enhanced training, they have a group of specialist surveyors, but they are ensuring anybody going into a property is trained to a sufficient level to recognise something and report it, and that is where the enhanced training comes in.

9. Dan Read said that if Clarion owns the land that properties are being built on, then they will continue to look at the small sites, for example they have some garage sites and some old care sites. If they do not own the site, then they are unlikely to look at a scheme of less than 50 units because of the economies of scale.
10. Sally Greetham said in respect of the jobs and training offer, it is a national offer for all their residents and the work undertaken with the Neale Wade and Thomas Clarkson schools were because they had been engaged in the research undertaken the year before and this was a project that came out of the research. However, they will work across all schools if it is part of their curriculum, and the schools want to engage.
11. Yvonne Ogden said that in respect of reporting of repairs, customers can either telephone or go online, in which instance they will be able to track their enquiry. Councillor Miscandlon said not all areas in Fenland have a good internet system to be able to report online; it may be desirable but for some it is not feasible. Sally Greetham responded that the option to go online for those that can should then free up the phone lines for others; they will not be removing the option to telephone.
12. Councillor Mason asked for clarification regarding Councillor Miscandlon's comment about food hubs and asked if Clarion are talking about warm hubs as opposed to the food banks they support in March and Whittlesey. Yvonne Ogden replied that they support both warm hubs and food pantries, as opposed to food banks; they tend to work through the Trussell Trust with food banks. If it is a food pantry, as FACT is, then that is something they currently support in Fenland. In terms of warm spaces or warm hubs, the intention is not to create anything over and above what is already being provided but to try and meet a need. FACT service many Clarion residents and so they have been successful in getting grant funding to be able to open their centre for people who need additional support through this winter.
13. Councillor Booth said in respect of property maintenance he has been asking for the last three years about maintenance of air source heat pumps and oil-fired boilers, but the focus always seems to be on gas provision. Not everyone has gas in Fenland, particularly in the rural areas. He would therefore like detail on these and asked that this information be provided in future presentations.
14. Sally Greetham apologised to Councillor Booth and replied that gas comes under a separate contract but everything else forms part of the overall repair satisfaction figure hence the two are tracked separately. However, working with their regulator they will be reviewing their customer satisfaction figures and how these are monitored. Councillor Booth said that previously it was reported that as air source heat pumps are a niche area, parts are not always readily available, but the Council had been told this had been resolved. He would like to know if this is the case and are there any supply issues. Sally Greetham said that some repairs are taking longer than they would like and much of this has been due to supply chain issues, so it has been a challenging 12 months, but additional contractors have been used for emergency repairs where necessary. Dan Read added that data on air source heat pumps will improve as they are moving away from gas boilers in new developments into more sustainable heating methods.
15. Councillor Booth asked why the average turnaround to re-let an empty Clarion property has increased from 31.9 days in 2021/22 to 42.7 days. Previously the panel had been told this was due to Covid, but we are now outside of that. Sally Greetham responded that the supply chain, along with some recruitment issues in their own workforce, have impacted on the re-let time. Aside from the moral issue of having properties sitting empty, from a business perspective it does not make sense because it affects Clarion's income, so they are working hard to resolve this. As previously stated, this has been the most challenging 12 months that she can recall, and the issue of damp and mould has created a further demand on resources. Where they are trying to ensure their let properties are in good order, this has taken some of the focus away from the void properties. John Ferman added that this is a national issue; bill costs are

increasing and as operatives can now earn significant money elsewhere, many are leaving. Unfortunately, this means that there is not the labour force to turn around empty properties as quickly as they would like. He is hoping that the situation will settle down as Clarion do want to turn round their void properties as quickly as possible, not just for economics but for moral reasons.

16. Councillor Booth said last year he raised that there were several empty properties at Thorney Toll. A local resident came forward at a recent parish council meeting and said they have been told that Clarion is now seeking to dispose of those properties. This has caused a lot of concern in that small community; these are properties sitting empty that could provide much needed housing. Councillor Booth stated that he had been assured last year that there were no immediate plans for these properties, and so he is disappointed that he has not been kept informed. John Ferman said he understands Councillor Booth's concerns, he met with Dan Horn recently and had promised to look to see what was possible; he will be meeting with officers again to look at a joint strategy regarding the properties in Thorney Toll. Councillor Booth asked if that would be a strategy to get people back into these properties. John Ferman responded that he cannot make that promise at this meeting, but he will look at all possibilities and see what is viable. Nationally, this is something they have to do with each empty property, and they need to be able to continue to do that. He added that Dan Horn has raised his own and members concerns, and Clarion have agreed to take those concerns on board and work together to come up with solutions where possible. Councillor Booth thanked John Ferman for the information.
17. Councillor Booth said the presentation regarding future development is quite bleak compared to what was presented last year. He is particularly concerned by the comment that Clarion had been told a 65-unit development was acceptable only to be told later that it was not, leading to the development being aborted. He would like to know what happened and why. Dan Read advised there was no written confirmation of the advice but in a formal pre plan discussion a planning officer had indicated it would probably get planning permission; however, they then left the authority, and a new planning officer interpreted the planning requirements differently. Councillor Booth addressed the Chairman and said it seems that something has gone wrong at the Council's end, and he requested the issue be highlighted with the Planning Portfolio Holder to see what has happened considering a large amount of affordable housing could potentially have been delivered in the district. Councillor Mason stated that the comment was noted.
18. Councillor Booth then asked if Clarion have a sense of how many properties they could deliver in Fenland on land other than their own. Dan Read answered that the strategic land team would look at large scale sites of about 200 plus. They will look at buying options rather than buy land up front.
19. Councillor Booth asked if Clarion would consider a rural affordable housing exception site and he would be interested to know their thoughts on the new Fenland local plan and if it would help them get planning permission for sites in the future. Dan Read responded that he would have to make a very good case for Clarion to pursue rural exception sites because generally they involve less than 50 units. If they own the access onto the site, or own part of the site, they will look to work with partners to grow those sites to a size they would be interested in. Regarding the local plan, it will help but what all developers want is certainty. The Gaul Road site of 65 units that had to be abandoned was in the local plan but is now coming out of it unless the planning goes through for the local plan change. Dan Horn added that the Council does have partners who want to deliver exception sites, they work in partnership with Cambridgeshire ACRE, and some have already been delivered. He thinks the new local plan will also help by having red lines defining communities; the current plan often made it more difficult to find a site. Councillor Booth said he was told by planning officers at the time that because there were no defined boundaries, there was no exception site policy, which he did challenge but he believes this will help going forward. He added that the draft local plan has some guidance on exception sites although it fails to mention support from parish councils and will therefore need some tweaking.
20. Councillor Booth said he also wanted to bring up that there are some viability issues around development in Fenland and the calculation for providing affordable housing is not helped by

the formula set by government. He did raise last year about approaching the Combined Authority because they have a pot of money that can help delivery of affordable housing so he would like to know if the Combined Authority have been asked if they would contribute to make the Gaul Road site viable to progress it. Dan Read responded that the Combined Authority have not been asked about that site as Clarion were submitting a Homes England grant to the maximum level allowed. They were also looking at putting in recycled capital grant funding in to make it viable but unfortunately this had not worked out. Councillor Booth said he was surprised to hear that they could not have contributions from both pots.

21. Councillor Booth said his final point about development was that Clarion had alluded to renewable energies. He said it is positive to hear that they are going to incorporate that type of technology, but he had previously asked about house batteries in combination with solar PV and asked if that is something that Clarion are now looking at, as last year it is something they were just considering. The issue around that though is that he has heard it is currently taking six months for installation because of a national skills shortage. Dan Read said it is true that Clarion is looking to move to no gas on their developments, but there is a lack of air source heat pumps now as more people move to that technology. They are looking at the battery-based system and they are trying to move that out to the market but in some instances it depends on the developer as some will be using gas until they are legally no longer allowed to. Councillor Booth thanked Dan Read.
22. Councillor Mason asked if there are any military covenant residents on the housing register and if so, what is the waiting time. Sally Greetham responded that she would find out and forward the information.
23. Councillor Mason asked about communication and how residents are kept updated regarding their housing officer. Sally Greetham responded that residents are encouraged to get in touch through the contact centre in the first instance as they manage all initial first stage enquiries. If necessary, an enquiry can be fast tracked to the local team who will contact the housing officer. Clarion also ensures its website is kept updated and residents receive a quarterly newsletter.
24. Councillor Mason asked if Clarion receive complaints from Fenland councillors directly or through Dan Horn. Dan Horn advised that following previous feedback, Clarion had set up a dedicated regional director email address for members so they could pass on any complaints received from their ward. This email address can be circulated again to members, and he suggested that he be copied into any emails members send for his awareness and so he can incorporate any complaint into the Council's 3Cs system for monitoring. John Ferman responded that the formal route also allows Clarion to track complaints and to guarantee a response in a timely manner from the right party. Councillor Booth said he uses that email regularly, but it can take about 3-4 weeks for him to get a response and he asked if anything can be done to speed that up as it is a long time for a resident to wait. John Ferman replied that the numbers coming through have increased hugely and there was also a cyber-attack, both of which have slowed down response times. Clarion has a response time now of 20 days but in time hope to be able to reduce back down to a 10-day response time, but they will need to get the mechanisms in place and retain the staff they have in order to turn this round. Councillor Booth thanked John Ferman and said that it is usually the case that residents approach Fenland councillors after having tried every avenue with Clarion first. Councillor Mason said another form of communication could be through the town clerks and John Ferman said that certainly Clarion wish to be more proactive in what they send out and that would be a great way to do that.

Councillor Mason thanked the Clarion representatives for their attendance and confirmed that the Review of Clarion report is noted.

*(Sally Greetham, Yvonne Ogden, Dan Read, John Ferman and Dan Horn left the meeting).*

## **OSC17/22 WISBECH RAIL UPDATE**

Councillor Mason welcomed Tim Bellamy to the meeting.

Tim Bellamy provided an update on Wisbech Rail and provided some context around the local transport and productivity plan.

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

1. Councillor Hay said that if the final decision is to go with heavy rail then that is dependent on the Ely Area Capacity Enhancements (EACE), and she asked what the time frame would be for EACE. Tim Bellamy responded that the good news is that he attended a meeting of the all-parliamentary group two weeks ago hosted by Transport East. They outlined that their highest priority scheme is EACE, and they are actively trying to encourage a discussion with the Department for Transport and other MPs from across the country that recognise that EACE is the right answer. He cannot provide a timeframe, but positive sounding is coming from government along with the fact that they have secured additional funding from the Combined Authority to do further work on the snail rail loop which will also help with movement into Newmarket etc.
2. Councillor Hay said if at the end of the options assessment it is decided to go down the route of light rail, how easy would it be to convert to heavy rail later as and when the capacity at Ely is large enough to be able to do that. Her concern is that light rail is an inferior service. Tim Bellamy said that the costing to convert to heavy rail would need to be outlined in the report to allow an informative decision to be made. Councillor Hay said she was pleased to hear that.
3. Councillor Booth said he is disappointed with the content of the report because there seems to be one delay after another. This was first discussed when he was elected to the Council twelve years ago. It is his view that the report seems to be saying there are deficiencies in the 2020 business case because we are having to fund additional research and do more work on what is required to get funding. Tim Bellamy replied that is not correct because things have changed since 2020. All work needs to be updated to reflect changes in government policy. The business case outlined in 2020 was coherent and appropriate at the time but now more work needs to be done to satisfy what both Network Rail and government require to make sure the business case submitted is robust, appropriate, and not open to challenge.
4. Councillor Booth said if this additional work goes ahead, costing £310k of taxpayers' money, he would like to know what the next stages are, how much more money will be spent on consultants and how long it will be before Fenland residents can travel between March and Wisbech and Wisbech and Cambridge. Tim Bellamy responded that there is a staged approach to delivering any infrastructure scheme, but the money mentioned will not be spent on consultants. This will be spent by Network Rail and the experts within Network Rail who know how to deliver these types of schemes, so it will not be spent on external resources. He is happy to outline the next stages and how that will go forward but he could not currently advise on costs. Councillor Booth asked what the normal timescale would be to deliver from beginning to end. Tim Bellamy replied that light rail or an alternative could be delivered within the next five to ten years, but if looking at heavy rail, then that links back to EACE and other issues and may well be a longer-term operation. The lower cost option is more likely to be delivered but is that what we want as a collective, do we want to deliver something and improve that connectivity or do we want to hold out for longer term and more expensive heavy rail? The Options Assessment Report will allow us to make that decision. Councillor Booth thanked Tim Bellamy.
5. Councillor Miscandlon asked how much influence the problems at the Ely junction are having on the progress of any decision on Wisbech rail, as nothing ever seems to get resolved. Tim Bellamy replied that he believes there is some influence, but EACE is coming up the agenda quickly. Also, now that Sizewell on the Suffolk coast has been given the go ahead, EACE capacity will be needed to ensure getting the vast amount of construction material that will be required delivered to Sizewell along the rail network rather than by the A14. With Sizewell being developed to provide an energy solution then to do that, it should be easy to verify some of that funding for EACE. Therefore, he does think Ely is an influence around anything on the rail network, but it is also a priority for many authorities and going up the government agenda.
6. Councillor Booth pointed out that under item 3.10 of the report, reference is made to Wisbech

Garden town, but he understands this project has been abandoned because government considers the proposal not viable because of flood risk. Tim Bellamy thanked Councillor Booth, he noted this, and he would update accordingly.

7. Councillor Booth said that regarding the A47 upgrade, it seems from this report the chance of getting dualling is remote because of the BCR ratings and asked if this is correct. Tim Bellamy responded that the BCR rating is one of the lower ones within that programme and so he would say holding out the hope for dualling would be optimistic. The focus would be on safety improvement alignment and other things that can be done as quick wins. That is not to say that dualling should not be on the table going forward but a lot of work would need to be done to improve the BCR. In the meantime, there are quick wins that we are trying to promote through National Highways.
8. Councillor Booth said in respect of smaller scale projects, the Guyhirn roundabout was delivered earlier this year. As part of that project, it was planned to place bus stops where they would prevent causing traffic holdups on the A47 which is currently what is happening. However, he cannot get an answer to what is happening with that project which appears to have dropped off the radar and asked Tim Bellamy if he had any information on this. Tim Bellamy replied he would find out and forward a response in due course.

Councillor Mason thanked Tim Bellamy for his attendance at today's meeting and said the Wisbech Rail Update report is duly noted.

*(Tim Bellamy left the meeting).*

## **OSC18/22 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME**

Members considered the future work programme.

Councillor Booth asked about the Task and Finish Group. Amy Brown explained that meetings had previously been arranged but were cancelled to meet requirements due to the passing of HM the Queen. Subsequently further work is being done to correlate member and officer availability to arrange a series of meetings between now and the next meeting of Overview and Scrutiny in the hope that any recommendations regarding the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) can be taken to that meeting for approval. Councillor Booth stated his concern that although he had given his availability, his understanding was that other members had not, and given the timescales involved it would be unrealistic now to feed KPIs into the business plan for 2023/24. However, he would like to look at them regardless and if necessary other members should be nominated to go on the Task and Finish group so that the work is not held up. He said that we should be looking at dates going forward from January; KPIs can take months to develop, and it is important to have good quality output rather than rush things through. Councillor Mason agreed that was a sensible suggestion and thanked Councillor Booth.

3.28 pm

Chairman