

CABINET



MONDAY, 18 DECEMBER 2023 - 2.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor C Boden (Chairman), Councillor Mrs J French (Vice-Chairman), Councillor I Benney, Councillor Miss S Hoy, Councillor A Miscandlon, Councillor P Murphy, Councillor C Seaton, Councillor S Tierney and Councillor S Wallwork

APOLOGIES: Councillor Mrs D Laws

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

CAB37/23 PREVIOUS MINUTES

The public minutes of the meeting held 20 November 2023 were approved and signed.

CAB38/23 DRAFT BUSINESS PLAN 2024/25

Members considered the Draft Business Plan 2024/25 report presented by Councillor Tierney.

Councillor Boden said he was grateful for the work put into the plan by officers and Councillor Tierney; the format continues to improve, and language made simpler for residents each year. Councillor Tierney also commended officers, saying there was little need for his involvement.

Councillor Miscandlon commented that having been involved in Overview and Scrutiny and the work of the Task and Finish Group during the previous administration, he is pleased to see that the new committee continued the work of the group and has finished what was started as the results are now paying dividends. Councillor Boden said the value of Overview and Scrutiny is underrated by the public as it is largely invisible, but it is important they continue to do their job effectively, question and challenge the Cabinet and look at performance indicators that are relevant and appropriate to keep an eye on the performance of this Council.

Proposed by Councillor Boden, seconded by Councillor Tierney and AGREED to consider the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group outlined in Appendix 1 of the report and include in the Draft Business Plan 2024-25, and to approve the Draft Business Plan 2024-25 for public consultation.

CAB39/23 REVISED GENERAL FUND BUDGET AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2023/24, DRAFT GENERAL FUND BUDGET ESTIMATES 2024/25 AND DRAFT MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (MTFS) 2024/25 TO 2028/29 AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2024-2027

Members considered the Revised General Fund Budget and Capital Programme 2023/24, the Draft General Fund Budget Estimates for 2024/25, the Draft Medium Term Financial Strategy for 2024/25 to 2028/29 and the Capital Programme for 2024/27 report presented by Councillor Boden.

Councillor Boden said he continued to commend the work of the Finance Team for producing the figures in a careful, cautious, and consistent way for consideration by Cabinet; 2024/25 will not be as difficult for Fenland District Council as it will be for others who have either had to issue, or are close to issuing, Section 114 notices. Councillor Boden added there are significant challenges ahead, and he quoted the statement within the report made by the S151 officer, stating that he

fully endorsed these comments; there will be some very difficult decisions to make at the appropriate time, but the Council needs to ensure it places as small a burden as it reasonably can upon the residents of Fenland. Councillor Boden further stated that the Council has a good record of keeping its council tax down compared to many other local authorities around the country but that will only continue as long as it can meet the challenges mentioned by the S151 officer; being realistic it will not be able to continue long term but so long as the Council can manage to provide good value for money services and continues to look at ways of ensuring it operates in an efficient and effective manner, then council tax increases can be kept down or avoided.

Councillor Hoy said she does not know if this is correct, but it has been claimed that Huntingdonshire has a 40% lower precept than FDC. Quoting the council tax figures she believed neighbouring local authorities charge for their Band D properties, Councillor Hoy noted Fenland charges the highest figure in Cambridgeshire and she would be interested to know why if this is true. Councillor Boden explained that even if the figures quoted are correct, it is misleading to compare the Band D figures for each council. It does not represent the average household in each area as this differs depending on how many households are in bands A to H in each area, and Fenland's average of Band D homes is lower than any other council in Cambridgeshire. Over the last six years, East Cambridgeshire has not raised council tax whilst Fenland has reduced its council tax by 2% but other district councils within the county have raised theirs sometimes by significant amounts. Cambridgeshire County Council has a policy of increasing the council tax by as much as it can every year. In respect of individual districts, comparing Band D figures is arithmetically correct but extremely misleading and does not express the average cost per household within the various areas. Councillor Boden pointed out that what also must be taken into consideration is that Fenland District Council also has a far greater liability for internal drainage board payments than the other five district councils in Cambridgeshire and so a significant proportion of budget is taken up with that. It is complicated but not surprising that Fenland's Band D council tax charge is higher than others; if it was the same then the average payment would be massively less than the other areas. Councillor Hoy said that was a helpful answer which makes a lot of sense but from a communications perspective, this sort of information needs to be relayed. Councillor Boden agreed there should be some form of communication strategy to prevent misleading information being given to the public.

Councillor Mrs French congratulated officers and Councillor Boden saying it is very difficult to come up with figures, but she questioned the West End Park mooring figure of £155,000. The mooring has been out of action for over four and a half years, and she has repeatedly chased this but is amazed at that figure when it was originally around £45,000. Councillor Boden thanked Councillor Mrs French for bringing this item to his attention and said that officers would investigate this and advise before the next meeting, but they will need to look at the whole Capital Programme to see what is and what is not appropriate. However, it has been found that the capital costs involved in projects are now greater than estimated several years ago which will make for some very difficult decisions to be made. Councillor Mrs French said that the original cost was given at the beginning of this year not four or five years ago hence her query. Councillor Boden responded hence it is important not to assume the figures given will be the figures seen on the capital programme, but he is grateful for her comments.

Proposed by Councillor Boden, seconded by Councillor Hoy and AGREED that:

- (i) The draft budget proposals for 2024/25 outlined in the report be approved for consultation.**
- (ii) The revised General Fund Budget and revised Capital Programme for 2023/24 be approved, and**
- (iii) The proposed Capital Programme for 2024-2027 be approved.**

CAB40/23 OPEN SPACES - PLAY AREAS CAPITAL INVESTMENT

Members considered the Open Spaces, Play Areas Capital Investment report presented by

Councillor Murphy.

Councillor Boden said that along with the recommendations at 3.3 of the report, he wanted to emphasise paragraph 2.12 which stated that in making decisions on the schemes of proposed replacements, improvements or consolidation, the view of the district councillors of the town concerned will be considered. Virtual meetings of the relevant councillors will be convened within the next six months for each of the towns to consider any alternative utilisation of the capital and revenue resources which are currently anticipated to be available for play areas in that town and once those views are known, a further report will be presented to Cabinet.

Councillor Hoy thanked the team for their work on the parks in Wisbech as they are looking good, particularly the new play area which was well used in the summer. However, she wanted to query what seemed to be a contradiction regarding Burcroft Road where the report suggests either replacement or removal after 15 years, but the recommendation is to remove with no replacement, which makes it sound like the decision has already been made. Councillor Hoy said that local members fought to have the play equipment installed and it would be a shame to have it removed at the end of its useful life with no replacement; there is nothing that side of town for children so she would request that the play equipment be replaced when necessary. Councillor Boden thanked Councillor Hoy for her helpful comment, he agreed there was some contradiction within the report, and said that is exactly what this new policy of consulting with district council members in each individual town is meant to address. He fully understands the points she is making but it is now realised that plans for play areas in each town cannot be carried forward without support and input from members in those towns, whilst remembering that provision of play areas is not statutory and therefore not something the Council has a duty to provide. As a result, many councils around the country have stopped replacing or renewing any play areas because they cannot finance anything which is not a statutory service.

Councillor Miscandlon said he is glad to see that should there be issues with play equipment in a specific ward, local members are now consulted as their input is paramount. Councillor Boden agreed that there has been insufficient involvement of local ward members previously and their involvement is essential.

Councillor Wallwork said it is vital that this council does not go down the route of not spending money on play areas, as they and open spaces are fundamental for children, they are building blocks for their social skills. She understands it is costly, but some things are worth the money. Councillor Boden thanked Councillor Wallwork but reminded her of the words of the S151 officer in that there will be difficult decisions to make in the future, therefore he looks forward to her support in making the other difficult decisions to protect the items which members believe are so important.

Proposed by Councillor Murphy, seconded by Councillor Boden and AGREED to:

- **Approve the policy approach to future spending on play areas and play area adoptions as identified in the report in sections 2.2 - 2.9, subject to the provisions of section 2.12.**
- **Delegate to the S151 Officer, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Environment, responsibility to ensure funds, that are made available to deliver the play area improvements detailed in section 3.3 of the report.**
- **Note the changes proposed in Section 12 regarding St Paul's Drive and Willey Terrace in Chatteris. Pinewood Avenue in Whittlesey and those in Malt Drive, Westhead Avenue and Burcroft Road in Wisbech, subject to the provisions of section 2.12.**

CAB41/23 IMPLEMENTATION OF A HOME IMPROVEMENT AGENCY (HIA) SERVICE FROM APRIL 2024

Members considered the Implementation of a Home Improvement Agency Service report presented by Councillor Hoy.

Councillor Hoy thanked Kings Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council for their services over the years in undertaking the home improvement agency role and supporting thousands of vulnerable households in Fenland to make their homes safer and more accessible to enable them to remain in their homes.

Proposed by Councillor Hoy, seconded by Councillor Miscandlon and AGREED to approve the award of the tender to East Cambridgeshire District Council.

CAB42/23 ON AND OFF-STREET PARKING ENFORCEMENT UPDATE

Members considered the On and Off-Street Parking Enforcement Update report presented by Councillor Mrs French.

Councillor Hoy said that as a county councillor she had recently received an update from Highways and Transport which said civil parking enforcement was coming to Fenland in February and the costs had been negotiated, which she found to be a bit over enthusiastic compared to the information in the report presented by Councillor Mrs French.

Councillor Boden said there are unresolved issues that are fundamental to the working of any scheme such as this and the Council is not going to be able to move forward with civil parking enforcement unless at the very minimum the lines and signs, once upgraded, are maintained by the County Council. Without that the Council will not be able to enforce legally and this is one area that Cambridgeshire County Council will not give a guarantee about. Councillor Boden added that it is an abysmal position to be in, and he hopes that County see sense. Councillor Mrs French said hopefully this will happen in 2025 under a new administration. Councillor Boden commented that fortunately the CPCA have agreed to make their funding available for this until 2025 so it provides an opportunity for a change of policy possibly after the county council elections.

Councillor Murphy said the local councils contributed £100k each towards this but if it does not happen will they get their money back and with interest? Councillor Boden responded that the money relates to the £100k given to each town through the CPCA Market Towns Fund and therefore is ultimately government money. It is good that the CPCA did agree that this money could be held over until 2025 when it may be possible to move forward with civil parking enforcement following a change of administration at County Council. However, if unable to move forward it may depend on what happens at the Mayoral election in 2025 but regardless of the result of any elections, the prospect of gaining interest on the money is wishful thinking.

Councillor Boden referred to the report recommendation to decide how the project shortfall will be funded and suggested that one or more of the Council's reserves should be used subject to the agreement of the S151 Officer and the Portfolio Holder for Finance. This was agreed.

Proposed by Councillor Mrs French, seconded by Councillor Boden and AGREED to:

- a) Note progress made to date by FDC and CCC in relation to moving the implementation of CPE forward.**
- b) Note the predicted increase in the overall project delivery cost.**
- c) Fund the project shortfall through one or more of Council reserves subject to the Agreement of the S151 Officer and the Portfolio Holder for Finance.**
- d) Delegate to the Leader and Deputy Leader the ability to identify, take advice on as necessary and negotiate the red flag issues arising from the draft agency and service level agreements and to report back to Cabinet if agreement cannot be reached.**

CAB43/23 WISBECH HIGH STREET UPDATE

Members considered the Wisbech High Street Update report presented by Councillor Seaton.

Councillor Seaton reported that the consultant has now submitted an options report for 11-12 High Street as required by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, however this has not long been received so will be covered at the Cabinet meeting in January.

Councillor Seaton reported that piling work has resumed on 24 High Street after a two-week break and although this has put the project behind schedule there is every chance of catching this time up over the next nine months. Once piling is completed, the next phase is the ground floor slab with work then progressing above ground.

Councillor Hoy said she is concerned by the statement within the report saying that at the time of writing any delay is unknown, nor the cost or cost of any piling revision, stating that this is very worrying. Councillor Seaton responded that in respect of the piling, following discussion with the construction team, it is hoped that there will be no additional cost over and above, but he agreed it is extremely worrying but it is a difficult development being undertaken and there were problems with the possibility of buildings either side being affected by the piling. However, lasers have been used to ensure that the movement on the buildings is within the limitation and whilst piling work was stopped to undertake these checks, the works have restarted again.

Proposed by Councillor Seaton, seconded by Councillor Hoy and AGREED to note the current position in relation to the 24 High Street construction project in Wisbech High Street and note information regarding the property at 11-12 High Street.

CAB44/23 DRAFT 6 MONTH CABINET FORWARD PLAN

Councillor Boden presented the draft 6-month Cabinet Forward Plan for information.

CAB45/23 LAND LEASE RENEWAL OPTIONS (CONFIDENTIAL)

Members considered the confidential Land Lease Renewal Options report presented by Councillor Mrs French.

Councillor Boden proposed a list of options and instructions as to how officers should proceed to take the matter forward.

Proposed by Councillor Mrs French, seconded by Councillor Boden and AGREED:

- 1. to note the update on lease negotiations as reported, and**
- 2. to instruct officers to renew the lease on the terms outlined.**

(Councillor Hoy did not agree with the recommendation).

(Members resolved to exclude the public for this item of business on the grounds that it involved the disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 3 and 5 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972).

CAB46/23 CONFIDENTIAL MINUTES

The confidential minutes of the meeting held 20 November 2023 were approved and signed.