

CABINET

MONDAY, 16 DECEMBER 2024 - 2.00 PM



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

CAB32/24 PREVIOUS MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held 15 November 2024 were approved and signed.

CAB33/24 REVISED GENERAL FUND BUDGET AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2024/25, DRAFT GENERAL FUND BUDGET ESTIMATES 2025/26 AND DRAFT MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (MTFS) 2025/26 TO 2029/30 AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2025/26 TO 2027/28

Members considered the Revised General Fund Budget and Capital Programme 2024/25; the Draft General Fund Budget Estimates for 2025/26 and Draft Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 to 2029/30 and Capital Programme for 2025-2028 report presented by Councillor Boden.

- Councillor Boden commented that there is a lot of uncertainty around council finances particularly given that central government have not yet indicated what Fenland will receive, and the Chief Accountant had said this is the most difficult budget he has ever had to put forward as a result. There are specific issues that need to be addressed, for instance the cost of the Internal Drainage Board levies and homelessness, which continues to be a significant drain on resources and is above the budgeted figure for the current year. However, the transformation programme continues to look at all services with a view to how they can be reformed and made more efficient whilst providing the same outcomes.
- Councillor Mrs French congratulated Councillor Boden and officers for producing this budget at such a difficult time.
- Councillor Tierney said some councils would simply raise council tax to address the challenges and so it is admirable that this council's approach is always to aim to keep the strain off local people by making difficult choices until it is impossible to do otherwise.
- Councillor Boden stated that members may find themselves having to make the choice between unpalatable changes or increasing council tax but will always look first at ways to save money and reduce costs before even considering raising council tax.
- Councillor Miscandlon said with reference to internal drainage boards and their costings, this was raised by himself and the Section 151 Officer at a recent Special Interest Group (SIG) meeting. Given that 41 councils have signed up to the SIG relating to IDBs and the worsening funding gap, central government are going to have to take notice and help find a solution to the problem.

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

- (i) the revised General Fund Budget and revised Capital Programme for 2024/25 be approved**
- (ii) the draft budget proposals for 2025/26 outlined in this report be approved for consultation**

(iii) the proposed Capital Programme for 2025/26 – 2027/28 be approved.

CAB34/24 DRAFT BUSINESS PLAN 2025/26

Members considered the Draft Business Plan 2025/28 presented by Councillor Tierney.

Proposed by Councillor Tierney, seconded by Councillor Boden and AGREED to approve the Draft Business Plan 2025-26 for public consultation.

CAB35/24 PROPOSED DISPOSAL OF PROPERTY ASSETS

Members considered the Proposed Disposal of Property Assets report presented by Councillor Benney.

- Councillor Boden pointed out that auction is not the only way in which the Council may necessarily be disposing of one or two of these assets. It may be that there are special prices which could be obtained from interested parties which would allow officers, in consultation with the Section 151 Officer, to get best value by means other than auction but it is key to always get best value.
- Councillor Hoy said she slightly disagrees with Councillor Boden's comment regarding best value having noted that the Chapel in Wisbech Cemetery is on the list for disposal. She would be very unhappy for it to be disposed of, and the building then potentially used negatively that would be inappropriate for the setting for example as a nightclub or youth club. She agreed that whilst best value is important, there should be caveats that in certain places thought needs to be given to who is potentially buying it rather than selling it to the highest bidder regardless of what they are going to do. Councillor Boden thanked Councillor Hoy for her helpful comment but said it is worth pointing out that best value does not necessarily mean the greatest amount of money; best value also looks at the context within which a particular decision is made, and her comments will have been noted about the sensitive nature of the site. He is sure that officers and members understand a site such as that is hardly going to be suitable for something like a nightclub.
- Councillor Benney emphasised that as councillors, they are expected to get best value for money. That rationale could be applied to every site in the report because every person that lives next door does not want it.
- Councillor Laws agreed that auction is not necessarily the best place to sell land. The Council has a list of developers, and it would be appropriate to advertise these assets on the Council's website first, again with sensitivity. Planning can be a very emotive subject for the people who live nearby and if any items go to auction there should be something that ties it to a development rather than anything like a youth club or nightclub that is going to cause problems for people.
- Councillor Boden stated that it is important to look at each asset individually. Generally public auction is the best way for the Council to obtain, and be seen to obtain, a fair price, however when restrictions are placed on the number of individuals who might see something, there is the risk that someone else may miss it and say they would have put in a better offer if only they had known about it. Therefore, public auction should be seen as the default position but is not a guaranteed position on any asset.
- Councillor Tierney said there is at least one site where there has been a genuine suggestion by an elected member for a nightclub in a graveyard. It was a long time ago but the point being made is that best value does not always mean the most money, but it has been said that just because someone next door does not like it, that is not a reason to. It is more complicated than that; there are certainly places where there are things that should not be done and if the Council sells a property to someone who then does that, then it is partially culpable. Councillor Hoy is merely saying that we should try and avoid doing anything silly with sensitive places and he thinks most people would broadly agree with that.
- Councillor Boden said what most of these sites, and those previously disposed of, are used for,

subject to all normal planning rules, is not something which the Council would want to be restrictive on because the aim is to get the greatest amount of money. However, there will be some exceptions and possibly the chapel cemetery may be one of those rare exceptions where we may wish not to just go for the highest bidder. Even with the changes being made by central government about planning, he has concerns about how easy it would be to get planning permission to get a nightclub in the middle of a cemetery, closed or otherwise.

- Councillor Benney said for clarity he did say that disposals would be by public auction or private treaty. Everything has been looked at in a sympathetic light and members' views have always been taken on board when looking at this.

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

- (i) Approve the list of sites listed at Appendix 1 as surplus and recommended for disposal**
- (ii) Determine:**
 - a. The method and terms of sale either by way of auction, openly marketed private treaty or by special purchaser private treaty, and**
 - b. The acceptance of an offer to purchase by private treaty or via auction is delegated to the Head of Property, Assets and Major Projects and the Corporate Director (Finance). Where the likely and actual sale price exceeds the existing delegated authority of the officers then the decision will be made in consultation with the Leader of the Council and/or Portfolio Holder for Economic Growth in respect of properties.**

CAB36/24 WISBECH HIGH STREET UPDATE

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

Councillor Tierney commented that he was pleased to see the project taking shape and that there is a building at last. He praised the good work being done, great progress has been made and it is good news for Wisbech.

AGREED to note the monthly update relating to the works at 24 and 11-12 High Street, Wisbech.

CAB37/24 DRAFT 6 MONTH CABINET FORWARD PLAN

Noted for information.

CAB38/24 PURCHASE OF A PROPERTY PORTFOLIO IN FENLAND - UPDATE ON DUE DILIGENCE (WITH CONFIDENTIAL APPENDICES)

Members considered the Purchase of a Property Portfolio in Fenland – update on Due Diligence report presented by Councillor Hoy.

Councillor Boden said the rationale at the meeting of Cabinet on 30th September remains the same. This property is not a business acquisition to generate an income, it is to assist with homelessness and will reduce the Council's costs for homelessness and housing benefit subsidy.

Councillor Hoy said that when this came to Cabinet in September, some people asked why there had been what they felt was secrecy over the matter and wondered whether it was because the property was to be used for asylum seekers. She explained at the time and would like again now to confirm that the property is not being used for asylum seekers. The reason that the appendices are confidential are purely financial; the Council is bidding for the property and wants to prevent

someone else offering the same or a higher bid. She reiterated that the property is not for asylum seekers and will not be while she is the portfolio holder for housing.

Proposed by Councillor Hoy, seconded by Mrs French and AGREED to consider new information presented in this report, in particular the financial and legal implications as set out in Schedule 1, and:

a) To reaffirm its decision of 30th September 2024, which was to:

- **Authorise officers to purchase, through the Council's Section 151 Officer, the portfolio of property available at Meadowcourt Elm in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Finance (The Leader) and Housing and following satisfactory due diligence procedures.**
- **Authorise officers to proceed with a planning application for the conversion of the main house to provide additional accommodation as detailed herein with costs to be approved in advance, in consultation with the S151 Officer and Portfolio Holder for Finance; and**

b) Authorise officers to undertake the actions proposed as set out at Schedule 1 as part of the ongoing due diligence.

CAB39/24 FORMER BARCLAYS BANK, MARCH - UPDATE (WITH CONFIDENTIAL APPENDIX)

Members considered the Former Barclays Bank, March update report presented by Councillor Boden.

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

- **note the update provided**
- **approve the revised disposal strategy detailed in the report**
- **give delegated authority to the Leader of the Council, in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and S151 Officer to approve the disposal of the property on terms to be agreed.**

CAB40/24 DISPOSAL OF SURPLUS LAND IN DODDINGTON (CONFIDENTIAL)

Members considered the confidential Disposal of Surplus Land in Doddington report presented by Councillor Benney.

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

- **note the contents of the report**
- **authorise the Head of Property, Assets and Major Projects, in consultation with the S151 Officer and Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, to agree the sale documents on the terms reported.**

(Members resolved to exclude the public from the meeting for this item of business on the grounds that the report 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 of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) as indicated).

CAB41/24 PORT OPERATIONS (CONFIDENTIAL)

Members considered the confidential Port Operations report presented by Councillor Benney.

Members carefully considered the report recommendations and reviewed the options.

Proposed by Councillor Benney, seconded by Councillor Boden and AGREED to the report recommendations.

(Members resolved to exclude the public from the meeting for this item of business on the grounds that the report 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 of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) as indicated).

2.55 pm

Chairman