

COUNCIL

FRIDAY, 14 MARCH 2025 - 5.30 PM



PRESENT: Councillor N Meekins (Chairman), Councillor B Barber (Vice-Chairman), Councillor I Benney, Councillor C Boden, Councillor G Christy, Councillor J Clark, Councillor S Clark, Councillor S Count, Councillor D Cutler, Councillor Mrs M Davis, Councillor L Foice-Beard, Councillor Mrs J French, Councillor G S Gill, Councillor A Hay, Councillor Miss S Hoy, Councillor M Humphrey, Councillor S Imafidon, Councillor C Marks, Councillor A Miscandlon, Councillor Dr H Nawaz, Councillor D Oliver, Councillor D Patrick, Councillor B Rackley, Councillor D Roy, Councillor C Seaton, Councillor E Sennitt Clough, Councillor T Taylor, Councillor S Tierney, Councillor S Wallwork and Councillor A Woollard

APOLOGIES: Councillor G Booth, Councillor J Carney, Councillor D Connor, Councillor K French, Councillor R Gerstner, Councillor A Gowler, Councillor P Hicks, Councillor Mrs D Laws, Councillor P Murphy, Councillor M Purser and Councillor M Summers

Councillor Meekins announced with sadness the passing Bernard Keane who had been a Fenland District Councillor for March East from May 1999 until 2015. During that time, he served as Chairman from 2007 to 2009 and also contributed to the work of various committees to include Licencing, Planning, and Overview & Scrutiny. He was also a founding member of the Golden Age Team.

The Council offered their sincere condolences to Bernard's friends and loved ones and a minute's silence was held to commemorate his life.

C53/24 LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION - DRAFT PROPOSALS

Councillor Meekins announced that to have a full debate on this important item, he proposed that the standing orders be modified to allow members to speak on each of the questions contained in Appendix 1 of the report as well as have an opportunity to make a general point. Councillor Boden seconded the proposal which was agreed by Members.

Councillor Boden proceeded to present the Local Government Reorganisation – Draft Proposal report which was seconded by Councillor Mrs French.

Members responded to each question in turn as follows:

Question 1

Should FDC initially express our concern and opposition to the manner and timing of this Local Government reform process, whilst recognising the right of Central Government to impose this and whilst also confirming our eagerness to participate fully in the process and to co-operate fully with other local councils so as to get the best possible outcome for local residents?

- Councillor Boden said he thinks it is not improper for the Council to express concern about how quickly it is being done and will not end up with the best outcome. Government is in charge and has the democratic right to impose what they want. LGO is long overdue, but this is not the way of doing it. In 1972, the contrast of all the work that went into that is stark. It is appropriate to

say we are not happy, but it is vitally important to cooperate and go along with the process otherwise we will have no voice or say at all. We may come up with the same solution and Government may still ignore that so in participation we do not guarantee that we get a voice but if we do not, we guarantee that we will not get a voice. Members must try and be as constructive as possible in getting the best outcome for Fenland.

- Councillor Tierney said he is in support of this except that it is too nice. He would much rather be tougher, we are not eager, we have to do this because we are forced to. This is a terrible thing to be doing for this area, there will be far less ability to change what a giant council can do for local people, taking away all the things that FDC does, such as free parking and council tax freezes. He would like to express this in every piece of literature put to Government.
- Councillor Hoy reiterated the same, we should not be eager to do this, we will end up in a very terrible situation particularly if we go with Peterborough, do we want their rough sleepers and problems with drugs and alcohol? FDC has much cheaper properties, we are going to only make up a very small portion. The Council works very well, the officers do exceptionally well, we will lose some of those, it is very sad. We must accept it, but we should not say we are eager.
- Councillor Nawaz said there are good and bad things about this. Devolution of the health and social services but how far devolved are they, we are losing the local touch. He knows every street in his ward and many local people and what their issues and concerns are. His principal concern is that an assembly of 100 members representing 500k to 1 million people cannot be categorised as devolution. As for the make-up of the unitary, it is being floated that possibly Peterborough will combine with Huntingdon and Fenland but there are differences in their identities. The issues and concerns that Cllr Hoy has alluded to, and he shares Councillor Boden's concern that given the rushed implementation of this, we are not going to be able to reflect and think carefully of the possible consequences and we will not end up with the best possible solution either, these are his reservations but we will fully cooperate and he supports that we participate in order that our voice is heard robustly and effectively.

Question 2

Does Full Council see any exceptional circumstances to justify the splitting of any existing district council area in Cambridgeshire between two or more new unitary authorities?

- Councillor Boden said when Government set up this process they said they did not want any existing district council to be split between 2 or more different unitary authorities. The reason – the disaggregation of the Council would be really complicated, when you split a council into pieces all the assets, liabilities, contracts need to be split, and it is a very complex and drawn-out process. When this happened in Northants it took the best part of three years to work it out. Government has said they would much rather that we use existing district councils as the building blocks on the existing boundaries unless there are exceptional circumstances. This request asks can we see any and we could argue about what should/should not be included. Given the extent of this he cannot see the justification of us saying, for example put Chatteris in one local authority and the rest of the area in another. He sees the unity of Fenland as being appropriate as is the case with the other authorities as well. Cambs City is surrounded by South Cambs, and it makes sense to just combine the two. In this process it would cause unnecessary additional burden and would achieve little. He believes the answer should therefore be no.
- Councillor Miscandlon voiced his agreement, splitting up an area into two or three other areas would be totally detrimental. North Northants had three years of difficult negotiations to try and get it sorted. We do not want that. The answer should be no.

Question 3

Does Full Council oppose, in principle, the creation of a single new Unitary Authority covering the whole of the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough area, on the grounds that this would be too large an area for residents to consider such a unitary authority to be "local"?

- Councillor Boden said if one reads the information put out by central Government, the idea that our local unitary authority would cover the whole of Peterborough and Cambs, there are some difficulties in that there is already a combined authority, and Government can change it any time it wishes. The idea of one authority covering the whole area would be consistent with what the Government has put out. That would be a desperately bad position, two major cities acting as polar opposites with a population of over 900k. There is nothing local about that. Considering the amount of representation Fenland would have, we would be very lucky to get 10 councillors out of 100. It is important that we send a message to government in case they have the idea that bigger is better, if you do it arithmetically, yes, the greater the economies of scale but there needs to be a balance between that and local representation.
- Councillor Count said apart from supporting Councillor Boden's comments, he believes this falls short of the Government's intentions, we cannot have a Combined Authority of one so unless there is an intention to have additional areas outside its current authority, it cannot be.
- Councillor Hay agreed with Councillor Boden's words, saying one unitary for a whole area with a population of 900k+ is just too unwieldy, we would never get anything done for the rural areas. She is worried with 500k.
- Councillor Mrs Davis said she support the statements by everyone who has already spoken, her concern is the villages, the market towns may get some grace, one unitary trust, the villages would lose out, two might give us a little more chance.
- Councillor Taylor said he does not know what this one trick party is up to, we are a rural area, we know this system inside out; to put us with Peterborough and Cambridgeshire would be a disaster, they are trying to pile everything into one to get rid of their own financial ploy – making themselves look better. We do not know about city life and city life does not know about us. No to two big cities in our system.
- Councillor Marks said we have seen what the CPCA has done recently in Manea, we have just lost our bus service, it is dictatorship from afar and this should not be allowed to happen.

Question 4

Does Full Council oppose, in principle, the creation of a single new Unitary Authority covering the whole of the area of the current Cambridgeshire County Council, on the grounds that this would be too large an area for residents to consider such a unitary authority to be "local"?

- Councillor Boden said mathematically we would be satisfying Government by having the two unitary authorities in the area. However, one of the stated objectives is to ensure that smaller unitaries with financial difficulties are absorbed into larger areas. This proposal would not satisfy that, but the county council network previously advocated for the abolishment of the districts and the counties to take over. We have experience of what it is like to be ruled by Cambridgeshire City councillors; look at the roads. Cambridge and the surrounding area are growth areas and that would be the focus which would be disastrous for Fenland. Going along with the County Council network idea should not apply here in Cambridgeshire.
- Councillor Count said earlier on Councillor Nawaz talked about the identity of an area, the identity of Cambridgeshire is not coherent at all. He was the Leader at one time and the difference between outcomes, health, affluence, identity of north and south is huge. We are trying to get coherent throughout – it has been difficult, when Leader he understood the differences and tried to deal with them as best as he could. In the last few years, there is a simple misunderstanding of these differences, and we have to bow to them, it is the lack of identity the larger we become. A single Cambridgeshire unitary will not work here. He is sad to see the direction we are going but the good news will be if we are no longer ruled by Cambridgeshire.
- Councillor Nawaz said going back to his first contribution to question 1, this is losing localism times seven. There are seven authorities all with their own characteristics and need be that health, education, employment, or transport. We have areas of deprivation, north of Wisbech, mid Fenland, all this will be drowned in one massive organisation ruled by the majority party who may not represent the specific needs of Fenland. We might as well be ruled directly from Westminster; it is sad to see the concept of localism being drowned out by an authoritarian

approach.

Question 5

Does Full Council accept that, given the need to provide upper and lower-tier responsibilities in a financially sustainable manner, the new unitary authority which includes Fenland would need to have a population of at least the Government's stated 500,000 lower limit, if not higher?

- Councillor Boden said he will have some difficulty trying to justify why we should have a local authority with a population of 500k. This is what they want to see although they have said informally that they would have smaller in special circumstances. He knows from discussions with various members of this council, far from moving in the direction we are being forced in, they would like to go backwards to urban and rural district councils, so away from a larger authority, but this is not the way we are allowed to go. We must accept we are going into a unitary authority. There are some high spending, high-cost responsibilities that the county council has e.g. ASC, CSC and SEND. Some of these costs are demand-led so they cannot be predicted or controlled they just have to be absorbed; you need a large council tax/financial base to do this sustainably. As an example, looking after just one child for social care where that child has a high level of need you can be talking in figures of £1m+ per year. Over £30k per week for the needs of that child and these requirements can suddenly land on a local authority because a family moves from one place to another and the authority must meet that immediately. You need financial resilience which can only be met in two ways; very rich areas or larger areas to spread the load and that is what this figure represents. If we are to be in a unitary, we will need that degree of size to absorb the massive pressures and when we get the budget for the new unitary, up to 80% will be taken up in those areas - not even considering highways or what this council does now. To sustain this, they will need the size to absorb the pressures, so this is why the 500k+ figure is appropriate for Fenland. A smaller number will be unsustainable so the answer should be yes.
- Councillor Tierney said people do not realise that regardless of who is in charge, things like highways get crowded out by the huge cost of the social areas, that challenge is always there. If people are frustrated now about the roads, this will get worse, those massive costs will crowd out everything. Bins, streetlights, parks, cutting of grass, festivals, all sorts of things that are done now by this Council, a new council will have these crowded out by these high costs and the Government does not want to address this. This will become a problem for the gigantic new council. These will be looked on as days fondly remembered. He hates 500k but it is needed to work.

Question 6

Does Full Council accept that the Government's specific and national priority growth agenda for the South of the County could potentially justify Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire District Councils, with a population of around 313,000, arguing that exceptional circumstances exist which may justify those areas (with or without the area of East Cambridgeshire District Council) forming a unitary authority with a population of fewer than 500,000?

- Councillor Boden said he had just explained why 500k is a minimum figure but one of the exceptions is a large amount of wealth and growth and in Cambs City and South Cambs there are both. Government has indicated they are expecting much more development there in terms of housing, infrastructure jobs etc. The whole area has a population of just over 900k, two to one therefore does not work for 500k+ so it is in our interest as well as Cambs and South Cambs that we recognise they are a special case, an area of the highest growth in the country. So, if there are to be exceptional circumstances justifying fewer than 500k, he cannot think of a more appropriate place. That would then leave the rest of the area to form a unitary authority of sufficient size. We should bear this in mind. Many discussions have taken place between CEOs and Leaders, and this has been on Chatham House rules so he cannot comment on what others are saying but if we do say that Cambs City and South Cambs are special then he thinks this will help us in Fenland.

- Councillor Count said that Councillor Boden articulated very well that this might be a special case. In terms of identity, when you look at Cambs City, this is the centre surrounded on all four sides, it is completely encircled. Anyone in South Cambs looks to Cambs City as their city. They do not look in two directions, their outcomes match very nicely so there is a special case for what is already established as the GCP area with or without East Cambs. You could still go under 500k and maintain a reasonably sized authority. Sustainability – size and finances. Anyone who can afford £50m to do up their Guildhall must have a certain amount of resources or charge £30 per day to park. The Government is very keen to put more homes there so it will be at that 500k mark very quickly.

Question 7

Does Full Council favour an initial unitary council size of around 100 members (subject to reduction at the end of the first term of office) with wards or divisions formed from the existing County Council divisions in Cambridgeshire and the existing City Council wards in Peterborough?

- Councillor Boden advised that what happens with local government reorganisation and a lot of districts in the new unitary, is that it is chaotic and difficult to keep control, especially in that first term of office with a lot of learning, reorganisation and recalibration required to form an authority that works. It is usual to start with a larger number of councillors to meet the amount of work needed and then during the first term of office, boundaries will be reviewed and a reduction made in the number of councillors. For example, Buckinghamshire became a unitary with 147 councillors and now after 4-5 years of existence, the number of members has been reduced to 97. Similarly, Durham as a unitary authority started with 126 councillors and the number has since reduced to 98. It is necessary to have a larger number to begin with to meet the exceptional demands of knitting a new authority together, which is a complicated process. It is not inappropriate to start with a figure of around 100 councillors, not in the long-term but in terms of dealing with upper tier responsibilities. We are also talking about authorities which are much larger than our districts, and how too few councillors would cope with the casework. Just because FDC will not exist does not mean that the service requirements will stop, they will continue, and there needs to be enough councillors to cope with that.
- Councillor Count said there are presently some 330 members at districts, county and Peterborough level, not including parish or town councils. With a limit of 100, looking at 200 councillors is a reduction of 130. It is a good start, but it needs and will go further. He agrees with the concept of 100 but would want to raise the difficulties of basing it on the divisions and wards. When places like Bucks changed, to maintain the level of degree of parity, you are met with the simple choice of one, two, or three councillors per division. The same will apply here, however much we start off with there is no capacity within the Boundary Commission to assess this for the whole country. He suggests it may be that when people look at the numbers it will be better to look at wards, but it is a question we need to think about a bit more. The Government has set out proposals, the latest guidance being numbers to come between 30 and 100. 30 for 500k? If you hit anywhere near the higher number, you must give a detailed explanation, putting forward the proposals of a transitional arrangement is important, there are things that the district and county do which are very different, with a lower number so much corporate knowledge will be lost. On behalf of Fenland residents, we need to be at the higher number. He would support this but would like Cabinet to consider how it is divided up later.
- Councillor Nawaz said he would agree, but additionally there are differences between Peterborough City Council and the rural areas in Fenland, or rural areas in general. Currently for example the South Whittlesey division stands over 13 miles whereas for Peterborough it may be less than 3 miles with the same number of residents. On top of that the number of councillors will have additional work to do, for example the so-called devolution and reorganisation of health services, the Government are in the mood to do away with the current NHS England model. How will that be delivered? Through local councils. If so, councils will be expected to have a part in delivering and monitoring health, social care and education. The same number of councillors to do additional work will need to be considered as well as the logistical issue of the areas that need to be covered. He would therefore argue for more than

100 but around 100 would be a good start.

Question 8

Does Full Council agree, until there is a firmer idea as to the boundaries of any new unitary authorities, and until the creation of the finance officers' financial model based on 2024/25 budget data for all seven principal authorities, that it would be premature to indicate to Government the level of potential savings (if any) that this Local Government Review process may produce?

- Councillor Boden stated that one of the things which the minister has asked us to do for 21st March is to indicate how much money FDC might save by making these changes. One thing that is certain is it will cost a lot to make the changes. In theory it is possible to make some reductions, but they may not be as large as imagined because the economies of scale will not work here for the main areas of expense: ASC, CSC, SEND. If we are talking about two upper tier authorities with upper tier responsibilities, there will be no savings out of that. Look at Surrey and Essex potentially being split into three, so that will cost more based purely on economies of scale. It would be rash to go back to say we will save £20m per year as there is no justification for saying that but, having said that, the LA officers are putting together a template to look to see what savings are possible and we should wait until November before we say anything about that.
- Councillor Count said anyone who thinks there will be any money saved must live in cloud cuckoo land. Massive change, a change of premises and structures, it costs millions. Doing it to all organisations at the same time and combining them into a giant organisation means we will not see any savings, we will have costs forever and we will be paying for it for years. Look at when the County moved to New Shire Hall, the problems have gone and on. You can do some good things but whatever you do is never going to be enough. Some officers in some authorities will come up with things that looks like savings, but it will not happen.
- Councillor Christy said this is the question that underpins this exercise, the whole misconception about savings. We have already heard about all our differences; savings are achieved through synergies. To make this work we need another layer of management not less and it will cost millions to make this happen. He would support that we are not able to put this forward.
- Councillor Count said he has seen some confidential figures but when you look at the cost of splitting things up and how you can get that back, he struggles in Cambridgeshire. We have a sense of questions here to feedback to Cabinet. Yes, he thinks we should hold off giving figures, but we should give a clear message that we are underfunded. It will not save us; we should take this opportunity to request more money. It will cost millions, well over £10m, that must be met from existing budgets, but the Government are not giving support for that. What if we cannot, we are already terribly underfunded, and this will make our situation worse. He would ask that Cabinet also say provide us with more money to cope.

Members were invited to provide final remarks.

- Councillor John Clark stated he would like to declare an interest in that he receives £6,000 paid expenses from this Council and this affects him because effectively he is voting for losing his job. There are other members on district and county earning more than £40,000 and he is surprised that no one has declared an interest. There is already some unitary as we have members on town/county/district and combined authority councils. We have one councillor making several decisions on various councils. There is an understanding that this is going to happen, but we have to get the best deal we can, there is no choice, and this could have happened under a conservative government also. There will be a lot of work to do, hours were spent putting together the combined authority and Councillor Count will be able to say how much work he put into the CPCA. Councillor Clark continued that he does have concerns; the Leader sits on a town council, he is here as the Leader, he is on Cambs, he is on the CPCA, and a London Council and hopes he is able to find the time to give this enough attention for Fenland. Furthermore, staff attrition is a real concern, in any reorganisation you tend to lose

your best staff first. Over the next three years, although staff will be TUPE'd it will be an uncomfortable position for them, it will be difficult to manage and get the best out of them. He would hope that the Chief Executive is able to manage this and look after his staff. In respect of council tax harmonisation, that could benefit Fenland for a little while. Fenland Council tax is high compared to East Cambs. If there is a harmonisation, Fenland could have a few years grace so might not pay as much. A BBC report mentioned that draft responses were received from six different leaders stating they were considering different scenarios, but they are waiting for a response from Fenland. He does not know if the Cabinet meeting following this meeting will decide that or if we are running our own race.

- Councillor Hoy said she could not leave unchallenged Councillor Clark's comment about Fenland's council tax being high. That is a Band D, which in Fenland there are few of so that is an unfair comparison. When Councillor Clark was the Leader, he increased council tax every year. Regarding his comment about pay and the Leader being on a number of authorities, he too was a member of several authorities except for March Town Council, which was an unpaid post.
- Councillor Boden summed up that, whilst we may be willing, the word 'eagerness' is inappropriate. When looking at the size of a council and how many members will be required, the comments made by Councillor Count are particularly relevant, particularly in terms of corporate knowledge. Councillor Boden added that he fears that some of the comments made today are correct and many savings will turn out to be illusory or far less than anticipated and that can be reflected in the Council's response. Regarding the comment made by Councillor John Clark, he was correct to point out the effect on staff, not just in Fenland but in the dozens of councils that will be involved in this process over the next three years as their livelihoods and futures are unexpectedly up in the air. The Chief Executive is more than well aware of this issue and is taking the appropriate steps to deal with this issue. Regarding council tax harmonisation, Fenland has a very low council tax base, but harmonisation is not in the amount of council tax paid, but the amounts paid for different bands. Fenland's Band D is higher because of our low base but it can take years to achieve harmonisation; it took seven years for Suffolk. He does not want Fenland residents to be paying more than others. He stressed that he would be able to take the time to deal with this but even with pressures on local government reorganisation, this council has been able to push through the Fenland Inspire! projects to safeguard a legacy for its residents and will continue to have facilities that they will expect and require once Fenland District Council ceases to exist.

Council AGREED to share the draft minutes of the debate with Cabinet for their consideration in determining Fenland District Council's initial response to Government.

6.45 pm

Chairman