

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 14 JULY 2025 - 10.00 AM



PRESENT: Councillor Mrs M Davis (Chairman), Councillor E Sennitt Clough (Vice-Chairman), Councillor B Barber, Councillor G Booth, Councillor L Foice-Beard, Councillor A Hay, Councillor N Meekins, Councillor D Roy and Councillor A Woollard.

APOLOGIES: Councillor J Carney and Councillor P Hicks.

Officers in attendance: Carol Pilson (Corporate Director and Monitoring Officer), Amy Brown (Assistant Director), Anna Goodall (Assistant Director), Stephen Beacher (Head of ICT Digital & Resilience), Phil Hughes (Head of Leisure Services/SRO March Future High Street Project), David Wright (Policy & Communications Manager), Garry Edwards (Engineering Manager) and Helen Moore (Member Services and Governance Officer).

Guests in attendance: Councillors Boden, Mrs French, Tierney and Wallwork. Dan Palframan and Matt Wickham (Freedom Leisure).

OSC11/25 **PREVIOUS MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of 9 June 2025 were confirmed and signed.

OSC12/25 **FREEDOM LEISURE**

Members considered the Freedom Leisure Operating Contract Annual Report, which was shared in the form of a presentation, welcoming Dan Palframan, Matt Wickham, Carol Pilson, Phil Hughes and Councillor Wallwork to the meeting.

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

- Councillor Barber referred to the figures shown in the presentation for the past year but there is nothing to base this on as there is no evidence of the previous year's figures. She asked for an explanation as to why the participation figures were down from last year as stated in the presentation. Dan Palframan responded that George Campbell has some competitors emerging locally, and in cases like this, if a low cost operator opens customers will tend to try it out and swap memberships, but then over time there is a turnaround and customers start to return and when looking quarter on quarter George Campbell is recovering in terms of numbers of participation on the gym and the fitness side. He continued in terms of the aquatics this is up year on year, however, there were some closures due to unplanned repairs that needed to take place.
- Councillor Barber stated two-thirds of the staff are female and only a third are male, is there a reason for this? Dan Palframan stated the reason for this is that there is a large learn to swim school scheme for swimming lessons and a high proportion of those employed are women, with it being a sector industry standard across the country, with a lot of the teachers being female. Matt Wickham added from a national perspective the statistics in Fenland are slightly skewed and there is an overall good mix to create a balance to the business, but locally this is a consistent trend.
- Councillor Barber stated that looking at the presentation she found it hard to read the small print around the pie charts. Dan Palframan agreed with the statement and noted it for future presentations.

- Councillor Barber stated that she had noticed that some of the customers had mentioned that there were not enough evening swim sessions and wondered if this was going to be reviewed. Dan Palframan responded that a review on the pool programme takes place quarterly and the approach is that as long as there is a balanced programme across all the pools with the idea that the customer can swim at any pool at any one time. He continued the programme does get reviewed and changed based on user trends.
- Councillor Sennitt Clough asked what the plans are there to improve the cleanliness of the Leisure Centres and to improve the maintenance of the gym equipment? Dan Palframan responded that recruitment had been a struggle, especially at the Manor Leisure Centre, this has now been resolved with a new manager in place, and he is slowly building his team around him to improve the service. He continued in regard to the maintenance of the gym equipment, this remains to be an ongoing challenge, however, there are talks on going to bring back a maintenance package which will speed up improvement to services across the Leisure Centres. Councillor Sennitt Clough stated that when attending the gym she overheard a conversation about a piece of leg equipment and it was evident that the staff did not know how to answer the questions being asked, with them stating 'it was above us' and she feels that the information shared today needs to be transferred down to the staff so they are better equipped with being able to deal with customer queries. Matt Wickham thanked Councillor Sennitt Clough for the feedback and will take this back to the local team.
- Councillor Foice-Beard stated, with another new gym opening in Wisbech, are there any plans in place to maintain members and promote new joiners? Dan Palframan responded there are some national campaigns coming up, but it is also recognised that the core of the staff and the team are local and know what is going on in their local community, there is funding and with the help of Phil there will be a campaign promoting what the Hudson provides versus other organisations. Councillor Foice-Beard asked if there were any concerns around Snap Fitness coming to Wisbech? Matt Wickham responded that there was not because this has happened so many times in the past and members leave out of curiosity but Freedom Leisure have a different offer and can go head to head on price on these budget gyms, but as stated previously there needs to be an improvement on cleanliness and maintenance of the gyms and also investment in trained experts as budget gyms do not supply that service and it is important to get the right knowledge and motivation from a trained team of experts which the Freedom gyms offer.
- Councillor Booth asked when the promotions are happening is there a focus on the fact that Freedom Leisure has these trained professionals and is the advertising more personable to show who those people are? Dan Palframan responded that this is something that is currently being worked on, there are national campaigns coming up as well as localised ones which can be adapted to local community needs. Matt Wickham added that the way the company is recruiting has changed from just qualification based to more personality, with the interview technique questions having been changed to focus on the personality because that is what interacts with the customers rather than just based on a qualification. He continued if the employee is the right person this will be presented to the public through social media as part of the advertising.
- Councillor Roy made an observation that in the Fenland years in numbers section of the presentation it would be useful to have the comparative figures from previous years so the difference can be seen. He continued it has been mentioned that gas is burnt to produce electricity, and he would like to understand if this is sustainable and whether there are plans to change it? Matt Wickham responded that the numbers can be provided but were not added to this presentation on a comparable basis. He continued the Combined Heat Power Units (CHP) are very common because gas is cheaper than electricity and generally new Leisure Centres will be built without a CHP unit, they will have installed air or seat pumps and solar PV, using solar thermal to offset the cost of the air seat pump which run electricity. Matt Wicken stated that in the Fenland area the buildings used by Freedom are inherited facilities which is a concern and from a sustainability point of view all the buildings would need to be closed down and solar PV or even wind farms would be used, but the cost is prohibitive and to take out the CHP would be phenomenal so there needs to be a balance

taken between Freedom Leisure and the Council as a whole and officers to understand exactly which way this needs to be taken. He continued there is Government funding and Public Sector Decarbonization Scheme Funding, but it does remain a challenge to remain cost effective and reduce the carbon numbers.

- Councillor Mrs Davis stated that the sauna and steam facilities have been closed for some time and are there any plans to reintegrate them or are they going to be permanently closed? Councillor Wallwork responded that there are no plans to re-open them as the cost of the renovation would be astronomical and the evidence showed that the footfall was not great enough to warrant the work needed.
- Councillor Mrs Davis asked what measurable incentives are there in place to ensure inclusivity and accessibility for the underrepresented and the lower paid? Dan Palframan responded Freedom Leisure have a concessionary pricing structure available to those who are eligible, funded through Cambridgeshire County Council, which allows children to enjoy an activity at the venue and Freedom provide food vouchers which can be taken to a supermarket or any retailer who is part of the scheme. He added that Freedom Leisure work closely with other governing bodies such as Sport England, Swim England and UK Active to allow as much access as possible.
- Councillor Booth asked for more information concerning the five MPS and issues stated in the report and mentioned the quantum seems to be missing, for example, how many people are raising these and how big an issue is it? He also mentioned the Net Promoter score and the fact that certain people have been excluded because of known issues. Matt Wickham responded the issues with the Net Promoter score is probably around the George Campbell pool, it was a known issue, it was being fixed but it was unfortunate the survey went out at the same time so that was the justification because there was a problem which everyone was aware of, which took longer because more issues were found, and it was being resolved and that was the only item that was retracted. Councillor Booth asked what impact this had on the Net Promoter score and reiterated the question asked about the quantum and the five issues with the numbers of complaints made against each issue found. Dan Palframan responded he could give an indicative number and could provide the physical numbers directly through Phil Hughes' team. He continued around 100 surveys were received for the bigger venues, which is a finite snapshot in terms of volume and in terms of the MPS score it will be neutralized, ranging from some venues which were slightly negative to some venues that were very strong positives, but excluding the known issues over 53% were promoters so were scoring as nine or ten out of ten, there is also another 30% of people who are neutral and 27% who did not share a view. Councillor Booth recommended that this information is shared within the presentation as this is what the public get to see and congratulated the organisation on a successful MPS score.
- Councillor Sennitt Clough stated there has been a lot of discussion around customers coming back to Freedom Leisure after a new gym has opened in the area and asked what happens if these customers fail to come back? Matt Wickham responded ultimately Freedom are in a contracted position, the contract is set and will be in place for as long as that contract runs, with the key strength being to keep working with the Council, and the community to deliver the service and Freedom is in a strong place to deliver that as a partnership.

Members noted the information reported.

OSC13/25 PROGRESS OF CORPORATE PRIORITY - ENVIRONMENT

Members considered the Progress of Corporate Priority – Environment, welcoming Councillors Boden, Mrs French and Tierney together with Carol Pilson and Garry Edwards to the meeting.

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

- Councillor Sennitt Clough asked how are the priorities decided generally and what impact will Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) have on overseeing and managing the

priorities or what the predicted impact will be? Councillor Tierney responded that the priorities are decided through the Council's procedures, councillors and officers feed into the process then it is shared with all the committees it needs to be shared with including O&S, and then the priorities are finalised and pushed forward. He continued how this will be affected by the LGR he could not comment on as there was not enough detail out yet and stated that the priorities will be decided on a year-by-year basis using any new information to adjust as and when necessary.

- Councillor Sennitt Clough asked considering the changes about to take place, the Corporate Priorities model of a one-year plan with three-year aspirations, i.e. a medium-term strategy, is no longer the most effective suitable model and how will the changes taking place affect the viewing process? Councillor Tierney stated that he thinks the model is right, the medium-term plan is a four-year plan which is reviewed every year allowing the team to feed in and adjust accordingly.
- Councillor Sennitt Clough asked for an update on the Fenland Inspire projects. Councillor Boden responded that at the last Cabinet meeting which took place on the 16 June a report was given on Fenland Inspire and where the Council is with the projects divided into two tranches. He stated that the first tranche will be going ahead this year within the capacity available and the second tranche will be going ahead, when the Council has reasonable confirmation that the LGR is going to go ahead, which is going to take place from the 1 April 2028. Councillor Boden continued the Council is expecting legislation to be laid before both Houses of Parliament as statutory instruments in the spring of 2026 and as and when this happens will unlock the remaining part of Fenland Inspire because without that certainty of termination of FDC there could be difficulty in financing what it is that is being suggested. He continued having said that, at the meeting of Cabinet last month, it was announced that one of the projects will not be going ahead and that is the Wisbech Chapel project, with the reason being on the preliminary examination of the project it was evident that it would not be sustainable so hence it was removed from the list.
- Councillor Foice-Beard asked why there are 40 plus street light units still awaiting inspection and is the inspection in relation to the low-level lighting bulbs or the columns, and what is the risk if these are structurally unsafe? Councillor Mrs French responded that the outstanding street light testing works related to both electrical and structural integrity testing with the assets themselves being a combination of columns, poles, brackets and ground mounted up lighters and the delays are associated with factors such as contractors unable to access due to excessive tree vegetation overgrowth, the contractor unable to find the assets on site or access the assets which are restricted by locked gates, parked cars etc. She continued that a handful of assets also require traffic management by Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) to obtain road space to access due to the asset's location with the highest structural risk being associated with columns that are cast iron or concrete, but ongoing work continues with the contractors. Garry Edwards added, in terms of street lighting, unfortunately there are some that are waiting to be structurally and electrically tested and it is hoped that they will be completed this week, but as stated earlier, parked cars and access to some of the streetlights can be difficult. He continued, in terms of the risk, any of the streetlights that the contractor comes across where there is immediate danger, they will remove the streetlights to make it safe for the public and so far, the total is 16 streetlights that are of the highest category.
- Councillor Mrs Davis asked how many complaints have been received due to the new splay of lights from the new heads? Garry Edwards responded that complaints have been very low, but FDC only has responsibility for around 1,800 streetlights, and FDC do share the same road space as Cambridgeshire County Council's (CCC) assets who have more than 53,000 streetlights. He continued that CCC's luminaire specification is different to FDC's as in they seem dimmer, which is where the complaints have derived from and FDC have had a few complaints that the light is projected too far forward or too far rearwards, which is a quick fix by adding a small shield to prevent that light splay.
- Councillor Booth stated that there was a new contract in place for street lighting, and in Parson Drove there are some outstanding replacements, he is aware that UK Power

Networks are to undertake the connections, but would like to know how the handover with the new contractors is going and what is the plan to get up to speed with all the outstanding pieces of work? Garry Edwards confirmed that the handover with the new contractors has gone well but is slower than anticipated because of the different management systems of streetlights in place which has made the transition slow. He continued, in terms of the legacy schemes, every effort has been made to complete as much work as possible with the former contractor but unfortunately this has caused a three-way triangle between FDC, CCC and UK Power Network because of road space permits etc but what is sometimes undertaken is that FDC can fit a temporary supply so the streetlights are working.

- Councillor Mrs French referred to the TTRO's and the traffic management which has to be carried out through CCC, which has got to be booked for a minimum of 12 weeks.
- Councillor Roy stated he would like to raise the issue of bulky waste collection as since the increase in cost there has been evidence of constant fly tipping and wanted to know if this can be revisited or the possibility investigated of a discretionary scheme or even a bulky waste amnesty for the low-income community? Councillor Tierney responded that he did not feel there was any evidence that shows the small increase in bulky waste collection has increased the amount of fly tipping. He continued he felt the service is great value for money and is the cheapest other than Peterborough out of other local authorities and he was pleased to report that the service has been growing year on year. Councillor Tierney continued in regard to the amnesty he was aware that this has been tried in other authorities where people are given the opportunity to get rid of loads of waste but then as soon as this is over the rubbish starts to accumulate again so this encourages ongoing amnesties which costs a lot of money and he feels that most people accept that there is a cost to removing bulky waste and FDC is cheaper than most private companies and is doing it legally.
- Councillor Hay stated should there be clarification that LGR is definitely going ahead and FDC will be abolished, how will that affect the Council's ambition to introduce civil parking enforcement in the area? Councillor Boden responded that it should make no difference because civil parking enforcement is one of those projects that is going ahead anyway regardless of whether or not there is LGR, but in the likelihood of LGR taking place this will make it easier to overcome some of the obstacles that there has been up to now.
- Councillor Booth wished to come back to the point made by Councillor Tierney regarding bulky waste and that the Director has got the ability to provide an exemption, but there is not an option for this through the online form so practically there are no means to enact that service. He continued that Peterborough City Council tried an amnesty, but they did drop this idea due to the cost and suggested speaking to colleagues at Peterborough to research the results from this exercise. Councillor Booth also added that his biggest concern was the rogue traders that undercut the Council to collect bulky waste and then fly tip in the countryside and feels enforcement needs to be considered. Councillor Tierney agreed with this statement and questioned if the cost of an amnesty is going to be worth it from any environmental benefits that are gained but is happy to explore the options available.
- Councillor Barber stated in light of how much money the Council generates from the blue recycling, and how much is now not used because it is not recycled properly, it was noted from the report that FDC will continue to support customers to maximize their recycling efforts and she was curious on how this will be put in place? Councillor Tierney responded that FDC support customers all the time by providing a good service, alongside this FDC constantly promote recycling constantly on all the available channels, like Council communications, the website, libraries and community groups. He continued there are also the group called 'Getting it Sorted' which is a volunteer service which is being worked on presently and will be relaunched very soon. Councillor Tierney added that alongside this there is an encouragement to ask local councillors to keep spreading the word when out and about and reminding customers that by recycling they can save money at the same time. Councillor Barber commented that she did not feel that residents realise that they are generating savings within their Council Tax by recycling and feels this should be promoted more. She added that local WI groups and other coffee morning groups would also be a good place to promote recycling. Councillor Tierney took on board the feedback and added

that this is more an area for councillors to spread the word in the local communities through their daily duties rather than officers visiting local coffee mornings, etc.

- Councillor Mrs Davis stated that from April there is an Extender Producer Responsibility payment and asked would this be worth looking into as the more tonnage the more money Fenland can make. Councillor Tierney responded that the Extender Producer Responsibility acts as a tax, for example manufacturers who use packaging now have to pay for the packaging that they use and the more environmentally difficult it is to get rid of the more expensive that charge is which encourages manufacturers to use less packaging or to use different packaging that is more environmentally friendly, and conveying this to the public more is a good idea.
- Councillor Mrs Davis stated from the report there has only been 9 penalties issued from 790 fly tips, she asked is there a gap in the evidence and what makes it so difficult for these people to be caught? Councillor Tierney responded the reason it is so hard to prosecute these offenders is because people know if they fly tip they could get caught and these people know not to dump literature with address detail on it into the rubbish pile. He continued that officers do go out and visit sites and check for evidence as part of their job, and occasionally there will be some evidence found that can lead to a conviction but often the evidence is not found that is needed to prosecute. Councillor Mrs Davis asked if there were any plans to carry out the project that was trialled in New Road? Councillor Tierney commented that this was being looked at for the hotspot areas in Fenland but despite it being effective it was also expensive and there must be a balance between the cost to the Council versus the benefit.
- Councillor Mrs Davis asked how will the Council measure carbon savings from the net zero village funding? Councillor Tierney stated that when the proposals were presented the carbon benefit and the saving had to be built into the planning which generally meant that less power was going to be used from sustainable power that benefited the net zero situation, this has been checked, the work has already been done and the benefits should already be there.
- Councillor Barber asked what the progress was concerning the food waste collection? Councillor Tierney stated that the reason this has not been spoken about is because it is a bit too early. He continued the Government has imposed new regulations regarding food waste and each Council has been given a little bit of leeway on how they will introduce that, FDC's plans are in place, the caddies have been ordered for inside and outside the house, it has been through Cabinet to order the vehicles and later on in the year the Council will be looking at the staffing ready for next year. Councillor Tierney added that around Autumn time the publicity will start to roll out so that everyone knows everything that is going on and answer all the questions. Councillor Barber asked if there were going to be bags to put inside the containers and will street vendors be included? Councillor Tierney responded in regard to the bags the answer is yes but some of this is still being worked on and in regard to traders, trade waste has to be arranged by the traders and can be provided through the Council. Carol Pilson added that all traders will need to familiarise themselves with the trade rules to find out whether they are covered or not at this stage.
- Councillor Booth stated that last year it was suggested that when the new regulations come in that officers take a look and see what opportunities there were to improve recycling, the food waste has been mandated by the Government, but what other opportunities are there to improve the recycling in this area? Councillor Tierney responded there is a report going through RECAP in the Autumn which will provide some more answers and a better understanding. Councillor Booth asked if the tax on the brown bins would be removed as a result of the new regulations or will there still be a charge? Councillor Tierney responded that at this present time there are no plans to remove the brown bin tax.

Members noted the information reported.

OSC14/25 PROGRESS OF CORPORATE PRIORITY - TRANSFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

Members considered the Progress of Corporate Priority – Transformation and Communications, welcoming Councillors Boden and Tierney together with Anna Goodall, Stephen Beacher and David Wright to the meeting.

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

- Councillor Roy stated that he would like to understand the real time cost savings regarding the digital switch over to the Council and has there been any significant impact on staffing levels? Councillor Tierney responded this has been a smooth transition with no costs or savings and no significant changes to staffing levels.
- Councillor Mrs Davis asked since the move over to the Cloud infrastructure and the Team technology, what is the contingency plans for data loss, cyber-attacks and service interruptions? Councillor Tierney stated that there is sufficient cover for data loss, with Cloud backup in place with on and off-site backup and this system is regularly tested. Stephen Beacher confirmed that there is regular patching, fire walls and network segmentation in place to protect from any cyber-attack.
- Councillor Mrs Davis asked how can the service-level improvements be quantified resulting from the £214k in cashable savings and 7,000 officer hours saved and specifically how have these gains transferred into better outcomes for residents and what governance or audit mechanism are in place to independently validate self-reported achievements and figures? Councillor Tierney stated that this is quantified through the Council's procedures, data and analysis are measured, tested and recorded, once the figures have been checked through the various departments the results are reported back to the committees, who can then question individual things if they feel there has been a mistake.
- Councillor Mrs Davis asked how the Council is ensuring that consultations are reaching underrepresented or digitally excluded groups in Fenland and how is it ensured that the automation of services does not negatively impact those with complex needs or low digital literacy? Councillor Tierney stated that lots of people are ready to go digital and the more that can be encouraged the better it is because that frees up resources for those who cannot be supported. He continued with underrepresented people they are approached in lots of ways such as the Golden Age Fairs, press releases and the website alongside a variety of other actions within each community and in regard to others who are not digitally represented there are other methods like phone calls and the library. Councillor Mrs Davis asked if there are any information leaflets that can be shared at local coffee morning and events that councillors attend to spread the word? Councillor Tierney responded there was not but there is a hard copy of the information available which councillors could take with them with all the information inside.
- Councillor Mrs Davis referred to the Transformation Agenda (TA2) and asked how are the objectives aligned with the Council's long-term strategic goals especially in light of the LGR and Fenland Inspire Programme? Councillor Boden responded that it has changed, TA2 considerably especially around how FDC performs its services without harming the services which are provided, this has provided an opportunity to look at all the services provided to see how each service can be made more efficient and more effective, all of this demands an upfront cost in terms of the time it takes for officers to examine the system and put forward the changes, and the way transformation works is that the savings made following that initial cost outweighs that initial cost, and that is the justification for the transformation. He stated that the problem with LGR is that in many cases if looking at services provided by FDC, there will not be that trail of savings to be made because once LGR takes place, the overwhelming majority of the services provided will be provided in different ways and in ways at the moment that cannot be anticipated so to some extent TA2 has been truncated and the opportunity for FDC to make even more savings than FDC otherwise would have done.

Members noted the information reported.

OSC15/25 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL ANNUAL REPORT 2024/25

Councillor Mrs Davis presented the Annual Report to be submitted to the next Council meeting.

Members approved the draft Annual Report for forwarding to Council.

OSC16/25 UPDATE ON PREVIOUS ACTIONS

Members considered and noted the update on previous actions.

OSC17/25 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered and noted the Future Work Programme.

12.10 pm

Chairman