

# OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 18 JULY 2022 - 1.30 PM



**PRESENT:** Councillor D Mason (Chairman), Councillor A Miscandlon (Vice-Chairman), Councillor A Hay, Councillor M Purser and Councillor R Wicks

**APOLOGIES:** Councillor M Cornwell, Councillor M Humphrey, Councillor R Skoulding and Councillor F Yeulett

**OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:** Amy Brown (Head of Legal and Governance), Dan Horn (Acting Assistant Director), Phil Hughes (Acting Assistant Director) and Linda Albon (Member Services & Governance Officer)

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:** Councillor C Boden, Councillor S Clark and Councillor S Count

## **OSC1/22    APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN FOR THE MUNICIPAL YEAR**

It was proposed by Councillor Miscandlon, seconded by Councillor Purser and resolved that Councillor Mason be elected Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the Municipal Year.

## **OSC2/22    APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN FOR THE MUNICIPAL YEAR**

It was proposed by Councillor Mason, seconded by Councillor Hay and resolved that Councillor Miscandlon be elected Vice-Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the Municipal Year.

## **OSC3/22    PREVIOUS MINUTES.**

The minutes of the meeting of 9 May 2022 were confirmed and signed.

## **OSC4/22    UPDATE ON PREVIOUS ACTIONS.**

Members considered the update on previous actions and made the following comments:

- Councillor Wicks stated he is still waiting for the information he requested in respect of the Levelling Up Fund, namely a comparison with other local authorities and the figures they have received from the Combined Authority. Councillor Mason advised that this is in hand.
- Councillor Hay expressed her concern that the Panel have not yet heard if the Mayor of the Combined Authority will be attending a future meeting, as they would like to know how he will manage the Levelling Up agenda, particularly given the current high rate of vacancies within the Combined Authority.
- Councillor Miscandlon said that whilst acknowledging vacancies at the Combined Authority, he could confirm that the Skills Committee is fully staffed.

## **OSC5/22    PROGRESS OF CORPORATE PRIORITIES - COMMUNITIES**

Councillor Mason welcomed Councillor Boden, Councillor Clark, Councillor Count, Dan Horn, and Phil Hughes to the meeting.

Dan Horn and Phil Hughes were invited to give a brief overview of the priorities within their respective teams.

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

- Councillor Mason asked Councillor Clark if the Golden Age Fairs have a greater attendance if they are run alongside another event and if so, could it become a policy to link up with other events. Councillor Clark agreed that the attendance is greater and other age groups also attend as a result. She added that the Community Support Team does look at other events and if they could link with the Golden Age Fair within their meetings.
- Councillor Miscandlon thanked Dan Horn for the comprehensive report on housing figures. He would like to know how many suppliers of social housing there are in Fenland, what stock of homes they have and what the criterion is to acquire a property. Dan Horn replied that there are several registered housing providers in Fenland of which Clarion is the biggest and best known as it has the former council housing stock. However, there is a plethora of other registered providers at work, and the Council encourages them to work within Fenland as we have a target to meet housing need. There are a lot of people on the Council's HomeLink housing register, and although the register is managed through Clarion, it is a statutory function for Fenland District Council to discharge. Dan Horn said that he would circulate a link to a list of all the providers within Fenland and, as all providers are regulated by the social housing regulator, he will also circulate a link to their latest assessments, which were last done in 2020. Councillor Miscandlon thanked Dan Horn and asked that both links be circulated to all councillors and not just to the Overview and Scrutiny members.
- Councillor Wicks asked Dan Horn if members could be given contact details for all providers as they currently only have the details for Clarion. They will then know who to contact should they receive a complaint from a ward member. Dan Horn responded that although he can do this, he would encourage members to first ask their residents to follow their housing provider's formal complaints procedure and for members then to let him know of any issues so he can follow these up alongside the formal route.
- Councillor Wicks said he would like to know homeless numbers and the relevance against the Military Covenant. Dan Horn responded that the HomeLink register shows that as of 11<sup>th</sup> July, of the 1576 live Fenland applicants waiting for homes, 25 had declared a link to the military. He added that the allocations policy has a special section on prioritisation which was last approved in 2021. Councillor Wicks said he was also thinking in terms of rough sleepers as that was also included within the report. Dan Horn stated that he would ask the Outreach Team to investigate the number of rough sleepers over the last twelve months and ascertain how many have a military background. Councillor Wicks thanked Dan Horn and said that it is part of ongoing work to contact the military welfare organisations to help resolve the issue. Dan Horn commented that in terms of the military covenant, if anyone has spent just one day in the military, it will trigger support and the Council will tap into that support network.
- Councillor Hay said that in respect of social housing, it would be interesting to know how many of the other providers deliver additional services and in which areas. For example, do they provide extra services for the elderly and disabled? Dan Horn said that the link he will circulate will detail the services provided but generally all providers offer the same services as Clarion. He added that if any member has difficulty receiving assistance from a provider to any concerns they raise, then please let him know.
- Councillor Hay said that as Clarion come before the Overview & Scrutiny Panel once a year to give the Council a degree of input and oversight, she wondered if it would be possible for some of the other large providers to be invited to a meeting of the Panel. Dan Horn replied that he could not be certain of that, and it would be unlikely to get them to the same meeting, they do not have a requirement to come but he would hope they may want to as part of their social responsibility. He said he would look at this further adding that Accent have over 500 properties and are probably our biggest housing provider after Clarion, so although they are under no obligation to attend a meeting, they may want to. Councillor Hay thanked Dan Horn. She said that although she knows there is no compulsion for them to attend a meeting, in the interests of

transparency it could be good publicity for them to show that they are working with the local authority to ensure the best outcomes for their tenants.

- Councillor Boden suggested that rather than looking for all the providers to attend a meeting it may be a good idea to focus more on individual elements, i.e., affordable right to buy, rather than take a scattergun approach. Dan Horn agreed that was a good point, and said that development is one area of business, and although there may be big stock numbers of certain providers in Fenland, some may not be active for new development and there are some new providers who may be looking to build in Fenland that you may wish to see. If the Panel wants to focus on management, the services they provide and how tenants are treated, then that would mean meeting a different group of providers.
- Councillor Mason asked if it is policy that open spaces will remain as that and not used for development in the future. Phil Hughes responded that it would depend on the space, for example the Manor field at Whittlesey is protected and held in trust but other spaces are not. He added that the Council is exploring opportunities to sell some smaller open sites to third parties. Councillor Mason said he understood that designated open spaces were for the public to use for leisure activities. Phil Hughes responded that the Council maintains a vast number of open spaces, but the term can relate to a strip of grass or a grass verge as well as vast areas such as Wisbech Park or West End Park. The Council has packets of land that need to be maintained and the grass cut but they are not formal open spaces like a park with a play area. Councillor Mason said he was thinking of a particular piece of land in Whittlesey which is designated open space but has been padlocked for the last five years, therefore there is no access for the public to use it as intended. Phil Hughes said he would investigate this if Councillor Mason could send him the details.
- Councillor Mason said he had been interested to read the CAB statistics and asked if it was possible that in future these statistics be broken down into market town and village areas rather than take a blanket Fenland approach. He stated that although the figures are impressive it does not give a true picture of where actions are taking place. Dan Horn confirmed that he would do that.
- Councillor Hay commented that it would be interesting to know what support each of the town and parish councils are giving to CAB. She knows that within Chatteris there have been complaints in the past that residents are not getting a very good service from them and that may be because they contribute less than, say, Whittlesey, so for that reason it would be interesting to know what the individual areas are doing.
- Councillor Clark said that her parish council and some others do contribute to CAB but although they used to hold surgeries in the rural areas, often nobody would turn up so now they are being invited to attend the Golden Age Fairs to give advice which will help.
- Dan Horn stated that the Council has a service level funding agreement with CAB and although focus tends to be on council debt recovery and homeless prevention, it can be seen from the summary report that CAB provides a much wider aspect of help around welfare. During austerity, the Council did a consultation with CAB to reduce funding over a 3-year period and then as part of the mitigation they looked at what they could do to adjust their service. The Council ensured from those negotiations that it remained a district-wide accessible service, albeit it much of CAB's work can be done over the telephone. He stated that he will obtain a breakdown of towns and villages as requested and will ask what funding they are getting from other sources for Fenland area work.
- Councillor Miscandlon said on the Rural Cambs CAB he has had recent conversations with Nick from CAB, who is grateful for all the help received. Some towns do not contribute as much as others, but Nick praised the commitment from Whittlesey with the officer sited in the council offices. CAB would like to see more co-operation with the towns and the Council and an enhanced service in Fenland going forward to mitigate the problems. Councillor Miscandlon added that CAB provides a vital service for Fenland and the figures in the report echo that for everyone to see but he agreed it would be useful to be itemised. Dan confirmed that he would send the information out to all councillors, both the current report and the one broken down by ward.
- Councillor Clark said she understood that the Panel would like to hear more about the work of

Active Fenland, which as the name suggests encourages people to get more active within the district. She advised that the team organised a tea dance at the Queen Mary Centre in Wisbech two weeks ago, which was extremely well received. Many people attended and some had travelled from places such as Whittlesey and Downham Market. As a result of its success, further tea dances will be organised for each of the towns. Active Fenland also put on activities such as rambler walks; they are a very encouraging team and work really well.

- Councillor Purser referred to CAB, saying that he understood that the March office closed because they saw so few people with only having an hour a week in the library. He asked how the Wisbech service works, is it by appointment only? Dan Horn responded that CAB had a reduction in their grant from Fenland District Council over a three-year period, and as part of that adjustment they reduced the amount of time that they spent in other towns while keeping their core base at Wisbech. However, their service is still available across the district. He is aware that they offer additional services based on funding, as already highlighted by Councillor Miscandlon at Whittlesey, but he will get further details as part of the actions from this meeting. Councillor Purser said the reason he has brought this up was because March Town Council reduced their funding due to no longer having the facility, but some residents do not have the confidence to discuss their issues with CAB over the telephone, or for whatever reason cannot travel to Wisbech. Dan Horn said he could understand that, and in those cases would encourage residents to find an advocate who could help support them. He suggested that if a member took on that role on behalf of a ward member, they should contact the Council, who will then contact CAB to look at solutions around that.
- Councillor Miscandlon said that since March has no facilities, he wondered if it would be prudent to offer CAB services here at Fenland Hall on an appointment basis only. Dan Horn said that sounds like a good idea and worth considering but it would need some funding from March Town Council if they did not have the facilities themselves to offer. The Council would then need to consider that and look at the various risk assessments that would be linked to external organisations using the premises. Councillor Purser agreed he would discuss the issue further with March Town Council.
- Councillor Wicks referred to Golden Age and said it was his understanding that in the past there was engagement from local health organisations but as they have now moved to having social prescribers as part of those surgeries, would they not be a valuable addition as attendees to the Golden Age fairs. Councillor Clark thanked Councillor Wicks and said she would look into that at their next meeting.
- Councillor Mason said that Whittlesey Emergency Food Aid are still having problems in relocating and although this is not Dan Horn's remit, he would value Dan's support in pushing that project along. It is now eight months since it was agreed with Cambridgeshire County Council to relocate to the rear of Whittlesey Library and papers were signed in December. The current temporary premises are no longer adequate and have been broken into twice, and in this current economic climate is bursting at the seams. Dan Horn said he was happy to see what he could do to assist and would discuss the situation with Councillor Mason outside of this meeting.

Councillor Mason thanked Councillor Boden, Councillor Clark, Councillor Count, Dan Horn, and Phil Hughes for their attendance this morning and all the hard work that had gone into the report and that the Panel looked forward to further progress in the coming year.

**The report was noted for information.**

## **OSC6/22 DRAFT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2021-2022**

Members considered the draft Overview & Scrutiny Annual Report for 2021-22.

Councillor Miscandlon said he is very impressed with this comprehensive report; it is a credit to Amy Brown and officers, and he will support it wholeheartedly.

Councillor Hay thanked Amy Brown as Monitoring Officer and the Member Services team for the invaluable advice they have provided over the year. Councillor Purser echoed Councillor Hay's comments.

Councillor Mason asked the Leader if he would like to comment on the report. Councillor Boden responded that the report is a good reflection of the breadth of work that the Overview & Scrutiny Panel has undertaken over the previous year, and it is impressive given what has happened over the last two years. However, one point in the report that did strike him is the comment that all meetings are held in public. He is aware of interest in greater scrutiny of the work of the Investment Board so the Panel may care to consider whether to explore the possibility of meetings that may not be held in public. Councillor Mason said that the Panel had asked for an interim report of the Investment Board in six months' time to be reassured that things are running as they should and, although he attends these meetings as an observer and is happy with the legalities of it, he realises that if the public are kept informed as best they can despite the confidentiality of the meetings, then that gives greater reassurance that the Investment Board is being run in the correct manner hence the request for the interim report.

**The Overview and Scrutiny Panel AGREED to note the Annual Report.**

### **OSC7/22    FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME**

Members considered the Future Work Programme.

- Councillor Wicks asked why Anglian Water are not included in the programme given they still have several outstanding actions. Amy Brown responded that since last week's pre-meeting, Anglian Water have been contacted and it has been established that they have provided some further information but due to changes in personnel this had not been picked up. The action plan has been updated; there is still one further outstanding question, and we will continue to work with them to update that. They have also now accepted an invitation to attend a meeting next May and that will be added to the plan. Councillor Wicks said his concern with that date is that there will be a new tenure of Council and some existing members may no longer be in office so will be unable to raise their points on any ongoing matters. Amy Brown suggested that in that case, the situation can be reviewed at the beginning of the year and if there are enough new questions without going back over what they have already answered, then Anglian Water will be invited to an earlier meeting. Councillor Wicks agreed that would be a good idea because we do not know what this winter will bring and what impact it will have.
- Councillor Wicks referred to the October meeting when there will be an update on the CPCA Growth Service. He asked that given that their report last year was very general and focussed on the whole of Cambridgeshire, he requested that we ask that we get the salient detail of their activities within Fenland. Councillor Mason said that will be taken into consideration and requested when they are submitted a list of questions the Panel may wish to ask.

2.28 pm

Chairman