

COUNCIL



MONDAY, 15 JULY 2024 - 4.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor N Meekins (Chairman), Councillor B Barber (Vice-Chairman), Councillor I Benney, Councillor C Boden, Councillor G Booth, 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 K French, Councillor R Gerstner, Councillor G S Gill, Councillor A Gowler, Councillor S Harris, Councillor A Hay, Councillor P Hicks, Councillor Miss S Hoy, Councillor M Humphrey, Councillor S Imafidon, Councillor Mrs D Laws, Councillor C Marks, Councillor A Miscandlon, Councillor J Mockett, Councillor P Murphy, Councillor Dr H Nawaz, Councillor D Patrick, Councillor M Purser, Councillor B Rackley, Councillor D Roy, Councillor C Seaton, Councillor E Sennitt Clough, Councillor M Summers, Councillor T Taylor, Councillor S Tierney, Councillor S Wallwork and Councillor Woollard

APOLOGIES: Councillor J Carney, Councillor D Connor and Councillor D Oliver

C12/24 PREVIOUS MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of 20 May 2024 were confirmed and signed.

C13/24 CIVIC ENGAGEMENTS UPDATE.

The Chairman drew members' attention to the civic activities undertaken by himself and the Vice-Chairman in the weeks preceding Full Council.

Additionally, the Chairman had also attended the D Day Beacon Lighting on 6th June and the Huntingdon Mayor's Tea Party on 13th July.

C14/24 TO RECEIVE ANY ANNOUNCEMENTS FROM THE CHAIRMAN OF THE COUNCIL AND/OR THE HEAD OF PAID SERVICE.

The Chairman made the following announcement:

“The first of my announcements today is to acknowledge the resignation of former Councillor Kay Mayor who stood down in June.

Kay was initially elected in 2007, diligently and dutifully representing her constituents over many years. During her time as an elected member of Fenland District Council, Kay took up many important positions serving on the Appointments and Overview and Scrutiny Panels, the Licensing, Planning, Project Review and Staff Committees.

Kay also fulfilled the role of Chairman for three years and was involved in the popular Golden Age Fairs and Twinning Association.

I would like to take this opportunity to offer Kay our sincere thanks for her many years of service to Fenland District Council and to wish her all the very best for the future.

As a result of this resignation, a by-election was held for the Whittlesey South Ward on 4th July and my next announcement is to confirm the appointment of Councillor Gurninder Singh Gill.

Councillor Gill, congratulations on your appointment and welcome to Fenland District Council and your first Full Council meeting.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to announce that this year's Civic Reception will take place between 6.30pm and 8.30pm on Friday 6th September at Gorefield Community Hall. I shall also be hosting a coffee morning here in the Council Chamber between 10.00am and 12.00pm on Friday 17th October. This will be held in aid of Damsons, a community support group based at Peckover House for people living with mild to moderate dementia and their informal carers. I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible at these events".

C15/24 **TO RECEIVE QUESTIONS FROM, AND PROVIDE ANSWERS TO, COUNCILLORS IN RELATION TO MATTERS WHICH, IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIRMAN, ACCORD WITH THE PROVISIONS OF PROCEDURE RULES 8.4 AND 8.6.**

The Chairman stated that no written questions had been received under Procedure Rule 8.6. Councillor Booth asked the following question under Procedure Rule 8.4 as Leader of the Opposition.

- Following the decision by the previous Government to withdraw the moratorium on new incinerators what other practical matters can the Council undertake regarding the Wisbech incinerator now that the judicial review has been refused? Councillor Boden responded that although the area had been badly let down, the new government may be able to take action that could assist. Certainly, any proposal by government ministers to overturn the decision about the Wisbech incinerator would be resisted by civil servants, but their advice is not necessarily followed, particularly by one who would be involved, that person being Ed Miliband. A letter is being drafted to him as Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, Robbie Moore, Recycling Minister and Steven Reed, Secretary of State for the Environment to put a case to them that it would be in accordance with their own policies that they ran for election on. Anything that can be done will be done to get that decision reversed. Councillor Booth thanked Councillor Boden for his response, saying that is what he was hoping to hear, and he is sure would receive unanimous support from all members of the Council. It needs to be made clear that there is cross party opposition and all residents groups and associations in Wisbech and the surrounding area agree it would be the wrong decision to build this incinerator so near to schools and housing.

C16/24 **TO RECEIVE REPORTS FROM AND ASK QUESTIONS OF CABINET MEMBERS WITH PORTFOLIO HOLDER RESPONSIBILITIES, IN ACCORDANCE WITH PROCEDURE RULES 8.1 AND 8.2.**

Members asked questions of portfolio holders in accordance with Procedure Rules 8.1 and 8.2 as follows:

- Councillor Hoy addressed Councillor Boden saying that during the election campaign, Councillor Patrick said the Liberal Democrats had done nothing regarding the Wisbech incinerator. She felt this to be an unfair comment as whilst she thought County Council could have done more, both Councillor Booth and Councillor Cutler had done a great deal. She asked Councillor Boden if he agreed it was unfair to make an assumption of an entire party when two individuals from that party on this Council had done a lot towards the campaign. Councillor Boden responded that it was not appropriate to bring party politics into the issue; there was complete support from the Council's opposition group leader and the members he represents and if fewer people had been concerned about party politics in this issue perhaps the outcome would have been better.
- Councillor Gerstner asked Councillor Mrs French if there is any update on Civil Parking Enforcement. Councillor Mrs French advised there was no update, but a solution is still being

worked upon.

- Councillor Sam Clark asked that Councillor Murphy convey her thanks to the Street Scene Team for their work investigating and prosecuting fly tippers. Two weeks ago, a vast quantity of waste appeared overnight in Newton-in-the-Isle. Street Pride members visited the site and found documents with a name and address. A Street Scene officer attended within the hour, collected the documentation, visited the address, gathered information and started a formal investigation. Within days, two individuals were identified for enforcement action which should lead to a prosecution. This incident highlights the professionalism of the Council's Street Scene officers and the strength of the partnership with Street Pride groups.
- Councillor Booth asked Councillor Mrs Laws for an update on the Local Plan. Councillor Mrs Laws said the Council's new Planning Policy Manager is currently reviewing the work done to date and mapping options for a pathway forward as proposed changes at national level may have an impact. Once this exercise is completed a more detailed project plan will be developed and shared with senior members which will include a range of stakeholders' engagement to ensure the final Local Plan reflects members' wishes. There is a lot going on within Planning and it is a case of waiting for Government. Councillor Booth asked if that meant there would be delay to a second public consultation. Councillor Mrs Laws responded that there would be a delay, there is no option and whilst the Council has a very good new planning policy manager, there has also been a wait for outside consultants' reports. However, all members will be kept informed, the working party will be resurrected and will move forward with the new guidelines from Government.
- Councillor Tierney addressed Councillor Boden and said that following the news about the incinerator he had been contacted by many residents who had a lot of questions. One of the most common refrains was that people felt the decision was a done deal from an early stage. Although he knows nothing about the workings of Government, he did find the timing of the end of the moratorium at almost the exact time that ministers ceased to be ministers was curious, and he wonders what role civil servants played in this. He has heard that both the leader of WisWin and the Mayor of the Combined Authority are going to write to the new Secretary of State so there is still a possibility that the new Government could show that there is no obstacle created by the civil service and that it is possible to reverse the decision. He would therefore like to ask the Leader if it is possible for every district councillor who wants to, to sign the letters that Councillor Boden previously mentioned to show a united front that is not based on party politics. Councillor Boden said he had no problem with members signing the letter if they so required, so long as it can be arranged without any delay to sending the letters.

C17/24 MOTION SUBMITTED BY COUNCILLOR TIM TAYLOR

Councillor Taylor presented his motion regarding weeds.

Councillor Nawaz seconded the motion stating that during the recent election campaign he had knocked on many doors in Whittlesey, and weeds was one of the major issues causing grievance and is a complaint repeated throughout the district. As minimum, weeds constitute a nuisance making the streets look scruffy and unsightly with rubbish getting caught up in them. He is aware that emergency calls have been made to Highways because excessive weed growth has impeded surface water drainage. The issue is prevalent, and he cannot understand the timing of treatment as suggested by the County Council.

The item was opened for discussion and Members made comments as follows:

- Councillor Miscandlon said he supported the motion because there has been a considerable increase in ragwort, which is dangerous for livestock and must be eradicated. The only way to do this is to use weedkiller and it needs to be done now.
- Councillor Count thanked Councillor Taylor for the motion although he took exception to the opening comment about the County Council's failure to deal appropriately with the weeds. Although not wrong, it was materially incorrect as County Council officers carried out the

instructions of the strategic political body that runs the Council. That body is made up of the Labour, Liberal Democrat and Independent Alliance which made a formal decision to stop weed killing despite being constantly warned by other members of the consequences of this approach and the resulting complaints that would come from the public. Those warnings and complaints were repeatedly ignored, and it was not until the groundswell of opinion reached fever pitch that they agreed to do something. There was a delay in immediate action as a little money was put in the budget process, but the budget was not passed until February this year. Spraying could have started in April but did not start until June, and it is now a case of too little, too late. Everyone can see how prolific weed growth is throughout the district and the resulting damage caused by roots which are well established. It will not be easy to eradicate them now with simple summer and autumn spraying. Councillor Count said that the administration then decided that as the weeds have grown too large and are too difficult to remove, they will need to be removed by hand. Councillor Count said he was angry to learn that the limited budget had already run out and many areas had not been touched. He felt it important to say that the county council officers had done a fantastic job of carrying out the instructions of the joint administration, they did what they had been told but this failed the public, despite the administration having been warned that this would happen. Councillor Count added that he is pleased the motion has been put forward; he will be supporting it because the situation as it stands is not good enough.

- Councillor Patrick said he would be supporting this motion having seen the state of Wisbech over the last year.
- Councillor Mrs French said she will support this motion but asked that it be sent to the Chairman of Highways and Transport as this was the committee where the decision was made to overturn the previous decision. She added that Councillor Count is right in saying that very little money has been put into the budget and that some parts of the County do not want the weeds sprayed which is a disgrace.
- Councillor Mrs Laws said she fully supports this motion and welcomes it. It was ludicrous for the County Council to say they were going to hand weed as it is a false economy. Weeds are coming through the gullies and into the drainage system and surface water has been a huge problem. We all complain about road surfaces, but the weeds have taken grip and are uprooting tarmac and lifting paving stones, which is a trip hazard. It was a ridiculous idea to stop weed spraying and she agreed with Councillor Miscandlon's point about the danger to animals.
- Councillor Tierney said that it is fair to say there is a policy difference at County Council level. It seems to him that there is nothing more important to those in charge than their environmentalism which then bleeds into every policy. He wishes that the Liberal Democrats and Independents at County were as sensible as those serving at Fenland District Council as here members work together to find common ground and work forwards and while this is not the case at County Council, these problems will keep arising.
- Councillor Gerstner said he also fully supports the motion. He had questioned Highways about their agenda for weed spraying in Whittlesey because the weeds are six feet tall in some places, but nobody could say when it would be done.
- Councillor Davis said that she supports the motion but warned that having asked when her area would be weeded, the date she was given has been and gone so any information they give cannot be relied upon.
- Councillor Imafidon said he supports Councillor Taylor's motion, adding that it is a false economy for the County Council not to spray the weeds. This is causing flooding in some areas of Wisbech as they are getting into the drainage system.
- Councillor Booth said that this is clearly a party-political motion based on many of the comments. The motion was raised last year but people forget that glyphosate must be used in dry periods, and it has been very damp this year but Highways have been applying weed killer and are trying to get round while they can but once sprayed, there needs to be time to allow glyphosate to take effect. The seasons are shifting and changing, and it is getting warmer later into the year. He does not disagree with what people are saying but repeated his opinion that this is a party-political motion. Meanwhile, ragwort can be mechanically removed, and

sometimes it has to be in order to remove the roots.

- Councillor Hoy said she understands Councillor Booth's point about it being party political, but it is hard to avoid that because the people in charge are of one persuasion. However, she would implore Councillor Booth to tell them a policy change is needed.

Councillor Taylor summed up saying that many farmers do use glyphosate in October to kill off the seeds that have fallen off the back of combines and then germinate, before they start working on the land. That late application also gives them a chance to hit a particular problematic weed for farmers called black grass, but normal annual and perpetual weeds would not be effectively growing in October unless there is a dry, hot summer. Farmers used to look after the roadsides but that was taken away from them. It concerns him that if the County Council are now looking at two applications of chemical spray, are they looking at preventing and stopping grass cutting as well? He thanked members for their comments and support for this motion.

The Motion was approved.

C18/24 TREASURY MANAGEMENT ANNUAL REPORT 2023/24

Members considered the Treasury Management Annual Report 2023/24 presented by Councillor Boden.

Councillor Mrs French thanked officers who have worked extremely hard on this, along with Councillor Boden.

Councillor Nawaz commented that the Council's fiscal management has been competent, and he will support and commend this report.

Councillor Boden said he was thankful for the recognition of the work done by officers and passed on his congratulations also.

Proposed by Councillor Boden, seconded by Councillor Nawaz and AGREED that the Treasury Management Annual Review 2023/24 be noted.

4.55 pm

Chairman