

# OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 3 NOVEMBER 2025 - 2.30 PM



**PRESENT:** Councillor Mrs M Davis (Chairman), Councillor J Carney, Councillor L Foice-Beard, Councillor A Hay, Councillor P Hicks and Councillor A Woollard

**APOLOGIES:** Councillor G Booth and Councillor D Roy

**Officers in attendance:** Paul Medd (Chief Executive), Peter Catchpole (Corporate Director and Chief Finance Officer), Dan Horn (Assistant Director), Anna Goodall (Assistant Director), Sian Warren (Chief Accountant), Elaine Cooper (Member Services) and Helen Moore (Member Services and Governance Officer)

**Also in attendance:** Councillors Boden, Christy, Count, Mrs French, Hoy, Imafidon, Seaton, Tierney, and Wallwork.

**Guest:** Sue Stavers (Regional Director of Housing for the Eastern Region), Sally Greetham (Regional Housing Lead), Carl Grimmer (Regional Repair Lead), Daniel Read (Head of London Partnerships for the North Region at Clarion and Latimer), Adam Curry (Planning Investment Manager for Cambridgeshire), Tracey Thompson (Communities Team for Clarion Futures), and Maria Walker (Clarion Futures Communities Officer for the Fenland Area).

## **OSC18/23 PREVIOUS MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of 14 July 2025 were confirmed and signed.

## **OSC19/23 REVIEW OF CLARION**

Members received a presentation which gave an overview of Clarion's work and development by representatives of Clarion.

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

- Councillor Hay stated on the presentation it says that there are 52 inactive units and asked, is that meant to be empty homes? Sue Stavers responded that this is the way the system used captures information around the stock conditions, and these are units that have not been uploaded to the system yet. She continued there are to date 30 empty homes in the Fenland area. Councillor Hay asked how long these homes are likely to be empty for as she did notice there are waiting lists for every type of unit. Carl Grimmer emphasised the additional investment that Clarion have put into their empty homes in the Fenland area, he acknowledged that it has been difficult to maintain the number properties that are coming through as a void and to bring them back into a lettable position as quickly as Clarion would like to. He continued this figure has been improved by 60 within the last year but there are still a high number of voids that are coming through, but the return in the Fenland area is 12 a week, which is an improvement on previous figures, which has been achieved by doubling the bespoke work to the void properties and he is expecting the 30 to come down over the coming weeks.
- Councillor Hay asked for the phrase 'Cloned Survey' to be explained in more detail. Carl Grimmer explained that this survey is in relation to stock conditions information from the

surveyor, once he has been out and collated all the information relating to a property, if the Surveyor is unable to enter a property and it is similar to one that they have already been into, it will be classed as a clone, for example, if there is a row of houses all of the same build and nine have access and information has been gathered, the tenth one would be classed as a clone.

- Councillor Hay asked where the wellbeing hub is going to be located in Chatteris and what sort of advertising has been done within the community? Maria Walker stated that the Wellbeing Hub is part of a joint application that Clarion Futures carried out with People and Animals to the health bid and they were awarded £38,000. She continued that the advertising is undertaken by the People and Animals, they are working closely with Living Sports and a local charity called Berts and Bees to open the hub. Maria Walker added that the wellbeing hub which is due to be run from the library will not be a one size fits all and she would like to know what the local community would like to gain from the wellbeing hub being in Chatteris, which is why it has taken a little while to open. Councillor Hay asked why the Town Council has not been approached? Maria Walker stated that she will feed this information back.
- Councillor Hicks asked what Clarion would consider as a good figure for inactive units and are they achieving that? Carl Grimmer responded it depends on the value and cost to bring the properties round to a rentable state again, a rolling number of 20 would be reasonable for the Fenland area and he expects this to happen by the new year, bringing the figure down from 30 which it currently sits at, this is being achieved by doubling the internal workforce with a further 4 recently recruited bringing the workforce total to 15 from 8 working in the Fenland area.
- Councillor Woollard asked if Clarion is satisfied that the cost of air source heat pumps is justified against the saving on fuel and efficiency of the equipment? Andy Curry stated that Clarion are happy with the move away from fossil fuel burning appliances and air source is a good option to use with the addition of cap wall insulation, upgraded lock insulation, plus new doors, windows and external wall insulation if needed, He continued with these extra measures in place this will insure the best out of the heating systems for the customer. Daniel Reed added this is the same with the new builds, the company is ensuring that each property has a EPCB rating which is one of the highest rates that can be achieved on a house. He continued any new residents are educated on how to use the new heat system, so they are getting best value for money.
- Councillor Woollard asked what is the current situation and the real position against the three objectives that have been set out, how are they being met and what is being undertaken to achieve these objectives? Sally Greetham stated over that period show on the presentation, there was a reduction of anti-social behaviour, with the Police reporting an 80% drop in their figures and there was also an increase in customer satisfaction. She continued that Clarion are aware this is an ongoing challenge but there has been significant improvements which has come down to a close working partnership with other agencies, choosing the right tool to deal with the right problem at the right time and raising awareness on how customer tenants report things, plus adding additional features like CCTV and lighting for customer safety. Councillor Woollard asked if this scheme was going to be extended across Fenland? Sally Greetham responded that with the nature of anti-social behaviour, local bespoke solutions need to be considered to the challenges in that particular area, what Wisbech has given the team is a handy set of tool kits which could be shifted depending on what and where the challenges are.
- Councillor Barber stated on the action plan there is a mention of environmental improvements and asked if, Clarion are aware of the rubbish that is being dumped at the back of the Salvation Army in Wisbech? Sally Greetham responded that there are wardens checking fly tipping on a regular basis and when the team is alerted, they do react quickly She also added that CCTV has been added to the well know trouble spots.
- Councillor Barber stated that in Newton two Clarion houses are up for sale and asked why they are not being improved for use rather than being put up for sale? Also, when Clarion put properties up for sale is the profit invested back into the new round of properties. Sue

Stavers responded that the two properties in Newton were put up for sale because of the cost it would take to bring them up to an acceptable standard for Clarion to re-let out and as a transfer agreement there is a commitment that when Clarion sell its stock the money is reinvested into new builds.

- Councillor Foice-Beard asked if there was a list of the organisations mentioned in the presentation with their projects and locations for public access and do these organisations submit an evaluation piece with an impact report after the work is complete? Maria Walker replied that she has sent an email out to all the organisations asking them for a breakdown of everything that they are delivering that is linked to Clarion funding. She continued all of the organisations that Clarion support all handle their own advertising through social media, as this is a part of Clarion funding that is difficult to pinpoint, they get strategic support from Clarion which then will impact the things that they can deliver. Maria Walker committed to forwarding an updated list of organisations involved in this project.
- Councillor Foice-Beard asked regarding the Fenland Project Work, how are these plans going and are they on schedule? Adam Curry responded that Clarion employs the service of Equans in the region which are a tier one contractor and the work is on schedule and due to be completed by the end of the financial year.
- Councillor Foice-Beard asked if there was any data on accessibility adaptations and adjustments requested and any data around Clarion's response or their assessment time on works completed? Sus Stavers answered that they did not have any data with them today but there is a special adaptations team who coordinate all the repairs and improvements, some of which are done in house, and some are external via the DFG. She continued there is a current vulnerability and accessibility strategy that accesses needs of the homeowner. Sue Staver committed to sharing some data as an action after the meeting. Councillor Foice-Beard added that there is a high volume of digital exclusion in some local areas, and some local residents do not use the digital world and asked if some of the information could cover this area.
- Councillor Foice-Beard stated as seen on the presentation measuring the success, how does this measure against last years and the year before that? She additionally asked, was this an isolated area of concern in Wisbech, or is this information from the whole of the Fenland area? Sally Greetham confirmed that the biggest area of anti-social behaviour is concentrated in Wisbech and the project that Clarion had was exclusively in Wisbech. She continued to say that across Fenland there has been a higher level of anti-social behaviour, but this has also been evident across the whole of the UK.
- Councillor Mrs Davis asked if Awabb's law has gone past the pilot stage? Carl Grimmer stated that Awabbs Law went live this week and that is what Clarion is working on now through training and understanding on what this means for the Clarion organisation and its residents with changes to reporting and a change in the IT system.

### **Members noted the information provided**

### **OSC20/23 ANNUAL MEETING WITH THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE, INCLUDING LGR**

Paul Medd and Council Chris Boden attended the meeting with a presentation having been circulated prior to the meeting.

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

- Councillor Woollard stated that in the report it says that the budget was originally balanced but now it is currently being suggested a possible deficit of £1.4 million if interventions are not met, and also following that projected deficits of £2.2 million for 2026 and rising in subsequent years and he would like some reassurance that Fenland District Council (FDC) are continuing to be a prudent Council and that FDC will expect to be budgeting wherever possible with no losses and no deficits. Councillor Boden responded that steps have been

put in place through the Budget Equalisation Reserve which has not needed to be relied on which is testimony to the fact that the Finance Team and officers work really hard to ensure that FDC works as efficiently and effectively as possible when spending public money, however, officers face an unusual situation coming up regarding the budget for 2026/27 where legally FDC do not actually know for sure that Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) is going ahead, and that means being prudent FDC cannot assume that the Council will cease to exist on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2028. He continued the Council do believe that is likely to be the case, and believe it is the Governments current intention to carry this out, but it may not happen, and if it does not the Council cannot find itself in a position where it has made financial decisions on the assumption that LGR will take place and then it does not. Councillor Boden added with this in mind the 2026/27 budget will be much more difficult than the 2027/28 budget even though the projected deficit is smaller in 2026/27 because the Council must not make the assumption that LGR will go ahead and the Council will cease to exist on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2028. He stated that there have been a good number of meetings to identify opportunities which exist so the Council can ensure that prudence continues to be shown by FDC either until the 31 March 2028 or into the indefinite future depending on what happens with LGR.

- Councillor Woollard stated that March Country Park project mentions that there is confirmation of the land transfer agreement only, what does this mean, is this going ahead and has the land been agreed? Councillor Boden responded that the project was split into two phases because of the potential impact of LGR on phase one and phase two with Phase one identifying land ownership and then agreeing to the terms of the land transfer to FDC, and Phase two will see the detailed design and delivery of the project, He stated that the work has been done by officers and by lead members to confirm ownership and discussions have been undertaken with the owners, but as of yet no agreement has been reached on terms which are acceptable to both parties. Councillor Boden continued that work continues with officers who are currently preparing an update project briefing paper for the lead members which is expected imminently.
- Councillor Barber stated that in regard of the Fenland Inspire Projects and LGR, have any of these projects been started and if not is this because of LGR? Councillor Boden responded that this project was reviewed in June, and eleven projects were separated out which would progress currently with the remaining projects awaiting clarity of the attention of Central Government. He stated that if the Council were to progress all of the projects which are in the very lengthy Fenland inspire list, then the Council would not be being prudent and the eleven chosen are either because they were already underway or because their cost was such that it was definitely able to be achieved regardless of the LGR. Councillor Boden added that there was also the problem of limited officer resource as to why some of the projects could not proceed immediately and the Council needed to prioritise. The good news is that the eleven are continuing to move forward and will not be affected by LGR but having said that FDC does continue to have a fluid and flexible approach when opportunities arise. Councillor Barber suggested that a press release would be a good way of informing the public about some of the projects taking place as she finds she is getting asked all the time Councillor Boden stated that he was reluctant to be over exuberant about what the Council has achieved and is going to be achieving but having said that he did agree with Councillor Barber about giving out a public progress report and a success to date report and will be taking this away from the meeting to discuss with the Chief Executive.
- Councillor Foice-Beard stated that with regard to the Fenland Future Limited projects at Nene Waterfront, Wisbech and the Elms, Chatteris, can further details and dates for delivery be provided? Councillor Boden stated that a separate company has been set up called Fenland Future Ltd (FFL), which is dealing with the development of these two sites, legally that means that a lot of the decisions being made are not being made by FDC, officers or members of the Council, the decisions have to be made by the directors of the company with means that the Council does not direct the directors or FFL to do things, but occasionally conversations and observations do happen, and the FFL have faced challenges along the way but the final decisions are made by the directors. He continued

things have slightly changed due to LGR and a business plan needs to be in place and published from FFL by 31 January 2026, between now and then the Council will be giving consideration to the effects of LGR on the two sites involved with FFL and the Council will be looking for recommendations to be made based on the evidence when the Council starts looking at the numbers in conjunction with LGR to work out what is best for FDC and the people of Fenland.

- Councillor Mrs Davis asked how realistic are the commercial projections given the national economic uncertainty? Councillor Boden responded that the commercial projections income is holding up very well and at this time there is no need for mitigation to be made and as far as the Council are aware there is not going to be the prospect of any mitigation.
- Councillor Mrs Davis asked what is the risk of partial delivery with the Fenland Inspire projects if external funding, such as Football Foundation does not materialise? Councillor Boden stated that he worked on the assumption when originally putting forward the concept of Fenland Inspire that the Council would not receive any external funding to support projects, so if there were no external funding the proposal would still go ahead, however if there is a chance of external funding this can assist in bringing projects forward in terms of the delivery timetable which works in the Councils favour and allows the Council to be prudent in making decisions and bring the spend forward.
- Councillor Mrs Davis asked beyond financial savings, what evidence shows the transformation programme has improved customer satisfaction and service quality? Councillor Boden stated that the evidence lies within the performance indicators and also with the customer satisfaction levels which are shown and have held well which is credit to the officer service. Paul Medd added that the Council have been bold and ambitious around transformation, and this has clearly underpinned the high level of customer service satisfaction that FDC have managed to retain but the Council has also been pragmatic and sensible in the transformation programme that the Council has sought to pursue.
- Councillor Mrs Davis asked are the savings from TA1 and TA2 sustainable or one-off efficiencies that will erode over time? Councillor Boden responded that the transformation agenda is not just about saving money, but largely about greater efficiency and greater cost effectiveness, with some of the changes in TA1 and TA2 being one-off changes and other changes were more fundamental which has reduced the amount of spend the Council had for that particular aspect of the Council's work, which was then fed into the base budgets for future years. He added that those ones that are sustainable, and the one-off ones are by definition a one-off and he was hoping to introduce a TA3 but due to the LGR there will be no long-term saving benefits as the Council will cease to exist from 31 March 2028 which will affect that long term payback period that the Council would have and the residents would benefit from if changes were made. Paul Medd gave the example of the success and savings made by the My Fenland team with the help of the Transformation team.
- Councillor Mrs Davis asked on infrastructure projects, how can FDC leverage its consulting role to get tangible community benefits, e.g. jobs, environment, and skills? Councillor Boden stated that it has always been difficult for the Council to use its consulting role to achieve those objectives as there is a limited amount of effect the Council can have when it comes to the private sector investment which takes place within Fenland, however within the consulting role Government money is being channelled via the Combined Authority to the Fenland area and it is there where the consulting role and the interaction from FDC officers and other officers within Cambridge and Peterborough Combined Authority ensure Fenland gets its fair share of money made available by Central Government for a whole host of different areas. Paul Medd added that a lot of growth is organic and there is room for FDC to enhance that growth and the Council continue to be very active directly in connection with the Combined Authority.
- Councillor Hicks asked if FDC are in a position where staff are leaving because there will be no new jobs in two years' time, and has LGR affected recruitment? Councillor Boden responded this issue was highlighted when the Government made its announcement last December regarding LGR, but he has been pleasantly surprised that there does not seem to be any signs at this time of a leakage of staff as far as Fenland is concerned Paul Medd

added this is a real issue and it has been ever since LGR was announced and he is sure it will continue to be a concern until the ongoing uncertainties associated with LGR are finally resolved one way or another. He added that staff are being fully updated on a regular basis to help alleviate stress and worry and in terms of recruitment thankfully there is a stable workforce, and recruitment has not been a big issue, and he feels the reputation FDC holds puts the Council in good stead. Councillor Hicks stated that he can see a situation as the end date becomes closer that there will be hardly any staff left Councillor Boden stated that the Council was not going to be in that position as the functions of Council will still be happening on the 1 April 2028, bins will still need to be emptied and that applies to all other functions across the Council, LGR will inherit different function run by the Council and this will stay in place until the new functions are rolled out which could take a long time. Paul Medd added that there has always been a turnover of staff within the Council but there is no significant evidence this has anything to do with LGR.

**Members noted the Information provided.**

### **OSC21/23 COMMERCIAL INVESTMENT STRATEGY AND INVESTMENT BOARD UPDATE**

Members considered an update on the Commercial Investment Strategy and Investment Board from April 2024 to March 2025

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

- Councillor Woollard asked for clarification on the quarter of a million-pound fees for DM and DP attached to the Chatteris project. He continued there are also consultancy fees shown of £191,400 and £117,000 to Instinctively Green plus £41,000 in legal fees which are in his view colossal and are not allocated to the two principal projects, so what are they for, why have these fees been paid and are they justified? Councillor Boden stressed the FDC is not a development company and FFL does not have the expertise that is necessary for a development company, so the Council has to buy that expertise in. He explained that the abbreviation DM is the Development Management (DM) cost, and the DP is the Development Planning (DP) cost both of which are supplied to FDC by Luvals. Councillor Boden continued, as far as the legal costs the company has various things which it has to do like training, land transfers and legal advice for the overall objective to be achieved and there would be significant benefit to FDC in managing to subsidise its revenue account and services given to residents on an annual basis.
- Councillor Mrs Davis asked if there are any confirmed timelines for the delivery and completion of the project as they seem to have been rolling on? Councillor Boden stressed that there has been a lot of work happening on the technical side both in terms of what appears on the ground and what has to go in for the planning application and also the way the company is set up and the decisions which have been made. He added that considering the options the Council has now based on LGR that may change what the Council has planned, but as far as the Elms in Chatteris is concerned if the Council was to continue to go ahead as planned the site should be under construction by July 2026 subject to the agreed viability assessments being positive and as far as the Nene Waterfront is concerned in Wisbech there are negotiations happening with an interested party for a significant part of that site and the Council is progressing well with the extra care offer on-site five which is due to go to Planning Committee soon.
- Councillor Mrs Davis stated there are rising loan costs of £147,000 in 2024/25 and asked at which point do projects become financially unviable and the decision taken to step away? Councillor Boden confirmed this figure was projected to increase significantly over the course of the forthcoming years as additional capital is required in order to achieve the objectives of the company. He continued that if the Council did find there was a significant financial lack of viability, then things can be changed and there are mechanisms in place to

deal with unexpected financial lack of viability, and this is currently being reviewed under LGR, and he was expecting there to be options for the Council to work with.

- Councillor Mrs Davis asked as there has been no formal investment board meetings in 2024/25 how is governance being maintained? Councillor Boden responded that there was very little point in holding Investment Board meetings if decisions were not being made, but every month the Investment Board members received an update on what the situation is, and good governance is exercised.
- Councillor Mrs Davis asked what impact will LGR have on FFL assets, governance and accountability? Councillor Boden replied there is an obligation upon FFL to have a business plan published by 31<sup>st</sup> January 2026 and that is the responsibility of the directors of FFL with the situation being reviewed, and options be investigated.
- Councillor Mrs Davis asked if there is an exit strategy for underperforming or stalled projects? Councillor Boden stated that the basic answer is no, but there is a situation where there is a facility which was made available back in 2021 of £25 million pounds to support the Council's Investment Strategy but to date the Council has only scratched the surface of that £25 million pounds because the Council has been prudent with only one commercial investment which is mentioned in the report.

#### **Members noted the information provided**

#### **OSC22/23    USE OF WAIVER PROVISIONS**

Councillor Mrs Davis provided details of decisions that she had waived the need for notice to be given on the Forward Plan and call-in procedures.

Councillor Boden stated that it is necessary to exercise this waiver, but it is not desirable unless necessary and is pleased with the balance shown.

#### **Members noted the waivers permitted by the Chairman since the date of the last meeting.**

#### **OSC23/23    UPDATE ON PREVIOUS ACTIONS**

Councillor Hay mentioned that some of the reports have been sent incomplete, Member Services agreed to re send the report with the missing information.

#### **OSC24/23    FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME**

Councillor Mrs Davis stated there was nothing further to report.

4.55 pm

Chairman