

# OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 12 OCTOBER 2020 - 1.30 PM



**PRESENT:** Councillor D Mason (Chairman), Councillor A Miscandlon (Vice-Chairman), Councillor G Booth, Councillor S Count, Councillor M Cornwell, Councillor M Humphrey, Councillor Mrs K Mayor (*as substitute for Councillor D Connor*), Councillor M Purser, Councillor D Topgood, Councillor R Wicks and Councillor F Yeulett

**APOLOGIES:** Councillor D Connor and Councillor R Skoulding

**OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:** Peter Catchpole (Corporate Director and Chief Finance Officer), Anna Goodall (Head of Governance and Customer Services), Paul Medd (Chief Executive) and Carol Pilson (Corporate Director and Monitoring Officer)

**GUESTS:** Councillor C Boden, Councillor S Clark, Councillor Mrs J French, Councillor Mrs D Laws, Councillor P Murphy, Councillor C Seaton, Councillor C Seaton, and Councillor S Wallwork

Councillor Mason welcomed members of the public and press watching the livestream of the Overview & Scrutiny meeting via YouTube due to Government guidance on social distancing. The meeting was held in accordance with the provision set out in the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 and with Fenland District Council's Virtual Meeting Protocol.

## **OSC16/19 PREVIOUS MINUTES.**

The minutes of the meeting of 7 September 2020 were confirmed and signed.

## **OSC17/19 ANNUAL MEETING WITH THE LEADER AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

Members had received a copy of the Leader and Chief Executive's presentation prior to the meeting.

Councillor Miscandlon welcomed Councillor Boden and Paul Medd to the meeting and thanked them for their attendance; he congratulated them on the compilation of the report and said that it was an opportunity today to look forward rather than back.

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

1. Councillor Miscandlon asked if there is enough capacity within the Corporate Management Team (CMT) following the departure of Gary Garford and is there an intention to review CMT capacity. Paul Medd responded that he has been asked this on several occasions over the last ten years as we have worked our way through austerity and are now confronted by COVID-19. He has always said it is important to strike the right balance between making savings in the management structure where possible but equally retaining the appropriate management capacity to ensure we are able to effectively deliver members' priorities. In his opinion yes, we have enough CMT capacity although we are busy and have a lot to do in the range of services we deliver. However, since Gary Garford's departure we have benefitted from interim cover provided by Simon Machen; a very experienced director

in economic growth and regeneration. Meanwhile, management capacity is frequently discussed with the Leader, so it is under continual review. Councillor Miscandlon thanked Paul Medd for his reply.

2. Councillor Mason said that the panel are very interested in the Investment Board and Fenland Future Limited. How much has been invested thus far and what are the key projects coming up that can be spoken about? Councillor Boden said there are some exciting possibilities but for reasons of commercial confidentiality he cannot say too much about those prospects currently. However, he can say that the first formal Investment Board approved further appraisal work to be carried out on the development of the Nene Waterfront. A timetable has been drawn up and it is expected that a detailed report will be taken to the Investment Board early next year. A paper will be presented on potential investment in residential property at their next meeting and preparations are in place for the inaugural board meeting of Fenland Futures Ltd, which will take place soon. Councillor Mason thanked Councillor Boden for his response; he appreciates that much is currently confidential, but the panel will be updated as and when possible.
3. Councillor Miscandlon asked how COVID-19 has affected the investment programme going forward as was originally envisaged by the Investment Board. Councillor Boden said there was a change of focus when setting up the new arrangements to deal with COVID-19, and generally the pandemic has caused some operational delays in making decisions about investing in property funds which had previously been discussed. There were no benefits anticipated from the Commercial and Investment Strategy in the 20/21 budget but the impact on the budget was detailed in the report to Full Council in August, but these are not to do with the investment programme itself. We are about three or four months behind where we would have been; many of our ideas have to be evaluated now that the business environment is so different. Councillor Miscandlon thanked Councillor Boden and said that the public would be grateful for the actions being taken so far and going forward will be dealt with in the appropriate manner.
4. Councillor Purser asked if the Council has any data regarding the type and number of businesses that have closed in Fenland in light of the pandemic and the subsequent impact on business rates. Councillor Boden responded that it is currently too early to say what the effects are on NNDR and businesses. Unfortunately, we will have to make a guess for the budget process for 21/22 and we are watching events carefully. It is difficult to tell how many businesses have closed as there may always have been some that were going to close anyway. However, he is pleased that despite all the problems, a number of businesses have actually started up during this time. The situation is further complicated by the number of grants made available, which has obscured the position substantially as we are not receiving money for many businesses as this is covered by central government grant and we do not know what will happen once these grants finish or if they will continue beyond March 2021. He anticipates there will be fewer businesses in 2021/22 but the extent is difficult to say. The greatest publicity has occurred in the retail, hospitality and leisure sector and so that may be where we will see the greatest effect, but many had a rateable value of under £15k and so qualified for small business rates relief and did not pay NNDR. We also do not know what will happen after the furlough scheme ends and what effect that will have on larger businesses; however early indications are that collection rates have held up far better than anticipated and are not far off target. Councillor Purser thanked Councillor Boden.
5. Councillor Wicks said that there were a number of activities that the Council promoted prior to COVID-19 such as Street Pride and the Pride of Fenland awards and asked what does the future hold for these and similar activities? Councillor Wallwork agreed that these events have had to be put on hold and the ever-changing situation means we cannot fix any future dates. However, we are in the midst of planning an online Pride of Fenland ceremony and looking at how that might practically work. Unfortunately, some events such as Street Pride will have to wait although we are still in contact. Once the pandemic ends, we will be doing some community work to restart some of what we have always done. Councillor Wicks thanked Councillor Wallwork.

6. Councillor Wicks asked for an update into further initiatives such as Getting it Sorted and the recycling events. Councillor Murphy advised that the situation is much the same as indicated by Councillor Wallwork but there is a lot going on. Small groups have continued with socially distanced litter picks, planting of floral displays have continued, and recycling awareness has been upheld with competitions for children. A lot of work is being undertaken with the schools to keep the children on board so as not to lose interest.
7. Councillor Mason said that within the annual report the information on Cultural Strategy was very interesting and it was noted that further details would be available in the autumn. He asked if there was any further information available now. Councillor Seaton responded that for some time FDC has been working towards the development of a creativity and cultural strategy. Following discussions with the Arts Council, funding of £15k was secured to appoint a specialist to develop a creativity and cultural strategy for the district. It will not be an FDC strategy but a document for a wider community creativity and cultural partnership for years ahead. Further details will be provided at the November meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny panel and it is hoped that the Arts Council will be keen to work with the partnership to implement the strategy once it is signed off. Councillor Mason thanked Councillor Seaton.
8. Councillor Cornwell expressed his concern regarding health services, saying that members rarely get feedback from our representatives on the different health committees, hence members feel disengaged in health matters generally. He asked if something could be done about that. For example, there is a major event being planned by one of the large private practice cooperatives which means that five of our major district practices are being reorganised but we know nothing about this and we do not know what the effect will be. He asked why members are not engaged in this process and why are members not aware of what is going on in the local primary care services. Councillor Wallwork responded that links to updates can be provided but in terms of GP surgeries, we engage with them, but we do not direct to them and we cannot demand that they make us aware of their business and tell us everything. Councillor Cornwell replied that even GP practices have a relationship with the CCG (Clinical Commissioning Group), and the CCG has a relationship with the Health and Wellbeing Board. Our representatives on these boards should be receiving information to report to us; perhaps they should ask the appropriate questions at the appropriate meetings, but either way the system feels disjointed as there was a time when we were aware of what was going on. Councillor Wallwork said although she did not believe FDC had been given constant information from the GP services historically, she agreed to look into this further, adding that we do have some great relationships with the health services. However, she reiterated that we cannot demand and must be respectful and supportive; they are currently dealing with major issues. Councillor Cornwell thanked Councillor Wallwork, adding that all he was saying was that there has to be a reporting relationship as it is important for us to understand what is going on.
9. Councillor Yeulett said there is talk of a second wave of the pandemic which will further involve local government. He asked Councillor Boden what are the challenges that we will face, and do we have the resources to deal with the impact this will have, and he also asked how the collection of council tax payments is going. Councillor Boden answered that in respect of council tax, we have continued to receive it, although the numbers are slightly skewed due to additional funding received from central government for those claiming council tax support; the numbers are down on our target but not by much. However, we are concerned about what will happen after furlough and regrettably when, rather than if, we see more unemployment. Regarding our response to the pandemic going forward, Councillor Boden said it is important to distinguish those parts of the response to COVID-19 dealt with at district and county council level. The overwhelming majority of the burden falls at county level. At district level, there are a number of further grants to be made for which we will be responsible for administering and distributing. We must be able to respond with the local COVID hub ready to deal with an increase in demand. The advantage is that we do not have to set it up from scratch; the hard work was done by officers who put in a lot of hours in March and April to set up the hub, which can grow as required. We also have an

enforcement function, with the emphasis on advising rather than levying fines as a first approach. We are constantly being asked by businesses about the effects of ever-changing regulations on them. There has also been a lot of input at officer level, particularly from our Chief Executive, with partnership work done being done in terms of monitoring and action at both county level and with the Combined Authority. The increase in the local COVID hub will form the major part of our primary function as a district council and we are in a stronger position now than in March to deal with an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases. Paul Medd said that further to Councillor Boden's comprehensive response, he would like to add that we have been keeping an eye on case numbers across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and where we have identified small local spikes we have been proactive with interventions to get on top of that to prevent a significant increase in numbers. We also adhere to the test and trace requirements which have been covered at length through the media and been proactive in local outbreak control planning. We also have a dedicated officer team that meets regularly working to a specific action plan, and he remains in close contact with Councillor Boden daily discussing the fluid situation; meanwhile CMT colleagues liaise with their portfolio holder leads. Councillor Yeulett thanked both Councillor Boden and Paul Medd and added if there was confidence in having sufficient capacity going forward to meet the challenges; also he had noted in the report that there is a test centre in Wisbech and asked if there are any plans to have any further test centres elsewhere in the district. Paul Medd replied that he believes we have sufficient capacity as a council, augmented by support from central government with additional funding to reopen the high streets, and to provide extra environmental health capacity. Money has also been received from the county council which we have put into the environmental health service as it has played a prominent role in dealing with COVID-19 across our communities. In respect of testing centres, we do have a mobile unit in Wisbech, but the requirement for testing centres is not something that sits within our discretion – but we would respond as a council area if there was a request to increase testing capacity within Fenland. If we do, we would liaise with the Leader and members over suitable test sites.

10. Councillor Purser said that FDC staff had worked very hard in this unprecedented situation. He asked in view of a potential second spike would there be anything that they would do differently next time. Councillor Boden responded that it was a difficult period at the beginning which brought about changes to the way members and staff worked but subsequently we have reflected upon that. It was chaotic at the beginning, having to respond to the latest advice which was not always quick or consistent, and staff did very well under very difficult circumstances. We have now learnt from that and if we see a second spike, we have systems and infrastructure in place to allow us to respond. However, once the furlough system ends there may not be as much immediate voluntary capacity available as in the first wave but if so, we can identify this quickly and call upon the NHS volunteers who came forward originally. Facing the future, we have looked at more general lessons to be learned. We have looked at how new ways of working will operate, for example where and how staff will work or the redeployment and retraining of staff if necessary. We have had to make significant changes to customer engagement and the way we interact with residents, whether that be how they pay us for things or how we respond to their questions. We have learned much about organisational resilience and we have more questions rather than answers about future accommodation. Paul Medd responded that as Chief Executive he is proud of the effort of all staff over the last six months notwithstanding their contribution pre-pandemic, but their motivation and resilience has been exceptional and has kept the Council delivering valued services to local people. He said that the thanks and recognition received from members has been passed to staff and this has been well received, along with the many comments of praise from the public. We are in a strong position to continue the fight against COVID as well as to continue delivering services and projects. He added that resilience is important; whilst we always ask for more from staff, it is important to ensure they get the work/life balance right. Finally, some fantastic work is being undertaken around customer engagement which the Leader and Cabinet colleagues will share more broadly as that work evolves. There is exciting potential for how we continue to

transform, modernise and become more efficient and effective. Councillor Purser thanked Paul Medd and said all staff are owed a huge debt of gratitude and he wanted to thank them for all they had done. Councillor Mason concurred with Councillor Purser's comment on behalf of the Overview and Scrutiny panel.

11. Councillor Booth said that the Council had also relied to some degree on volunteers in the community and that point was missed in the presentation. Once calls were received, information was passed to those volunteers who provided the practical help by doing the shopping, collecting and delivering prescriptions etc. and we must not forget that. These volunteer groups are still ongoing, and we must continue to engage with them going forward and plan towards the second spike; although calls for help have reduced, they will increase again. Furthermore, he knows of people who signed up to the NHS volunteer group, but they were not fully utilised and some waited weeks before receiving requests for help. This group of volunteers were dedicated to helping people in the shielded group whereas other volunteers helped anyone who did not fall into that category. He asked if this group would be expanded to help everyone who needed it and not just the shielded group. Councillor Boden said he agreed wholeheartedly with Councillor Booth's comments about the importance of the voluntary organisations. Regarding the utilisation of the NHS volunteers, this is a national initiative and for central government to determine as to how they are made available for use.
12. Councillor Wicks raised the heading in the report regarding the promotion and lobbying for infrastructure improvements. He referred to the Ely upgrade junction, which he said will have a significant effect on Fenland but has been much delayed, and the announcement of a considerable amount of money into the Connecting Cambridgeshire project. A number of rural residents have contacted him about when they will see improvements to their infrastructure and broadband speeds, and he asked Councillor Boden if we will be lobbying as a council for the Ely upgrade and where do we stand with Connecting Cambridgeshire? Councillor Boden said the Ely infrastructure is problematic, particularly the north junction, and we have made representations about that, but the mayor of the combined authority, supported by local MPs, is in the strongest position to deal with it and we have given him our full support in trying to force through an improvement. The mayor has vociferously expressed his frustration to National Rail regarding this and unfortunately Councillor Boden can give no further update today but said that Councillor Wicks is correct that the effect of the Ely upgrade is fundamental to current and future rail services within Fenland. Furthermore, the amount of investment put in by Cambridgeshire County Council over the years means that we are in a stronger position than many other rural counties, we are in a relatively good position in respect of broadband services but accepts that unfortunately some residents, including some of our own members, do not benefit and appreciates this particularly affects people who require good broadband for home working and operating businesses from home. There are no short-term solutions, but we continue to push for an increase in productivity and faster broadband connections.
13. Councillor Count said today has primarily been a performance review of the last year. The world has changed due to coronavirus so he would like to know what FDC's core visions are and are they still fit for purpose or do they need amending. Councillor Boden replied that we are a relatively small second tier council in a two-tier system with most local government functions performed at county level. However, we are ambitious and wish to have a district which is a better place to live for everyone not just in terms of quality of life by providing access to countryside and cleaner air but in terms of economy and stronger skills to ensure better jobs. For that we need infrastructure and we continue to lobby for money for this. In the last few years, we have received money from the Combined Authority which has been crucial in helping us with our aims. With thanks largely due Councillor Count's leadership at county level there is also now more focus on us in the north. Opportunities to invest more money in skills is vitally important and much of this work is hidden and not as obvious as a new bridge or rail service. Councillor Count thanked Councillor Boden, saying he was looking forward to their continued partnership and working together to improve the lives of local people.

14. Councillor Booth referred to the report on Freedom Leisure and the excellent service it was said to be providing. He said that he was disappointed that there were no facts or figures provided to back up this statement and asked how this view was arrived at. Councillor Boden advised that many performance indicators had been set to provide targets for Freedom Leisure to reach beyond saving FDC money. They had done better than anticipated with these targets until their closure in March due to the pandemic. However, we have worked very closely with them to ensure their survival and for them to reopen safely as soon as possible. They have been responsive and cooperative to our requests and that is why they were able to reopen. Councillor Booth thanked Councillor Boden for his response and for providing the evidence required to support that statement but said that in future could such statements be provided with the supporting facts and figures.
15. Councillor Mason wanted to place on record his thanks to Councillor Boden and Councillor Clark for the many hours of work they had put in to resolve the recent issues particularly in respect of the swimming pools.
16. Councillor Humphrey referred to the last two pages of the report regarding external funding received and asked for context on why this was included in the presentation. There were some good figures in there, but he was surprised to see them. Councillor Boden said it was just the intention to show the amount of external funding that has been drawn into our area. It shows through partnership working and taking advantage of opportunities that exist, that money is coming in and gives a flavour of the unusually large amounts of money that has come into the system over the last 12/18 months. It is easy to forget what we can utilise and administer from what comes into Fenland from third parties. Councillor Humphrey thanked Councillor Boden saying the figures are to be commended.

*(Councillor Cornwell left the meeting).*

Councillor Mason thanked Paul Medd for his attendance at the meeting today.

*(Paul Medd left the meeting).*

## **OSC18/19 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME**

Members considered the Future Work Programme.

Councillor Booth said that the agenda meeting for November looked quite heavy and suggested the Culture Strategy update be deferred to a later date. This was agreed.

Councillor Mrs Mayor asked if Anglian Water would be attending the December meeting. Anna Goodall confirmed they were committed to attending at a future meeting and will identify the most relevant person to attend once they have received the questions that members would like to ask.

2.56 pm

Chairman