

# OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 6 DECEMBER 2021 - 1.30 PM



**PRESENT:** Councillor D Mason (Chairman), Councillor A Miscandlon (Vice-Chairman), Councillor G Booth, Councillor D Connor, Councillor A Hay, Councillor R Wicks and Councillor F Yeulett

**APOLOGIES:** Councillor M Cornwell, Councillor S Count, Councillor M Humphrey, Councillor M Purser, Councillor R Skoulding and Councillor D Topgood

**OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:** Niall Jackson (Member Services, GDPR & Governance Officer), Sam Anthony (Head of HR and OD), Dan Horn (Head of Housing and Community Support), Carol Pilsen (Corporate Director and Monitoring Officer) and Kathy Woodward (Internal Audit Manager)

**GUESTS:** Sally Greetham (Clarion), Yvonne Ogden (Clarion), Daniel Read (Clarion), Adrian Mills (Anglian Revenues Partnership), Lorraine King (Anglian Revenues Partnership), Matthew Waite (Anglian Revenues Partnership), Paul Corney (Anglian Revenues Partnership)

## **OSC25/21 PREVIOUS MINUTES.**

The minutes of the meeting of 8 November 2021 were confirmed and signed subject to the following comments:

- Councillor Booth clarified that in the previous minutes section it was an action for Councillor Benney to provide an update from the Combined Authority. He asked that the panel write to Councillor Benney to chase an answer due to the time taken to reply to this request.

## **OSC26/21 UPDATE ON PREVIOUS ACTIONS.**

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

- Councillor Miscandlon requested that all outstanding actions be chased up.

## **OSC27/21 REVIEW OF CLARION**

Councillor Mason welcomed attendees from Clarion, Councillor Hoy and Dan Horn to the meeting.

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

- Councillor Mason asked whether Cadent had any routine maintenance programmes in place. Sally Greetham informed the panel that, regarding routine gas maintenance compliance, Clarion were undertaking 99.78 percent within the timescales. She noted that this was good compared to peers who only average around 99.4 percent. She informed the panel that they do well in other areas of maintenance such as solid fuel types where 100 percent servicing had been achieved and noted their programme for green technology servicing which was in the high 90s for compliance. She explained there were some challenges with compliance including customers refusing entry which prevented 100 percent compliance. She explained there are more legal opportunities for enforcing gas compliance and that where compliance was lower than expected this was due to there being less of a legal basis for compliance. In addition, Sally noted that Clarion also have a planned routine maintenance scheme for when kitchens, bathrooms and roofs are due to be replaced. She also explained that alongside the usual investment programme they had successfully undertaken a decarbonisation project in Fenland.
- Councillor Yeulett asked how the sites for new builds are chosen with regards to good transport

and facilities. He also asked what plans they had to implement the green agenda noting the expense and questioning how they will manage this. Daniel Reed noted that Clarion have a strategic land team who look at long term options which take 5-10 years to develop and an everyday land team who buy sites with planning already passed. He explained that all sites are chosen in consultation with the local authority and the housing management team to ensure that they are in an area that is well located. He further noted that they also have a strategic project team which works on sites already owned but are coming to the end of their life such as Springfield Avenue and Roman Court. He explained that these sites are modernised and that they were aiming to be zero net carbon whilst remaining as affordable as possible for residents. He noted that Clarion were also trying to be more sustainable when working with developers on any package deals for land and building, however he explained that this was done at the developer's discretion as there was no legal obligation to build houses to a high level of sustainability yet.

- Councillor Yeulett noted that the price of modern green technology such as the ground source heat pumps was high at 18,000 pounds and asked whether Clarion could work with these prices whilst keeping the cost down for residents. Daniel Reed agreed that it was expensive and that whilst it was not a legal obligation to have them in a new build, Clarion were attempting to stay ahead of the curve in phasing out traditional fossil burning technology.
- Councillor Miscandlon asked what steps were being taken to future proof their housing stock and what the programme for replacement was in relation to gas boilers. Daniel Reed reasserted that Clarion were attempting to phase out the use of traditional boilers in new builds and that they had a long-term programme to replace their current stock with modern technology in the next 8-10 years. Sally Greetham informed the panel that there was a Clarion 2040 standard which aimed at eventually becoming carbon neutral but that the first approach was to make homes more energy efficient and that how this is achieved will vary from property to property. She explained that they have a strategy with a robust financial plan and that their plans have been helped by the decarbonisation project in Fenland. She noted that Clarion will seek government funding where possible as with the Fenland project and that it was important to bring the residents along with them. Daniel Reed explained that technologies are improving all the time and expressed the hope that as technology improves there will be a chance to replace single units rather than whole systems. He also noted that they were looking at utilising electric boilers but that they had a bad reputation in the past and they needed to be happy with them before this route was explored further.
- Councillor Miscandlon asked what strategy was utilised when relocating problem tenants. Sally Greetham noted that it is the tenants who choose where they go and that any vulnerable tenants have access to support wherever they go. She explained that if a resident is at risk of breaching their tenancy agreement, they work with them to resolve these issues through the tenancy sustainment team. She also noted that they had successfully collaborated with Fenland colleagues on the Ferry project which helped provide more support to customers and reiterated the importance of working with third parties to help vulnerable residents.
- Councillor Miscandlon thanked Clarion for a very comprehensive report.
- Councillor Booth asked whether Clarion were keeping up with the servicing of the air source heat pumps and whether they had experienced any problems due to the supply issues in England. Sally Greetham noted that she was confident that they could keep up with the servicing demands and that they were happy with how servicing had been undertaken with contractors. She agreed that there were challenges across the sector with repairs and maintenance due to struggles in the supply chain, but good contracting management has meant that this has been managed well.
- Councillor Booth noted that solar panel numbers seemed quite low as grants were available from government and asked whether there were any plans to introduce more in the future. He also enquired about the possible use of house batteries. Sally Greetham noted that they did have plans to continue introducing solar powered alternatives noting the recent decarbonisation project. She explained that the project will give a good insight into what will work well in the area. Councillor Booth asked whether Clarion had an idea of how many houses would have solar power installed. Sally Greetham noted that they do not have a specific figure as each

property was bespoke in what would work well. Yvonne Ogden noted that they were working with residents to maximise the efficiency of the technology and better manage the cost across all areas. Daniel Reed also noted that they were looking at battery technology but that they always go with a fabric first approach as the less heat escaping the better.

- Councillor Hay asked what Clarion were doing about sheltered housing and the maintenance of the communal areas. Sally Greetham noted that if any sites are brought to Clarion's attention by Councillors they can do a recheck. She explained that there were some challenges with sheltered housing specifically which can make it hard to let. She noted that they are subject to routine maintenance work as with the other properties but agreed that it was an area that probably needed tidying up.
- Councillor Hay noted that there used to be wardens living in sheltered housing and asked whether there was anything in place for a quick response now they were gone. Sally Greetham explained that the model today was that each house had alarm systems to use in emergencies and that there were also daily welfare calls to check in. She noted that the live smart manager is also on site several hours a day and that they also identify any additional needs of residents living on site along with organising community events, to bring residents together. She explained that the model had changed since Fenland District Council owned the stock as today's digital technology should enable residents to connect to people if needed.
- Councillor Wicks asked how many properties were left vacant for extended periods of six months or more and asked what the reasons for being left vacant were. Sally Greetham explained that she didn't have an exact figure to hand but that she could provide this after the meeting. She noted that the average turn around was currently 30 days and that this was good compared to peers. She explained that properties can be empty for longer due to work needed in the property such as in the kitchens and bathrooms and that problems with the supply chain meant that repairs could take longer. She informed the panel that there had been some flooding in some units not so long ago which had also required more work to prevent this from reoccurring.
- Councillor Wicks asked what the procedure was for housing people with children and without transport to ensure that there was support available in the town and rural areas. Sally Greetham reiterated that this is a benefit of the system as residents can choose where they go and that the benefit of having a knowledgeable team allows relevant advice to be given to individuals moving into the area.
- Councillor Wicks asked what the timeline was for a right to buy from application to completion. Sally Greetham noted that this can vary significantly from application to application and can take anywhere from 6-18 months for a live application to be completed depending on complexities and any possible disputes in valuation. She added that the average time for completion was 9 months.
- Councillor Yeulett asked what challenges Clarion had experienced due to Covid. Sally Greetham noted that there had been challenges with staff attending properties and undertaking servicing. She added that there had been challenges where people had struggled to pay rent and that they had to take a different approach to managing arrears as eviction was not a possibility. Yvonne Ogden noted that there had been a raft of support offered by Clarion stating that they had spoken to every vulnerable person several times to ensure they had the support needed. She also explained that they had aided partners and had contacted them to make sure they were okay and could function as normal. She noted that they utilised available funding to help assist partners and she explained that they provided consultants to help partners understand ways in which they could continue to deliver services going forward.
- Councillor Booth noted that there were a number of long-term vacant properties at Thorny Toll and asked why this was a case. Sally Greetham noted that some roofing work was being undertaken here and that these properties were challenging to let due to their positioning on the A47. She noted that they are looking at their options due to the high turnover of families.
- Councillor Booth asked how complaints are taken and what lessons had been learnt from them. Sally Greetham noted that they had completed a piece of work around complaints analysis and that the main recommendation was around transparency and sharing lessons learnt with customers. She also added that there was work to be done around informing customers about

how they can make complaints and the process they can go through.

- Councillor Mason asked whether there were any other highlights from the presentation that Clarion wished to speak on. Yvonne Ogden noted that they had provided over 83,000 pounds to help partners in assisting vulnerable residents. She added that they were also supporting the Oasis centre and had assisted with floodlighting on Lime Avenue. Furthermore, she informed the panel that they were leading on a national consultation with backyard nature on how to engage in green spaces. Sally Greetham added her thanks to Fenland for their continued assistance, especially on the decarbonisation project. She also noted the rough sleeper's accommodation programme in collaboration with Fenland which had helped to support vulnerable individuals.
- Councillor Booth noted that there were 250 new properties in the pipeline and asked why the number had dropped from previous years, stating his worry that this was not enough housing. Daniel Reed informed him that this was due to Clarion being more realistic as past reports had included schemes which were possible rather than probable. He noted that the market was also currently difficult with high land values and build costs. Councillor Booth noted that Combined Authority currently had money for social housing and that they were a key body that Clarion could be working with. Daniel Reed noted that they were attending those meetings and have also become a partner of Homes England which has provided 250 million pounds worth of grant for the next 5 years across the country.
- Councillor Mason thanked Clarion for the report and noted that it demonstrated how far Clarion had come.

**The Annual review of Anglia Revenues Partnership was noted for information.**

#### **OSC28/21 ANNUAL REVIEW OF ANGLIA REVENUES PARTNERSHIP**

Councillor Mason welcomed attendees from Anglian Revenues Partnership (ARP), Councillor Mrs French and Sam Anthony to the meeting.

Members considered the Annual review of Anglia Revenues Partnership presented by Adrian Mills.

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

- Councillor Hay asked how the collection of arrears for Fenland compared in terms of percentages in relation to other partners across ARP. Adrian Mills informed the panel that they did not have the information to hand and would provide the exact figures after the meeting.
- Councillor Hay asked whether Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) were still not contributing to the recovery costs of the fraud team? Adrian Mills noted that whilst this was currently the case, under the new fraud hub they would be investing into resources to help conduct fraud recovery work. Councillor Mrs French clarified that CCC had agreed to invest a significant amount of money and that they were awaiting a signed agreement with a memorandum of understanding also being drafted.
- Councillor Hay asked whether the new civil enforcement initiative would be undertaken by ARP? Councillor Mrs French informed her that no decision had been made yet and that it was due for discussion in the new year.
- Councillor Yeulett questioned what increases in workload there had been for ARP regarding business rates? Adrian Mills explained that there had been an increase in workload for property registrations with businesses coming forward to apply for the various Government grants. He also noted that extra work had been undertaken regarding small business rate reliefs. Matthew Waite-Wright explained that there was an influx of registrations for business rates which created an extra workload. He also noted that they were required to make sure that all their current records were correct so that the right people could collect their grants. He explained that they also employed a third party to visit the small businesses who had not collected the small business rate relief to ensure that they had the right people registered. He noted that they were contemplating employing another third party to investigate whether there are any business rate properties that have been missed. Lorraine King added that the number of work

items had increased by 39 percent compared to 2017 and the number of hereditaments had increased by 6 percent in the same period.

- Councillor Yeulett asked why other Council's insist on different forms for universal credit? Adrian Mills explained that the Department for Work and Pensions customers are told to contact their local Council and complete another form for Council Tax support. He informed the panel that ARP have linked their Council Tax Support scheme to Universal Credit data share so that when customers claim Universal Credit this information is automatically treated as a claim for Council Tax support removing the need to complete separate forms. Councillor Yeulett asked for confirmation that they were confident in this process? Adrian Mills confirmed ARP were happy with the process and added that if a customer contacts ARP and it is spotted that they are not claiming Council Tax support they are encouraged to claim and supported through the process. He also noted that they were looking to streamline the process and make it possible to get a reclaim for previous months where they would have been eligible.
- Councillor Yeulett questioned what the term hereditament referred to? Adrian Mills explained that in this context it referred to properties.
- Councillor Miscandlon questioned how many fraud related prosecutions had been investigated on behalf of Fenland District Council and what percentage this was of the overall investigations and prosecutions? Matthew Waite-Wright noted that there were 11 ongoing cases across ARP. Adrian Mills noted that there had been no prosecutions in Fenland but that the funding from CCC would help expose more suitable cases for prosecutions with a value that is in the public interest. He noted that there would be conversations with S151 Officer to agree the approach going forward. Matthew Waite-Wright explained that criminal prosecutions are rare with only four live prosecutions across the ARP.
- Councillor Booth asked how many cases the enforcement agency deal with annually? Paul Corney answered that this was around 17000 across the whole of ARP and that these cases would be split relatively evenly across the partners. He noted that the overall will have rose slightly this year due to parking cases also being included.
- Councillor Booth questioned why there were only 2 complaints regarding enforcement compared to 17,000 cases? He noted his worry that complaints were not being captured and that there may be an issue in how complaints are being dealt with. Paul Corney noted that ARP monitor and record all complaints received and act when the complaints are justified. He noted there had been no justified complaints in enforcement and informed the panel that the team wore body cameras and that all complaints could be reviewed via these. He noted that enforcement works better as an in-house service as it allows the individuals situation to be considered. He noted that ARP offer advice and support where necessary to avoid heavy debts for those who cannot afford it.
- Councillor Booth reasserted that only having two complaints across 17000 cases may indicate an issue and that money collection was emotive and usually elicits complaints even when not founded. He suggested a review of the complaints process to ensure that all complaints are captured even when invalid. Adrian Mills confirmed that they can look at the complaints process and review this.
- Councillor Yeulett questioned whether there were any common challenges across ARP partners and if there were any specific challenges in Fenland? Adrian Mills explained that despite synergies in policies and procedures across the five partners there were areas that changed from Council to Council such as the Council Tax Support Scheme. He noted that these differences did not cause any administration issues and that staff were well trained in differences across the partnership.
- Councillor Mason asked how Fenland would benefit from the parking enforcement scheme and what the cost to Fenland would be? Paul Corney explained that Fenland will receive 15 percent of any net surplus fees and the two Council's that bring the cases to the enforcement agency will receive 27.5 percent. He noted that in the unlikely event of any deficits, these will be divided by the same percentages.
- Councillor Mason thanked ARP, Councillor Mrs French and Sam Anthony for their time.

**The annual review of Anglia Revenues Partnership was noted for information**

## **OSC29/21 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME**

Members considered the Future Work Programme:

- Councillor Mason informed the panel that the Wisbech Rail Report would be deferred to a later date.
- Councillor Miscandlon commented that the current programme was comprehensive. Councillor Booth supported this comment and noted that May could be used for the deferred Wisbech Rail Report.
- There was a discussion around inviting the Road Safety Partnership and it was decided that they would be invited to the February meeting as part of the Community Safety Partnership item.

3.03 pm

Chairman