

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 16 JANUARY 2023 - 1.30 PM



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

APOLOGIES: Councillor A Hay, Councillor M Humphrey, Councillor R Skoulding and Councillor F Yeulett

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE: Linda Albon (Member Services & Governance Officer), Amy Brown (Assistant Director), Peter Catchpole (Corporate Director and Chief Finance Officer), Paul Medd (Chief Executive) and Mark Saunders (Chief Accountant)

GUESTS: Councillor C Boden, Councillor S Count, Councillor Mrs J French, Councillor S Hoy, Councillor P Murphy, Councillor C Seaton, Councillor S Tierney

OSC19/22 PREVIOUS MINUTES.

The minutes of the meeting of 5 December 2022 were confirmed and signed subject to the following comment:

- Councillor Booth said he had one point concerning the Wisbech to March railway. He had raised whether Government had changed the goal posts, but this was not captured in the minutes. Tim Bellamy did not give a direct answer so he had responded that on his interpretation it sounded like they have, so he would like that recorded as an observation.

OSC20/22 UPDATE ON PREVIOUS ACTIONS.

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

1. Councillor Booth said at the last meeting with Clarion there was an issue about the planning submission for 65 affordable homes not being progressed. He did ask if they had applied through a formal pre-application process to get advice; they were not sure at the time but said they would come back with an answer, however, we are still waiting for that.
2. Councillor Miscandlon asked if there is any update on the ongoing watching brief between FDC and Peterborough City Council regarding the review of planning. Councillor Mason advised there had not so this remains as an ongoing action.

OSC21/22 DRAFT BUSINESS PLAN 2023-2024

Members considered the Draft Business Plan 2023/24 report presented by Councillor Boden.

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

1. Councillor Tierney commented that officers have done an exemplary job as always on the Draft Business Plan and he found the report to be clear and written in plain English with no jargon.
2. Councillor Mason commented that the Panel would review each section in turn, starting with Economy.
3. Councillor Mason said in respect of staffing levels, he was of the understanding that a

dedicated grant officer was going to be recruited this year which would relieve Phil Hughes of a very heavy workload. Paul Medd responded that there is a dedicated Economic Growth Team, and although it is fair to say that quite a bit of Phil Hughes' work contributes within that priority, his role is not dedicated to the economic priority and does not sit within that team. At one time FDC did have a dedicated grant funding officer but due to austerity there was a change in emphasis in terms of how external funding is pursued. So, although we do not have the luxury of a dedicated grants officer, this is now a function embedded into officers' roles in different teams. Since then, there has been a significant degree of success having embedded the pursuit of external funding into officers' daily activities. Councillor Mason thanked Paul Medd and stated he was not making any criticism. He added that Phil Hughes has done a very good job under a lot of pressure in many directions but just thought that having a dedicated grants officer would have helped.

4. Councillor Booth referred to the number of empty properties in the district and said that page 24 of the report should show a net decrease in the number of empty properties to make it clearer. He added that with communities, in the past there was, quite appropriately, emphasis on vulnerable members of the community, but the point he has been trying to make is for community support as a whole. He asked that any advice given in support to any community group holding an event is proportionate and that we do not over burden them with red tape.
5. Councillor Miscandlon said that he agreed with Councillor Booth regarding his comment on red tape, but equally we must be careful not to totally ignore it as potentially the Council could be open to legal action if something goes wrong. Councillor Booth said the key word is 'proportionate', making sure it is fit for purpose and not a one size fits all.
6. Councillor Mason said he feels the leisure centres are deteriorating; there seems to be no proper maintenance programme in place and Freedom Leisure does not appear to have the resources to maintain the centres to a standard he would expect. On a visit with the Leader to the Manor Leisure Centre he found it to be a disgrace; there was a hole in the roof, with water dripping down which is totally unacceptable. Councillor Mason said that it is all very well supporting Freedom Leisure financially but what is being done about maintaining the building?
7. Councillor Boden responded that he would trust the leak was reported and agreed the situation cannot be allowed to continue. Councillor Mason is correct that Freedom Leisure have faced financial difficulties, in part created by Covid. However, recovery has not been rapid and the increase in utility costs has not helped. However, Freedom Leisure must fulfil their contractual agreement and he agreed it is necessary to raise the matter with them as this cannot be allowed to continue indefinitely as FDC will potentially face liability.
8. Councillor Booth said was it not part of the agreement that FDC would still undertake an amount of maintenance? Councillor Boden agreed that there is a division of responsibility between the two parties. Paul Medd said he agreed with Councillor Booth's observation and will follow up with further information in respect of the differentiation in daily and bigger issues. Councillor Booth said this comes back to a point he previously raised; are we happy that we have a robust process to ensure items are dealt with in a timely manner? Paul Medd replied yes, there will always be ongoing repair and maintenance issues. Three of the leisure centres are old buildings already so inevitably there will be ongoing challenges with that, but swift reporting and corrective action is reasonable.
9. Paul Medd added that these are highly relevant questions in terms of the operation of leisure management, but the essence of the meeting today is to deal with priorities in the business plan rather than operational matters.
10. Councillor Mason referred the Panel to the section on Environment within the Business Plan.
11. Councillor Mason asked how anti-social behaviour is being tackled. There is a problem locally in Whittlesey which he believes is due in part to a lack of youth provision by this council. Councillor Count agreed there are areas in the district highlighted for anti-social behaviour, but it is not fair to say there is no youth provision. The role of the Community Safety Partnership, when hearing about problematic areas, is to put together a problem-solving group, in which they engage with relevant partners. Youth workers and the police work together to give educational talks in schools on subjects such as county lines and knife crime. Sometimes it is not a matter of enforcement but one of perception, and the reality is not the same as fear is

often a factor. Fenland crime rates and instances of anti-social behaviour are actually lower than perceived.

12. Councillor Mason said youth engagement is key. He does not feel that there is a youth policy currently; there was funding at one stage in Whittlesey of £125k for youth provision with match funding but that was withdrawn, and the money diverted elsewhere.
13. Councillor Miscandlon said he agreed with Councillor Count regarding the issue of perception, however we do need to encourage young people to join the groups on offer.
14. Councillor Purser said that there are plenty of youth facilities in the area, for example Young People March. West End Park has a great play area for children which is always in use. Facilities are available in the district and there is plenty available for young people to do if they look.
15. Councillor Mrs French agreed and added that the BMX park has recently been refurbished, rugby at Longhill Road has youth participation of all ages; kick boxing, table tennis and boxing are all available and we also have the new addition of the water splash park in Wisbech. There is much out there when you stop and think about it but perhaps parents are not aware.
16. Councillor Count said it would be good to arrange some sort of mapping exercise if it does not already exist to make people aware of the whole range of activities available for young people in the district.
17. Councillor Mrs French said the County Council are currently trying to assist the owner of a kickboxing club with funding and there could be other help on offer.
18. Councillor Wicks commented that there are a number of very successful youth clubs in Whittlesey so there is some provision, but it should not be neglected. If any youth groups need funding, we should be able to help point them in the right direction.
19. Councillor Miscandlon said that with all these activities going on across the towns it would be good to have officers collate all that information. It should then be put on the FDC website and sent to the town and parish councils. Councillor Boden responded that is a very helpful suggestion and it would be appropriate for the draft business plan to be amended to ensure FDC acts effectively to provide better information to residents throughout the whole of Fenland. It is a superb example of what can be done to improve the Business Plan.
20. Councillor Tierney responded that the only difficulty would be in keeping the information up to date. This is a major job; he is not saying it should not be done but we need to think about how it might work before committing ourselves to a big ongoing task such as this. Paul Medd said that this is something that officers can review and see how it can operate practically.
21. Councillor Booth said that Councillor Count made the point about crime statistics but that is about reported crime. The issue is one of public engagement, some people do not report incidents of crime or anti-social behaviour so that needs to be borne in mind. He would observe that this is an item that sits under the Environment portfolio, but he thinks it should come under Communities. Councillor Count said there is a community safety element hence it came to him.
22. Councillor Wicks said that more needs to be done to highlight the issues of crime committed in the rural areas that is not experienced in urban areas; this is something that is often overlooked or neglected. Councillor Count agreed and said that one of the things he has been doing in meetings with the Police and Crime Commissioner is arguing for a breakdown in datasets to cover rural areas. Whereas a regular police force may place tractor theft low on their list of priorities, when we had a rural taskforce they were aware of and placed higher priority on tractor theft, recognising the significance of their high value, as well as for example the knock-on effects crimes such as hare coursing and all the associated behaviours linked to that. He will continue to bring forward discussions on rural crime being different to urban crime and to have these data sets broken down. He thanked Councillor Wicks for his comments and said he will keep up the work on that.
23. Councillor Boden said he was now able to provide an answer to the question regarding leisure centre maintenance. A CIPFA-planned preventative maintenance report was commissioned by FDC in late 2021 and this work replaces a prior report from 2018. FDC has set aside considerable sums in the capital budget over the coming two years to implement recommendations that are FDC's responsibility within the report. It should be noted that Freedom Leisure are responsible for day-to-day works including any works that are under

FDC's capital threshold of £10k. Some of the extensive works are already completed, including roofing works at the Hudson Centre and George Campbell, and guttering works at the Manor. Replacement of the Hudson fire alarm is a project that is underway with other projects due to start in Spring 2023 including electrical wiring works at the Hudson and changing room works at the Manor and George Campbell. Grant funding is usually available for larger capital improvement or new build projects but not maintenance works. Where such projects take place within leisure centres, funders will be approached to reduce costs to FDC where possible. Councillor Mason thanked Councillor Boden and said that was very reassuring.

24. Councillor Miscandlon asked what is being done to attract more businesses to Fenland. There is one particular business he is aware of, and he would like to know how it is progressing and growing. Councillor Boden advised that in the absence of Councillor Benney he was unable to answer as he does not know the business being referred to and it would not be appropriate to single it out at a meeting such as this. However, the Economic Growth team was appointed in 2020 and works closely with Councillor Benney as Portfolio Holder for Growth. The team is wedded to achieving economic growth and prosperity in the area. It is widely acknowledged that economic growth is likely to result from businesses already in the area rather than because of new inward investment. The team has refreshed the economic growth strategy which has subsequently been endorsed by Cabinet and Council reflecting the context we now have post pandemic, ensuring that the focus of the team is business engagement. We have also put in place various performance measures against the strategy which are reported via the portfolio holder update reports to Council to ensure the positive impact the team have is both measurable and quantifiable. The Economic Growth team have devised and implemented with member approval the discretionary business rate relief scheme, targeted at businesses considering moving into the Fenland area therefore providing an incentive to our area. In addition, the team have also launched a further business rate relief policy targeted at developers of industrial units to kick start developments in the district as we have a limited supply of these units locally, potentially limiting inward investment opportunities and expansion of existing businesses within the area. The Economic Growth team have worked with colleagues in Planning to devise and implement a fast-track planning application process for applications that will support employment in the area. The team has worked closely with the Combined Authority's 'Start Grow' initiative which provides grants to start-up and micro businesses across Fenland. The scheme concluded in December 2022 and the total grant award figures are currently being finalised and will be shared with the O&S panel during the next meeting in February. The team has run an external workshop event at the Boat House in relation to skills and recruitment as this has been a recurring theme identified by local businesses that they are finding challenging. The team works closely with the CPCA Growth Works inward investment team responding to queries and engaging with businesses considering a move into Fenland. One of the key notable successes in this regard has been the Turmeric Company that moved into Fenland in 2022 from outside the area resulting in additional local employment opportunities. The team played a key part in the Covid Business Grant project team, ensuring businesses were sustainable during the pandemic. Furthermore, FDC has also recently been successful in relation to the Shared Prosperity Fund bid by the Combined Authority from central government and a key aspect of that bid is in relation to business grants. More generally, the team engage with businesses both new to the area and those which are more established to identify any support required, acting as a conduit for external funding, energy advice and support, as well as skills and recruitment and take a very proactive approach ensuring that businesses continue to regard Fenland as a vibrant and supportive environment in which to be located.
25. Councillor Mason said he has been approached by people in the hospitality sector who are very fearful about going forward in 2023 and perhaps they are looking for concrete support and he thanked Councillor Boden for his statement.
26. Councillor Wicks said that having worked with the Business Development Officer and pointing him in several directions, it is not only Wisbech that needs help. He is continually being told about the lack of small business units within the area and it is against that background where we have got to encourage employment within Fenland to stop it becoming a more dormitory

area. He would like to know how much effort is going into making these small business units available.

27. Councillor Boden said that is a very valid and helpful question and Councillor Wicks has hit the nail on the head. There is a clear shortage in Fenland of small business units, particularly industrial units. There are only so many things we can do. Firstly, we can build more small industrial units ourselves. We had a plan to do so at Chatteris but unfortunately over the last 6-9 months, construction costs have soared so high that it is no longer economically viable for us to do this currently. As soon as the building industry returns to some degree of stability, we will come back to that. Secondly, we can give support to third parties who wish to build units. We have done several things in that respect. One is having the opportunity for any such development for business rates not to be levied upon any such development until the units are occupied. It takes some of the degree of risk away from the developers if they know that business rates will not be incurred until units are occupied. Thirdly, we can refer to our draft local plan where more opportunity is being given for business and industrial development to take place in all parts of the district to open areas so there is greater possibility for land use to be exercised in that way, whether brownfield or greenfield sites. Councillor Boden added that he is frustrated by the Council's own inability to build. The costs to do so have skyrocketed but should they come down, then he is sure a business case for doing that will be revisited.
28. Councillor Wicks thanked Councillor Boden for his answers which he found to be most valuable. He added that members will know he is passionate about the enhancement of infrastructure in this area, and in particular Ely north junction and the dualling of the A47. Members continually push this point, but now we as a council should be making representations to the higher parties of the effect on employment and prosperity of Fenland and the impact it is having.
29. Councillor Seaton agreed with Councillor Wicks. He stated that FDC is part of the A47 alliance, which is made up of several councils and business partners. A new task and finish group has recently been set up to coordinate a combined response and we are lobbying and having ministerial visits. National Highways have recently consulted on the section from Peterborough to Guyhirn, but unfortunately they have come back with a response to that consultation saying the business case does not stack up to dual the A47, one of the reasons being that there are not many accidents. In his view they are missing one of the fundamental points which is that dualling the A47 from Peterborough to Wisbech would open an economic corridor opportunity. We are still trying to open up business opportunities and housing growth within the Fenland area. The A47 Elm High Road roundabout is still in their plans, and it is hoped work there will ease congestion. In the meantime, we will continue to lobby for the dualling of the A47 and as he is on the transport committee of the CPCA will continue to push the case for it.
30. Councillor Miscandlon said equally we need to open a relief road around Whittlesey as growth there has been stifled. Councillor Seaton agreed and said there is a problem with heavy traffic running through the town, but this pressure would also be eased if we had the A47 dualling. This is not a problem exclusive to Whittlesey.
31. Councillor Booth said that at the last meeting there was a presentation by the Transport Officer from the Combined Authority, and we would be lucky to get a light railway between Wisbech and March in the next five to ten years, and from what he was saying about the A47 there is almost no chance of getting dualling, particularly if we are being told the business case does not stack up. Therefore, something needs to change at government level to be in with any chance. There is too much bureaucracy, red tape and wasted money on all these consultations when the work could have been getting done. People are fed up with all the delays.
32. Councillor Mason asked if there were any questions on the Quality Organisation section of draft Business Plan.
33. Councillor Booth said this section mentions Consultation and Engagement but what is missing is consultation engagement with parish and town councils and this should be added. Also, he would expect performance indicators to be on the first and not second page.
34. Councillor Miscandlon said that as many consultations are undertaken online he was pleased to see that the point he had raised previously about not everybody being online had been taken on board, and that people can still engage by other means. Councillor Tierney said of course

we must be able to reach out to everyone until such time, if ever, that everyone can access services online, but we are certainly not there yet.

35. Councillor Booth referred to page 4 of the draft Business Plan and said as an observation there is mention of there being a fifth priority around Council for the Future but there is no section on that. Councillor Boden responded that it is a cross cutting priority that cuts across the other four, but he agreed it would be helpful to expand on that for clarification.
36. Councillor Booth said he had one final point and that was relating to the page regarding investment across Fenland. Yet again there is not enough being done for the rural areas, and he keeps making this point. With the lack of public transport and mobility in the villages, they are identified as an area of rural isolation as people cannot get to facilities. How we are looking after rural communities needs to be looked at.
37. Councillor Boden said he was very grateful for all the comments which will be fed back so the final version of the Business Plan will reflect many of the comments made today.
38. Councillor Booth said he would ask that the Leader and Cabinet are open to the fact that the panel may be coming back with additional KPIs as a result of the forthcoming Task and Finish Group, which will make the Business Plan a dynamic and living document that we can make changes to as and when required. Councillor Boden responded that he is open to suggestions but would rather have replacement than additional KPIs so they do not become meaningless for being too many.
39. Councillor Mrs French said she was of the understanding some questions had been raised at the pre-meeting relating to March High Street and she would be happy to provide an update. The question was how March businesses will be supported to ensure their survival during the disruption caused by the development plan. Councillor Mrs French said the redevelopment of the marketplace, Riverside and Broad Street will bring some unavoidable disruption but the plan changes. This is far from the emergency actions that took place just before Christmas that had a considerable impact. The planned development work will ensure that a lane remains open north and south throughout the works so disruption will be kept as low as possible, although some disruption is inevitable. As part of the contract work, a liaison officer from the contractors will be in touch with local business weekly ensuring they know what is planned. There are three elements to the works, firstly to bring the infrastructure up to standard, with March having recently suffered ruptured gas pipes and burst water mains. There is the March Area Transport Study which has been ongoing since 2017, which has been broken into different elements, being the quick wins, and medium-term and long-term works. Some of the quick wins have been completed and the medium-term works are being done now, i.e., new zebra crossings in St Peters Road and Station Road. There are speed reductions in Upwell Road and Norwood Road and longer-term plans include the upgrading of the roundabout at Peas Hill Road, works to improve the Hobbs Lot junction due to the number of accidents and the installation of a northern link road. Councillor Mrs French added that FDC is also working on a walking, cycling and mobility strategy. Councillor Mason thanked Councillor Mrs French.

The Draft Business Plan 2023-24 was noted for information.

OSC22/22 BUDGET REPORT

Members considered the Budget Report presented by Councillor Boden.

Councillor Boden paid tribute to the work done by Mark Saunders, stating his expertise and knowledge is second to none.

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

1. Councillor Mason said in his presentation, Councillor Boden referred several times to the word 'assumptions' but there are realities in there such as core spending power, new homes bonus decreasing and business rates shortfalls. He said that Councillor Boden had indicated that over the years we have over budgeted so therefore assuming we have reserves, would he be

correct in saying that these would counter those shortfalls which are identified in the report as major risks?

2. Councillor Boden said there are two different types of reserves. The first is the general reserve but the reserve he was talking about is budget equalisation which is kept separate because it is specifically related to systemic budgeting issues where the outturn ended up being a surplus, even if on occasion we were budgeting for a deficit over the year. He cannot give a positive answer to the question because he cannot guarantee what will happen in the coming years. It is possible that there will be substantial business rates changes in 2025/26 or that fairer funding will come in which may harm district councils as opposed to county councils in two-tier areas. Lots of things will change and risk is not always a one-way thing, i.e., it will not always be negative. We should bear in mind that as a council we are in a much better financial position than many other district councils across the country because we have been prudent over the last 14 years. Councillor Boden said he has confidence about how we will be able to address the future because we are not in control of the way government makes changes to do with regulations which affects the way we receive money, but central government will not go out of its way to bankrupt local government and they will change regulations to ensure councils can continue to operate financially. Since we are in a better position than many, Councillor Boden said he is confident they will be sufficient for us to continue.
3. Councillor Mason asked for more clarification on core spending power because it appears we are well down on the national average, and he would like to know why. Mark Saunders replied that core spending power is the measure the government uses to determine what resources and funding authorities have and compare for one year to the next. This includes all the items listed on page 31 of the report. Historically what is also included is the level of council tax increases. Because FDC has not increased its council tax over the last five years, we have not increased our core spending power as have those that did.
4. Councillor Mason asked if that meant that FDC was being penalised as a result. Mark Saunders responded that was not the case. Councillor Boden said it is good that FDC has kept spending down whilst still maintaining services. Peter Catchpole added that for clarity, it is assumed that every council is going to raise their council tax by their permitted amount and that is why the league tables can look different. Councillor Mason thanked Peter Catchpole for that information.
5. Councillor Booth asked in that case, what is the purpose of that indicator? Councillor Boden responded that we often question the purpose of a lot of the numbers that government produce for us or that we produce for them. It does give an idea to central government about what is likely to be in their accounts for the forthcoming financial year, but he had to agree that they do not have a great deal of use.
6. Councillor Booth said it looks like we are getting additional funding from central government through the budget settlement so is it correct that the shortfall would be about £109k taking the two figures together? Councillor Boden said there have been many other amendments to the projected budget for 2023/24 and they are still coming through. He is hoping that ARP will come up with the NNDR1 number and he thinks that may produce a significant positive sum; overall he would be disappointed if we do not end up with a surplus figure rather than a deficit based on the numbers and information received so far.
7. Councillor Mason asked for assurance that in order to balance the books we are not going to cut services next year. Councillor Boden replied that there is no intention to cut front line services to balance the books. It is appropriate however, for the new council to take its own view about what services there should be and at what level. They may wish to spend more money or less money on services, and it is totally appropriate for them to do what they need with the mandate they will have as a result of the election. Councillor Boden repeated that there is no intention to cut services to balance this budget. Councillor Mason thanked Councillor Boden for the reassurance.
8. Councillor Booth observed that the Fairer Funding Review should have been introduced about two years ago and asked if this is going to be the new equivalent of the revaluation where the Government keeps kicking it into the long grass. It brings uncertainty for local government and the issue it creates when trying to balance budgets. Councillor Boden said the fairer funding

issue has been in abeyance for some six or seven years; the idea behind it is to change the balance of where money goes but he cannot say when that will be resurrected. As far as business rates are concerned, we are told that change will take place in 2025/26 but this is a difficult issue. If he could, he would abolish the whole business rating system, including the valuation office agency and put in a corporation tax increase to give a greater opportunity for business premises operating from physical premises to be more competitive as opposed to those operating online. It would also remove an enormous amount of complicated administration. Councillor Boden said Councillor Booth was right in that we cannot tell when they are going to happen, we have been promised some for years but whatever happens, ultimately central government will not allow local government to go bankrupt and we are more resilient than many other councils.

9. Councillor Mason asked if a contingency plan is in place should the worst happen, and Freedom Leisure go to the wall. Councillor Boden said that it would be a matter of FDC taking a considered opinion at the time. There was a time when this looked likely and that is why we and other authority customers provided support. There is no reason to believe now that Freedom Leisure is in a position where that outcome is likely, but it is possible and if so FDC will be obliged to take on the responsibility for those leisure centres. Ultimately, it will be a matter for the new administration to decide what to do; however, it is not in our interests or in the interest of the leisure centre customers to allow Freedom Leisure to go to the wall. Councillor Mason said he is not suggesting we are but just wants to see that contingency plans are in place.
10. Councillor Wicks queried risk registers and mitigating factors within the corporate register and asked if they exist. Councillor Boden said they do exist however members and members of the Audit & Risk Committee only see the top level of the risk management system which exists. The value of the risk management procedure that we have is not in what we see but what happens at a lower level. They are fully supported by a whole raft of risk analysis at operational level monitored carefully by a group of senior offices and managed by individual operational departments. It is thorough and substantial. Paul Medd said that there is a corporate risk methodology for everything that we do in order to be proactive in terms of how we quantify risk and mitigate against it. Whilst it is thorough, we can never entirely capture all the risks that exist, for example the pandemic. When confronted with issues that we are unable to predict, it is about the robust systems we have in place to respond accordingly and to have agility to react and deal those unseen risks if and when they occur in the future.
11. Councillor Booth raised the issue of the Planning Department and its resources. He gets the impression that statistically there is a delivery failing and so he asked if more resources need to be put into that. Councillor Boden said there is a high level of demand on the planning service, and we have been looking at a root and branch analysis of work being done with a view to a significant reorganisation within the planning team. There are clear opportunities for efficiency savings which means we will be able to get more from the same number of staff we have currently. For example, we have some senior, highly qualified members of the team spending too much of their time on administrative work. Changes in processes will make a difference and lead to a significant potential saving, spending less on planning and getting better results. Paul Medd agreed and said essentially we have a substantive structure fit for purpose. However, the key issue is that there is a national skills shortage of planners. However, we have a good name and a good track record and are working hard to retain the talent we have.

The Overview and Scrutiny panel AGREED to:

- 12. note the revised General Fund Budget and Capital Programme for 2022/23**
- 13. send the Draft General Fund Budget Estimates 2023/24 and the Draft Medium Term Financial Strategy 2023/24 to 2027/28 for consultation**
- 14. approve the Capital Programme 2023-2026.**

OSC23/22 FEES AND CHARGES 2023/24

Members considered the Review of Fees and Charges 2023/24 report presented by Councillor Boden.

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

1. Councillor Purser said he is asked on a regular basis if it can be guaranteed that car parking will remain free in the district. Councillor Boden said it is ever possible that central government can force us to charge in the future and we cannot change that, but in the meantime there will be an election taking place in four months' time and this will be a decision for the new administration. Overwhelmingly, most councils charge for car parking, and they make a nice surplus from it and use it to subsidise the rest of their operations. However, as long as Councillor Boden remains Leader of the Council, there will be no charges for car parking unless forced by central government.
2. Councillor Booth said that is the policy of this council, but we are getting to a situation where it is not the only thing we need to do. We need to come up with a better offering to keep our market towns viable. Ultimately we need better shops and services.
3. Councillor Boden said that generally the amount of money needed for changes are considerable and we are depending on opportunities provided to us by the Combined Authority. We have the current March High Street funding works for example. He cannot give a definitive answer, however, to the future of the High Street. Experts are currently saying that people are now requiring experiences. As a council we do need to be aware of the need for flexibility within our high streets and to allow them to change, we have to facilitate that change even if it is for something we do not want to see ourselves.
4. Councillor Mason asked if there is a large demand for room hire at the Boat House and South Fens. Councillor Boden responded that there is significant demand, but we have to be aware of the competitive position and so we have applied a general inflationary increase. We could increase it by more but do not want to create problems for current tenants. It is not just a matter of maximising council income but the impact on the very businesses we are trying to support. Councillor Mason suggested a decrease could attract more tenants.
5. Councillor Booth referred to the proposed changes at Section 3.2 of the report on mini-factories, South Fens Business Centre and the Boathouse and said there had been discussion in the past that these should be considered as breeder units. He asked if that had been fully considered, particularly if we are increasing some of the fees by about 40%. He asked if we are satisfied it will drive the right outcomes we are looking for as it is not always about occupancy but rather about getting those business set up so they can move on to other areas when they find the facilities. Councillor Boden said it is important to have realistic charges in terms of the costs that we incur but we do consult with officers to get their opinions.
6. Mark Saunders replied that all services review their services and make their proposals based on ensuring costs are covered. Rates are examined to ensure they are competitive and set between a minimum and maximum to give negotiating room with tenants. Councillor Boden emphasised that new rents will not apply until existing tenancy arrangements expire. Peter Catchpole added that we have had a new Head of Property for about a year who has helped make a big difference, he has done a lot of work with qualified surveyors, and we have seen the occupancy rates rise which tells us we have done the right thing and we have already driven up income in those areas. He signs off all the new leases that come through and sees the amount of work that goes in behind them. Councillor Boden added that our Head of Property has certainly proved his worth.
7. Councillor Mason asked if there had been any thoughts about hiring out the facilities at Fenland Hall. Councillor Boden said that we do not offer the Council Chamber for functions currently but that can be considered as part of the accommodation review. Any out of hours usage would incur additional staff costs and there would be confidentiality and security risks which would need to be assessed. He doubts that hiring out the Chamber would provide any significant outturn.

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel AGREED to recommend to Cabinet that the Fees and Charges be included in the final budget proposals for 2023/24.

OSC24/22 FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered the Future Work Programme.

Councillor Mason stated that it was unlikely that the Mayor of the Combined Authority or his deputy would be able to attend a meeting this municipal year, as planned. Councillor Booth asked if the date of the next meeting was the issue otherwise we could change it. Amy Brown said it was not a matter of the date but there has been ongoing dialogue with the mayor's office, and they will make it happen if it can.

Councillor Wicks said he is disappointed on a number of fronts. Firstly, that the presentation from the CPCA last year reference skills and the opportunities that they were creating were miniscule and he has not seen any effort to rectify that or come back to this committee to give an indication of what they are doing to address the problem. Secondly, he thinks it is likely that the CPCA will be adding a precept to Council Tax for all residents in Cambridgeshire. Councillor Miscandlon said he sits on the CPCA O&S committee and there was a meeting, but he is not sure what is happening with regard the CPCA precept as no decision was made. Regarding skills, he met with the Head of the Department for Skills who accepted criticism that the report had been produced in a hurry, but they are attempting to correct this, and he will provide an update to this panel when he himself gets an update.

4.07 pm

Chairman