

RURAL & FARMING EXECUTIVE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY, 13 MARCH 2024 - 2.00 PM



PRESENT: Councillor T Taylor (Chairman), Councillor Mrs J French (Vice-Chairman), Councillor J Clark, Councillor S Count, Councillor C Marks and Councillor G Booth

APOLOGIES: Councillor M Humphrey

Officers in attendance: Peter Catchpole (Corporate Director,) Anna Goodall (Assistant Director), Simon Jackson (Economic Growth Manager), Dawn Caplin (Investment in Business Officer) and Helen Moore (Member Services and Governance Officer)

RF1/23 APPOINTMENT OF THE CHAIRMAN FOR THE MUNICIPAL YEAR

It was proposed by Councillor Mrs French, seconded by Councillor Marks and resolved that Councillor Taylor be elected Chairman of the Rural and Farming Committee for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

RF2/23 APPOINTMENT OF THE VICE-CHARMAN FOR THE MUNICIPAL YEAR

It was proposed by Councillor Taylor, seconded by Councillor Count and resolved that Councillor Mrs French be elected Vice-Chairman of the Rural and Farming Committee for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

RF3/23 COMMITTEE TERMS OF REFERENCE UPDATE 3.3.3 RURAL & FARMING EXECUTIVE ADVISORY COMMITTEE.

Members considered the flooding affecting the district.

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

- Councillor Taylor stated that drainage is highlighted in many planning applications, and he has been looking at these plans alongside Middle Level and the Drainage Boards to review drainage strategies to try to prevent flooding and to assist where possible as farmers know the land and know how drainage works. Middle Level has stressed that their drainage is at full capacity, and it is a concern.
- Councillor Booth agreed flooding is an issue, but the legislation is fragmented and disparate and there are many different organisations involved because the County Council is the Lead Flood Authority plus there is Middle Level who are the lead for the drainage boards, with the question being what the role of Fenland District Council is. He added that the Environment Agency will step in if there is a so-called emergency, which this area is on the cusp of because of the amount of water on the fields and the soil and moisture deficit being at 0%. Councillor Booth questioned that Fenland District Council's Planning sets policy which is considered in applications but what other role can the Council play? Councillor Mrs French made the point that the Planning Committee take flooding into consideration as local councillors know their areas and all have great concerns especially with the amount of water that has fallen in recent months.
- Councillor Count stated in terms of reference for this Committee it states it is the voice of the

farming community and nobody knows the land better than local farmers which is particularly relevant for the Fenland area because of the nature of the land, the drainage, and the ditch structures, also the pumping stations in the area which makes this area a different to other areas. He made the point that it is important that when the Lead Flood Authority and all the other agencies listen to people who are experts in flooding, that they listen to a local committee that can represent the voice of the farming community who have hands-on experience of how the fields and water tables are affected and the urban community.

- Councillor Booth stated he agreed this committee is the voice of the farmers, but it also needs to be the voice of the rural communities. One of the problems needing to be acknowledged is within the drainage board the public do not realise the work that is undertaken behind the scenes to keep the water systems flowing and the amount of maintenance that takes place, and he feels there needs to be more knowledge shared in the wider community. Councillor Booth added the question remains is this panel a voice for the farming and rural communities as there is no actual legislative powers that this Council has apart from the planning process which is common knowledge.
- Councillor Taylor stated Councillor Mrs Laws could not join this meeting but she is the councillor who is up to date with Middle Level and the Flood Watch Scheme, however Middle Level are not statutory consultees, they can be overridden on varied planning decisions but Councillor Mrs Laws is trying to get a Council body or someone from Middle Level as a statutory consultee to offer assistance with the drainage and flooding industry within the Fenland area.
- Anna Goodall added this is an Executive Advisory Committee so if there are recommendations this panel wishes to make to the Executive then that will be possible through this committee.
- Councillor Booth understands what has been said around Internal Drainage Board (IDB) not being statutory consultees for planning and it is a point he has raised within the Local Plan that the IDBs knowledge should be considered which would be better than the Environmental Agency sitting in their office far away from where the issues are happening. He added the other issue is there is a special interest group at the LGA regarding how IDBs are funded and are the Council going to be feeding in to this because this is a low water area and the area receives water from the uplands where it flows through local systems but the cost for this has to come out of Fenland taxpayers money or from the Government through the General Grant so the question is will the Council be playing more of an active role and will there be any guidance on this.
- Councillor Mrs French added Fenland does pay a large amount of money to the Drainage Boards, but the Government will be giving additional money to local authorities to assist with the drainage costs this year.
- Peter Catchpole stated he represents Fenland District Council on the officers' group for the Special Interest Group (SIG) alongside Councillor Miscandlon who is a representative on the SIG board as a member of the Council and work is being undertaken with the IDBs, ADA and all sorts of other organisations looking at the way IDBs are funded, and the Council is working with them as it recognises the great work that IDBs do. He continued this is about how they are funded and the impact they have on a smallest number of Councils which does not affect a large number, so the Council is working on a new funding mechanism so it does not bear the brunt of that special levy which will be around £2m.
- Councillor Count acknowledged that the Council is already taking an active role and those hardest hit by the funding arrangements, adding this year was successful.
- Councillor Marks stated there needs to be more education as it has been discussed that the Fens is one of the wettest parts of the country which a lot of people do not understand. He added he was concerned looking at some of the farming ditches that they are not being kept clean and wondered if this was something that the committee could work with the National Farmers Union (NFU) to try and promote, plus other parties too because there is Cambridgeshire County Council land that he knows have dykes that are blocked and he feels everyone needs to work together, including Anglian Water, as when there are flooding issues it is never quite clear who these areas belong too, and when there is an emergency there needs to be a clear picture at the time of who to contact quickly. He added he feels this would be

something the committee could work on with the farmers and everyone involved.

- Councillor Booth reiterated his earlier question as to how this advisory committee feeds into that process as Councillor Miscandlon is the representative for the Councillors, will this committee be inviting him to discuss what has been said to get an insight on issues shared and give some input?
- Councillor Taylor stated that he has no issue with that idea. Councillor Mrs French also recommended to invite the Lead Flood Authority at County Council plus Brian Heffernan who is the enforcement for flooding across the County Council.
- Councillor Clark stated he felt that if various members of the public are going to be invited to the meeting, the panel needs to speak as one voice like the Overview and Scrutiny Panel meetings do.
- Councillor Mrs French referred to Councillor Marks' comments and advised that at the County Council they are mapping out every dyke across the area and are spending time and finance on looking at all the dykes to clean and dig them out and the issue is being taken seriously.
- Pete Catchpole clarified the role of the SIG, which is focused on the funding and not the role of IDBs etc. He would be happy to bring an update on the work that SIG is undertaking in relation to funding to a meeting, but it is a very narrow piece of work, and it is the funding of the IDBs and not anything beyond that.
- Councillor Booth accepted Peter Catchpole comments and stated the funding is the core of the development and infrastructure that needs to be put in place properly with the right mechanisms and would like further updates.

Members on the Rural & Farming Executive Advisory Committee updated Terms of Reference.

(Councillor Mrs French declared that she is a member of the Planning Committee and Cambridgeshire County Council's Flood Group)

RF4/23 RECENT MOTIONS TO FULL COUNCIL IN RELATION TO FARMING & RURAL MATTERS - NEXT STEPS

Members considered the recent motions to full Council in relation to farming and rural matters.

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

- Councillor Count commented he would like to understand what this committee could add to a debate that has already taken place in full Council and would it not be more beneficial to monitor the action logs to ensure that the actions are put in place. Councillor Taylor responded that once the motion has gone through Council his job is to pick up the action and contact the relevant people to engage with the motion and gain advice as needed. Anna Goodall confirmed, it is the role of this committee to monitor the actions in accordance with the motions and ensure they are taking place.
- Councillor Booth asked if the same framework is going to be used as Overview and Scrutiny Panel and Audit and Risk Management Committee. This was confirmed by Anna Goodall

Members noted the action for the Farming and Rural Committee on motions submitted to the Full Council.

RF5/23 ANGLIA WATER RESERVOIR UPDATE

Members received a presentation by Joe Hillier – Programme Manager, Karen Staples – Major Infrastructure Programme stake holder, Matt Pluke – Head of Environment, Huge Maxfield – Land Engagement Leader, from Anglian Water regarding the proposed Reservoir in the District.

Members were advised that the key issues are as follows:

- Why the Fenland area needs a reservoir, which is due to potential climate change, with less rain forecast, local growth in the area, and current water sources getting more stressed.
- The project is classed as a national significant infrastructure project which is set out in the Planning Act and is signed off by the Secretary of State. The project is stakeholder led, and all comments are taken into consideration from the local communities to meet the area's needs.
- How the Reservoir can support the area and work alongside other local organisations such as the Fenland Future work programme and the food and farming organisations.
- Anglian Water will be looking at investment and opportunities that will come back into the Fenland area as part of the growth programme.
- The proposed effect the reservoir has on the local community and the different matters that have arisen in the intervening period.

Members made comments asked questions and received responses as follows:

- Councillor Count asked about the natural water table, does this affect the surrounding environment and what impact the carbon emissions (CO₂) has as the ground is unique in the Fens due to the high peat soil? Joe Hillier responded the local farmers help Anglian Water to understand the natural water table connectivity between the mid-levels as they work the land all the time, the reason this area was selected is due to the underlying materials recognising that there is some peat but there is a competent thick clay horizon underneath called the Roden beds. He stated that the reservoir will be hydraulically isolated so there will be no interaction between any surrounding water other than potential transfer roots, the studies that are happening now are looking at how this will all fit together and what the benefits will be in terms of reducing pumping at St Germans and the flood management benefits for the area. Councillor Count asked in terms of the isolated pumping is there going to be a base so that the natural clay is not being relied on? Joe Hillier responded that the reservoir will be relying on the natural clay as a base, there is a geological investigation being undertaken proving where those clay horizons are and it is showing that they are superficial overlying deposits such a peat and other materials, below that there are really thick lenses of clay which is a competent material, water pressures have been measured and the water horizons around the area. He stated that once the foundations are put together the clay will be formed as the base and a hydraulically isolated unit will be developed. Councillor Count stated he was concerned as all the local roads are suffering and being degraded as they are on clay and peat and with the enlarging and decreasing drought and farming, the clay gets moist and the clay dries out, so if Anglian Water are planning to put a few million tons of water on top of clay this will raise the water table everywhere else which will cause flooding. Jo Hillier responded the reservoir will be made of a very low permeable basin and the clay walls will be approximately 200 metres wide and the quality of the clay in this area is particularly good with extremely low permeability which should go towards the transmissivity that is being referred to. Councillor Count asked if there will be any paperwork or scientific evidence to back this up to relay people's fears? Joe Hillier responded there will be evidence produced and if the storage is not permeable then this will not form a very good water storage containment, from an engineering perspective it will be proved that the clay will work, and it is all in line with expectations, proven methods and proven materials for building these type of elements and at the moment there is a confidence in what has been seen, but the proof needs to be confirmed along with the building and permit of the project which will be undertaken and evidence will be released through the DCO process as the project goes on so it is accessible within the public domain. Matt Pluke added to answer the second question concerning carbon emissions, the biggest hot spot regarding the carbon emissions is during the construction of the reservoir in terms of shifting the soil and the excavation, with the carbon once in supply being relatively small compared to during the construction but these

sorts of carbons are relatively well understood and there are models around the challenges that were shared earlier around peat being scientifically immature in terms of understanding the carbon emissions associated with a reservoir in operation as opposed to the agricultural land where science is not great. He stated that experts in this field have been recruited but it has been recognised more information is needed to be able to quantify the impact in terms of the peat that is there and the carbon emissions by taking expert advice so there is more work to be undertaken as this is a significant area in terms of any emissions associated with peat.

- Councillor Booth stated it was spoken about the fact that the reservoir water will be pumped in and out and asked if there will be any exploration in new technology for pumping because there are some concerns around net zero and using old diesel pumps. He is aware that there is some development needed across the Country and a goal that needs to be reached within 10 years, and asked what will Anglian Waters approach be regarding sustainable pumping? Matt Pluke responded the preference is for renewable energy, there is research being carried out to look at alternative renewables which could be used instead of taking electricity off the grid, one option is seeing if solar can be integrated as part of the development of the reservoir and even wind power because with these two and battery storage it would address the intermittency issue which would happen with just one source or the another and this will also reduce carbon on energy. Councillor Booth asked if Anglian Water are confident that the pumps will be strong enough to deal with the volumes of water which is going to be needed because this is new technology particularly with the electric pumps? He added what would happen if the area got flooded and what is the resilience around this plan? Joe Hillier responded these are the types of questions that are being asked during the research that is being carried out at this early stage. Karen Staples added that at this early stage there are no plans to narrow down one specific option as technology is moving on and the plan is to keep this project at the forefront of any new development. Matt Pluke stated that there are other reservoir pumping stations which are pumping significant volumes of water, and the carbon resilience is working relatively well with renewable energy attached.
- Councillor Marks expressed the view that this is a great project to have in this area, however, it will not be built until 2036, so asked about the here and now with the flooding issues that are happening locally and what guarantees will Anglian Water give in regard to management of the area as the local villages have been let down time and time again when it comes to flooding in this area. Karen Staples responded as a reservoir team it would not be right to try to answer this question, but she stated she would take these questions back to pass onto the relevant team. She added she was aware that there is a challenge with Anglian Waters reputation and the company is working hard to correct that image. Councillor Marks responded that he had heard from Mr Tuffs and that particular matter he was dealing with has now been resolved. He also added he would like to draw the attention to the open drain policy and extra water being moved through new rivers, with his local village about to lose the local fire service, and with the village being 2 miles away from the construction site in question this is a major concern, so asked if Anglian Water will be working with the local emergency services? Joe Hillier stated these are areas that will be looked at as the project builds momentum and he wanted to reassure and build trust that these local worries will all be addressed, the water will be moved through existing rivers and at this time there are no plans to build new rivers in the area. Karen Staples added to address the concern around the emergency services this forms part of the DCO process as the emergency services are a statutory consultee so they will get notified automatically about the project and a report will be submitted. She continued there is also a lot of work going on with Middle Level Commission as they are a trusted partner in the local community and are working closely with Anglian Water on this project.
- Councillor Clark stated overall Fenland is very good at being sceptical in saying they do not want this or the water bills to go up to pay for it but what has not been mentioned in presentation is the plus side around recreation and nature and the benefits states personally I welcome it and it is councillor's job to influence the people around them that this is a good

thing to have, yes there will be problems and there will be people that do not want it because it is in their back garden but there are positives and he feels as a committee it should be advising the Cabinet that this is an asset to the area.

- Councillor Count agrees this could be an asset to the area, but he can also see this could be a blot on the landscape and he would like to understand how the Council go about making sure this is the right reservoir for the area which the committee can fully endorse. He shared a few concerns around opportunities as he can see the potential to work with local farmers, local groups, clubs, and fishing but where will the money for this come from? He asked if Anglian Water has the money to match fund the whole project and not just the construction and what is the plan for this to become a reality? Karen Staples responded there are lots of opportunities at this early stages, some of the key areas being looked at are around creating a socio economic strategy and a recreation strategy which will be explained at one of the consultations, there are some ideas already of what this could be, but there is an opportunity for the community to feed into what the final design could be through the two consultations phases, one being this year and one that is coming up next year where the designs will be presented. She continued at this stage Anglian Water are not going to be overly prescriptive because any initial comments will go through to an emerging design which will be looked at over a two-year period with a view to deliver something that the area would want to see. Karen Staples stated Anglian Water have been working with Fenland District Council and local authority officers to capture the feedback the wider community has, and to take on some feedback from their technical officer to make sure all the information is fed back into the emerging design. She made the point that there are things that the DCO will provide and pay for because that is required as part of the mitigation of having the reservoir at this site and there are some things that Anglian Water will not be paying for as it will be the customer water bill payers that will be paying as part of the DCO agreement but if there are any roads that need to be built as part of the reservoir design the economic growth within the area will be considered. Matt Pluke stated Anglian Water are obliged as part of a public water supply company to provide recreational facilities on a reservoir of this size which sits within the Water Industry Act. He continued there is also an obligation through the biodiversity net gain to deliver 10% biodiversity net gain which makes Anglian Water obliged to deliver a natural habitat which is great for people and nature, so this acts as a benefit. Matt Pluke stated that the other benefit is the use of the open channels that will be moving water through the environment which will deliver environmental opportunities and benefits for nature. Karen Sharps added as part of the DCO, Anglian Water do recognise that they do have to pay for things, but the company has gone a step further undertaking a study to look at all the opportunities that could happen and then look at what part the DCO would pay for then look at the other options and see what funding can be found through other organisations. Joe Hillier stated he wanted to mention it is good to talk about the negatives which can help with the mitigation but on a wider point this is an exciting project and he would like to engage the committee to think about the potential it will bring to the region, with at this stage the design still being planned and sharing what has been talked about today will all help towards ensuring this area makes the most of the opportunities this project can offer.
- Councillor Count stated he still did not feel he has been convinced enough to endorse this project because it seems there are a list of opportunities but nothing too prescriptive. He expressed the view that the obligation to fund 10% of certain things like biodiversity sounds convincing but as an example he would like to know if Anglian Water funds a cycle path around the reservoir will this funding also cover the cost of a cycle path to the local villages so members of the public enjoy a full journey by bike from door to door or will someone else have to fund this part of the project because if this area is just going to have a reservoir with a cycle path around it and no links to villages then he is prepared to say no to this development. Councillor Count added he would like to have a lot more detail before anything happens to make him feel fully supportive because it could have potential and does present great opportunities, but he feels he does not want to endorse this too early without more evidence of the final design and the benefits for the outlining villages.

- Councillor Mrs French stated there is a walking, cycling and mobility strategy ongoing and one of the areas she has been working on is a link from March to Chatteris.
- Simon Jackson stated he would like to reassure the committee that all these areas are being looked at and the Council are working closely with Anglian Water and other consultants working on the project with the key remit being to make sure those opportunities are exploited. He continued there are things being discussed that are extremely exciting and will be made to happen but cannot be discussed today, this will bring a lot of challenges in terms of construction but also a lot of opportunities for local people and local companies when it is built and finished in 2036.
- Councillor Mrs French stated it was said that consultations have taken place, but it is her understanding that none of the local farmers have been consulted and they do not seem to understand what is going on and stressed that she would like to see the farmers consulted. She continued that the local roads are terrible and there are problems with peat soil etc, with it being her understanding that there will be a lot of construction vehicles using the roads around the site when the local roads are damaged and asked would Anglian Water be repairing them. Hugh Maxfield responded, as far as discussions with land owners, the challenge has been that there has been a lot of work going on in the background to progress the design and get to a point where there can be a briefing on how things will look, there has been some interim meetings with the land engagement forum through the land owners and their representatives but he does appreciate this has been a work in progress, with there being representatives going out to local land owners to talk with them in advance of the public consultation so they have a chance to feed in formally and informally beforehand through that process. Karen Staples added Ruth Oldfield and Joe Hillier are full time consultants with St Germans working to support landowners and part of that role is to go out and talk to local landowners on a daily basis and hold meetings with the NFU on a monthly basis to keep them up to date on the project. She stated that Anglian Water are very aware of the agricultural community and with the aid of forums etc are very open to any feedback and suggestions given which can improve any future communications. Karen Staples added moving on to traffic, transport and the roads, they are aware that there will be a huge impact on traffic and transport whilst this project takes place but as part of the environmental impact assessment there is a traffic and strategy plan in place to see which is the most sustainable way to get materials to and from the site and as part of the environment statement there is requirement to supply what impact there will be on roads and rail etc. and how Anglian Water will mitigate that.
- Councillor Booth asked about the other projects Anglian Water have, is the Grantham to Bexwell pipeline currently going on through the district, is there any interconnectivity planned at this moment in time to link up with the reservoir because he was aware that there have been talks about a national water pipeline? Matt Pluke responded the reservoirs are part of a strategic solution, the strategic pipeline that has been laid will be interconnected in some way so the water in this reservoir can be used locally but there will be an opportunity for good resilience reasons to distribute it further afield. He continued in terms of a national grid of water there are constraints with that as water is a lot heavier and therefore expensive to pump, with there being a project being developed by Cambridge Water and Anglian Water to integrate the two supplies, so there is a level of integration where it is wise to do so. Councillor Booth asked does that mean there are no plans for a national water grid? Matt Pluke replied these reservoirs are being developed by the regulators as strategic resource options and so the water companies do work together to look at where strategic options are available so if they are the best solution they will be developed but at the moment the Lincolnshire reservoir is for Anglian Water and the Fens reservoir will be for Cambridge and Anglian water beyond that it would not make good sense.
- Councillor Booth stated the other thing that has not been mentioned is the Environment Agency, with extraction licences and the whole plethora of legislation he assumes is why this project is going to take so long to develop. Matt Pluke responded that Anglian Water have got a secure extraction licence and work closely with the Environment Agency to make

sure the water is there and it can be taken without derogating rights to anybody else and there is an extraction licence with the Environment Agency and Anglian Water are progressing through that. Joe Hillier added there is a lot of legislation but that should build confidence that this project is safe and being fair to those around.

- Councillor Marks stated he is in support of this project but there is still a situation where there are a number of farmers and a number of businesses that are working with the unknown from Anglian Water because they are being told about the plans but are asking themselves should they farm what they are farming now or should they be looking at other land to use, plus the other problem that presents itself is the cost of land as land prices are going up around the area where this proposed reservoir will be as land owners know farmers will be looking to purchase other land within this area. He asked when will there be a date announced as to whether this is going ahead and there is still a village in turmoil because there is no infrastructure or money being spent so where are the shareholders going to come up with a billion pounds for this project but not looking after the infrastructure that is already present? Hugh Maxfield stated he fully accepts the current state at this point but until the project progresses there is no certainty which land will be used with there being a design freeze proposed for December 2024 and at that point the project managers will be in a position to go out and negotiate agreements with landowners to acquire the land and the rights that are needed from that point, those will be optional agreements that would provide some upfront funding and then the actual acquisition would take place once the consent has been granted for the reservoir. He added that there are lots of discussions going on to understand as much as possible with those farmers particularly around their business and the impact this will have so Anglian Water can do as much as they can to assist those situations. Karen Staples stated to answer the question about the date when the next design freeze happens after phase two consultation, negotiations will start to be put in place before the project goes to the DCO in 2026. Joe Hillier added in terms of funding the reservoir this is not something Anglian Water is going to do as this is such a massive project which is why there has been encouragement to get external support to provide the funding needed. He stated that this is a common approach in the UK for a large majority of infrastructure schemes, with Anglian Water's part to ensure that everything is in place with the community engagement and the right solution in terms of how this project will work and that the needs are met for the DCO so what is planned to be delivered will be delivered. Councillor Marks stated these are loans from investors that will need to be paid back with interest which means the infrastructure around it falls more because there is a reservoir that needs paying for in the Fenland area. Joe Hillier responded the way this model should work means it is equitable for all generations so it will not mean this generation pays for everything and the next generation benefiting completely it is about spreading the load across the board. He continued the infrastructure construction is a huge amount of cost and ensuring that there is a set rate with minimal additions to people's water bills to pay for this for many years but that is built into the contract with that operator.

Updates from Anglian Water and requested that they be invited to future meetings to provide.

(Councillor Taylor declared he had an interest in the item due to comments he had made and left the meeting for the duration of the item. Councillor Mrs French took the Chair.)

RF6/23 RURAL ENGLAND PROSPERITY FUND

Members considered the Rural England Prosperity Fund report presented by Simon Jackson and Dawn Caplin.

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

- Councillor Count stated he was in agreement with the funding proposed but queried The Men's Shed as he understands there is a Men's Shed at the FACT offices, and the report also indicates that there is a Men's Shed in Wisbech so has there been a misunderstanding or is it a different type of Men's Shed? Simon Jackson stated he would take that question away and check with Councillor Christy who runs the FACT site.
- Councillor Mrs French asked which is the other company and location in March for the Men's Shed? Simon Jackson responded it is listed as unused space on Station Road, Cemetery Chapel, March to renovate the inside of the two Chapel buildings that have recently been repaired externally. Councillor Mrs French confirmed this is a disused building, and there is a Men's Shed at FACT on a Wednesday and Saturday and is open to women too. She continued there is a conflict here with the two sheds and feels the funding needs looking at to see if this project can be moved into one big shed as she does not feel this project needs duplicating with when the extra funding could be used elsewhere.
- Councillor Marks stated, in reference to apprenticeships, is this something that is being pushed as there are a lot of youngsters between the ages 18-25 who are starting their own businesses and there are a lot of local businesses looking for apprentices, but travel and access is an issue? Simon Jackson responded there is a wider programme of support for skills apprenticeships, when Cabinet made a decision with the shared prosperity funding this was to provide a top slice of it to the CPCA as other local authorities have done to add to an areawide skills programme which would include apprenticeships, internships and so on, so what the Council are being careful of is as this programme is much smaller it will add value to what is already planned and happening as the CPCA and other colleges are already doing a lot of work.
- Councillor Marks asked if this was common knowledge as the businesses, he speaks to are struggling to recruit apprenticeships and there seems to be money sitting there and local business do not seem to know this is available and feels this is something that should be pushed. Simon Jackson agreed and stated the CPCA are mindful of this fact and in the past, there was an extensive database built up of businesses and as an Economic Growth Team this is the main mechanism for communicating directly with businesses. He stated there are currently 2500 businesses on the list and the Council is about to procure a customer relationship management system which will help to improve that communication even further, there is a regular newsletter that goes out with information about what the Council, other stakeholders and other partners are doing including around skills so part of the team's role is to make sure people are opening those emails and engaging with the information sent. Dawn Caplin added when undertaking site visits every effort is made to connect with businesses and conversations are had around apprenticeships but there is a worry that this is not just treated as cheap labour and that there is a proper programme in place and the right people are being connected to the right job, so the support is out there not just with grants but with ensuring the apprenticeship is supporting businesses too. Peter Catchpole added there has been many times when grants have been given out to businesses particularly in the Covid years and one of the sources the Council relied on was Councillors sharing names that are not on the database so if there are any names Councillors can share then a dialogue can be set up with those businesses to see if they are eligible for a particular grant on what funding can be offered for the future.
- Councillor Taylor stated he would like to ask about the grants because in his experience since the reservoir has been mentioned the banks have denied financial funding for the local agricultural businesses as farmers are classed as high risk because the banks do not know what length of time Anglian Water are talking about which affects the farmers business finance plans and asked, are the Council looking at grants surrounding the proposed reservoir area or is it being classed as high risk, with the same approach as the banks? Simon Jackson responded the funding that is being referred to in the report ends in March 2025 so this would not affect someone who is applying for a grant within the proposed reservoir area. Dawn Caplin added that she would be recommending some trusts and foundations to Anglian Water to help with the funding of the project.

- Councillor Clark stated in the report it states that businesses have until the 6 April to log an expression of interest for the grants and asked what the process is after the closing date? Simon Jackson responded there is £163,500 worth of funding available and once the expressions of interest forms are received, they are carefully assessed and scored then the grant is given out to the right candidates, but if there are not sufficient candidates then the grants will be opened again. He continued that Dawn and himself have learnt that when there is money with an end date the project needs to have a strong start so Dawn has undertaken work to get expressions of interest etc and the marketing in place before the launch date so that in theory when the grants are launched the Council could be paying money out quickly so there is not a lot of this money left in the pot in the new financial year, however even though this is a front loading plan the candidates will need to have good plans in place a good quality application with clear outcomes and objectives, good job creation, which can later be presented to the CPCA. Dawn Chaplin added if Councillor Taylor has any contacts, he wishes to share then the team would really like to focus on farmer and farming diversification, tourism and also there is a meeting planned with the NFL to relay the information available so this area can be specifically targeted and supported.
- Councillor Mrs French asked if any of this funding was available for the local shop owners and businesses within March Town Centre in relation to the redevelopment? Simon Jackson responded in theory they could apply because this falls within the geography however the way this scheme is designed is Government led and providing it delivers what the Government wants delivered the team would not stop them applying.
- Councillor Booth stated he understands what this is doing for the businesses but he would like to know about section 2.6 and the community place funding applications as this is a Rural England grant process and it seems the free grants are going into the towns and not into the surrounding villages which has completely missed the mark and he feels very disappointed because he raises this every time there is a business plan discussion because it looks at what is happening in the big towns and not what is going on in the local villages. He feels that no one seems to have gone out to these villages to find out what they want so while he supports the business aspiration, he does not support what they are proposing under section 2.6 for the community place because it is not supporting the rural end of Fenland, it is only supporting the towns.
- Councillor Count expressed the view that this was a case of letting the more rural communities know and getting the bids in as this is not a case of the Council allocating this because they have favouritism of towns it is because rural bids have not come in with a strong enough bid so if local councillors represent a rural village let them get the message out and advise on the things they could bid on with a strong form. Councillor Booth responded he agreed and feels that the message needs to go out again as he feels councillors are failing to deliver on this funding. Dawn Chaplin stated she finds that a lot of the rural communities want grants to renovate their village halls and there is not enough money for these kinds of projects so that is something to be mindful of when communicating with rural residents. Simon Jackson added he agreed with Dawn Chaplin that this money is for 'rural' areas and that does mean everywhere in the Fens, apart from Wisbech, so technically these towns apart from Wisbech are rural towns notwithstanding the point made today and he will take this point back.
- Councillor Booth stated that he feels Cabinet needs to relook at the funding for the community place, particularly for the rural areas. Councillor Mrs French stated that she did not feel that Cabinet have missed out the rural villages but would like it noted that these villages cannot be forced to apply. Councillor Count stated it would be worth talking to the Parish Councillors and getting a data base put together of local businesses and community groups that could benefit from the funding so they can be contacted directly instead of through the parish newsletter which Councillor Booth mentioned does not seem to be affective enough in this situation. Simon Jackson stated this is definitely something that can be looked into but this is something that is already happening within his team.

Member noted the Rural England Prosperity Fund Report

RF7/23 CLIMATE IMPACT ASSESSMENT FOR UK FARMING

Members received a presentation from Rob Wise of the NFU.

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

- Councillor Marks stated he would like to know the view on Anaerobic Digestion (AD) plants as there has been peat disappearing over the years which happens for a multiple of reasons but there are now fields after fields feeding these AD plants and the tractors on the fields are puddling the land and he feels this is contributing to the flooding issues in this area because the fields are not recovering as the water is just laying on the top of the field and the peat is soaking into the clay below. Rob Wise responded on the issues surrounding AD plants these can be similar to root cropping, the growing of the maize and potatoes which is undertaken on cropping licences, annual cropping licence and sometimes landowner farmers who grant these cropping licenses, looking for short-term return. It is undeniable that the effect on the movement of soil from the fields if there is only a short-term interest does constitute as much attention as when there is a long-term interest in that land. He added this is a difficult area to legislate or regulate on whether to constrain individual farmers or landowners in decisions about how that land is used. Councillor Marks made the point that there are many solar farms in this area taking up good soil where good crops could be grown but the fields have instead been covered in glass panels which are catching all the water, and he would like to know what the NFU view is on this as opposed to the land being used for its proper use and solar farms being placed in lesser land usage? Rob Wise responded that generally the NFU has taken the view that the not best used land should be prioritised for solar but as an organisation the NFU cannot dictate to individual businesses how they use their land, all the NFU can do is make the point of the best available land that should be prioritised, there is increasing innovation within the solar industry to allow for increased cropping use, possible vertical panel arrangements and high level mounted arrangements being introduced that will allow for cultivation underneath the panels.
- Councillor Taylor raised concerns about the operation of the NFU. Rob Wise agreed to take his concerns away.
- Councillor Clark stated he felt the committee needed to be careful where it strays in terms of Fenlands most rural communities including farming matters that the Council are responsible for the Council are not responsible for, with what has been mentioned today he cannot see how the committee can bring value to this presentation. Rob Wise responded he was invited to share the climate reviews and values the interest from the committee. He added that he is pleased to see this committee has been developed to support the rural and farming community and looks forward to the committee adding value to future ventures.

Councillor Taylor left the meeting at this point and Councillor Mrs French took the chair.

- Councillor Count stated he found the peat reports very interesting as he was part of the early committees being developed alongside the universities. He added as the data is still being worked on at what stage does the NFU think it will be able to give an update or a report that can be used with the overall figures as he has had many people comment that they would like to rework the Fens from the figure that were produced which are not accurate now, and it would be nice to have the updated information to help with some of these conversations. Rob Wise stated the NFU are getting close to being able to share the new data with Fenland soil has been at the heart of the reports looking at greenhouse gasses and emissions coming from deep peat soil versus Skirt Fens versus grassland versus crop land and as the emissions data is collated and put together, the actual data with the extent of peat left has painted a broader picture, so there are partial figures that can be shared now and the NFU are pushing for the global figure to be shared by the end of the year.
- Councillor Marks commented that this committee cannot change what has been spoken about

today and that his concern was about the land usage seen now with peat going and the AD plants and the damage it is doing to the land. He feels it will not be long before farmers say they cannot do anything with the land, then it will come into planning because someone will want to build houses on the land as it is not profitable for use, so he feels this does impact the area and the amount of water that comes off the land needs to be taken into consideration.

Members noted the latest update from the NFU.

RF8/23 ADVISORY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME DISCUSSION

Members considered the Future Work Programme

- Councillor Booth asked that Anglian Water be invited back this time next year for an update on the reservoir. Councillor Marks added that the IDB and Middle Level should also be invited as they are involved too.
- Anna Goodall suggested a visit from the Police on rural crime and exploitation within the area. Councillor Marks asked if all the rural emergency services could be invited, if possible, on the 7 October 2024 with the focus on how the rural environment impacts on their services.

5.00 pm

Chairman