

COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET

17TH JANUARY 2019

Present:

Councillor AW Berry - Chairman
Councillor NJW Parsons - Vice-Chairman

Councillors -

Sue Coakley SG Hirst
C Hancock MGE MacKenzie-Charrington

Observers:

SI Andrews JA Harris (until 4.35 p.m.)
AR Brassington (until 4.35 p.m.) RA Morgan
David Fowles (from 4.10 p.m.) LR Wilkins (until 4.30 p.m.)

CAB.69 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor AW Berry declared an Interest in respect of Agenda Item (12) - Community Organisation Loan - as he had suggested such way forward to the community organisation, and stated that he would leave the room while the item was being discussed.

There were no other declarations under the Code of Conduct for Members or Section 106 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992.

There were no declarations of interest under the Code of Conduct for Officers.

CAB.70 MINUTES

RESOLVED that:

(a) the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on 15th November 2018 be approved as a correct record;

Record of Voting - for 5, against 0, abstentions 1, absent 0.

(b) the Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Cabinet held on 3rd December 2018 be approved as a correct record.

Record of Voting - for 6, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 0.

CAB.71 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions had been submitted.

CAB.72 MEMBER QUESTIONS

No questions had been submitted by Members.

CAB.73 LEADER'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Leader welcomed Mrs. Kathryn Skill, the recently-appointed Committee Officer, to the Meeting.

CAB.74 PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

The Cabinet was requested to consider and adopt (subject to any amendments considered necessary) an updated Preventing Homelessness Strategy.

The Head of Paid Service explained that, as the updated draft Strategy presented for approval included four priority actions that had timeframes/target dates that had already passed, these had been reviewed. Relevant updates, including suggested changes, were set out in the Addendum which had been circulated at the Meeting.

The Cabinet Member for Housing, Health and Leisure stated that the Council had an important task to avoid and minimise the impact of homelessness across the District, and a legal duty to do so. He stated that the Council reviewed each strategy every five years and that the last Strategy had been adopted in 2016, but was no longer considered fit-for-purpose. The Cabinet Member advised that significant changes had been introduced by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2018 and subsequent pressures from the welfare reform had led to an expected risk that the levels of homelessness would increase across the District. Accordingly, the Strategy for 2018 to 2023 gave most emphasis to prevention of, rather than dealing with, homelessness.

Councillor JA Harris was invited to speak on this item. Councillor Harris stated that there was little reference within the Strategy in regard to mental health and that, having spoken with Officers, he had discovered that poor mental health was a key cause of rough sleeping nationwide. Councillor Harris added that he considered the Strategy was simply providing the 'bare minimum' and that it was crucial that the Strategy made more reference to, and provision for, mental health issues.

In response, the Cabinet Member expressed his belief that the Strategy was much more than the bare minimum. He explained that the County Council was due to come forward with a mental health programme which, once produced, would be incorporated into the Strategy; and confirmed that he would seek to ascertain the date being proposed for the introduction of the programme.

Reference was made to the spike in the number of homeless cases as a result of mental health in 2016/17, and the Head of Paid Service undertook to source the background to these figures and report the findings to the Cabinet.

It was also suggested that the revised target date for the roll-out of a 'fit-for-purpose' Rent Deposit Scheme was ambitious, given the need to evaluate the trial scheme at West Oxfordshire District Council. This was accepted, and a revised target date set, of 1st June 2019.

RESOLVED that, subject to the amendments to the list of Key Actions, as identified in the Addendum circulated at the Meeting, but with the further amendment of the timescale in relation to the roll-out of a Rent Deposit Scheme to 1st June 2019, the Preventing Homelessness Strategy be approved.

Record of Voting - for 6, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 0.

CAB.75 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME FOR 2019/20

The Cabinet was requested to consider, for onward recommendation to the Council, proposals for revising the current Council Tax Support scheme with effect from 1st April 2019, having regard to the results of the public consultation previously undertaken on the proposed scheme.

The Head of Paid Service explained that he had spoken to representatives of the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) in light of their consultation comments and concerns, with the following outcomes:-

- CAB welcomed the proposed disregard of all child maintenance payments when calculating weekly income;
- CAB had confirmed that their revised discount bandings had not based on client or claimant evidence, so were happy to support the Council's proposed bandings for the coming year on the understanding that there would be a further review and consultation in advance of any new scheme for 2020/21;
- with regard to protected groups, people receiving Personal Independence Payments (PIPs) did fall within the definition of Vulnerable Groups; and officers were now actively reviewing claims which were impacted by Employment Support Allowance, with a view that those claimants who were impacted negatively would receive protected status and would not be disadvantaged.

The Head of Paid Service also reported that, with reference those claimants who had been impacted by the extant 2017/18 position to include child maintenance payments as income when calculating council tax support, Officers had sent applications to all relevant customers inviting them to apply for discretionary relief to offset the financial disbenefits - and applications had already received and awarded relief; and Officers would follow up in those cases where applications had not been received.

In response to a Member's question, it was reported that Officers regularly received information from the Department of Work and Pensions which identified potential relief claimants.

Councillor JA Harris was invited to speak on this item, as Proposer of a related Motion at a recent Council Meeting; and welcomed the suggested approach, especially with regard to ignoring all child maintenance payments when calculating weekly income.

RECOMMENDED that:-

(a) the current Council Tax Support Scheme in relation to Working Age claimants, including any uprating, be amended as follows for 2019/20:-

(i) by introducing a banded scheme which would see a simple flat rate percentage discount awarded, depending on a person's total weekly 'net' income, as follows:-

Household weekly net income	% council tax support available
£0 - £125.99	100%
£126 - £187.99	75%
£188 - £290.99	50%
£291 - £384.99	25%
£385 +	0%

(ii) by ignoring all child maintenance payments when calculating weekly income;

(b) those defined as disabled (see Appendix 'C') and those in receipt of War Widows Pension and/or War Disablement Pension be protected from all of the above changes.

Record of Voting - for 6, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 0.

CAB.76

PROPOSALS FOR CHANGES TO LOCAL COUNCIL TAX PREMIUMS

The Cabinet was requested to consider proposals for changes to Long Term Empty Property Premiums, for onward recommendation to the Council.

The Head of Paid Service introduced the item and, in conjunction with the Chief Finance Officer, responded to various questions from Members.

The Cabinet Member for Enterprise and Partnerships commented that, whilst he fully supported the changes proposed, he felt it was important that the changes did not penalise those whose properties were empty for good reason, e.g. probate.

In response, Officers confirmed that proportionate action would be taken, and owners, or indeed Members, could inform Officers of any empty properties and/or special circumstances within their Wards. The Cabinet was also advised that recruitment was currently taking place for an Empty Homes Co-ordinator, to lead on this and other aspects of empty properties.

In expressed their support for the proposals, a number of Members stressed the importance of communicating the changes as widely as possible.

RECOMMENDED that the Long Term Empty Property Premium (currently set at 50%) be:-

(a) increased to 100% from 1st April 2019 for those properties which are/have been empty for two years and over;

(b) increased to 200% from 1st April 2020 for those properties which are/have been empty for five years and over;

(c) increased to 300% from 1st April 2021 for those properties which are/have been empty for 10 years and over.

Record of Voting - for 6, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 0.

CAB.77

PROPOSALS FOR COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION FOR CARE LEAVERS

The Cabinet was requested to consider proposals to apply council tax discounts for care leavers, for onward recommendation to the Council.

It was explained that the Government's care leavers' strategy, 'Keep on Caring', encouraged councils to consider exempting care leavers from Council Tax using powers already at their disposal; and, through a subsequent report into homelessness, the Communities and Local Government Select Committee recommended to Government that care leavers be made exempt from Council Tax up to at least the age of 21.

The Cabinet Member for Environment commented that she wished to endorse the scheme, explaining that it made 'absolute sense' and would help vulnerable people within the District to live independently.

The Cabinet expressed its support for the proposals and commended the fact that the six Gloucestershire District Councils and the County Council had worked together to agree and recommend a common Council Tax discount scheme for Care Leavers from April 2019.

RECOMMENDED that:-

(a) with effect from 1st April 2019, care leavers who meet the eligibility criteria as detailed within this report be eligible to apply for a discretionary council tax discount as follows:-

(i) where a property is solely occupied by a care leaver, 100% discount will be awarded;

(ii) where a care leaver is in occupation and jointly liable with others, a 50% discount will be awarded;

(b) the Group Manager for Customer Service (Publica Group (Support) Limited) be authorised to award the specified discounts;

(c) the Council's Constitution be updated to reflect the approved delegated decision-making arrangements.

Record of Voting - for 6, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 0.

CAB.78

BUSINESS RATES RELIEF FOR RETAIL PREMISES

The Cabinet was requested to consider a scheme of rate relief for retail premises, as outlined by Government in the Autumn Statement 2018.

The Leader of the Council introduced this item and expressed the view that charity shops should not be awarded this relief as, in most cases, they received

80% charitable relief and therefore had an advantage over other high street traders.

The Cabinet expressed its support for the recommendations and commented that the relief was intended to revitalise 'high streets' and that a 30% reduction would make a great difference to independent businesses. The Cabinet also agreed with the Leader's suggestion that such relief should not be awarded to charity shops; and supported the delegation arrangements to enable relief award decisions to be made more easily and quickly.

It was also noted that central government would fully reimburse local authorities for the local share of the discretionary relief.

RESOLVED that:

- (a) a scheme of Retail Rate Relief be approved in line with the principles set out in Appendix A to the circulated report, subject to such relief not applying to Charity Shops in light of the high level of mandatory relief already received for the financial years 2019/20 and 2020/21;**
- (b) the Group Manager for Customer Services be authorised to award such relief in accordance with the approved scheme;**
- (c) an update report be submitted in October 2019 outlining the take-up of such relief throughout the District and giving the opportunity for amendments to the scheme based on the expenditure at that point.**

Record of Voting - for 6, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 0.

CAB.79

COMMUNITY ORGANISATION LOAN

The Cabinet received a report detailing a request from Cirencester Housing for Young People (CHYP) to change the terms of an existing loan.

The Cabinet Member for Housing, Health and Leisure introduced this item and explained that he and the Chief Finance Officer had met with three of the Board Members from CHYP to consider and explore a number of potential options, which had resulted in the positive outcome presented to Members.

The Cabinet Member for Environment explained that the suggested approach would ensure that the Council would recover the loan principal while enabling CHYP to financially plan for the future and to move to the most effective governance arrangements for future service provision. She also highlighted the contribution the organisation made, including supporting the Council in fulfilling its statutory responsibilities to prevent homelessness under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

RESOLVED that the revised conditions of the loan, as set out in section 4 of the circulated report, be approved.

Record of Voting - for 5, against 0, abstentions 1, absent 0.

Note:

On behalf of the Cabinet, the Cabinet Member for Housing, Health and Leisure

wished to extend his thanks to the Chief Finance Officer for her work in relation to this item.

CAB. 80 VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRE GRANTS - 2019/20 TO 2021/22

The Cabinet was requested to consider the approval of continued grant funding, totalling £54,000, to existing community providers of Visitor Information Centres (VICs) for a three-year period.

The Head of Paid Service introduced this item and explained that the stability offered by a three-year grant period was highly valued and welcomed by the VICs and would be more beneficial to them than an increase for a shorter period. He added that Officers would be researching the potential for business rates relief for the centres and explained that the Council could also consider one-off funding proposals during the grant period.

The Cabinet Member for Enterprise and Partnerships explained that he had undertaken a visit to all of the VICs located within the District and reported that despite the unchanging grant award, the centres were working hard to increase their offer. He added that some centres had suffered from falling income due to a variety of matters; and that the sharing of facilities at the centre in Stow-on-the-Wold and the digital work at the Tetbury centre were both to be commended. The Cabinet Member concluded that the three-year funding helped to leverage in other funding, help maintain footfall and investigate future initiatives.

The Cabinet Member for Housing, Health and Leisure expressed his disappointment that the Council could not source extra funding for the centres to enable them to contribute more to the District overall. In response, the Cabinet Member for Environment reminded Members of the uncertainty surrounding this Council's future financial position, and that any potential increase in funding being awarded would require the submission of a robust business case.

RESOLVED that the provision of £54,000 to existing community providers of Visitor Information Centres, by way of grant funding for the three-year period 2019/20 to 2021/22, be approved.

Record of Voting - for 6, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 0.

CAB.81 SAFETY IMPROVEMENTS TO MEMORIALS AT COUNCIL CEMETRIES

The Cabinet was requested to consider the allocation of funding, and agree actions to be taken, to improve memorial safety in the Councils Cemeteries.

The Cabinet Member for Environment explained that the Council had always undertaken assessments of risks and that, recently, there had been a number of memorials reported as dangerous. She explained that whilst the memorials were the responsibility of the individual families, the age of many of the memorials meant that, often, family members could not be traced and the responsibility then would fall to the Council. The Cabinet Member explained that it was prudent to examine the memorials in a managed way and that repair or laying down the memorials were the safest options, if the best endeavours of Officers could not trace any family members. She also drew attention to the suggested annual allocation of £2,000 to ensure that necessary works could be undertaken promptly and effectively on a rolling basis.

The Leader of the Council explained that the £20,000 allocation was a 'catch-up' and that the actual amount needed for the necessary works would not be known until the survey was undertaken.

In response to various questions from Members it was reported that the funding allocation was to enable works to any dangerous memorials to be undertaken at the time of their discovery; the risk of public injury lay with the Council as the owner of the cemeteries; if the monuments were deteriorating and not yet considered dangerous, the Council had the option to contact the family before any action was taken; and the Council would only look to spend money on works that were urgent and that evidence would be presented for the works from topple testing.

RESOLVED that:

- (a) a sum of £10,000 be allocated from the Council Priorities Fund Earmarked Revenue Reserve to undertake a full survey of memorials at Chesterton, Stratton and Watermoor Cemeteries;**
- (b) the costs associated with any immediate works required to be undertaken to any memorial be met from the Council's Priorities Fund;**
- (c) the outcome of the survey, and costs of any further recommended repair works by the Council, be reported back to the Cabinet for review and funding decision;**
- (d) the process set out in the circulated report for attempting to contact the families of those buried in the plots with dangerous memorials be agreed;**
- (e) an annual allocation of £2,000 be made from the Council Priorities Fund for a rolling programme of memorial inspections and safety improvements.**

Record of Voting - for 6, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 0.

CAB. 82

**GENERAL DATA PROTECTION REGULATION (GDPR) COMPLIANCE
PROGRESS REPORT**

The Cabinet received an update report on actions being undertaken as part of the Council's implementation of the new Data Protection Legislation and information security management.

The Cabinet Member for Enterprise and Partnerships introduced the item and explained that good progress had been made on this topic, as evidenced through the Action Plan. He added that there was a desire to ensure all Members of the Council were enrolled onto the G-Mail system as soon as possible to ensure full data compliance. In this connection, the Head of Paid Service expressed the hope that this would be achieved by no later than 1st February 2019.

RESOLVED that:

- (a) the report be noted;
- (b) regular progress reports be submitted to Cabinet.

Record of Voting - for 6, against 0, abstentions 0, absent 0.

CAB. 83 SCHEDULE OF DECISIONS TAKEN BY THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL AND/OR INDIVIDUAL CABINET MEMBER

The Cabinet noted a Schedule detailing decisions taken by the then Acting Leader of the Council, the Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Forward Planning, and the Cabinet Member for Environment.

CAB.84 ISSUE(S) ARISING FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY AND/ OR AUDIT (IF ANY)

There were no formal recommendations, or other matters, arising from Overview and Scrutiny and/or Audit.

CAB.85 OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business that was urgent.

The Meeting commenced at 4.05 p.m. and closed at 5.20 p.m.

Chairman

(END)