

Minutes of Policy & Finance Committee

Meeting Date: Tuesday, 12 November 2013 starting at 6,30pm
Present: Councillor S Hirst (Chairman)

Councillors:

R Elms	A Knox
J Hill	G Mirfin
T Hill	J Rogerson
K Hind (7.10pm)	D T Smith
B Hilton	R J Thompson
S Hore	A Yearing
K Horkin	

In attendance: Chief Executive, Director of Resources, Director of Community Services, Head of Regeneration and Housing and Head of Revenues and Benefits.

439 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor M Ranson.

440 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 September 2013 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman. Councillor Yearing included both as being present and in apologies.

441 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor K Horkin commented that as he had a number of business interests in the area, there may well be need to declare an interest.

442 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

443 LOCALISATION OF COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT

The Director of Resources referred to Minute 448 of Committee dated 20 November 2011 and now updated Members on the implementation of our local Council Tax Support scheme. She asked Committee to agree minor amendments to the Council's local Council Tax Support scheme for 2014/2015 and recommend this to Full Council on 10 December 2013.

Committee were reminded that as part of the package of welfare reform measures, the government decided to abolish Council tax benefit from 1 April 2013 and replace it with locally determined schemes of Council Tax support. In doing so, the government reduced the funding available to local Councils to pay

for this support from 100% subsidy to a grant of only 90%. This grant had now been rolled into the main local authority funding and will therefore be further reduced for 2014/2015 in line with the reduction applicable to each Council.

The scheme applied by this Council matched the previous Council Tax benefit scheme but with a 12% reduction to entitlement for those of working age.

Transitional funding was made available by the government for one year only for 2013/2014 for Councils who limited the reduction in entitlement to 8.5%. This Council decided to accept the funding and limited the reduction to 8.5% but for 2013/2014 only.

She further commented that given the experience that we had had in implementing the scheme this year and changes to funding occurring in 2014/2015, it was sensible that we continue with our scheme based on the previous Council Tax benefit with a 12% reduction to apply for working age claimants as previously approved in December 2012. However, in order to ensure that our scheme continued to mirror the housing benefit scheme and the scheme applicable to pensioners, it was necessary to uprate it in the same way as those schemes.

*** RESOLVED: That Committee recommend to Full Council approval of our local Council Tax Support scheme for 2014/2015 as set out in the report. ***

444 REVIEW OF FEES AND CHARGES

The Director of Resources sought Committee's approval to increase Committee's fees and charges with effect from 1 April 2014.

The Council's latest budget forecast allowed for a 2.75% increase in the level of income raised from fees and charges. The Budget Working Group had agreed with the proposals to increase the Council's fees and charges by 2.75% for 2014/2015 allowing the roundings to the nearest 5p which may result in higher increases.

RESOLVED: That Committee agree the implementation of the fees and charges with effect from 1 April 2014 as attached to the report.

445 GRANTS TO VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS

Committee were asked to ratify the payment of grants to the Little Green Bus and to the Clitheroe Community Bonfire.

- a) Little Green Bus – following the recent purchase of a replacement minibus by the Little Green Bus, a request had been made for the release of the grant funding set aside for this purpose.

Voluntary organisation grant scheme monies of £3,700 had been released together with a Local Strategic Partnership grant allocation of £2,500 giving a total grant payment of £6,200. These amounts had

previously been approved but were held until the purchase had been made.

- b) Clitheroe Community Bonfire (through the Rotary Club of Clitheroe) – following the loss of other sponsorship for the provision of fireworks at the Clitheroe Community Bonfire, a request had recently been received for a sponsorship of £500 towards the fireworks for this year’s event. Due to the timing of the request, the event and the next meeting of this Committee, the request had been agreed by the Chairman and Vice Chairman of this Committee. Payment of the grant had been made from the unallocated balance that was available for voluntary organisation grant scheme budgets.

RESOLVED: That the payment of the grants to Little Green Bus and Clitheroe Community Bonfire be ratified.

446 FINANCIAL REGULATIONS

Committee were requested to accept revised financial regulations. The Director of Resources commented that there had been just one change in the section on budgetary control which clarified that ‘virements from direct employee cost budgets will not normally be approved and virements from income budgets will only be considered if the full year budget had already been achieved’.

*** RESOLVED: That it be recommended to Full Council that the Council’s revised financial regulations be approved. ***

447 MONITORING REPORT ON VILLAGE AMENITY GRANTS

Committee received a report which gave a progress detail on the projects approved through the Village Amenity Grant scheme to allow further consideration of any underspend that may occur.

Committee were reminded that a report had been considered by Committee on 25 September 2013 to provide information on the allocation of village amenity grants made available through the Council Tax income on second homes/performance reward grant monies. 21 applications had been approved totalling £108,724. On 26 March 2013 Members received an update on the progress of these projects and agreed that where projects were making progress but were likely to complete beyond April 2013, an additional six month period be granted with a new deadline of 31 October 2013.

To date of the £108,724 offered, two projects totalling £97,622 had been claimed leaving an underspend of £11,102. One issue had arisen in relation to a large capital project at Queen Elizabeth II Playing Fields, Whalley. This grant had been approved for £10,000 towards the cost of a new multi-use games area, youth shelter and green gym. The Trust were currently in the process of completing an application to become Ntrust registered which would enable them to draw down the necessary match funding to enable the project to proceed. This in turn had delayed the project start date. Details were also given of two

other projects where there had been delays at Dinckley and Bolton-by-Bowland village halls.

RESOLVED: That

1. Committee confirm the large capital project at QEII Playing Fields charitable trust be given an additional five month period beyond October 2013 in which to claim their grant funding due to the size of the project and its significance to Whalley; and
2. apart from that project, agree that any funding unclaimed by 31 October 2013 would no longer be eligible for payment.

448 STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP – COMMUNITY STRATEGY

Members were asked to consider a refresh of the Community Strategy and delivering partnership priorities.

Committee were reminded of the recent history of the Local Strategic Partnership and its development of a sustainable community strategy. The current strategy runs to 2013 and consideration needed to be given to a mechanism to identify and provide a clear focus for partnership working going forward to reflect Council and community priorities.

Members were provided with a summary review of the current position of activities in the adopted strategy. The summary identified the key themes against which actions and priorities had been taken forward. Significant funding had been generated through the countryside partnership enabling performance reward grant monies to be drawn down and the availability of second home Council Tax income, both of which were directed towards activities to deliver the Community Strategy.

A review of delivery against the agreed themes and objectives was included within the report and given that there were 65 outcomes identified with only three showing as red, in fact demonstrated the high level of success in delivering against the Community Strategy.

Members then discussed this matter in some detail.

RESOLVED: That Committee support the preparation of a revised focused Community Strategy.

449 EAST LANCASHIRE TRANSPORT MASTERPLAN – CONSULTATION

Committee were asked to consider the draft East Lancashire Transport Masterplan.

Lancashire County Council had published for consultation a draft Transport Masterplan for East Lancashire and as highway authority they were aiming to produce a series of masterplans that would provide coverage for the whole of Lancashire.

One of the main purposes of the masterplans was to identify issues and opportunities that would have an impact on the highway network and public transport systems operating in the area and to help provide a co-ordinated approach to investment planning and delivery of a transport system that would support the long term needs of the area.

The Masterplan would take into account the anticipated development proposals across East Lancashire and in particular would take account of proposals contained in the submitted Ribble Valley Core Strategy. Some key areas of investment were already identified such as improvements to the Clitheroe to Manchester rail corridor through Transport for Lancashire which was an initiative being taken forward by Lancashire Enterprise Partnership.

In summary the approach in the Masterplan was to be welcomed in particular the recognition of the need for work at the strategic level highlighting key route infrastructure that was necessary for the long term economic wellbeing of the borough. Some work had already been undertaken by the County and its partners or was due to commence shortly as funding had become confirmed. Other work was subject to programing, however as presented the timeframe for work relating to Ribble Valley was not considered to be an issue.

RESOLVED: That

1. Committee authorise the Chief Executive in consultation with the Chairman to submit a response to the consultation informed by a full briefing to be held with all Councillors and Lancashire County Council advising Lancashire County Council of Committee's general support for the measures and proposals set out in the draft Masterplan but the concerns expressed regarding the need for greater recognition of the role of bus services in rural areas to support local communities be made together with any other relevant matters arising from the briefing; and
2. the Head of Regeneration and Housing arranges a briefing with Lancashire County Council to ensure the submission deadline of 6 December to be met and that progress with the masterplan is reported to the Economic Development Working Group.

450

COUNCIL TAX BASE 2014/2015

The Director of Resources informed Committee of the latest position regarding the calculation of the Council's Council Tax Base for the next financial year. She asked that Committee consider changes to our current Council Tax discounts on long term empty properties.

She reminded Members that the Council Tax Base was the measure of the number of dwellings to which Council Tax is chargeable in an area that was used for the purposes of calculating a billing authority and major precepting authorities Band D Council Tax. The relevant amounts calculated are the number of chargeable dwellings in each band shown on the valuation list on a specified day of the previous year and the adjusted for the number of discounts and reductions for disability that apply to those dwellings. She further commented that

significant changes had taken place since last year which would affect the need to calculate our tax base; these were the introduction of local Council Tax support scheme and the introduction of new flexibilities under the technical changes to Council Tax.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits then informed Members that from 1 April 2013, second homes may be charged 100% of the normal rate of Council Tax instead of the previous maximum of 90%. Unoccupied and substantially unfurnished properties were subject to a discount of anything between 0-100% of their Council Tax at the discretion of the billing authority. Properties undergoing (major repair works) or 'structural alteration' which are vacant can be subject to a discount of any amount between 0-100% for a maximum of 12 months. The full 50% discount must be retained on a second home where the liable person is required as part of his/her employment to live in job related accommodation.

From 1 April 2013 local authorities could also set an empty homes premium for long term empty properties. Properties which had been unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for over two years may be charged up to 150% of the normal liability.

Members then discussed the implications of these changes in some detail.

*** RESOLVED: That Committee

1. recommend to Full Council that a discount of 50% on long term empty properties is removed from the 1 April 2013; and
2. recommend to Full Council that an empty homes premium of 50% is charged for properties empty for more than two years.

451 NATIONAL NON DOMESTIC RATES WRITE OFF

The Head of Revenues and Benefits sought Committee's approval to write off National Non Domestic Rate debts. In particular where the company had gone into administration or liquidation and therefore there was a need to write off NNDR debts.

Members then asked a number of questions in relation to the Council's ability to chase these bad debts. The Head of Revenues and Benefits and Director of Resources gave their comments on the questions raised.

RESOLVED: That Committee approve the writing off of £34,692.76 of NNDR debts where it had not possible to collect the amounts due.

452 REFERENCES FROM COMMITTEE - ADDITIONAL CAPITAL SCHEME

Committee were asked to consider a request from Community Services Committee to agree to the addition of a new capital scheme in the current financial year's capital programme.

Community Services Committee considered a report submitted by the Director of Resources which gave details of a request for an addition to the capital programme for 2013/2014. The scheme relates to the installation of a replacement piece of play equipment at John Smith's Playing Fields at a total scheme cost of £24,420. The scheme was part funded from a grant approved through the SITA Trust of £20,230. The balance of the scheme of £4,190 can be funded from the existing capital approval for play area improvements.

RESOLVED: That Committee agree to the request for the addition of the John Smith's play area scheme of £20,230 and the transfer of budget from the play area improvements capital scheme of £4,190 giving a total scheme cost of £24,420.

453 RIBBLE VALLEY COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP – UPDATE

Committee received a report for information on recent work and initiatives undertaken by the Ribble Valley Community Safety Partnership.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

454 TREASURY MANAGEMENT MONITORING 2014/2015

Committee received a monitoring report on our treasury management activities for the period 1 April 2013 to 31 October 2013.

The report included the following:

- borrowing requirements
- investments
- prudential indicators
- approved organisations
- recent events

RESOLVED: that the report be noted.

455 REVENUES AND BENEFITS GENERAL REPORT

Committee received a report which covered the following areas:

- National Non Domestic Rates
- Council Tax
- Sundry debtors
- Housing benefit performance
- Housing benefit/Council Tax fraud
- Housing benefit overpayments

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

456 RIBBLE VALLEY STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP PERFORMANCE REWARD GRANT PROJECTS

Committee received a report which gave an update on existing projects.

The report indicated that there was still £123,457 of funding still unallocated.

Members discussed the question of how to allocate this funding in the future.

RESOLVED: That

1. the report be noted; and
2. a report be considered by the Budget Working Group on suggestions of how to allocate this funding.

457 REVENUE MONITORING 2013/2014

Committee considered a report on the position for the first six months of this year's revenue budget as far as this Committee was concerned.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

458 OVERALL REVENUE MONITORING 2013/2014

Committee considered a report on the position of the revenue budget for the first six months of the current financial year.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

459 CAPITAL MONITORING REPORT 2013/2014

Members received a report on the progress of the approved capital programme for the period April to September 2013 with regard to schemes which fell within the responsibility of this Committee.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

460 OVERALL CAPITAL MONITORING REPORT 2013/2014

Members received a report relating to the progress of the approved capital programme for the period April to September 2013.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

461 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT WORKING GROUP

Committee received the notes of the Economic Development Working Group dated 20 August 2013.

462 BUDGET WORKING GROUP

Committee received the minutes of the Budget Working Group held on 24 September 2013.

463 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED: That by virtue of the next items of business being exempt information under Categories 1 and 3 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be now excluded from the meeting.

464 COUNCIL TAX NNDR AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT WRITE OFFS

The Head of Revenues and Benefits sought Committee approval to write off certain Council Tax, National Non Domestic Rate and Council Tax benefit debts relating to individuals or sole traders. He commented that there were now a number of cases where the debtor had been declared bankrupt or gone away and it had not been possible to trace them and therefore the Council needed to write off these debts. Members again made a number of comments on the report.

RESOLVED: That

1. Committee approve the writing off of £1,679.31 Council Tax; £10,213.95 NNDR and £2,373.13 Council Tax benefit debts where it had not been possible to collect the amounts due; and
2. the Chief Executive invite a representative of the Valuation Office to attend a future meeting of this Committee.

465 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

Committee received a report which gave information and an opportunity to discuss current economic development initiatives.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

The meeting closed at 8.02pm.

If you have any queries on these minutes please contact Jane Pearson (425111).