

Cabinet

Minutes of a Meeting of the Cabinet held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **16th January 2014**.

Present:

Cllr. Clarkson (Chairman);

Cllr. Cloughton (Vice-Chairman);

Cllrs. Mrs Bell, Mrs Blanford, Galpin, Heyes, Hicks, Howard, Robey, Shorter.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Bennett, Britcher, Burgess, Chilton, Clokie, Davison, Mrs Dyer, Marriott, Michael, Mortimer, Smith.

Chief Executive, Head of Legal and Democratic Services, Head of Customers, Homes and Property, Finance Manager, Revenues and Benefits Manager, Strategic Housing and Property Manager, Assistant Health, Parking and Community Safety Manager, Parking Maintenance Support and Abandoned Vehicles Officer, Senior Communications Officer, Member Services and Scrutiny Manager.

277 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet held on the 5th December 2013 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

278 Leader's Announcements

The Leader referred to the inclement weather over the Christmas period and he said that he had great sympathy for those residents in the Borough who had lost power over the festive period. He then referred to the recent incidents of flooding and commented that whilst the Borough was nowhere near as severely affected as Maidstone, there were incidents of flooding in the Borough. He intended to meet with Officers to see what action could be taken during such emergencies prior to setting up the actual Emergency Centre.

He also explained that the town would shortly be having a new Bank in that the Co-operative Bank would be opening at a location in Bank Street.

In terms of the work undertaken by T-CAT, he said that they had assisted during the flooding in terms of coning off certain areas and in particular the Civic Centre but they had also been working on the clearance of litter from areas not normally covered by the Borough Council. Indeed he said a number of alleyways had had a thorough clean-up operation but, however, only days later the litter had returned.

The Leader said that he believed that residents had a duty to be responsible and hoped that there would be ways of looking at enforcing against littering in the future.

In conclusion, he said that whilst the consultation exercise was still in progress on the draft Budget for 2014/2015, the Government had announced positive changes in that there would be a 1% allowance included within the formula grant which would be the equivalent of 1% increase in Council Tax paid for two years. Accordingly he said that the current administration would be recommending a freeze on the level of Council Tax for the next two years which would be achieved by managing services effectively and looking at value for money and efficiency.

279 O & S Review of “Procurement of Energy Saving Proposal for the Civic Centre: LED Lighting and Sub-metering” Report

The report advised that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 26th November 2013 had received a report on the Procurement of Energy Saving Proposal for the Civic Centre: LED Lighting which the Committee had been asked to consider by Council in May 2013. The Committee had discussed the report and were comfortable with the procurement process that had taken place.

The Portfolio Holder explained that he was pleased that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had looked at the proposal and were happy that the scheme should proceed. He also explained that the monitoring systems associated with the scheme had been installed over the Christmas period and currently LED units were being installed on a phased basis. By March he expected to be in a position to report that all the work had been completed.

Resolved:

That it be noted that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had considered the report and endorsed the procurement proposal.

280 Preliminary Budget Update – Government Grant Announcements and Business Rate Forecast

The report provided an update on the Government announcements that had been made since the draft Budget had been prepared and set out how they affected it. Tabled at the meeting was a revised recommendation 3 and a replacement for paragraphs 38 to 46 of the report.

The Portfolio Holder explained that the formula grant for 2014/2015 was in the region of £2.8 million whereas three years ago this level had been £5.6 million. For 2015/2016, the formula grant was expected to fall to £1.9 million. In terms of the intention to take the 1% Government Grant to offset any increase in Council Tax he advised that clarification was being sought on the letter which advised of the Government's position on the Grant. He then referred to the update paper which had been tabled which dealt with the Better Care Fund and he advised that he was

aware that the Ashford Health and Wellbeing Board would be considering this issue at its next meeting.

The Vice-Chairman, who was also the Chairman of the Ashford Health and Wellbeing Board confirmed that an item was on the Agenda for the meeting to be held on Wednesday 22nd January 2014 and said that Members were welcome to attend. In response to a comment from a Member that in terms of Disabled Facilities Grants, the Borough Council would need to obtain this from the Kent County Council, he said he was aware of this situation and hoped that the Kent County Council would work alongside the Borough Council in terms of making appropriate allocations.

A Member suggested it would be helpful if Members were given a “high level walk-through” of the whole budget report and process to enable them to fully appreciate the issues when voting for the Budget and Council Tax at the Full Council meeting. The Chairman said he saw no problem with this suggestion and the Portfolio Holder said he was sure that this request could be looked at.

The Portfolio Holder for Culture and Environment referred to paragraph 29 of the report and in particular to the fact that the Government would consult on measures to improve the incentive provided by the New Homes Bonus, in particular through mechanisms to withhold payment where planning approvals were made on appeal.

Recommended:

- That (i) the Grant announcements be noted.**
- (ii) the approval of the Council’s Business Rates estimate for submission to Government be delegated to the Deputy Chief Executive and Portfolio Holder for Resource Management and Control.**
- (iii) the announcements on the Better Care Fund and the role of the Ashford Health and Wellbeing Board in the development of the Local Plan for this funding be noted.**

281 Revenues and Benefits Recommended Write-Offs Schedule

The report proposed the formal write-off of 348 debts totalling £160,768.07. The proposals were in line with the Council’s Revenues and Benefits Service Write-Off Policy. The existing bad debt provisions already more than covered the sums involved.

The Portfolio Holder advised that every effort was made to recover debts and said that they were only written off where they were not viable in terms of recovery. He emphasised that debts would be pursued, particularly in terms of those persons who the Council had been unable to trace if they became aware of them in the future.

In response to a question from the Chairman, the Revenues and Benefits Manager said that the Borough Council had its own thorough methods for trying to locate those debtors who had moved away from the area but if that was unsuccessful, the debt was passed to an external debt collection agency. He clarified that the debt agencies only received payment on positive results. In terms of Housing Benefit overpayments, the Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that these occurred because for the most part recipients failed to inform the Borough Council of any changes in circumstances. When the Council became aware of changes a bill was issued to them for the amount owed since the original change of circumstance. In terms of Council Tax debts, he explained that a reminder letter was sent when Council Tax was about two months in arrears and after three months a Summons would be issued. Within six months it would be possible to pass the Liability Order for the debt to the bailiffs.

The Head of Customers, Homes and Property explained that in terms of debts for housing rents, they sought Eviction Notices rather than the Liability Order process.

Resolved:

- That (i) accounts totalling £40,071.54 that had been written off under delegated powers (Financial Regulations 11.1) be noted.**
- (ii) the write-offs listed in the Exempt Appendices to the report totalling £120,696.53 be approved.**

282 Property Acquisition, Investment and Disposal Strategy

The report sought the approval of the Property Acquisition, Investment and Disposal Strategy as set out within the report and approval of the use of Prudential Borrowing to predominantly purchase properties that met the criteria as outlined within the report. Furthermore, it was proposed that a Member Panel be established to monitor and control the release of £2 million per annum to fund investment opportunities which met the criteria in the report.

The Portfolio Holder said he was delighted that the report had come forward as it further demonstrated the Council's need to be innovative in its move towards more self-sufficiency based on the reducing Revenue Support Grant over future years. He said that decisions over individual purchases in his view needed to be taken in a timely manner and he drew attention to the flow chart which detailed the proposed investment protocol. He advised that any purchases made would be reported retrospectively as part of the Budget Monitoring report.

The Chairman clarified that the scheme was dealing with acquisitions for the General Fund and were not assets to be obtained as part of the work of the Property Company.

In response to a comment from a Member, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that there was a cost to borrowing the money but he explained that the process would require

due diligence to be undertaken before any purchases were agreed and this would include looking at the financial costs and returns associated with the acquisitions.

The Chairman advised that if the Cabinet supported the recommendations, the membership of the proposed Panel would be Councillor Shorter, Chairman; Councillor Bartlett, Vice-Chairman and Councillors Bennett, Chilton and Smith.

Recommended:

- That
- (i) the Property Acquisition Investment and Disposal Strategy as outlined within the report and its appendix be approved.**
 - (ii) authority be given to the Leader to establish a Member-led Panel to approve expenditure up to £2 million per annum financed by prudential borrowing if necessary for acquiring, and where necessary, carrying out adaptations to, investment opportunities which meet the criteria outlined within the report, subject to the Member Panel's proposed Terms of Reference being first reported to and approved by the Cabinet.**
 - (iii) a Budget allocation of £100,000 from reserves be approved to act as working capital to carry out site investigation works and the costs associated with the due diligence process on those properties to be acquired and/or considered for acquisition.**
 - (iv) Delegation 14.17 to the Head of Community and Housing in the Constitution be amended to read:**

“To settle the terms for the acquisition or disposal of land or property or interests in land or property in accordance with the Property Acquisition Investment and Disposal Strategy or where the principle of the proposed acquisition or disposal has been separately approved by the Council or the Cabinet”.
 - (v) a new delegation be granted to the Head of Legal and Democratic Services to read:**

“To execute and complete all necessary documentation to give effect to any acquisition or disposal of land or property or interests in land or property under the Property Acquisition Investment and Disposal Strategy or where the principle of the proposed acquisition or disposal has been separately approved by the Council or the Cabinet”.

283 Flexible Retirement: Communities and Housing

The report sought approval to the flexible retirement of one post in Communities and Housing and the consequential cost of a maximum of £42.4k funded from the HRA.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Customer Services advised that the Council's Flexible Retirement Policy was already in place and that it assisted in succession planning. The Portfolio Holder for Resource Management and Control said that the proposal made financial sense and in terms of personnel it helped Officers in terms of their overall development. He also explained that at the Joint Consultative Committee meeting on 9th January 2014, the Committee had been comfortable with the proposals.

Recommended:

The early release of pension and pension contribution be approved.

284 Electric Vehicle Charging Points

The report asked Members to note the Agreement that had been signed by the Head of Customers, Homes and Property to install five double electric vehicle charging points within the Borough.

The Portfolio Holder said he was supportive of the scheme and that it would enhance the Borough Council's work in terms of climate change and carbon reduction measures.

The Vice-Chairman commented that the issue of vehicle charging points had been discussed on Radio Kent that morning and he asked whether there were sufficient vehicles in use to warrant the installation.

The Assistant Health, Parking and Community Safety Manager said at the moment it was largely a "chicken and egg" scenario and it was hoped it would succeed in promoting electric vehicles.

In response to a question as to whether a charging point could be located at the William Harvey Hospital which would be convenient for a great many users, the Assistant Health, Parking and Community Safety Manager advised that the Office of Low Emission Vehicles (OLEV) had specified that the points had to be located on Council owned or leased land. The possible future installation of rapid chargers could be considered in due course.

A Member suggested that the locations should be added to the maps used by satellite navigation schemes. The Assistant Health, Parking and Community Safety Manager explained that at a future Officer meeting on this, they would be discussing how the scheme could be publicised and the issue could be raised at that point.

Resolved:

The Agreement to install five double electric vehicle charging points within the Borough be noted; the points must remain in operation for a minimum of three years; The Office of Low Emission Vehicles (OLEV) funding would cover the majority of the capital cost with Section 106 monies requested to cover the remaining capital cost and further three year maintenance costs.

285 Schedule of Key Decisions to be Taken

The report set out the latest Schedule of Key Decisions to be taken by the Cabinet.

Resolved:

That the latest Schedule of Key Decisions as set out within the report be received and noted.

(KRF/AEH)

MINS:CAXX1403

Queries concerning these Minutes? Please contact Keith Fearon:
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