

Cabinet

Minutes of a Meeting of the Cabinet held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **25th January 2024**.

Present:

Cllr. Ovenden (Chair);
Cllr. Campkin (Vice-Chair);

Cllrs. Barrett, Betty, Hayward, Wright.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Gathern, Harman, Nilsson, Walder.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Bartlett, Mrs Bell, Bell, Brunger-Randall, Chilton, Dean, Gauder, Giles, Hicks, Meaden, Shilton, Spain, C Suddards.

In attendance:

Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer, Corporate Director (Housing, Customer, Technology and Finance), Assistant Director of Housing, Service Lead – Finance, Housing Operations Manager (Income and Neighbourhoods), Neighbourhood Services Manager, Recovery Manager, Principal Accountant, Tenant Engagement Officer, Communications and Marketing Manager, Member Services Manager, Member Services Officer.

280 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 30th November 2023 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

281 Revenues and Benefits Recommended Write Offs

The Leader said that as this item came under his Portfolio, he had continued the previous practice of going through a couple of cases at random with the Officers to provide assurance. This had proved extremely useful.

The Recovery Manager introduced the report which proposed the formal write off of £129,869.65. The proposals were in line with the Council's Revenues and Benefits Service Write Off Policy and the Deputy Chief Executive (Section 151 Officer) had

been consulted along with Heads of Service for relevant areas. She advised that the Council had robust processes in place for reviewing such debts and a suite of methods for tracing individuals and businesses. She would be happy to meet with any interested Members to explain the process in more detail.

Resolved:

- That (i) the action that accounts totalling £22,859.14 have been written off under the delegated powers (Financial Regulations 11.1) be noted.**
- (ii) the write offs listed in the Exempt Appendices, totalling £107,010.51, be approved.**

282 Financial Monitoring – Quarterly Report

The Principal Accountant introduced the report which presented the Quarter 3 forecast outturn up to 31st December 2023. The forecast showed an overall pressure to the General Fund of £866k (an increased pressure of £241k since Quarter 2). A full break down of the key movements was shown in the report. The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was reporting additional pressures in the 2023/24 forecast of £566k. The report also provided an update on the collection fund, treasury management, reserves and progress on corporate savings identified in the 2023/24 budget.

The item was opened up to Members for questions/comments and the following points were raised: -

- A Member referred to repairs and maintenance in Housing and the additional cost triggered from the transfer of the service in house. He believed these costs should have really been recognised by way of an accrual in the accounts, and hoped the Council's Accruals Policy would be reviewed to make sure this happened in the future. The Service Lead – Finance advised that there had been an element of 'catch up' from the previous contract, but the point was well made and moving forward the Finance and Housing systems would be much better integrated and there would be a review of how the Council worked with other contractors on accruals.
- The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee referred to the Council's debt repayment. This was an issue which Overview and Scrutiny had asked to review and which he had concerns over. Borrowing appeared to be a short term basis with higher interest rates, with the opportunity to have locked in to lower rates via the Public Works Loans Board now lost. There was an element of hindsight here, but also part of the purpose of treasury management advisors. He wasn't sure if the Council had the right strategy here and this was something he was looking forward to examining further through Overview and Scrutiny.

- The Portfolio Holder for Homes and Homelessness commented on the General Fund and HRA positions for Housing. There had obviously been a significant increase in the number of homeless and people in Temporary Accommodation since the budget had been set. There had been significant action over the last three months including a gearing up of the on-street purchase programme and it was hoped that the HRA build programme could commence again soon. He recognised these were difficult times but he wanted to assure Members that everything possible was being done.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) the Quarter 3 forecast position for the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account be noted.**
 - (ii) the Collection Fund position be noted.**
 - (iii) the Capital Monitoring position be noted.**
 - (iv) the Treasury Management position be noted.**
 - (v) the provisional reserve allocations at Table 8 of the report be noted.**

283 Tenant Engagement Strategy

The Tenant Engagement Officer introduced the report which presented the Tenant Engagement Strategy for the Council. The strategy sets out a clear organisational approach and commitment to tenant engagement in the Borough. It set out an action plan for the Housing Service to ensure that it met the needs of its tenants and leaseholders as well as the Regulator of Social Housing standards. The Portfolio Holder said he wanted to thank the Report Author for producing a comprehensive and easy to read report.

The item was opened up to Members for questions/comments and the following points were raised: -

- A Member said that his view any successful engagement strategy would see the establishment of Tenants or Residents Associations and he asked if this as being considered and what the budget for such work was? Both Officers and the Portfolio Holder said that the exact shape of the engagement work was still ongoing. There were a wide range of ways to engage, but they would certainly encourage and assist in the setting up of associations if they were wanted by residents. This report set out the strategy and the Officers were working on a more detailed action plan for the next three years. Budgets would also be agreed as part of that process. The Member considered there was a difference between informing and consulting and hoped that this work would be genuinely consultative.

- A Member said that as a newly elected Councillor he had found the Tenant Engagement Officers worked really well with Ward Councillors to the benefit of Council Tenants. He commended the proposed strategy and he hoped that the Portfolio Holder would engage with Members more widely on this going forward so that more Members were aware of these Officers and the great work they were doing. The Portfolio Holder said he agreed with these comments and advised that there were already plans for a sequence of evening presentations to Members from the Housing team. Any suggestions for topics would be gratefully received.

Resolved:

That the Tenant Engagement Strategy for Ashford Borough Council be approved.

284 Temporary Accommodation Charging Policy

The Assistant Director of Housing introduced the report which introduced the Temporary Accommodation Charging Policy and sought approval for its adoption. She explained that charging for Temporary Accommodation was not a new thing, but this did formulate current practice in to a transparent policy document and ensured fairness and consistency.

A Member asked about the proposed increase to £21 per week. The Assistant Director of Housing advised that this was the first rise for many years and it was considered a realistic and affordable amount. She also confirmed that they would look to produce a more user friendly version of the policy for residents, as it was recognised that the current policy document was, by its nature, quite complex.

Resolved:

That the policy be agreed and adopted in full as of 1st April 2024.

285 Temporary Accommodation Placement Policy

The Assistant Director of Housing introduced the report which introduced the Temporary Accommodation Placement Policy and sought approval for its adoption. It explained that although not legally required, it would be important to help guide those involved through the process, including the applicant and the Officers of the Council.

Resolved:

That the policy be agreed and adopted in full as of 1st April 2024.

286 Housing Tenant Pet Policy

The Neighbourhood Services Manager introduced the report which proposed the introduction of a pet policy for Council Housing (detailed at Appendix A to the report). He explained that currently, many households had pets and they were not currently required to notify the Council when introducing a pet to their home. For some households, such as sheltered housing, they were not permitted to have a pet. This policy would formalise the process so the Council knew of the pets within properties but would also extend pet ownership to those that could benefit from having a pet, such as those living within sheltered housing who may be more vulnerable to loneliness. The purpose of the new policy was to formalise arrangements for when and how it was possible to have pets as part of a household, helping to guide Housing Officers and the tenants through the process, and to give greater clarity to tenants.

The item was opened up to Members for questions/comments and the following points were raised: -

- Members asked if the policy catered for pets other than cats and dogs, including chickens which were often kept by households. The Neighbourhood Services Manager confirmed that chickens were classed as livestock so there would not be permission for those at the moment, but this policy was not seeking to take a restrictive approach on other pets and would apply a sensible light touch approach with the ability to enforce and take action where necessary.
- A Member raised concern about a potential problem with dog fouling in communal areas and shared outside spaces. He asked if the Council could have the ability to issue fines where this occurred. The Neighbourhood Services Manager confirmed that there was a mechanism to issue fixed penalty fines via Community Protection Warnings and Notices.

Resolved:

That the implementation and commencement of the Housing Pet Policy be agreed.

287 Joint Transportation Board – Minutes of 5th December 2023

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Joint Transportation Board held on the 5th December 2023 be received and noted.

288 Trading and Enterprise Board – Minutes of 28th November 2023

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Trading and Enterprise Board held on the 28th November 2023 be approved and adopted.

289 Ashford Strategic Delivery Board – Notes of 24th November 2023

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Ashford Strategic Delivery Board held on the 24th November 2023 be received and noted.

290 Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group – Notes of 29th November 2023

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group held on the 29th November 2023 be received and noted.

291 Schedule of Key Decisions to be Taken

Resolved:

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

292 Economic Regeneration and Investment Advisory Committee – Notes of 14th December 2023

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Economic Regeneration and Investment Advisory Committee held on the 14th December 2023 be received and noted.

Queries concerning these minutes? Please contact Member Services
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