

SOUTH RIBBLE BOROUGH COUNCIL
COUNCIL MEETING – 16 NOVEMBER 2016
REPORT OF THE CABINET

The Cabinet met on the evening of Wednesday 26 October 2016

On that occasion the Cabinet considered the matters set out below. Decisions shown in boxed areas are subject to Council confirmation; the reports considered by the Cabinet were available to all members in advance of the Cabinet meeting.

1. Council Tax Support Scheme 2017-18

In presenting the report Councillor Clark (Corporate Support & Assets) commented that whilst a regular item the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) was to bring in new regulations hence the recommendation to include delegated authority.

A number of members in the audience expressed concern at the recommended delegation which would allow the level of contribution to be increased from £3.50 to as much as £5.00 per week. It was wondered if a decision on the final level could be deferred for member consideration at the next meeting. Also any increase affected those least able to pay. Councillor Clark confirmed the council had no control of the timescale and it could not risk the scheme not being in place. He added that whilst there was a range for the level of contribution, at this point there was no decision to increase this and any increase not exceed 2%.

In response to an enquiry regarding publicity for the scheme, the Revenues+ Manager in the audience indicated the range of publicity which included promoting Discretionary Housing Payments, use of the council's website and information to registered social landlords (identifying potential vulnerable tenants). He did not have to hand information of how many people had been able to take advantage of the Discretionary Housing Payments.

It was agreed that the council be recommended to approve

1. delegated authority be granted to the Revenues+ Manager in consultation with the Cabinet member for Corporate Support and Assets to make all necessary updates to this council's Council Tax Support Scheme to comply with any prescribed requirements that may be issued by central government. This may be by the making of specific regulations, or by amendment to the Local Government Finance Acts of 1992 and 2012;
2. delegated authority be granted to the Revenues+ Manager in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Corporate Support and Assets to make all necessary amendments to the Council's scheme to uprate the allowances and premiums in accordance with the revised Housing Benefit Circular when it is issued by the DWP. This process is a requirement of the prescribed elements of the scheme;
3. the publication of the updated scheme in accordance with the Local Government Finance Act 2012; and
4. the level of the deduction to be applied to Working Age recipients of Council Tax Support from 1st April 2017 be finalised and agreed in accordance with South Ribble's Scheme and as part of the Council's Budget and Council Tax Setting at the Council Meeting on the 1st March 2017. This figure would continue to be within the range (between £3.00 and £5.00 per week) which was consulted upon during the introduction and implementation of the council's scheme in 2012.

2. Private Sector Housing Grants Programme

In absence of Councillor Hughes (Strategic Planning & Housing), the Leader (Councillor Mullineaux) reported the proposal to implement a £500,000 grant scheme

over three years to support home owners. A housing survey in 2012 had identified that the borough (19.6%) was below the national average (22%) for homes that failed the Decent Homes Standard. This scheme supported the council's Housing Framework and endeavoured to stop the number of properties that failed the standard from increasing.

Whilst glad to see the council introduce such a scheme a number of other members expressed concern at the lack of detail of definitions, evidence to support proposals, absence of recycling monies, use of local traders, means testing and suggested changes to the certain age criteria and the maximum value of grant payable for works. It was suggested those in most financial need would not be able to afford 50%. There was concern that as presented there might be problems with running the scheme as there had previously been with Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG). Those members felt a decision on the scheme should be deferred and given further consideration.

The Strategic Housing Manager in the audience responded in detail to the concerns/questions raised by other members. This scheme was similar to previous successful ones such as the Winter Warm Campaign. Instead of recycling the monies it was felt the five year limit was appropriate and dissuade abuse. Regarding the level of grants, insulation was in three parts (cavity wall, external wall cladding (expensive) and loft). It was felt with a contribution a boiler could be acquired for the amount. There was a lot of detail behind the report (including lengthy definitions). It suggested members' might benefit from a Member Learning Hour on Decent Housing (session subsequently arranged for Wednesday 2 November 2016). She confirmed that at present the council was using information from 2012 pending a new study along with ongoing information received through Gateway. Advice had been sought and confirmed Right to Buy monies could be used. Experience with the DFG scheme showed that recipients got three quotes with the lowest successful – about 9/10 of those successful were local.

In response to comments expressed by other members, the Leader commented that there had been so many questions that it had been appropriate to ask officers to contribute. He was conscious of members' feelings, they needed to work together and he confirmed he was happy to take the report back and look at their concerns/questions.

It was agreed: that the report be deferred to enable further consideration of the concerns/questions raised.

3. Taxi Licensing Review – budgetary matters

Councillor Clark (Corporate Support & Assets) introduced this item indicating that in June he had been appointed to the Cabinet with the Finance & Resources portfolio. He was concerned of the possibility of expenditure exceeding £25000 and asked former Chief Executive to look at and provide an update on the financial position. The recommendation for a supplementary estimate in the sum of £94167 related to current costs to date. The Leader (Councillor Mullineaux) added that this was a purely budgetary report for works undertaken.

Councillor Clark responding to questions confirmed that the budget was not exceeded for phase 1, phase 2 was for further work by the external solicitors (including involvement in disciplinary proceedings) and referred to the council's constitution regarding the role of the Section 151 Officer.

Concern was expressed by other members that this matter had had a huge impact on the council notwithstanding the overall cost was £196536 (solicitors £88688) of which there was only approval from a non-published delegated decision for £25000. It was suggested that the external solicitors had been prepared to present their report sooner and format changed for the published final report. This topic raised questions about corporate governance within the council and it was not clear who had done what. It was confirmed when expenditure was incurred there was an investigation but

other matters would be dealt with when the review's recommendation were considered.

The report was welcomed as it gave clarity/transparency to some aspects, however it appeared on recent information that the former Chief Executive had been tasked to investigate the budget variances which was basically was to investigate himself. There was a denial that the external report had been stopped or additional expenditure agreed. There were questions concerning the actions of the council's Section 151 Officer.

Looking at the figures in the report, there were questions whether or not the scrutiny Review had exceeded £10000 and had procurement protocols/rules in the constitution been followed. In respect of this expenditure, it was suggested that appeared that phase 3 (£3080) related to the external solicitors meeting the scrutiny task group with their report and charged for expenses (and this should be added to the fee for the report not to the review). Also the appointment of LGA support had been commissioned in line with governance requirements. It was hoped members would stop the debate and innuendo on finances and spending.

The Cabinet member commented that some good points had been raised and reiterated that this report was to address the financial expenditure already incurred. He confirmed that the external solicitors' invoices had been scrutinised and paid.

It was agreed that the council be recommended to approve a supplementary revenue estimate in the sum of £94,167 in 2016/17 to cover the estimated costs.

4. The Cabinet's Forward Plan

It was agreed that the Forward Plan submitted under Section 22 of the Local Government Act 2000 be approved.

5. Exclusion of Press and Public

It was agreed that the press and public be excluded from the meeting during the consideration of the following item of business as it involves the discussion of information which is defined as exempt from publication under paragraph 3 (Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information) of Part I of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 and in which case the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing it.

6. Insurance Procurement

Councillor Clark (Corporate Support & Assets) presented the results of the joint insurance procurement exercise with Chorley Borough Council.

The Cabinet member confirmed that this matter came within his portfolio (under risk) and that self-insurance had not been considered on this occasion but could be in the future. It had been essential to have the council's insurer in place by 1 January 2017.

It was agreed that the council's insurer (for the respective classes of insurance mentioned) with effect from 1 January 2017 be as recommended in the report.

I hereby commend the report of the Cabinet to the Council.

COUNCILLOR PETER MULLINEAUX

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL