

CABINET

2 July 2018



Minutes of the Cabinet meeting held at the Town Hall, Bexhill-on-Sea on Monday 2 July 2018 at 11:00am.

Cabinet Members present: Councillors C.R. Maynard (Leader), Lord Ampthill, J.J. Carroll, A.E. Ganly, Mrs S. Hart, I.R. Hollidge, Mrs J.M. Hughes, G.P. Johnson, M.J. Kenward (Deputy Leader) and Mrs E.M. Kirby-Green.

Other Members present: Councillors J. Barnes, Mrs M.L Barnes, R.V. Elliston, J.M. Johnson, B. Kentfield, M. Mooney, P.N. Osborne, J. Potts, Mrs S.M. Prochak and M.R. Watson.

Advisory Officers present: Executive Director (MJ), Executive Director (AL), Assistant Director Resources, Revenue and Benefits Manager, Planning Policy Manager, Democratic Services Manager and Democratic Services Officer.

Also present: 3 members of the public.

Publication Date: 4 July 2018

The decisions made under PART II will come into force on 12 July 2018 unless they have been subject to the call-in procedure.

CB18/05. MINUTES

The Chairman was authorised to sign the minutes of the meeting held on 4 June 2018 as a correct record of the proceedings.

PART I – RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL – not subject to call-in procedure under Rule 16 of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules.

**CB18/06. SALEHURST AND ROBERTSBRIDGE NEIGHBOURHOOD
(7.4) DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2016-2028**

Following an affirmative local Referendum result in relation to the use of the Salehurst and Robertsbridge Neighbourhood Plan (SRNP) to help the determination of planning applications in the Parish Neighbourhood Area, Cabinet was requested to recommend to Council that the SRNP be formally adopted and become part of the statutory Development Plan for the area.

In April 2018, under delegated authority, the Executive Director resolved that the SRNP (as amended in line with the Examiner's proposed modifications) should proceed to local Referendum. This decision, together with a changed version of the Plan, was published

on the Council's website. Following the due legal process, and in accordance with the Neighbourhood Plan legislation, a local referendum was subsequently held on 31 May 2018 in the Salehurst and Robertsbridge referendum area of Salehurst and Robertsbridge Parish. Following a turnout of 40.74%, 90.26% were in favour of Rother District Council (RDC) using the SRNP for Salehurst and Robertsbridge to help it decide planning applications; 9.61% were against.

Following this result, it was incumbent on RDC under paragraph 38A(4)(a) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 to 'make' a Neighbourhood Plan within eight weeks of the referendum result. Members were advised that this took account of a further screening of the Plan in accordance with the Habitats Regulations, which had shown that it would have no material effect on any European site. The principal effect of making the Neighbourhood Plan was that it would become part of the statutory 'development plan' for the area. Hence, planning applications within Salehurst and Robertsbridge Parish would be determined against the SRNP, alongside relevant Local Plan policies, also having regard to the National Planning Policy Framework. It was noted that the development boundary for Salehurst and Robertsbridge, as well as the site allocations at Robertsbridge, as contained in the SRNP superseded the development boundary and related site allocations in the 2006 Rother District Local Plan.

The decision to make the SRNP would need to be publicised together with a statement setting out how the environmental considerations had been integrated into the Plan. Cabinet was pleased to recommend to Council that SRNP be "made" with immediate effect which would bring it into legal force and paid tribute to the tremendous efforts of the local community and officers of Rother District Council for bringing forward this second Neighbourhood Plan for the District.

RECOMMENDED: That the Salehurst and Robertsbridge Neighbourhood Development Plan 2016-2028 incorporating the Examiner's modifications, as presented to local Referendum, be "made" with immediate effect and form part of the Council's Development Plan.

PART II – EXECUTIVE DECISIONS – subject to the call-in procedure under Rule 16 of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules by no later than 4:00pm on 11 July 2018.

CB18/07.
(6.1) **HOUSING BENEFIT – SERVICE ISSUES AND PROPOSALS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

Cabinet received and considered Minute OSC18/07 arising from the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) held on 11 June 2018. The OSC had considered a detailed report looking at the service issues and proposals for improvements to the Housing Benefit service. The Council's processing times had been picked up as an area for concern through the performance monitoring reports and the

Council was currently in the bottom quartile of local authority performance and within this quartile, were also towards the bottom.

In understanding the Council's performance, the OSC had considered the four main causes which were 1) the level of deployed staff resources compared to budgeted, 2) the volume of work coming into the team, 3) the paper based service and 4) the increase in complexity of the work. Whilst performance needed improvements, it was acknowledged that the quality of the work carried out by the team appeared to be consistently good, a view supported by the positive outcome from recent housing benefit subsidy audits.

The OSC had heard that there were a number of immediate, short and medium term measures that the Council needed to introduce to improve processing times and other aspects of the service and a high level timeline and key work-streams to deliver the improvements had been submitted. This would include, amongst other measures, learning best practice from other high performing Councils, receiving support via the Council's Capita Resilience Contract and assistance on a "pay on processing" arrangement from Reigate and Banstead Borough Council. To support the Revenues and Benefits Manager it was proposed that an experienced project manager was appointed at an estimated cost of up to £75,000 per annum which could be met from the Medium Term Financial Strategy Reserve.

To help manage the risks that could affect the Council's ability to deliver the required service improvements, it was proposed that an Officer Board be established to meet quarterly to monitor progress, comprising the Strategic Management Team, the Revenues and Benefits Manager, the Project Manager and Customer Accounts Team Leader. It was also noted that the OSC would receive regular updates on progress and Councillor Lord Amptill would be the lead Member responsible for the delivery of the plan.

Cabinet gave detailed consideration to the report and fully endorsed the actions proposed to address the service issues highlighted. Cabinet commended the staff working within the team and understood well the complexities and difficulties being faced by the team on a day to day basis. It was hoped that the measures being endorsed, together with the proposed changes to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (considered at Minute CB18/08 below) would result in service performance improvements and improved morale as a consequence. Ultimately, the Council's efforts in economic regeneration across the district to create quality, well paid local jobs would, over time, hopefully also reduce the public's reliance on housing benefit and thus reduce the workload to more manageable levels.

RESOLVED: That

- 1) the high level timetable and key work-streams shown at Appendix 1 to the report be approved;
- 2) the Council engages a suitably experienced Project Manager to be funded from the Medium Term Financial Strategy Reserve; and

- 3) the governance and reporting arrangements outlined in the report be approved.

CB18/08.
(7.1)

COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME 2019/20

At its meeting held on 11 June 2018 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) had considered a report on proposed changes to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) to be implemented from the 2019/20 financial year. The proposals were the result of work undertaken jointly by all the East Sussex Councils. Cabinet received and considered the original report submitted to the OSC together with Minute OSC18/07 arising from the meeting of the OSC.

As the proposals were a fundamental change to the current approach, full consultation was required with the public, pre-cepting authorities and other stakeholders including support agencies such as Citizens Advice and Hastings Advice and Representation Centre. The detailed consultation documentation was appended to the report for Cabinet's approval as well as a copy of the equalities impact assessment.

The aim of the proposals was to simplify the scheme, give greater certainty of the amount of Council Tax relief to those working age households where their income varied on a regular basis and make it easier to administer. It was noted that the proposals for changes to the scheme for 2019/20 would not affect the scheme for pensioners, as these provisions were set by Government. Members were particularly pleased with the proposed income bands that would result in claimants being able to earn more money within their band maximum without the prospect of losing benefit and a resultant reduction in administration for the Council. For ease of calculation, it was agreed that once the scheme was finalised the amounts within each band would also be provided monthly.

The initial modelling of the new scheme had shown that the two main groups that would see a reduction in their awards were those families who had more than two children and certain disabled applicants or applicants who had a disabled child. Members noted that the number of children issue was in line with national government policy and brought the scheme in line with the approach taken by Universal Credit but were keen to ensure that any individuals or families with disabilities were protected from reductions in their awards. It was noted that modelling was continuing and this would allow the scheme to be fine-tuned over the summer and autumn time with the aim to minimise any reduction in award for the most vulnerable claimants, whilst maintaining overall scheme costs to the current level. Consideration to improved promotion of the Exceptional Hardship Policy would be given in due course to coincide with the launch of the new policy in 2018/19.

The consultation would last 12 weeks and the outcome would be reported back to the OSC on the 15 October 2018 where Members would have the opportunity to modify the proposals in light of the consultation and make recommendations to Cabinet for onward approval by full Council in December 2018.

RESOLVED: That the proposals set out in the report for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2019/20 financial year be approved for consultation.

CB18/09. **IRRECOVERABLE DEBTS**
(7.2)

Consideration was given to the report of the Executive Director concerning irrecoverable debts. Debts in excess of £4,000 could only be written out of the Council's accounts with the consent of Cabinet. Where it was apparent that the debts would not be recovered, it was financially prudent for these to be excluded from the accounts; this did not mean that the Council could not take action in the future, if information was received indicating the debt could then be recovered.

Cabinet was asked to write off 16 cases in total relating to Housing Benefit overpayments (six cases), Council Tax (four cases) and six Non-Domestic Rate cases totalling £133,567.14.

Members were reassured that the Council's debt recovery work was robust and undertaken in accordance with current Council policy. The Council's debt recovery work performed very well and it was noted that the Council would still seek to recover the debts should the whereabouts of liable persons come to light in the future.

RESOLVED: That the debts totalling £133,567.14 be approved for writing out of the accounts.

CB18/10. **PROPERTY INVESTMENT PANEL – TERMS OF REFERENCE**
(7.3)

The Council had established the Property Investment Panel (PIP) and agreed its Terms of Reference (ToR) at its meeting held on 18 December 2017 (Minute C17/46 refers).

Following its first meeting on the 11 June 2018 it was considered that as the Property Investment Strategy had been updated for reasons to do with Government changes in local authority property investment, it was necessary to amend the ToR. It was recommended that the make-up of the PIP be reduced by one Executive Member to two and increased by one non-Executive Member from two to three. A copy of the proposed revised ToR was attached at Appendix 1 to the report.

RESOLVED: That the revised Terms of Reference be approved and adopted, as submitted.

CHAIRMAN

The meeting closed at 11.55am

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