

CABINET

Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet held on Thursday, 7 January 2021 at 10.00 am in Remote Meeting

PUBLISHED ON WEDNESDAY, 13 JANUARY 2021

(DEADLINE FOR CALL-IN: MONDAY, 18 JANUARY 2021)

Present: Councillors R A Overton (Vice-Chair), A J Burford, E M Callear, L D Carter, R C Evans, C Healy, S A W Reynolds, P Watling, D Wright and S Davies (Chair).

Also Present: Cllr W L Tomlinson (Liberal Democrats / Independent Group Leader) and Cllr N A Dugmore (Conservative Group Leader)

CAB-37 Declarations of Interest

None.

CAB-38 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting held on 5 November 2020 be confirmed and signed by the Chair.

CAB-39 Leader's Announcements

The Leader stated that the country was now in a third period of national lockdown and infection rates of Covid-19 were higher than they had ever been. The Leader urged everyone to follow the rules. He discussed the roll out of the Covid-19 vaccinations and stated that it was vital that every part of the community worked together to get the vaccine rolled out as quickly as possible. The Leader expressed his frustration by the speed the vaccine was being delivered in Telford and Wrekin, with rates below the national average.

CAB-40 2020/21 Financial Monitoring Report

Key Decision identified as **Financial Monitoring & Mid-Year Budget Review 2020/ 21** in the Notice of Key Decisions published on 9 December 2020.

Reserved for Council.

Councillor R C Evans, Cabinet Member for Council Finance and Governance presented the report of the Director: Finance & H.R., Chief Finance Officer.

Cabinet Members noted the impact the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) continued to have across the Country. The Council had moved into a pre-emptive emergency response mode, prior to the first lockdown in March 2020.

Throughout the pandemic, the Council had continued to provide all the usual services, except when they have been required to be suspended due to national restrictions (for example, libraries and leisure centres). Income streams had been under pressure and there had been increased demand in many service areas, including Social Care.

The current projected pressure was estimated to be £19.28m (including council tax and business rates shortfalls). The Council had received £17.24m of Government National Emergency Response Funding, which left a residual pressure of £2.04m, which was a considerable improvement since the position was reported to Cabinet in November.

The capital programmed totalled £63m for 2020/21, which included all approvals since the budget was set. The projected spend was 97% of the budget allocation.

Covid-19 had impacted on collection rates, with income collection in relation to Business Rates, Council Tax and Sales Ledger all behind expected levels. Debt recovery action was suspended in March 202, with 'soft' reminders issued in July and recovery recommencing in August.

RESOLVED –

- a) that the 2020/21 revenue budget position, which has been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic be noted;
- b) to **RECOMMEND TO COUNCIL** that the following be approved:-
 - i) the proposed uses of the budgeted contingency (paragraph 5.1 of the report)
 - ii) the transfers to reserves in Section 5.2 and grant delegated authority to the Chief Executive, following consultation with the Leader, to approve the uses of the investment in Council Priorities Fund
 - iii) transfer of £1.25m to fund CSE Inquiry related costs in 2021/22 including making provision to respond to recommendations from this independent inquiry
 - iv) transfer of £0.75m to the budget strategy reserve
- c) the position in relation to capital spend and the recommendation that Full Council approves the changes to the capital programme detailed in Appendix 4 of the report be noted
- d) the collection rates for NNDR, council tax and sales ledger be noted.

CAB-41 Service & Financial Planning 2021/22 Proposals

Key Decision identified as **Service & Financial Planning 2021/22 – 2023/24** in the Notice of Key Decisions.

Councillor R C Evans, Cabinet Member for Council Finance & Governance presented the report of the Chief Executive and the Chief Financial Officer,

which noted that a one year service and financial planning strategy for the current financial year had been approved by Council on 5 March 2020.

A Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) was announced in November 2020, where the Government continued to shift the responsibility for funding essential local government services from government grants to local council tax payers. There was a high level of uncertainty around the future financial sustainability of councils. Telford & Wrekin has one of the lowest council tax rates in the West Midlands, however, the current low level of council tax was not sustainable in the current financial climate.

Key points of the strategy included:-

- A Council tax increase for 2021/22 of 4.99% which included an increase of 3% for the Government's "Adult Social Care precept". Council Tax in Telford & Wrekin currently remained the lowest across the Midlands region for the services that the Council provided.
- The Council recognised the financial pressures that many households can face and proposed to increase the amount of support available for those most in need, by doubling the provision of the Council Tax Reduction Hardship Assistance Scheme.
- The Adult Social Care precept would raise £2.188m which would be fully invested in to Adult Social Care services.
- Extra investments of £1m over 2021/22 and 2022/23 to support crime and anti-social behaviour initiatives.

Medium Term Capital Programme:-

A programme of capital investment programme totalling more than £228.532m was set out in Appendix 4 to the report. Amongst the capital investments included in the programme were:-

- £65.3m further investment into NuPlace, the Council's wholly owned housing company to provide good quality homes to rent.
- £40.7m for transport and Highways schemes, including improvements to the A442.
- £9.95m into the Stronger Communities Project, a scheme to bring brownfield sites into use, which included the delivery of the Station Quarter, the next phase in the transformation of Telford Town Centre

Attached to the report were a number of appendices, including the Capital Investment Programme, details of Reserves and Balances and details of education related Section 106 Agreements.

A consultation period would run from 8 January 2021 through to 7 February 2021 in order that careful consideration could be given to the views expressed

by the Council's Cabinet when preparing their final report and recommendations to Full Council on 4 March 2021.

Cabinet Members thanked the Chief Financial Officer and staff involved in preparing this report. Cabinet Members noted that it was a difficult decision to propose a rise in Council Tax and it was not taken lightly, however, the Government had not provided the funds it had promised. Without a rise in Council Tax, the Council would have to cut services or provide a lower level of service.

The Liberal Democrat / Independent Group Leader raised his concern in regard to the financial settlement from Government, and in particular, the £2m deficit from Covid-19 related spending. He thanked officers for producing a balanced budget and stated that the Government should introduce a formula for adult social care payments.

The Conservative Group Leader thanked officers for their work in producing the budget. He raised concern in regards to the Council being over-reliant on NuPlace and the new homes bonus.

RESOLVED that –

- (a) the proposed Service and Financial Planning Strategy set out in the report be approved for consultation between 8 January 2021 and 7 February 2021**
- (b) the high level of uncertainty relating to the medium term financial outlook for the Council be noted. This high level of uncertainty requires the Council to retain flexibility by limiting new ongoing investments to our highest priorities and retention of as much one-off resource as possible whilst identifying some additional budget savings to ensure a balanced budget for next year. This is due to:
 - i) the significant changes to the local government finance system which will may be introduced from April 2022;**
 - ii) the Government's one year CSR Announcement does not extend beyond the end of next financial year**
 - iii) the continuing uncertainty arising from the impacts of the pandemic.****

CAB-42 Customer Service Strategy (Final)

Cllr R A Overton, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Enforcement, Community Safety and Customer Services presented the report of the Director: Communities, Customer and Commercial Services. The report set out the new Customer Strategy, which had the vision to '*work with our customers to develop quality services that are accessible to all and to make every contact count*'.

The strategy built on existing good practice and highlighted improvements in a number of areas, including improved telephone performance and an increase in uptake of online services. The strategy outlined the aims to offer more services online, while recognising that online is not the best option for everyone and that alternative services would be provided for those who wanted them.

A formal consultation on the draft aims and the proposed Customer Contract (the renamed Customer Charter) took place in the Autumn of 2020, which confirmed there was strong support for the strategy.

Cabinet Members welcomed the report and noted that residents were at the heart of everything the Council did. In response to a question from the Leader of the Conservative Group. The Deputy Leader confirmed that due to Covid-19 pandemic, it had not been possible to consult in the usual ways and the consultation had taken place online.

RESOLVED that –

- a) **The new Customer Strategy and the Customer Contract attached at appendix A and B of the report be approved. This Strategy will be implemented with effect from 7 January 2021.**
- b) **Delegated Authority be granted to the Director: Communities, Customer and Commercial Services in consultation with the Lead Cabinet Member for Enforcement, Community Safety and Customer Services to take the necessary steps to implement these recommendations.**

CAB-43 Residents Survey 2020

Cllr P R Watling, Cabinet Member for Co-operative Communities, Engagement and Partnerships presented the report of the Director: Communities, Customer and Commercial Services. As a co-operative Council, the Council was committed to involving residents in developing the Council's plans to create a better Borough.

The survey took place between 29 July and 4 September 2020, and was mainly undertaken online, although paper copies were available on request. Every resident in the Borough was written to and there were regular social media posts in regards to the survey. In total, 5473 responses were received, with responses from every ward in the Borough.

The outcomes of the survey were very positive, key achievements included:

- 75% of residents were satisfied with the Council's response to Covid
- 92% of residents agreed that they felt well informed by the Council on advice and guidance to stay safe
- 82% of residents were satisfied with the Borough as a place to live

The survey also encouraged residents to be part of a new Community Panel and over 1600 residents expressed an interest in taking part.

Cabinet Members welcomed the survey.

RESOLVED that –

- a) The results and response to the Resident’s Survey outline in Section 4 of the report be noted
- b) The proposals for future engagement in Section 5 of the report be approved
- c) Authority be delegated to the Director: Communities, Customer and Commercial Services in consultation with the Lead Cabinet Member for Co-operative Communities, Engagement and Partnerships to take the necessary steps to implement these recommendations.

CAB-44 Employee Survey 2020

Councillor R C Evans, Cabinet Member for Council Finance & Governance, presented the report of the Associate Director: Policy & Governance. A staff survey was undertaken to explore employee’s experiences of working at Telford & Wrekin Council, as part of the business plan to be an employer of choice.

The results were very positive. The overall response rate was 56%, the survey was available online and also as a paper questionnaire for those employees who did not have internet access. Employees reported good working relationships in their teams, trust by managers and that the Council is a great place to work.

There were some areas where there needed to be some development, so an Action Plan was developed, which would be regularly reviewed. The action plan would look at the following themes:

- Wellbeing support for employees
- Employee development
- Employee recognition and engagement
- Workforce policies

Cabinet Members welcomed the feedback in the survey and praised the officers of the Council for their work throughout the pandemic.

RESOLVED that –

- a) the headline findings of the Employee Survey be noted
- b) the proposed approach to developing and delivering the Employee Survey Action Plan and associated timetable for delivery be approved.

CAB-45 2021/22 Schools Funding Formula

Councillor S A W Reynolds, Cabinet Member for Children, Young People, Education and Lifelong Learning presented the report of the Director: Education & Skills. It was reported that each year the local funding formula was reviewed for mainstream schools in the context of revisions to Department for Education (DfE) regulations or any other relevant developments. The Council made the final decision on the funding formula having consulted with schools and the Schools Forum regarding any changes. The local funding formula applied both to academies and maintained schools and in 2021/22 would determine the distribution of around £137m of funding, which included an additional allocation of approximately £12m for schools, of which £6m was for mainstreaming of existing teachers' pay grants.

The revised funding formula had to be submitted to the DfE agency - the Education & Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) by 21 January 2021. The report sought Cabinet approval for the proposed 2021/22 funding formula for Telford & Wrekin mainstream schools.

RESOLVED that the 2021/22 funding formula for Telford & Wrekin mainstream schools, as consulted on with the Schools Forum, be approved. The formula:

- distributes an estimated £137m, a £12m increase compared to 2020/21;
- includes a guaranteed increase per pupil of 2%, the maximum allowable by government;
- where appropriate, supports growing schools by using estimated pupil numbers to determine funding, to avoid a lag in money reaching growing schools.

The meeting ended at 11.28 am

Signed for the purposes of the Decision Notices

Anthea Lowe
Associate Director: Policy & Governance
Date: **Wednesday, 13 JANUARY 2021**

Signed

Date: Thursday, 18 February 2021