

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
SPECIAL COUNCIL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
HELD ON 26 JANUARY 2017 FROM 9.05 PM TO 9.25 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Bob Pitts (Chairman), Rob Stanton (Vice-Chairman), Keith Baker, Lindsay Ferris, Anthony Pollock and Angus Ross

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Richard Dolinski, Clive Jones and Pauline Jorgensen

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence received.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 28 January 2016 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

3. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

4. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions received.

5. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions received.

6. COUNCIL TAX BASE 2017/18 AND EMPTY PROPERTY DISCOUNTS

The Committee considered a report relating to the proposed Council Tax Base for 2017/18 in respect of the whole Borough and all constituent parts in order that each precepting body could subsequently set their Council Tax budgets for the year. The report also contained proposals for altering the percentage discount and timeframe of certain empty property discounts.

The Executive Member for Economic Development and Finance advised the meeting that the Council Tax Base was a technical calculation required to be made each year relating to the number of Band 'D' properties that were in the Borough.

Councillor Pollock also drew Members' attention to information contained in the report relating to the proposed changes to empty property discounts and bad debt provision.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the proposed Council Tax Base, for the whole area and by Parish, as set out in the report be agreed;
- 2) the proposed allocation of £60,000 grant to the parishes in respect of council tax reduction as set out in the council tax base table be approved;
- 3) the levels of discount for Council Tax charging in respect of certain classes of empty property in accordance with the details set out in this report be approved.

7. COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME

The Committee considered a report setting out a proposed localised Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTR) which would ensure that all working age Borough residents, who may experience financial difficulties in paying their council tax liabilities, had access to a scheme that offered financial assistance.

Members were informed by the Executive Member for Economic Development and Finance that benchmarking against neighbouring authorities had taken place when considering changes to the Scheme and as a result it was proposed that all recipients of CTR pay a minimum of 20% towards their council tax liability which was in line with other authorities.

Councillor Ferris raised a number of concerns with the proposals particularly as he felt that the report did not contain sufficient financial information on which to make a decision. As an example he cited that there was no evidence to support the expected saving of £150k. Given that the proposal was to increase the minimum amount payable from 10%-20% Councillor Ferris also felt that the report should have contained information about how much money was received last year following the agreed changes and what the impact had been on residents. In addition information on how much it cost, how many people were involved, how much extra they would be expected to pay and the likely impact on residents involved should have been included. Councillor Ferris also felt that the impact on the Council eg figures demonstrating the likely impact on the utilisation of the Hardship Fund as a result of the proposed changes should also have been included in the report. In response to the concerns raised Councillor Pollock responded that the Council had consulted widely on its proposals and having looked at neighbouring authorities had seen that Reading collected 20%. Collectability had been examined and Councillor Pollock stated that the Hardship Fund would assist those residents who found that they could not pay their council tax liabilities. He also pointed out that moving from 10%-20% would only result in an increase of around £3 per week and he felt that this was a modest proposal in light of the financial pressures the Council was facing.

Councillor Ferris also raised concerns about the proposed restrictions on the backdated beneficial changes being set at one calendar month and the impact this would have on residents who were often on zero hours contracts or had jobs where the hours varied from week to week which would lead to them having to inform the Council every time there was a change in their circumstances. In light of the fact that it takes the Council approximately six weeks to process a claim Councillor Ferris felt that it might be discriminatory for the Council to limit residents to four weeks. Councillor Pollock responded that the reason for the change to a four week notification period was to bring it into line with the rules around Housing Benefit and the change was not aiming to penalise people who just forget but to stop people who took much longer periods to inform the Council of any change. Councillor Pollock clarified that at the present time if a resident took two years to inform the Council of a change this could lead to the Council having to backdate beneficial changes to that date. The proposed change was intended to encourage residents to advise the Council of any changes in their circumstances and would mean that the Council was only liable to pay one month backdated beneficial changes; thereby managing the financial risk to the Council.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) a local CTR scheme for 2017/18 be adopted on the same basis as the 2016/17 scheme with the following changes:

- a. all recipients of CTR pay a minimum of 20% towards their council tax liability;
 - b. cease the awarding of backdated “beneficial changes”. The scheme to state that all changes must be notified within one calendar month;
- 2) all applicable amounts, premiums, allowances, disregards and deductions used in the calculation of entitlements be updated in line with the same increases applied to the Government set Prescribed and Default CTR schemes, along with any other legislative changes;
 - 3) the full disregard currently allowed for War Widows and War Disability Pensions be continued from 1 April 2017 in respect of the Prescribed and Local council tax reduction and housing benefit schemes;
 - 4) funds be made available to the hardship fund, known as Section 13A, for those who cannot pay their council tax liabilities, particularly as a result of changes for 17/18. This sum will be funded from the general fund and spend for 16/17 is estimated at £8,500.

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