

17 FEBRUARY 2021

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET

Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet held on Wednesday, 17 February 2021

- * Cllr Barry Rickman (Chairman)
- * Cllr Edward Heron (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

- * Diane Andrews
- * Jill Cleary
- * Michael Harris

Councillors:

- * Jeremy Heron
- * Alison Hoare
- * Mark Steele

*Present

In attendance:

Councillors:

Sue Bennison
Geoffrey Blunden
Steve Clarke
Keith Craze
Steve Davies
Arthur Davis
Jan Duke
Barry Dunning
Allan Glass
David Hawkins

Councillors:

Maureen Holding
Christine Hopkins
Martyn Levitt
Alan O'Sullivan
Alvin Reid
Joe Reilly
Steve Rippon-Swaine
Derek Tipp
Christine Ward

Officers Attending:

Bob Jackson, Jo Bailey, Alan Bethune, Sara Hamilton, Grainne O'Rourke, Sheryl Parry, Colin Read, Daniel Reynafarje, Manjit Sandhu, Claire Upton-Brown and Matt Wisdom.

Apologies:

There were no apologies for absence received from Cabinet Members.

165 STAN WADE

The Leader of the Council was sad to announce the death of Former Councillor Stan Wade, who sadly passed away on 16 February 2021, following a short illness. The Leader spoke of how he looked up to Stan during his early years on the Council in the 1980s and the incredible legacy in having both a son and grandson as serving Members of the Council in Councillors Malcolm and Alex Wade.

Members recorded their sincere condolences to his family and friends.

The Leader confirmed that the Chairman would give a full tribute at the Council meeting on 25 February 2021.

166 MINUTES**RESOLVED:**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 3 February 2021, be confirmed and signed.

167 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of any disclosable pecuniary interests made by Cabinet Members.

The Monitoring Officer had granted a dispensation to all Members of the Cabinet under Section 33 (2) (d) of the Localism Act 2011 to enable them to speak and to vote on item 6 – Medium Term Financial Plan and Annual Budget 2021/22, considered at minute 171 below. This item was the subject of a recommendation to the Full Council.

168 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There were no issues raised during the public participation period.

169 COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY - REPORT FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

The Leader of the Council reported on the latest progress with the Council's response to and recovery from COVID-19.

The Leader reminded everyone of the importance of staying home and reducing contact with others, as this remained the best action everyone could take to save lives. However, there really was room for optimism with the Prime Minister due to unveil the roadmap for ending England's lockdown restrictions on Monday 22 February 2021.

Progress with Covid vaccinations continued, with everyone in the top four priority groups having been offered a vaccine dose. The Leader again placed on record his thanks to NHS staff part of the vaccination programme locally, and to the many volunteers who continued to offer invaluable support and assistance.

With regard to the Council, there were currently two staff with coronavirus and two staff self isolating out of the 1,234 employees. In addition, nine staff were clinically extremely vulnerable and unable to work from home. The Leader took the opportunity to again thank all staff for their tireless work throughout the pandemic. In relation to the Government's winter support package, the Council had now paid out £15M to local businesses since November 2020.

It was confirmed that approval had been received from Hampshire County Council for funding of the roll out of a short term programme of community testing for people without symptoms. The appointment only scheme was aimed at Hampshire residents who travelled regularly outside of their home for work, and who were not covered by an existing workplace scheme. Subject to Government approval, 11 community testing sites would begin operation in Hampshire week commencing 22 February. This equated to one per District in Hampshire. The New Forest location was the Totton Health and Leisure Centre, and Members placed on record their thanks for the efforts of staff to make this possible.

The Leader concluded by encouraging residents to continue looking at the most up to date information on the website for support and assistance.

170 HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGET AND HOUSING PUBLIC SECTOR CAPITAL EXPENDITURE PROGRAMME 2021/22

RESOLVED:

1. That the proposed planned maintenance and improvement works programme for 2021/22 – 2023/2024, as set out in Appendix 2 of the report, be approved.
2. That the Cabinet recommends to the Council that:-
 - (a) the HRA budget as set out in Appendix 1, of the report be agreed;
 - (b) from 04 April 2021, an increase in rents of 1.5% from the 2020/21 weekly rent level, in accordance with Government guidelines, be agreed;
 - (c) from 04 April 2021, an increase in service charges of 0.5% from the 2020/21 weekly service charge level, be agreed;
 - (d) a Housing Capital Programme to 2023/24, as set out in Appendix 3 of the report, be agreed.

REASONS FOR DECISION:

As set out in the report.

KEY DECISION:

Report to Cabinet and Full Council.

PORTFOLIO:

Housing Services.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED/REJECTED:

As set out in the report.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST(S):

None.

DISCUSSION:

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report and highlighted the Council's continued investment in maintaining council dwellings, with over £11M to be spent in the coming year to maintain the decent home standards. A further £13M was also planned to be spent in acquiring and developing new additional council homes, as part of the overall strategy to bring on board 600 new council homes by 2026.

The proposed rent increase of 1.5% was highlighted, in line with Government recommendations. This would be the second increase in rents following the four years of rents being reduced. This equated to an average increase of £1.51 per week in rents.

Maintaining the Council's homes in good condition and attending to repairs remained a priority and the Portfolio Holder considered that the budget delivered a balanced approach in support of this.

The work of the Greener Housing Task and Finish Group was highlighted, in particular, the initiative for the installation of heat pumps for eligible tenants without mains gas was due to go ahead with the support of Government funding.

Attention was drawn to the Tenant Involvement Group comments within the report, which identified support for the content of the report, acknowledging that day to day decisions that impacted upon tenants were appropriate and sensible.

The Leader of the Council placed on record his thanks on behalf of all Cabinet Members for the significant progress in Housing Services.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Regulatory Services highlighted the environmental improvements of the proposed budget and programme, including the air sourced heat pumps, as part of the overall Greener Housing agenda.

171 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN AND ANNUAL BUDGET 2021/22

RESOLVED:

That the Cabinet recommends to Council that:-

- (a) there is a General Fund Net Budget Requirement in 2021/22 of £19,291,410 as set out in appendix 5 to the report, including the transfers to and from reserves, as outlined in appendix 5d;
- (b) the Band D Council Tax for 2021/22 shall be £183.36;
- (c) the General Fund Capital Programme for 2021/22 of £15.947m, as set out in appendix 6 to the report be approved; and
- (d) the site licence fees and service charges at Stillwater Park be increased by 1.1% in line with RPI inflation.

REASONS FOR DECISION:

As set out in the report.

KEY DECISION:

Report to Cabinet and Full Council.

PORTFOLIO:

Finance, Investment and Corporate Services / All

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED/REJECTED:

As set out in the report.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST(S):

The Monitoring Officer had granted a dispensation to all Members of the Cabinet under Section 33 (2) (d) of the Localism Act 2011 to enable them to speak and to vote on this item.

DISCUSSION:

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report and drew attention to paragraph 3.3 which highlighted that the Council had a forecast budget deficit of £2.885M going into 2024/25. Whilst this was not of immediate concern to the Portfolio Holder, it demonstrated the continued work required to balance the Council's finances under strong pressure, and to continue to deliver front line services.

The General Fund budget within the report was highlighted, with particular reference to the budget being based on the current delivery model for the Council. Therefore, taking the example of the outcome of the Health and Leisure Review, yet to be determined by the Council, this was independent of the budget for recommendation to the Council. The reserve position was also highlighted, to ensure the Council was well placed to respond, much as it needed to throughout 2020 with unexpected pressures.

The Portfolio Holder emphasised the need to look at 21st century ways of delivering services, in order to achieve a balanced budget, a prudent financial position and to deliver enhanced services for the community.

The Leader of the Council highlighted the incredible work to pull together the budget in an ever changing environment, as the impact of the pandemic was felt. He placed on record his thanks on behalf of the Cabinet to the Portfolio Holder, the Council's Chief Finance Officer, and all Members involved in the work of the COVID-19 Recovery Task and Finish Groups who had contributed to the early development of the budget as part of the emergency in-year budget set in September 2020.

172 HEALTH AND LEISURE REVIEW - PREFERRED BIDDER**RESOLVED:**

That the Cabinet recommends to Council that:-

- (a) the contract to operate and maintain the District Council's five Leisure Centres at Applemore, Lyminster, New Milton, Ringwood and Totton be awarded to Wealden Leisure Ltd trading as Freedom Leisure to commence on 1 July 2021 for an 11 year period with an option to extend for a further 4 years.
- (b) the terms of the Contract, summarised in sections 8 and 9 of the report, are noted.
- (c) a 4-month mobilisation period following award of contract is noted, enabling full operational control by Freedom Leisure Limited on 1 July 2021.
- (d) £2.242m of Prudential Borrowing to support the investment programme outlined in paragraph 14.11 of the report is approved.

- (e) Council discharges responsibility for an annual contract review and performance to the Community and Leisure Panel, who will set up a councillor working group at its next meeting.

REASONS FOR DECISION:

As set out in the report.

KEY DECISION:

Report to Cabinet and Full Council.

PORTFOLIO:

Leisure and Wellbeing

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED/REJECTED:

As set out in the report.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST(S):

None.

DISCUSSION:

The Leader of the Council on behalf of the Cabinet, placed on record his thanks to the Portfolio Holder, the Executive Head – Resources, the Council’s Chief Finance Officer and their teams, and all Members who had contributed to such an enormous piece of work. The Leader felt that the position the Council had now been able to get to, to be recommending a preferred bidder to partner with to deliver high quality leisure services, and ensure the Council’s wider financial responsibilities were met, was to the benefit of all New Forest residents.

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report and referred to the petition debated by the Council on 24 February 2020, which asked that the Council’s Leisure Centres be kept in public ownership and management and available to all. The resolution of that debate was for the Portfolio Holder and Cabinet to carefully consider the petition when making recommendations to the Council on the future running of the leisure centres. The Portfolio Holder clarified that the Council would continue to own the health and leisure centre buildings. Freedom Leisure as the preferred bidder, was a very community focused organisation and the ambition was to increase community use. The Portfolio Holder was satisfied that the Council was not privatising its leisure centres, instead working with a new expert partner, and that he had very carefully considered the petition, concluding that he fully supported the recommendations outlined in the report.

The Portfolio Holder highlighted the vision for the service:-

“Working with partners to create active communities by providing affordable, accessible leisure facilities, dedicated to improving physical and mental wellbeing and establishing a sustainable healthy lifestyle legacy for future generations.”

The Portfolio Holder was confident that Freedom Leisure as a partner of the Council, would help deliver this vision. The proposals would provide security for the provision of health and leisure services across the District for the next 11 years, including significant investment, whilst significantly reducing the cost of the service to the residents of the New Forest.

The Chairman of the Community and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Panel presented the recommendations of the special Panel meeting held on 9 February 2021, which considered this matter. The Cabinet heard that the Panel considered each section of the report in detail, with an opportunity for questions and comments that were fully answered. The Panel considered that the recommendations as outlined in the report were the best option for the sustainability of the District Council's leisure centres and the health and wellbeing of the community.

The Chairman of the Health and Leisure Task and Finish Group referred to the amount of detail and data produced throughout the work of the Group in arriving at a position whereby a preferred bidder could be recommended to the Council. He welcomed how robust the final contract was in view of the detail, and being able to recommend a decision that was best for the community.

The Portfolio Holder for Community Affairs endorsed the report, and highlighted the importance for the community, to keep healthy both physically and mentally.

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development welcomed the report as the most exciting development and potential outcome he had witnessed in his time as a councillor. The expertise brought in to invigorate the service into the future was welcomed.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Investment and Corporate Services highlighted this initiative as a great example of the 21st century delivery models referred to in the Medium Term Financial Plan, required to ensure the financial viability of the Council.

The Leader of the Council summarised the debate and referred to a required minor amendment to the first recommendation to clarify the title of the preferred bidder as "Wealden Leisure Ltd trading as Freedom Leisure."

CHAIRMAN