

4 DECEMBER 2024

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET

Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet held on Wednesday, 4 December 2024

* Cllr Jill Cleary (Chairman)

* Cllr Steve Davies (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

* Geoffrey Blunden

* Jeremy Heron

*Present

Councillors:

* Dan Poole

* Derek Tipp

In attendance:

Councillors:

Alan Alvey

Peter Armstrong

Steve Clarke

Philip Dowd

Alan O'Sullivan

Councillors:

Joe Reilly

Steve Rippon-Swaine

John Sleep

Neil Tungate

Christine Ward

Officers Attending:

Kate Ryan, Alan Bethune, James Carpenter, Tanya Coulter, Richard Knott, Ryan Stevens, Keziah Leary, Karen Wardle, Paul Whittles and Amanda Wilson

Apologies

There were no apologies for absence received from any Cabinet Members.

37 MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 6 November 2024, be confirmed and signed.

38 LEADERS ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Leader spoke about the recent coverage in the media about potential changes to the organisation of local government in England. This was at present speculation in advance of the Government's proposed Devolution White Paper, anticipated later in December. The media coverage had used dramatic headlines and talked as if decisions had already been made, however in reality, any changes to councils across England were a long way off and would be subject to detailed local discussions within the district and wider Hampshire and Isle of Wight area.

The Leader reported that conversations with other Hampshire Councils would continue, with a focus remaining on delivering the agreed vision to support

opportunities for local communities, protecting the New Forest as a unique and special place and to secure its prosperity.

The Leader reported that communities across the New Forest had recently held events for Remembrance Sunday and Armistice. The Streetscene team had cleaned war memorials in preparation for the events, and the Leader had represented the Council at the Lyndhurst Remembrance Service, followed by the parade to the War Memorial at Boltons Bench to lay a wreath.

The Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Council had attended Remembrance Services in their local areas and laid wreaths on behalf of the District. The Member Armed Forces Champion, Cllr Alvin Reid, attended a special Armistice Day commemoration, held at the Regimental Headquarters of 17 Port & Maritime Regiment, RLC, where he had been given the honour of assisting with the presentation of Coronation Medals to the soldiers. The Leader expressed her thanks to all those who had run these events so well and respectfully.

On Monday, 11 November, the Leader reported she had joined the Chairman for the commemoration at Appletree Court and had laid a wreath. She was pleased to see staff present, some who were also veterans of the armed forces.

Officers, supported by the Armed Forces Member Champion would continue to liaise with the Military based at Marchwood, along with charities who support the armed forces community across the District, to refresh the Armed Forces Covenant previously signed by this Council in 2014. A dedicated area on the NFDC website was being developed, to provide information about the support and benefits available to the armed forces community through the Council and other organisations. The aim was to deliver the revised Covenant and the web pages by the Spring.

39 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

40 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

41 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN - UPDATE

RESOLVED:

That Cabinet:

1. noted the revised MTFP forecasts, as outlined within the report and appendices;
2. endorsed development of the options identified to close the budget gap for 2025/26 and through to 2028/29;
3. endorsed the approach taken to set the Asset Maintenance and Capital Programme Budgets for 2025/26;

4. approved the continuation for 3 years of the annual £195,306 financial support provided to Citizens Advice New Forest (CANF), commencing 1 April 2025; and
5. approved the latest forecast position with regards to the Waste transition and roll-out costs, noting that an increase in transition costs is offset through a forecast reduction in 2025/26 roll-out costs.

KEY DECISION:

Yes

PORTFOLIO:

Finance and Corporate

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED/REJECTED:

As set out in the report.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST:

None

DISCUSSION:

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate introduced the report acknowledging that the Medium Term Finance Plan ran through to 2028/29. He highlighted the funding gap at the end of the period as £2.693 m and that this needed to be addressed.

The Portfolio Holder reported that paragraph 4 of the report set out the economic commentary around the Autumn Statement. It was necessary to address the budget deficit by minimising expenditure, making efficiencies and maximising income which was not always popular. It was important to produce a balanced budget and to deliver the services which were important to local residents.

There were significant challenges and costs associated with the delivery of the Waste Strategy, with legislative changes and the desire to improve recycling and reduce residual waste. It was also highlighted that the transformation programme needed further consideration in terms of expenditure and savings leading up to budget setting next year.

A recommendation in the report sought to continue support to Citizens Advice New Forest with a proposed three year settlement which would support those residents in need in the community.

The Portfolio Holder reported there was a significant capital programme detailed in the report, which would have an impact on the level of reserves going forwards.

Finally, attention was drawn to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), in particular the £9.96 million held in reserves for housing acquisitions and development to support the delivery of more council owned housing in the District.

The Assistant Director - Finance confirmed the report provided an update of the latest position of the Medium Term Financial Plan. He highlighted paragraph 4 within the economic commentary with a summary of the key elements of the Chancellor's Autumn Statement, including local government spending power to increase and an increase in Local Government Grants.

Paragraphs 15-25 of the report provided details on changes to the financial plan since the previous update. It was noted that the updated forecast deficit for 2025/26 was £466,000, rising to £2,693,000 for 2028/29. Significant changes to this included the impact on the decision to increase fees and charges in Keyhaven and car parking, the crystallisation of vacant posts as well as reinstatement of the support for homelessness, due to ongoing demand in the year as well as changes to the waste and transformation programme. It was highlighted that a recommendation was to support Citizens Advice for three years with an annual cost of £195,306 and this had been supported by the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

Work would continue in order to address the budget shortfall.

42 COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME 2025/26, POLICY REVIEW AND COUNCIL TAX PREMIUMS

RESOLVED:

That Cabinet recommend to Council the approval of:

1. The changes to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme from 1 April 2025:
 - a) The removal of the Band D cap at an overall cost to precepting authorities of £33k;
 - b) The increase of the de-minimis rule to £2 at no net cost; and
 - c) The alignment of childcare costs with Universal Credit for all claims at a saving of £3k to precepting authorities
2. The Council Tax Reduction Scheme Sanctions and Prosecution Policy

KEY DECISION:

Report to Cabinet and Council

PORTFOLIO:

Finance and Corporate

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED/REJECTED:

As set out in the report.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST:

None

DISCUSSION:

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate introduced the report and reported that the Council was responsible for determining its Council Tax reduction scheme. He expressed his thanks to a member led task and finish group which had carried out a review of the current scheme and considered changes for the next financial year as well as the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

The Service Manager Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services reported there were three main components to the report; a review of the Council Tax Reduction Schemes, a review of the Council Tax Scheme Sanctions and Prosecutions Policy and the prescribed exceptions to Council Tax premiums for second homes and empty homes.

The Council Tax Reduction Scheme had 8,000 claimants and the cost of this was £10 million, which was shared between all precepting authorities. A review had been carried out of the scheme and a consultation of the proposed changes took place over a 6 week period, resulting in 225 responses. Feedback had been received from Hampshire County Council expressing concern about the changes to the scheme which were more generous and therefore reduce the income it would receive, in light of the financial position of the County Council. The recommendations which sought approval was the removal of the Band D cap, an increase of the de-minimus rule to £2 and aligning childcare costs with Universal Credit.

The Council Tax Scheme Sanctions and Prosecutions Policy was reviewed every three years and as there had been no changes to legislation, only minor changes had been made to this policy.

Finally, no exceptions had been recommended to the Council Tax premiums relating to second homes and empty homes. It was reported that contact would be made with those affected by those premiums which would come into force from 1 April 2025.

A non-Cabinet member expressed support to the recommendations contained within the report. In response to a point raised by a non-Cabinet member in relation to armed forces veterans and the impact any compensation received, might have on any Council tax reduction, it was confirmed that the Council had agreed last year to continue with the income disregard in the assessment of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction and therefore support was already being provided to armed forces veterans.

43 COUNCIL TAX 2025/26 - SETTING THE TAX BASE**RESOLVED:**

That Cabinet recommend to Council the approval of:

1. the calculation of the tax base for the year 2025/26 of 73,355.0; and
2. pursuant to this report and in accordance with the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012, the amount calculated by this Council as its council tax base for the year 2025/26 as detailed in paragraph 13.

KEY DECISION:

Report to Cabinet and Council

PORTFOLIO:

Finance and Corporate

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED/REJECTED:

As set out in the report.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST:

None

DISCUSSION:

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate introduced the report highlighting that it was a legal requirement for the Council to set the Council Tax base, from which the precepts were calculated.

The Service Manager Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services reported that the Council Tax Base for 2025/26 involved detailed calculations looking at the number of properties in each council tax band for each town and parish. From this, the discounts, exemptions and other reductions as well as the Council Tax support was considered and converted to Band D equivalent. A forecast of the impact of the introduction of the second homes premium from April next year and the estimated in year collection rate had also been included in the calculation.

The overall tax base increase for 2025/26 is 98.3, however due to the second homes premium, the total tax base proposed is 73,355, an increase of 983.50.

44 LEISURE - UPDATE AND PROPOSED FEES AND CHARGES 2025

RESOLVED:

That Cabinet:

1. Noted the operational update from the Council's leisure partner; and
2. Recommend that Council approves the proposed increases in fees and charges as set out in Appendix 1

KEY DECISION:

Report to Cabinet and Council

PORTFOLIO:

Finance and Corporate / Community, Safety and Wellbeing

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED/REJECTED:

As set out in the report.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST:

None

DISCUSSION:

The Portfolio Holder for Community, Safety and Wellbeing introduced the report and expressed his full support to the recommendations.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate acknowledged increasing fees and charges was not popular, but felt it was important to work with Freedom Leisure recognising the good services provided to customers and that they would still be provided at outstanding value for money.

The Assistant Director – Finance clarified that Freedom Leisure had the ability to increase charges without seeking consent from the Council provided the increases were not greater than CPI, and that they did not relate to certain protected services such as Active Lifestyle products. In recent years the flexibilities in the contract had been sufficient for the price increases, however with the long term increases in utility costs and increases to staffing costs due to the rise in national insurance, this was no longer possible, without an impact on service delivery and hence the recommendation put forward.

45 HALF YEARLY UPDATE COMPLAINTS PERFORMANCE AND SERVICE IMPROVEMENT REPORT

RESOLVED:

That the half yearly update be noted.

KEY DECISION:

No

PORTFOLIO:

Finance and Corporate / Housing and Homelessness

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED/REJECTED:

As set out in the report.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST:

None

DISCUSSION:

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness reported that the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel had considered the report for housing complaints handling in the first half of the year. He felt it was important to recognise that the report was open and honest, covering all aspects of housing complaints, providing an opportunity to learn from them.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate highlighted that the report was before Cabinet due to the changes to the complaints process which came into force on 1 April 2024.

The Information Governance and Complaints Manager, reported as two Portfolio Holders had set out, that the report covers the changes implemented to the Council's complaint handling process as a result of the two new Complaint Handling Codes updates from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman and the Housing Ombudsman. The report detailed changes to members scrutiny of complaints and the new involvement of Cabinet in relation the process.

The report detailed the half yearly update on complaints. Key aspects included the Council's complaint handling across all services and complaints from tenants, under the jurisdiction of the Housing Ombudsman. 125 Corporate complaints had been received in the half yearly period, an increase on previous years. There had also been an increase in the number of tenant complaints received. It was recognised that learning from complaints was important in order to improve service delivery.

Finally, the report also included compliments received from the public to officers to show positive feedback.

The Leader expressed her thanks for the detailed report and the inclusion of compliments received.

A question was asked from a non-Cabinet member regarding complaints received which might relate to other authorities, such as the County Council or Towns / Parishes. The Information Governance and Complaints Manager clarified that all complaints were reviewed at the point they were received, and should the District Council not be responsible for the matter identified in the complaint, the complainant would be redirected to the appropriate authority for resolution.

One other non-Cabinet Member expressed the view that overall the number of complaints received was low and that there was a good level of satisfaction with the delivery of Council services. The opportunity to learn and improve the performance of services was also welcomed.

CHAIRMAN