

**TUNBRIDGE WELLS BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**CABINET**

**Thursday, 19 November 2020**

**Present: Councillor Alan McDermott (Chairman)  
Councillors March (Vice-Chairman), Bailey, Dawlings and Mackonochie**

**Officers in Attendance:** William Benson (Chief Executive), Lee Colyer (Director of Finance, Policy and Development (Section 151 Officer)), Stephen McGinnes (Mid Kent Services Director), Patricia Narebor (Head of Legal Partnership), Sheila Coburn (Head of Revenues and Benefits), Jane Fineman (Head of Finance and Procurement) and Caroline Britt (Democratic Services Officer)

**Other Members in Attendance:** Councillor Hamilton

**APOLOGIES**

CAB40/20 There were no apologies.

**DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

CAB41/20 There were no disclosable pecuniary or other significant interests declared at the meeting.

**NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS WISHING TO SPEAK**

CAB42/20 There were no Visiting Members who had registered as wishing to speak.

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING DATED 22 OCTOBER 2020**

CAB43/20 Members reviewed the minutes. No amendments were proposed.

**RESOLVED** – That the minutes of the meeting dated 22 October 2020 be approved as a correct record.

**QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL**

CAB44/20 There were no questions from members of the Council.

**QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC**

CAB45/20 There were no questions from members of the public.

**CONSIDERATION OF THE FORWARD PLAN AS AT 26 OCTOBER 2020**

CAB46/20 Members considered the plan. No amendments were proposed.

**RESOLVED** – That the Forward Plan as at 26 October 2020 be noted.

**BUDGET UPDATE REPORT 2021/22**

CAB47/20 Lee Colyer, Director of Finance, Policy and Development introduced the report that provided an update to the budget projections for the 2021/22 budget and subsequent years.

Discussion and responses to Members questions included the following:

- This was the second report in the process of setting the 2021/22 budget.
- In the absence of Government financial information for next year, the projections had been made somewhat in a vacuum against the constantly fluid impact of the Pandemic.
- The Council's financial strategy, set at the beginning of the Pandemic continued to hold true whereby the Council would build up an evidence base each month to track the actual income expenditure outturns along with the monthly local economic data and evidence of Government support packages.
- The Council was financially self sufficient and received no revenue support grant from the Government.
- To function without Government support had meant the Council operated more as a business and generated more of its own income than many other Councils with which to fund its own local services.
- Whilst the Pandemic had created some cost pressures, mostly around housing and community support, the most significant impact was the reduction of income from sales, fees and charges.
- The Council experienced income losses that reached £1m per month in May, with a recovery as the economy opened up but then a reduction in September as health concerns returned.
- At the time of writing the Report it was hoped the losses would be around £250k per month which accounted for the gross £3m annual reduction by March 2021. However the second national lockdown and the likelihood of further ad hoc restrictions was likely to be a feature for some time. Whilst this would increase the losses from income, it was also more likely that Government would extend the compensation scheme for income loss into next year.
- Locally and although from a very low base, unemployment had quadrupled.
- The collection of Council Tax and Business Rates were both below target (although not as low as first feared).
- The Government furlough scheme had now been extended to the end of the financial year.
- One way the Council had been generating income was through the promotion of local economic growth and sharing in the proceeds of additional Businesses. The scheme was expected to continue for a further year so may provide some help with which to help fund the Council's Capital Programme next year.
- Council Tax was currently modelled to increase by £5 a year and the Government expected this to happen in their assessment of the resources the Council had available
- Whilst service efficiencies would continue to be sought the quantum of the budget gap for the next financial year of approximately £3.5m was such that to avoid drastic cuts to services at a time when residents were most reliant upon them, it was proposed to temporarily use Council reserves to balance the budget.
- This could be afforded in the short term but when able to do so, reserves should be replenished.
- The Government needed to deliver on its promises to support Local Councils. Fortunately the Council entered the Pandemic in a healthy position with a balance budget, cash reserves and no external debt.
- However the gravity of the situation was such that the Pandemic

would result in fundamental changes to the economy and to the Council's income streams. This would require the Council to review which services it could afford to deliver, how it worked and the cost and effectiveness of its large numbers of property assets.

- The update provided for the immediate attention to be focused on continuing to help the community and the economy through the Pandemic.

**RESOLVED** – That Officers shall continue to work on delivering a balanced budget in line with the Budget Strategy and report back in December with proposals prior to public consultation on the draft budget.

**REASON FOR DECISION:**

To enable Directors and Heads of Service to continue the service planning process and to help develop proposals with their respective Portfolio Holder(s) for savings, changes to service delivery and optimise income.

**FEES AND CHARGES SETTING 2021/22**

CAB48/20 Jane Fineman, Head of Finance, Procurement and Parking introduced the report that proposed the fees and charges for 2021/22

Discussion and responses to Members questions included the following:

- The report covered all income streams from products and services except property rents and licencing income and delivered a budget income of £6m.
- The report also excluded parking fees which were assumed to remain unchanged next year. This was with the exception of a proposed amendment to the discount to the pay by phone purchases and the setting of the charges for the new Union House car park (expected to open summer 2021).
- The report also provided a complete review of forecast sales volumes and usages for 2021/22 which when multiplied by the prices proposed created the services income budgets for the next year.
- The medium term financial strategy usually assumed an increase of 3% year on year but due to the Covid-19 Pandemic it would assume an overall income deficit of £3m for 2021/22.
- This report showed a shortfall from last year of £253k as sales volumes had fallen and the Council was not anticipating them to fully recover throughout the next financial year.
- The report also reviewed concessions that the Council would usually charge for via the fees and charges.
- It was proposed to allow the provision of free bulky waste collections and free pest control services with the eligibility bands for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme.
- The introduction of Universal Credit had meant that some residents who were not necessarily the most in need were now eligible for the free services and this needed to be addressed.
- The number of residents who had signed up to the Green Waste collection service had exceeded last years budget. Despite Covid-19 the actual number of subscribers was now 22,000 up from 21,152 ( a rise of 9%). The budget for 2021/22 had therefore been increased to reflect this.
- It was also proposed to reduce the discount given to customers who

paid car parking charges by phone from 20p to 10p. When pay by phone was introduced a discount of 40p was given to recognise there was a 20p admin charge levied by the contractor to use the service and because the Council wanted to incentivise customers to use this method of payment. This was no longer the case so the discount was being phased out.

- Except in exceptional circumstances it was proposed the Council should no longer accept cheques. There were many other forms of electronic payments available which were cheaper for the Council and more cost effective to administer. The option to pay by cash would still be available.
- Details regarding eligibility for concessions for Bulky Waste and Pest Control collection would be done via the internet and on social media. Most residents who requested this service did so by phone so Customer Services would be able to provide eligibility details. Residents would still be able to have a collection every 3 months which by far would cover the requirements of the customers who use this service.

#### **RESOLVED –**

1. That the fees and charges set out in the report and the attached appendices be agreed.
2. That delegated authority be given to the s151 Officer to make any necessary amendments.
3. That the timings for the price increases to be implemented as indicated in the report be agreed.
4. That amendments to the eligibility criteria for Bulky Waste and Pest Control concessions be agreed.
5. That the option to pay for Council Services by cheque is withdrawn, except in extremis be agreed.

#### **REASON FOR DECISION:**

Securing revenue in line with the Medium Term Financial Strategy remains vital to balancing the budget annually in order to support all of the services provided by the Council.

### **CITIZEN'S ADVICE BUREAU (CAB) COUNCIL TAX PROTOCOL**

CAB49/20 Stephen McGinnes, Mid Kent Services Director introduced the report that sought approval for the adoption of the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) Council Tax Protocol.

Discussion and responses to Members questions included the following:

- The Local Government Association and CAB had devised this Protocol which promoted working together, early intervention and best practice in debt collection.
- The recovery process for Council Tax collection was defined in legislation and a set process must be followed.
- The approach in the Protocol would allow the Council to go beyond

the statutory minimum requirements, promote early intervention and to work together with the CAB and debt advice agencies.

- The Protocol provided good practice guidance to Local Authorities as well as advice to enforcement and debt advice agencies.
- The aim of the Protocol was to ensure residents received help and could access debt advice when needed.

**RESOLVED** - That the CAB Council Tax Protocol as set out in the report be adopted.

**REASON FOR DECISION:**

The protocol would offer practical steps aimed at preventing people from getting into debt and would ensure that taxpayers receive help and access to debt advice when needed. It would also ensure that any enforcement is carried out within the law and was reasonable.

**\*DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS POLICY**

CAB50/20 Stephen McGinnes, Mid Kent Services Director introduced the report that sought approval to adopt the updated Discretionary Housing Payment Policy.

Discussion and responses to Members questions included the following:

- TWBC was provided with an annual Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) by the Department for Works and Pensions in order to provide additional financial support on top of the support that was given as part of the Housing Benefit Scheme.
- The budget available to TWBC this year was just under £220k. This was an increase to reflect Covid-19.
- Last year 172 applicants were awarded a DHP. The reasons included, assistance with property moves to move to affordable accommodation and those who needed to downsize their accommodation.
- The Council already had a DHP policy in place, which was last approved in 2017. The policy had now been updated to provide clarity with regards to the responsibilities by both the claimant and the Council.

**RESOLVED** - That Full Council be recommended that the updated Discretionary Housing Payment Policy as detailed in the report be adopted.

**REASON FOR DECISION:**

The updated policy would provide a transparent process that sets out the prioritisation of awards that would be reviewed annually.

**URGENT BUSINESS**

CAB51/20 There was no urgent business.

**DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

CAB52/20 The next meeting would be held on Thursday 3 December 2020 commencing at 10:30am.

NOTES:

The meeting concluded at 12.35 pm.

An audio recording of this meeting is available on the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council website.