

SHADOW AUTHORITY CABINET

FRIDAY, 13TH JANUARY, 2023

Present:

Cllr G Archibald
Cllr P Bell (Vice-Chair, in the Chair),
Cllr J Derbyshire
Cllr N Hughes
Cllr A Jarvis
Cllr D Jones
Cllr V Taylor
Cllr P Thornton

Officers in Attendance:

Pam Duke – Director of Finance and Section 151 Officer
Caroline Elwood – Interim Monitoring Officer
Susan Fawkes – Cumbria County Council Officer
Richard Machin – Specialist - Communications
Jane McKeon – Democratic Services
Sam Plum – Head of Paid Service

PART 1 ITEMS CONSIDERED IN THE PRESENCE OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS

77 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor S Sanderson and Councillor J Brook (Chair).

78 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST/DISPENSATIONS

Cllr N Hughes declared a non-pecuniary interest in Agenda Item No.5, by virtue of the fact that he is a member of Bampton Parish Council.

Note - The Interim Monitoring Officer advised all Members that it was not necessary to declare a non-pecuniary interest in this instance, unless they preferred to do so for the record.

79 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED – That the press and public be not excluded during consideration of any items on the agenda for this meeting.

80 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the previous meeting of the Cabinet held on 9 December 2022 be agreed as a true and accurate record.

Note – The Vice-Chair in the Chair highlighted to Members that an additional Agenda item was to be included to give Members the opportunity to provide some statements.

81 CABINET MEMBER STATEMENTS

Councillor Andrew Jarvis, Cabinet Member for Finance briefed Members on the consultation process around Council Tax for the Westmorland and Furness Shadow Authority which was being launched today.

Councillor Jarvis stated that the vision for the new Council was clear: for Westmorland and Furness to be a great place to live, work and thrive. Achieving transformation in the delivery of services and the Council Plan, Councillor Jarvis advised, must be done in a financially sustainable way.

Councillor Jarvis noted the drastic rise in costs and that the Council was not immune to that inflation. Calculations for the cost of living and delivery of essential services would increase by at least £20m in 2023/24, the funding expected from Central Government would not meet this increase. The Government expected the Council to increase Council Tax to fill this gap. To enable the Council to get started delivering its ambition for the new Council Plan for Westmorland & Furness and to continue to support essential level services, a 4.99% rise in Council Tax was proposed from the 1st April 2023. This was comprised of a 2.99% basic increase plus another 2% specifically to help Adult Social Care. This was an increase of about £1.60 per week for a Band D Council Tax payer.

The Council continues to support those who are the most financially vulnerable through its generous Council Tax reduction scheme.

Councillor Jarvis noted that harmonisation was required to create an even 'playing field' so that residents would pay the same amount of Council Tax irrespective of where they lived within Westmorland & Furness. It was proposed to harmonise payments in the first year, as soon as possible. This meant that the levels of Council Tax increase payments would vary slightly across our W&F area for this first year only.

Councillor Jarvis explained that the Council was consulting on introducing a new premium of 100% for second homes in the area from the 1st April 2024. The W&F area had one of the highest rates of second home ownership in the country. Councillor Jarvis advised that by charging a higher rate of Council Tax the Council could generate a significant additional income to assist it to deliver its priorities for the local area and provide additional assistance to the local communities most affected by second home ownership.

Councillor Jarvis encouraged local residents and businesses in the area to share their views on the proposals through this consultation. Following consultation the final recommendations would be made to Cabinet in February and would then be forwarded to full Council for approval as part of the budget in March.

82 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Cllr M Wilson addressed the Cabinet in relation to Agenda Item No. 7. He asked a question relating to the Council Tax reduction scheme and the possible impact on many Parish Councils budgets.

The Vice-Chair in the Chair thanked Cllr Wilson for his contribution and requested Councillor Andrew Jarvis, Cabinet Member for Finance to respond.

Councillor Jarvis confirmed that it was right that the Council should review all grants to ensure that they were fair, appropriate and provide value for money. Councillor Jarvis stated that he would expect the Council to carry out this review as part of its annual review, as part of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme in June 2023/24. In the meantime, subject to Council approval of the budget and Council Tax reduction scheme, Councillor Jarvis as Cabinet Member for Finance, intended for W&F Council to continue to pay Council Tax reduction scheme grants to parishes in the next financial year.

Councillor Wilson thanked the Cabinet Member for his detailed and helpful response to his question.

83 LGR PROGRAMME UPDATE

Councillor P Bell, Vice-Chair in the Chair, agreed to provide an update on this report in the Leader, Councillor Jonathan Brook's absence.

The report provided an update on the Programme in place to support Local Government Reorganisation in Cumbria. Councillor P Bell outlined the key points as detailed within the report, which consisted of the latest Programme Dashboard and a summary of the Day One Board report which had been presented to the Day One Programme Board on 13 December 2022.

In response to a request for an update on ICT matters, Councillor Jones related that the Day One Board had confirmed that ICT Leads and Project Managers had been assigned to all the high priority work and systems. They would track progress and escalate any concerns. No concerns had been reported thus far and it was understood that all processes had been carried out in a 'succinct manner'. Procurement, ICT and Legal resource was being prioritised to drive progress. Progress and issues were reported weekly to the ICT Theme Lead and fortnightly reports were being prepared for Chief Exec Programme Board and Members.

The Vice-Chair in the Chair proposed the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor V Taylor.

Councillor N Hughes asked the W&F Shadow Cabinet Members if they thought that it would be useful to receive more than one update in March, as matters progress, so that Members could take a 'hands on approach' to any day to day issues that arose.

The recommendation to note the report was then put to vote, which was unanimous.

Decision

RESOLVED – That the report details and key points included in Section 3 of the report be noted.

84 COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME AND WAR PENSION DISREGARD (HOUSING BENEFIT LOCAL SCHEME)

Councillor Andrew Jarvis, Cabinet Member for Finance, presented a report asking Members to approve a new single Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2023/24 for Westmorland & Furness Council, with effect from 1 April 2023, in accordance with Schedule 1A(3) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992.

This follows consultation on this scheme authorised by Cabinet back in October. Councillor Jarvis reminded Cabinet that all Councils are required to review the Council Tax Reduction Scheme annually, the scheme itself falls into two parts. Councillor Jarvis advised Members that there was no need to make any decisions relating to pension age applicants as this was determined by Government, however it was agreed that it was necessary to determine the scheme in terms of working age applicants.

Councillor Jarvis explained that the Council Tax Reduction Scheme was introduced back in 2013 as a replacement for the Central Government-funded Council Tax Benefit scheme, at that time the districts of W&F broadly accepted the previous means tested scheme as a basis for awarding support for working age claimants, only minor changes had been made since then.

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Councillor Jarvis advised that the proposal was that the existing approach be largely maintained. This was stated as particularly important considering the current cost of living crisis and the pressure that this placed on the most vulnerable residents.

Councillor Jarvis related that the Council Tax Reduction Scheme Assessments were determined in accordance with Modified Scheme provisions under which a 100% voluntary disregard is applicable of War Disablement Pensions, War Widows' Pensions and War Widowers' Pensions under the Social Security Administration Act 1992. It was proposed that this principle be maintained within the W&F Council Tax Reduction Scheme. However a number of changes were being proposed to fully align the approach across the Council and ensure that the scheme could deal with changes to welfare and benefits with the implementation of Universal Credit.

Councillor Jarvis confirmed that the main aspects of the scheme would continue as set out at 3.8 of the report.

Consultation had taken place in line with statutory requirements, the details in response from the public were referenced at Appendix A. Councillor Jarvis drew Members' awareness to the fact that the proposed changes had received high levels of support.

The minimum income score for self-employed applicants discussed and consulted on in October was referenced. Following consultation, Councillor Jarvis advised that it had been decided not to proceed with this. It had become clear that a number of exceptions may be needed.

Councillor Jarvis summarised that overall, by agreeing to the proposals stated within the report, the Council adopt a harmonised and generous scheme. He confirmed that the Council would not be taking the option to cut support for working age residents, as many other councils have done.

Councillor Jarvis advised that he would like to propose the scheme with a slight amendment to recommendation 2.1, he proposed that recommendation (1) should now read: That Cabinet approve and recommend to Council the new single Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2023/24 for Westmorland and Furness Council, as outlined in this report; and recommendation (2) should read: that Cabinet approve and recommend to Council the 100% voluntary disregard.

Councillor J Derbyshire seconded the motion.

Councillor Archibald confirmed that he was very pleased that the Council was able to propose this scheme and streamlining process which would make it easier for people to get the benefit of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. He appreciated the fact that this new Council was making a statement early on that it cares about the vulnerable people in society and would do all it could to help them.

Cllr Derbyshire stressed how the sharing of information and getting the message out is now even more important given the current cost of living crisis.

A unanimous vote to approve the recommendations was taken.

Decision

RESOLVED – That

- (1) a new single Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2023/24 for Westmorland & Furness Council be recommended to Council for approval, to come into effect from 1 April 2023, as outlined within the report and in accordance with Schedule 1A(3) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992; and

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(2) the 100% voluntary disregard be applicable under the Scheme of War Disablement Pensions, War Widows' Pensions and War Widowers' Pensions, under Section 134(8) and 139(60) of the Social Security Administration Act 1992 and that Council is recommended to approve the same.

85 URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items of business.

The Meeting Ended at: 10.29 am