



Scrutiny Committee

Minutes

Tuesday, 24 October 2023 at 18:30

PRESENT:-

Councillor Williamson (in the Chair); Councillors Cordiner-Achenbach, Freeman, Grant, Galer, Hammond, Jeal, Murray-Smith, Robinson-Payne, Thompson & Wainwright.

Councillor Newcombe attended as a substitute for Councillor Waters-Bunn.

Mrs M Lee (Head of Customer Services), Mr M Brett (IT Support) & Mrs C Webb (Democratic Services Officer).

Councillor Smith (Leader of the Council) & Ms S Oxtoby (Chief Executive Officer) attended as observers.

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mogford & Waters-Bunn.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest declared at the meeting.

3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 September 2023 were confirmed.

4 MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising from the above minutes which were not covered elsewhere on the agenda.

5 PRESENTATION BY CITYFIBRE

Following a power outage which resulted in the IT equipment in the Council Chamber not working, it was RESOLVED:-

- (i) That the CityFibre presentation be deferred to a future meeting; and
- (ii) That the CityFibre presentation be given to the Committee via a Teams meeting. The Democratic Services Officer to liaise with Neil Mardle to arrange.

6 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT - OPTIONS FOR 2024/25 SCHEME

The Committee received and considered the report from the Head of Customer Services.

The Head of Customer Services outlined the options for the Council's Council Tax Support Scheme for 2024/25 for the Committee to consider as part of the public consultation on the scheme for next year. The Scrutiny Committee were invited to comment on the options outlined within the agenda report for the scheme.

The Chair asked for clarification that the funding from Norfolk County Council for the Hardship Fund had been secured. The Chief Executive Officer reported that the funding had not yet been secured.

Councillor Jeal voiced his concern that the reduction would affect those residents of working-class age who were already struggling with the cost of living and to whom £2 was the cost of a meal. He urged Members to keep the level of support at 91.5%.

Councillor Jeal asked for clarification as to whether the Hardship Fund was funded by the County Council or the Norfolk Assistance Scheme. The CEO confirmed that it would be funded by Norfolk County Council.

Councillor Grant asked if Members could set local criteria taking into account individual circumstances before awarding support. The Head of Customer Services informed the Committee that the Council could make adjustments to the scheme but she emphasised that our scheme was aligned to other welfare benefits and based on the Prescribed Requirements. Means testing was fairly consistent across the welfare

system. The Chair directed Members to page 11 of the agenda report which detailed a list of protected persons.

Councillor Wainwright reported that he understood why the Council had proposed this reduction in the scheme due to budget constraints, that he was personally, unable to support the reduction as it would have a profound effect on the most vulnerable residents in the community who were already battling with the cost of living crisis. Councillor Wainwright informed the Committee that although this issue had been discussed at the Budget MWG, he would have to take the matter to his Group. Kings Lynn & West Norfolk DC were moving towards 100% Council Tax Support, Norwich had been 100% for several years and we should stay at 91.5%.

The Head of Customer Services reminded Members that all residents of pensionable age would be fully protected. Council Tax support came at a real cost to the Council which was not covered by funding and she agreed that this was a difficult decision for Members but was necessary to stabilise the budget moving forwards.

Councillor Cordiner- Achenbach asked for clarification that the Hardship Fund would be in addition to the protected characteristics. The Head of Customer Services confirmed that that was correct and was in addition to protect the most vulnerable households. The Head of Customer Services also reminded Members that the current scheme does not protect any households in the working-age bracket. It might be considered more equitable to continue on this basis should a change to the overall scheme be made.

Councillor Cordiner-Achenbach reported that she had calculated that the increase in council tax would be 296% to those affected which was a significant increase.

The Head of Customer Services gave a breakdown of the figures as follows:-

- 80% support equates to £276.94 - an increase of £159.94 over a 52 week period equals £5.33 a week, an additional £3.08
- 85% support equates to £207.70 - an increase of £90.70 over a 52 week period equals £3.99 a week, an additional £1.74
- 87.5% support equates to £173.08 - an increase of £56.08 over a 52 week period equals £3.33 a week, an additional £1.08.

Councillor Cordiner-Achenbach asked for confirmation that the majority of claimants would be in Band A. The Head of Customer Services confirmed that the majority were in Band A and agreed that she would circulate a spreadsheet of the above figures to members after the meeting for information.

Councillor Newcombe asked if the figures utilised were based on the best-case scenario as the forecasted figures could vary to the actual figures based on a hybrid case load. The Head of Customer Services reported that the figures used were based on the highest caseload calculations and because of the seasonality and fluctuation of the caseload through the year would be less. Up-to-date forecasts were now being calculated together with tax base.

Councillor Newcombe asked if administration costs and debt collection fees were factored in to the calculations. Councillor Jeal was concerned that the recovery of council tax arrears would be obliterated by the admin and court recovery costs as this could offset any savings for the Council. The Head of Customer Services reported that the Council was required to follow a process by law to proceed to the summons stage to obtain a liability order to recover a debt. The Council worked closely with the

Early Help Hub, Dial & Citizens Advice to offer residents help and support in money/debt management and to advertise the Hardship Fund. The Head of Customer Services agreed to send out the costs to Members after the meeting.

Councillor Hammond asked for clarification as to whether single family claimants would be means tested.

The Chair reminded the Committee that they were not a decision-making body but were asked to give their views/comments to feed into the budget.

RESOLVED:-

(i) That the Committee recognises and notes that the Council is facing severe, ongoing financial challenges in the years ahead,

(ii) That the proposed decrease in Council Tax support will affect the most vulnerable families in the borough, noting that there are 1 million children living in destitution according to figures published by the Roundtree Foundation,

(iii) That the Head of Customer Services to supply a financial breakdown of the range of options presented to the Committee ranging from 91.5% to 75% and how the Hardship Fund, if successfully secured, will be applied to fill the gaps for struggling families who are already experiencing financial hardship due to the cost of living crisis; and

(iv) That the Committee request that the Budget Member Working Group note the comments when determining the level of Council Tax Support 2024/25.

7 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received and considered the Work Programme.

RESOLVED:-

That the Committee approve and note the Work Programme.

The meeting ended at: TBC