

FINANCE AND POLICY COMMITTEE

MINUTES AND DECISION RECORD

8 JANUARY 2018

The meeting commenced at 10.00 am in the Civic Centre, Hartlepool.

Present:

Councillor Christopher Akers Belcher (In the Chair)

Councillors: Kevin Cranney, Tim Fleming, Dave Hunter, Marjorie James,
Jim Lindridge, Brenda Loynes, Leisa Smith and Stephen Thomas.

Also Present: Councillor Carl Richardson as substitute for Councillor Alan Clark in
accordance with Council Procedure Rule 5.2.

Officers: Gill Alexander, Chief Executive
Peter Devlin, Chief Solicitor
Chris Little, Director of Finance and Policy
Denise Ogden, Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods
Ed Turner, Communications and Marketing Manager
David Cosgrove, Democratic Services Team

90. Apologies for Absence

Councillor Alan Clark.

91. Declarations of Interest

None at the commencement of the meeting.
During the discussions on Minute No. 96 'Council Tax Base 2018/19'
Councillor Thomas declared a personal interest.

92. Minutes of the meeting held on 22 November 2017

Confirmed.

93. Minutes of the meeting of the Health and Wellbeing Board held on 16 October, 2017

Received.

94. Minutes of the meeting of the Safer Hartlepool Partnership held on

Received.

95. Community Engagement and Cohesion Strategy

(Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods and Director of Finance and Policy)

Type of decision

Budget and Policy Framework.

Purpose of report

The purpose of the report was to present the updated draft Community Engagement and Cohesion Strategy to Members for to approve as a draft for final consultation.

Issue(s) for consideration

The Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods reported that the first draft of the Strategy was approved by Committee as a draft for consultation at the meeting on 18 September 2017 and an eight-week consultation ran until 17 November 2017. In addition discussions around social action and community engagement, which were key elements of the Strategy, took place at the public Your Say, Our Future event on the 22 November and the Staff Sounding Board on the 28 November. These discussions had particularly informed the proposed actions within the Strategy. The Youth Council had also received information on the consultation and agreed to consider and respond to the online survey individually. Details of the consultation responses were summarised in appendix 1 to the report.

A Member questioned if the strategy would lead to all community consultation sitting under the Finance and Policy Committee and also how the strategy would impact on policy committees and other community engagement. The Director stated that the policy would be embedded across the authority providing an over-arching engagement policy for all departments and committees. The Vice-Chair commented that within the action plan there was reference to “review[ing] the new model for providing support to the voluntary and community sector” by October 2019 and he questioned why the timescale for this was so long. The Director commented that there would be a new model for the Voluntary Sector Strategy for consideration by the Regeneration Services Committee cascading out of this strategy. The action plan could be amended to reflect the process and hence the implementation date for clarity. The Chair of the Adult Services Committee indicated that the proposed strategy was also providing a base for the review of public engagement within Adult Services.

A member of the public questioned the impact of the strategy on future services. The Chair clarified that the strategy was simply about engagement with local communities and how the council could promote and facilitate cohesion within communities. The Community Hub model had been introduced to protect and enhance services at a community level.

Decision

That the final draft of the Community Engagement and Cohesion Strategy be approved for consultation subject to the inclusion of an amendment to the Action Plan entry relating to the new model for providing support to the voluntary and community sector including reference to the timetable for the development of the Voluntary Sector Strategy.

96. Council Tax Base 2018/19 *(Director of Finance and Policy)*

Type of decision

Non-key decision.

Purpose of report

The report sought member approval, as required by statutory regulations, to a calculated Council Tax Base for 2018/19 which will be used for Council Tax billing purposes.

Issue(s) for consideration

The Director of Finance and Policy reported that the Council was required by law to calculate its Council Tax Base for the forthcoming year, and inform the major precepting authorities, Cleveland Police Authority and Cleveland Fire Authority, and local precepting authorities (Parish Councils), before 31 January 2018. The Council Tax Base is expressed as the number of Band D equivalent properties. Appendices to the report set out the Tax base for the Borough and the individual parish areas of Dalton Piercy, Elwick, Greatham, Hart, Newton Bewley, Headland, Brierton and Claxton.

As part of the Government's welfare reforms, Councils were required to determine and operate their own local schemes for providing support with Council Tax. Under these arrangements, there was a requirement to adjust the Council Tax Base to reflect the impact of the Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) scheme. Members had approved a 12% LCTS scheme for 2018/19, which maintained this support for the fifth year. The LCTS adjustment was expressed in terms of an equivalent number of Band D's within each Appendix.

The Medium Term Financial Strategy assumed increases in the Council Tax Yield in 2018/19 from a Council Tax increase and also from increases in the number of properties within the Borough. The 2018/19 Tax Base

proposals had factored in housing growth the equivalent of 452 Band D properties. This growth was forecast to be delivered from new builds at various developments across the Borough and the completion of properties within the Carr Hopps regeneration area.

Prior to the meeting, a Member had raised a query in relation to the calculations set out in the appendices. The Director commented in the meeting that figures in the appendices could not simply be 'added or subtracted between rows; there were detailed 'background' equations behind the numbers reported.

During the consideration of the report Councillor Thomas declared a personal interest as a member of Headland Parish Council.

The Chair commented that when Band D was used as the comparator for Council Tax, Hartlepool was within the top ten councils for council tax rates due to the balance of properties in the borough being heavily towards Bands A and B. When average council tax paid per dwelling in the Borough was used as the comparator, the Council ranked 266th in the country. The Chair suggested that this comparator should be more prominently used in publicity around council tax rates for Hartlepool.

Decision

1. That a Hartlepool BC Council Tax Base for 2018/19 of 24,021.0 as detailed in Appendix 1 to the report be approved.
2. That a Council Tax Base for 2018/19 for Parishes who intend to levy a precept upon the Council's Collection Fund, as detailed in Appendices 2 to 9 to the report, be approved as follows:

Dalton Piercy	104.0	Elwick	583.1
Greatham	575.5	Hart	317.0
Newton Bewley	33.4	Headland	721.5
Brierton	13.2	Claxton	16.1

3. That the proposed arrangements for monitoring and reporting of growth in the number of properties in the Borough be noted.

97. Irrecoverable Debts – Sundry Debts and Housing Benefit Overpayments *(Director of Finance and Policy)*

Type of decision

Non key decision.

Purpose of report

The report sought member approval to write out a number of debts considered irrecoverable. The Council's financial procedure rules provide

that any debt due to the Council of £1000 or more can only be written-out with the express permission of Members.

Issue(s) for consideration

The Director of Finance and Policy reported that each year the Council bills about £27m of sundry debts. The Council's performance in collecting these debts is positive with 98.6% of debts collected within the year they are billed. Furthermore, longer term collection of sundry debt continued to be very positive, with over 99% of sundry debts raised being fully recovered within two years. While the Council continued to vigorously pursue recovery there were some sundry debts that become irrecoverable and the report sought approval to their write out.

The Council administers Housing Benefit on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions and each year makes awards totalling about £37m to about 10,000 households in the Borough. Housing Benefit is a complex means tested type of financial support and sometimes there were delays in the Council receiving and validating information resulting in historical overpaid benefit.

Where Housing Benefit awards were reduced, the level of any overpayment of benefit is calculated which is recoverable from the claimant. Where the claimant continues to be in receipt of Housing Benefit, recovery is made from ongoing benefit at a standard rate as advised by the DWP; currently £11.10 per week or £18.50 per week for proven fraud overpayment cases. For those claimants no longer in receipt of benefit, they are invoiced and subject to the same recovery arrangements as sundry debts.

The report sought approval to write out of the Council's financial accounts a number of housing benefit overpayments for the reasons set out in Appendix A to the report.

The Director highlighted that in terms of the annual value of sundry debts raised (£27m) and housing benefit overpayments created (£1.2m), the amount proposed for write continued to be very low. In 2016/17 Hartlepool wrote out £99,000 of housing benefit overpayments relating to a number of financial years, as non recoverable, ranking the Council the lowest in financial terms out of the 12 North East councils (the average was £394,000). However, as benefits caseloads vary between Councils a more appropriate measure of levels of housing benefit overpayments written out was to consider write outs in £ thousands per 1,000 caseload. Comparative data for the 12 NE Councils, as obtained from national DWP statistics, showed that Hartlepool ranked third lowest on this measure.

In response to Member questions the Director confirmed that with debt absconders, the Council did retain details and would pursue the debt should the individual re-appear in the Borough. A national organisation was used to trace people wherever possible. In relation to the concerns around business debts, the Director referred to the letter sent to Government last

year in relation to individuals that appeared to declare bankruptcy and then restart a new very similar business often in the same premises. The government response had not been particularly helpful indicating that such action was within the law. Action to pursue business debts as far as was legally permissible was always pursued.

The following decision was agreed unanimously.

Decision

1. That approval be given to the write out of Housing Benefit Overpayments totalling £72,719.55 as detailed in Appendix A to the report.
2. That approval be given to the write out of Sundry Debts totalling £22,835.36 as detailed in Appendix B to the report.

98. Any Other Items which the Chairman Considers are Urgent

None.

The meeting noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on Monday 12 February 2018 at 10.00 am at the Civic Centre.

The meeting concluded at 10.35 am.

P J DEVLIN

CHIEF SOLICITOR

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