

At a meeting of the CABINET held in the CIVIC CENTRE (COMMITTEE ROOM NO. 1) on Wednesday 18 September 2012 at 2.00 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Trueman in the Chair

Councillors Blackburn, Gofton, Kelly, G. Miller, P. Smith and Speding

Part I

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet held on 5 September 2012 Part I (copy circulated) were submitted.

(For copy report - see original minutes).

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Receipt of Declarations of Interest

The Council's Monitoring Officer reported that she had granted dispensations to all Members of the Cabinet in respect of the Members' Allowances Scheme and Council Tax:-

- To enable them to participate (including speaking and voting) in any business of Sunderland City Council (the Authority) relating to consideration of the Members' Allowances Scheme, expenses or any other payment to members, and
- To enable them to participate (including speaking and voting) in any business of the Authority relating to consideration of matters relating to Council Tax, including the setting of the Council Tax and the consideration and approval of associated policies and procedures including benefits, exemptions, discounts and other matters relating to Council Tax.

In the case of the dispensation in respect of Council Tax, the dispensation would continue to apply even if the Member's property interests changed and so the property or properties on which the Member was liable to pay Council Tax change.

All of the dispensations were granted for a period of four years with effect from 18 September 2012.

The dispensations had been granted on the grounds that without the dispensation, the number of persons who would be prohibited by Section 31(4) of the Localism Act 2011 from participating in the business referred to, would be so great a proportion of the body transacting the business, as to impede the transaction of the business and also that without the dispensation, each member of the Cabinet would be prohibited by Section 31(4) from participating in the business to be transacted by the Cabinet at this meeting in respect of the Members' Allowances Scheme and the localisation of Council Tax Support Scheme and at subsequent Cabinet meetings at which these matters were considered.

Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillor P. Watson.

Draft Localisation of Council Tax Support Scheme

The Executive Director of Commercial and Corporate Services submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide an overview of Government proposals to localise Council Tax Benefit, through the introduction of the Local Council Tax Support Scheme from 1 April 2013, and to highlight the potential implications for the Council and its residents.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Councillor Speding in highlighting the report advised Cabinet Members that the Government proposals to localise Council Tax Benefit required all billing authorities to develop and then implement their own localised Council Tax Support Scheme by 1st April 2013 and it must be approved by Council before 31st January 2013. He reported that the measure was part of the Government's welfare reform programme which aimed to save approximately £500m nationally by reducing the amount paid out in respect of Council Tax Benefit.

Councillor Speding advised that as well as the transfer of responsibility from Central to Local Government, the Government would cut the level of grant support to Local Authorities by an average of 10% nationally in 2013-14. He added that however, the reductions varied based on benefit caseload information which the government had provided and for Sunderland the estimated reduction equated to approximately 13% which was estimated to be up to £3.4m. He reported that the exact figures would be finalised as part of the Local Government Finance settlement.

Cabinet Members were advised that within Sunderland, as with wider Welfare Reform, there were significant concerns as to the adverse impact of the grant reduction on both the City and its residents. Councillor Speding highlighted the key milestones, actions and guidance outlined in the report that the Council must follow in developing their local scheme including publication of scheme details and consultation requirements. In particular, he drew attention to an outline of the proposed scheme detailed in Section 10 of the report. He explained that this was a fair and reasonable scheme given the significantly reduced funding available from Government, taking into account the fact that pensioners were protected and proposed for those claimants of working age with dependant children families a flat rate £2 a week reduction in benefit compared to a flat rate reduction of £3 per week for those with no dependant children. He added that this would form the basis of the proposals alongside the other criteria outlined in paragraph 10.2 of the report.

In conclusion, Cabinet Members were advised that a further report which would present feedback from the consultation exercise and provide details of the proposed final scheme would be submitted to Cabinet, and then to full Council for consideration in due course.

Consideration having been given to the report, it was:-

2. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the Draft Local Council Tax Support Scheme, as outlined in the report, be approved for the purpose of consultation,
- (ii) to the extent that such consultation has not been possible in advance of the date of the meeting, agree to consult the major precepting authorities (fire and police) on the Draft Local Council Tax Support Scheme, as outlined in the report, and authorise the Executive Director of Commercial and Corporate Services in consultation with the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Secretary to reflect any comments received from precepting authorities in the Draft Scheme,

- (ii) publication of the Draft Scheme (amended as appropriate in light of the consultation with the precepting authorities) be authorised on the Council's website and in any additional manner determined by the Executive Director of Commercial and Corporate Services in consultation with the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Secretary,
- (iv) other persons likely to have an interest in the operation of the Scheme be consulted following its publication. Such persons to include representatives/representative groups of Council Tax payers and Council Tax benefit claimants, voluntary organisations and community groups, with the Executive Director of Commercial and Corporate Services being authorised to determine the final details of the consultation process in consultation with the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Secretary, and
- (v) a further report regarding feedback from the consultation exercise and the proposed final scheme be submitted to a future Cabinet meeting.

Review of Members' Allowances Scheme by the Independent Remuneration Panel

The Chief Executive and Executive Director of Commercial and Corporate Services submitted a report (copy attached) to consider the outcome of the Independent Remuneration Panel's Review of Members' Allowances and to make appropriate recommendations to Council.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Councillor Trueman highlighted the report and in particular drew attention to the Independent Panel's recommendations, including the backdating of the proposed amendments to the scheme, and requested the Cabinet to recommend to Council to accept the Independent Panel's recommendations and to also agree that the amended scheme would apply for the financial year 2013/2014, unless it was further reviewed.

Consideration having been given to the report, it was:-

3. RESOLVED that it be recommended to Council that the recommendations of the Independent Panel be accepted and the amendments to the scheme, as set out in the Panel's report, be backdated to the start of the 2012/2013 Financial Year, and also that the amended scheme will apply for the financial year 2013/2014, unless it is further reviewed.

Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006

At the instance of the Chairman, it was:-

4. RESOLVED that in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006 the public be excluded during consideration of the remaining business as it was considered to involve a likely disclosure of information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the Authority holding that information) (Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A, Part 1, Paragraph 3).

(Signed) H. TRUEMAN,
Chairman.

Note:-

The above minutes comprise only those relating to items during which the meeting was open to the public.

Additional minutes in respect of other items are included in Part II.