

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 17 January 2024

Present:

Councillor P Stuart (Chair)

Councillors	J Robinson	H Cameron
	P Gilchrist	S Mountney
	EA Grey	L Rennie
	A Davies	P Cleary
	S Powell-Wilde	H Gorman
	T Jones	J Bird
	JE Green	J McManus

95 **WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting as well as those watching the webcast.

96 **APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received by Councillor Janette Williamson. Councillor Julie McManus was in attendance as substitute.

97 **MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Jeff Green declared a personal interest by virtue of a family member employed by Peel LLP.

98 **MINUTES**

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held 13 December 2023 be approved as a correct record.

99 **PUBLIC AND MEMBER QUESTIONS**

The Chair informed Members that no public or Members questions, statements or petitions had been received.

100 **REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT ASSURANCE PANEL**

The Chair of the Independent Assurance Panel attended virtually and presented the third update report. The Panel had been set up to oversee the Council's improvement in response to the external assurance review commissioned by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) which was published in November 2021. The External Assurance Review was undertaken as a condition of the Council's request for exceptional finance support in 2020-21 and 2021-22.

The Chair of the Independent Assurance Panel Informed Members that they had been very encouraged by the progress of the Council over the last six months, noting that the draft Medium Term Financial Strategy and Wirral Plan had been considered by the Panel and were now better aligned.

The Chair of the Panel raised concerns regarding the delivery of the Capital Programme, specifically the regeneration programme and noted that a robust financial monitoring framework should be in place to provide assurance. General improvements noted were better cross-party working, and improved trust in the financial figures received by Members.

Members were advised that the Panel were to meet with Group Leaders and council officers following Budget Council, after which it was hoped that support would led by the Local Government Association.

The Chair proceeded to thank the Panel for the support and challenge provided by them over the years and noted that whilst Local Government Settlement had not been the figure that officers had anticipated, they were confident of a balanced budget for 2024/25. The Chair also voiced his appreciation for the increase in cross-party working and support from Group Leaders and Members for during both Budget setting discussions and in formulating the new Wirral Plan 2024-27.

These comments were echoed by Members who endorsed the increased level of trust and cross-party working across the Council. Members also noted the requirement to monitor the regeneration projects, as well as further development of the Performance Management Framework which formed part of the Council Plan 2024-27.

Resolved – that the content of the letter be noted.

101 **COUNCIL TAX BASE CALCULATION**

The Director of Finance presented the report which brought together related issues regarding the Council Tax Base for 2024/25 upon which the annual billing and Council Tax levels would be set.

Members were informed that the report set out how the Council Tax Band D equivalent was calculated, by considering changes such as new builds, demolitions, discounts and exemptions as well as the empty property discount. A further calculation was then undertaken with the expected collection rate. Members were informed that the collection rate had gone down marginally based on last year and it was assumed that the cost of living crisis had made a small impact on collections. The Director of Finance explained that the income generated via Council Tax collection was forecast to be just over £180m which represented 45% of the Council's funding.

Resolved – that the figure of 95,993.93 as the Council Tax Base for 2024/25 be approved.

102 **COUNCIL TAX 2024/25 LOCAL COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME, DISCOUNTS AND EXEMPTIONS**

The Director of Finance presented the report which brought together related issues regarding the proposed Council Tax Discounts including Local Discounts, Exemptions, and the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme to be used during 2024/25. Members were informed that approval was required by Council before 11 March 2024.

Members were advised that whilst the report was similar to reports presented in previous years, there were two additional changes recommended for 2024/25. This included increasing the empty property premium for premises that had been empty for more than one year to 200%, as well as a proposed change to the treatment of second homes (dwellings that are furnished but are not someone's sole or main residence). In regards to the latter change, Members were informed that a year's notice had to be provided, so the earliest this change could come into effect would be 2025.

Members voiced their approval that provision of Care Leavers Discount, the 100% discount awarded to Wirral Women's and Children's Aid and the Discretionary Hardship Relief Scheme was to continue. Also discussed was the number of empty properties in Wirral, including those of social landlords, where it was noted that empty properties can lead to Anti-Social Behaviour. Members were also informed that the projected figures for the Empty Home Premium was just under £1m, however due to the 12 months' notice people may choose to find different uses for their second home before the premium was applied.

Members also discussed the subject of housing, as well as the governance and oversight of housing issues within the Council and it was noted that the work programme for the Economy, Regeneration and Housing Committees had housing reports programmed for future consideration.

RECOMMEND – to Council that,

The level and award of each local discount for 2024/25 be as follows: -

1. Wirral Women's & Children's Aid

To continue to award Wirral Women & Children's Aid 100% discount. This remains unchanged from 2023/24.

2. Care Leaver's Discount

To award Care Leavers the requisite discount to reduce their Council Tax liability to zero until they are 25. This remains unchanged from 2023/24.

3. Empty Property Discounts 2024/25

Discount category D = 0% Full charge on properties undergoing renovations.

Discount category C = 0% Full charge on empty properties from date they become unoccupied.

Both to remain unchanged from 2023/24, and to include an exception for properties requiring adaptations to meet the need of a disabled person who will be occupying the property as soon as the adaptations are complete. This also applies to properties awaiting renovations prior to being occupied by someone under Ukraine resettlement scheme.

To reduce the Empty Property Premium from 2024/25 to properties that have been empty for more than one year (Currently Two).

So that the following apply: -

100% (200% Council Tax) for unfurnished properties empty for more than one year.

200% (300% Council Tax) for unfurnished properties empty more than five years.

300% (400% Council Tax) for unfurnished properties empty more than ten years.

4. Council Tax Discretionary Hardship Relief Scheme

The Council Tax Discretionary Hardship Relief Scheme, approved by Cabinet in October 2013, to continue in its current format for 2024/25.

The Scheme offers help and assistance in exceptional cases of hardship. Appendix 1

5. Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS)

The current Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme to remain unchanged from 2023/24 apart from the following:

a. The scheme to be aligned to all the Department of Work and Pensions uprating's and changes for Housing Benefit and Universal Credit.

b. There to be no loss of entitlement due to payments made under government defined compensation schemes.

6. Changes to the treatment of second homes (dwellings that are furnished but are not someone's sole or main residence)

From 1 st April 2025 the council to charge an additional 100% council tax (200% Council Tax) for any person with a second home within Wirral.

103 CAPITAL MONITORING QUARTER 3 2023/24

The Director of Finance presented the report which provided Members with an update on the progress of the Capital Programme 2023/24 at the end of December 2023.

The report recommended that Committee agreed the revised 2023/24 Capital Programme of £97 million which took into account of re-profiling, virements, additional funding requirements and grant variations identified since the Capital Programme was formally agreed on 27th February 2023 and revised via the Capital Outturn 2022-23 report.

Members were informed of additional grant funding, various schemes as highlighted in section 3.7, as well as the public sector de-carbonisation scheme. Further clarification was also given to Members on Birkenhead Market funding and Maritime Knowledge Hub.

Members also requested further information on various aspects of the report, including allotment site expansion, catering units and defibrillators. A request was made to consider a further allocation of funds in future years for highways maintenance and pothole repairs before further deterioration occurred.

Councillors Jean Robinson and Jeff Green left the room due to their interests as Directors of Wirral Growth Company and took no part in the discussion or vote.

Resolved – that,

- 1. the additional funding for the schemes referred to in section 3.7 in this report be approved.**
- 2. the changes to the programme detailed in section 3.8 be approved.**
- 3. the revised Capital Programme of £97 million for 2023/24, including the virements of budget referred to in Appendix C of this report be approved.**

104 **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chair introduced the work programme which provided an opportunity to plan and regularly review its work across the municipal year.

A request for performance monitoring workshops and a referral from Council regarding Borough of Sanctuary status were added to the work programme.

Resolved – That the Policy and Resources Committee work programme for the 2023/24 municipal year be noted with the above additions.

105 **MINUTES OF THE SENIOR OFFICER AND STAFFING SUB-COMMITTEE**

The Chair introduced the minutes of the Senior Officer and Appointments Staffing Sub-Committee which was held on 5th December 2023.

Members queried the possible need for a Human Resources sub-committee and asked that the chief officer structured be circulated to Members.

Also discussed were exempt reports published in the agenda, noting that some of the contents contained within the reports were already in the public domain. The Head of Legal Service explained that the report in question was exempt as it contained the personal information of individuals and that the exemption had been moved by the committee. The Council and Merseyside Pension Fund was also commended upon by Members for providing employment opportunities for care leavers.

Resolved – that the minutes of the Senior Officer and Appointments Staffing Sub-Committee held on 5th December 2023 be noted.