

CABINET

Monday, 4 November 2019

<u>Present:</u>	Councillor	P Hackett (Chair)	Leader of the Council
	Councillors	E Grey C Jones A Leech J McManus T Usher S Whittingham	Environment and Climate Change Adult Care Health and Wellbeing The Local Plan Community Services Children Families and Education Housing and Planning
<u>Apologies:</u>	Councillors	T Jones C Spriggs J Williamson	Regeneration and Growth Culture and Tourism Finance and Resources

46 LEADER'S ANNOUNCEMENT

Councillor Pat Hackett reported on the River of Light event which had been held on Sunday, 3 November 2019 at New Brighton. It had been an absolutely fantastic fireworks display which had been very well attended by local people.

Councillor Hackett thanked the Council employees who had been responsible for organising and helping out at this spectacular event.

47 MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

48 MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet held on 30 September 2019 be confirmed as a correct record.

49 EXECUTIVE KEY DECISIONS TAKEN UNDER DELEGATED POWERS

It was noted that no Key Decisions had been actioned by Cabinet Members, under delegated authority, during the period 20 September 2019 (date of publication of last Cabinet agenda) to date.

50 MILTON PAVEMENTS BUSINESS CASE

Councillor Pat Hackett introduced a report which sought approval of a strategic acquisition of property by the Council (referred to in the report as “Milton Pavements”) in the heart of Birkenhead town centre. The report also sought approval to the incorporation of this site into the Wirral Growth Company Limited Liability Partnership (LLP) Option Agreement on appropriate terms at an appropriate time. The Cabinet was informed that acquiring and assembling this land would contribute significantly towards town centre regeneration aspirations.

Additionally, the report also sought approval for a key, Council owned, neighbouring site, Birkenhead Market building, to be transferred into the Wirral Growth Company Option Agreement on appropriate terms and subject to the approval of the LLP. The Cabinet was requested to give its approval for the site referred to as ‘Allport Lane – Bromborough’ to be removed from the Wirral Growth Company Option Agreement in line with the Board decision of the LLP.

The regeneration of the town centre was a long-standing priority for the Council and was reflected in The Wirral Plan: A 2020 Vision. This Plan had set out the vision for the borough and had economic growth at its heart to ensure residents would be able to access good, high paying jobs in a stable and thriving economy. The Plan had identified 20 key pledges that the Council, and its partner agencies, must deliver and the proposals in the report directly supported the following pledges:

- Increase inward investment;
- Greater job opportunities; and
- Thriving small businesses.

The matter affected all Wards within the Borough and was a key decision.

Appended to the report were:

Appendix 3 – Redline boundary for ‘Milton Pavements’.

Appendix 4 – Redline boundary for ‘Birkenhead Market’.

Appendix 5 – Redline boundary for ‘Allport Lane Car Park, Bromborough.’

However, Appendix 1 – Acquisition Full Business Case and Appendix 2 – Acquisition Heads of Terms were exempt by virtue of Paragraph 3, part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 and were included at Agenda Item No. 9 on the agenda. (Minute No 55 refers.)

Councillor Hackett informed that given the well reported decline of the high street nationally and a challenging retail market, it was the responsibility of the Council, as long term stakeholder and investor, to take greater control of the area and ensure that future developments had a positive impact in terms of place making and broader regeneration.

The Council’s plans for economic growth were about creating community wealth. They were about creating opportunities for local people, regenerating commercial

areas and inspiring ambition. Prosperous communities were happier, healthier and better places to live.

This report set out the Council's initial plans for the much-needed regeneration of Birkenhead's commercial town centre and beyond. It specifically focused on the Council's vision and ambition to see Birkenhead, once again, become a thriving town with neighbourhoods of choice and a strong commercial heart, generating footfall and visitors alongside a revitalised retail and leisure provision with new streets and squares.

Councillor Hackett stated that the regeneration of the town centre was a long-standing priority for the Council and was the original backdrop to the formation of the Wirral Growth Company. He informed that it was important that the Council ensured the regeneration of the whole area. This was its long term ambition and it was an exciting time when a number of sites would be linked up around the area with the town centre, Woodside, Hamilton Square and Wirral Waters etc.

There was a big opportunity to work with the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority and Homes England to draw up the master plan. Details, communications and publicity about this would be available in the next two or three weeks. This was a vital element to the whole regeneration of Birkenhead. It was long overdue and residents and businesses had been asking for this for a long time. There had been consultation with market traders, residents and businesses and the actual regeneration would be people led.

Councillor Anita Leech declared a personal interest by virtue of her being a Board Member of the Wirral Growth Company.

RESOLVED:

That the Cabinet:

- (1) approves the Full Business Case for the acquisition of the land and rights of Milton Pavement and unit 13-15 at St Werburgh's Square thereby agreeing in principle for the Council to purchase these sites;**
- (2) thereby authorises the Director of Economic and Housing Growth, in consultation with the Director of Finance and Investment to finalise the purchase of the sites on the terms that are substantially in accordance with the draft Heads of Terms set out at Appendix 2, noting that the Heads of Terms contain a number of conditions that must be satisfactorily met before the purchase can be deemed unconditional;**
- (3) agrees that, once 'Milton Pavements' is acquired, this asset can be incorporated into the LLP Option Agreement on appropriate terms subject to approval of the LLP and the outcomes of consultation on regeneration plans;**

- (4) agrees that, once 'Milton Pavements' is acquired, this asset subject to planning permission and surveys can be demolished subject to the outcome of consultation on the regeneration plans;**
- (5) agrees that the Council owned Birkenhead Market site can be incorporated into the LLP Option Agreement on appropriate terms and subject to the outcome of consultation on the regeneration plans; and**
- (6) agrees that the site referred to as 'Allport Lane – Bromborough' be removed from the LLP Option Agreement.**

51 **COUNCIL TAX (EMPTY HOMES PREMIUM)**

Councillor Pat Hackett introduced a report which outlined the current arrangements for the charging of Council Tax on Empty Homes in Wirral together with new powers to increase this charge under the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018.

The report sought approval to allow a 200% premium to be levied, on homes that had been empty for five years or more, from the 1 April 2020. This would make the Council Tax payable on such properties 300%.

The matter affected all Wards within the Borough.

Appended to the report at Appendix 1 was Exemptions to the Empty Homes Premium.

Councillor Hackett informed that this was an initiative put forward by Councillor Janette Williamson and the driver behind the proposal was not increased revenue through council tax, it was about bringing pressure to bear on owners of empty properties to bring them back into use and provide homes for people who needed them. The Council's figures indicated that there were hundreds of properties which could be in use but were being left vacant. Wirral was currently under pressure to build at least 800 new homes a year and the owners of these empty properties should be playing their part by bringing their property back into use for rent. Ideally, no one would be paying this extra council tax and of course people could avoid it by letting their properties and providing homes for people in Wirral.

Councillor Hackett reported that there were Wirral residents desperate for homes and there was a scandalous situation where hundreds of homes were vacant and that could not be right. Vulnerable people were looking for homes and this initiative was an attempt to alleviate the situation.

Councillor Stuart Whittingham informed that homelessness took many forms and unfortunately people who slept rough were just the tip of the iceberg. There were people sofa surfing, staying with relatives and adults still living with their parents

because they could not find a home of their own. It was an absolute scandal that, whilst that was going on, there were homes standing empty. Councillor Whittingham knew that property owners might see the charges as being punitive but he encouraged them to speak to the Council who would encourage and help them to get these homes occupied again and so avoid this charge. The Council had a very active team that dealt with empty properties.

Councillor Chris Jones reported that landlords and owners needed to take responsibility. People would never have pride in their streets when they were living beside empty and dilapidated houses, if this was allowed to carry on.

RESOLVED:

That the Cabinet recommends to the Council that the full premium of 200% be applied to homes that have been empty for five years or more as allowed by the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018 from 1 April 2020.

52 **COUNCIL TAX - REDUCTION SCHEME**

Councillor Pat Hackett introduced a report which outlined proposed changes to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme operated by Wirral Council. The proposal had previously been considered by Members and approved in principle.

The report sought approval to allow a reduction in the minimum amount payable by non-protected groups from the current 22% minimum to a 12% minimum.

The report also sought the Cabinet's approval to simplify the claim process to enable notifications received from the Department of Work and Pensions for applicants applying for Universal Credit to be treated as a claim for Council Tax Reduction.

This matter affected all Wards within the Borough and was a key decision.

Councillor Hackett informed that this was an initiative put forward by Councillor Janette Williamson and reported that in 2013, the Conservative-led Coalition Government had abolished Council Tax Benefit for hundreds of thousands of low-income households across the county. It had replaced this support with the Local Council Tax Support Scheme, cutting the funding by 10% at the same time.

The Government's decision had disadvantaged thousands of vulnerable, low-income Wirral families. Since its implementation, the Council had tried its best, of course, to retain protection for these households, giving them the support that has been sadly lacking in national policy.

Councillor Hackett was delighted that the Council had now developed a proposal to help us go further. The report provided a proposal for a new scheme of Council

Tax reduction, an investment of more than £800,000 which would see more than 9,000 low income households get a better deal on their Council Tax.

The proposals in this policy increased the level of support currently provided to thousands of the most financially vulnerable in Wirral by reducing their Council Tax liability and simplified the system for many residents including those on Universal Credit, zero hours contracts and irregular incomes.

Councillor Stuart Whittingham informed that this was another measure that he warmly welcomed and it was nice that the Council could play a part in alleviating some of the issues brought about by the Government's approach to welfare policy. He found it particularly appalling to see the increased use of food banks across the country. Councillor Whittingham also referred to a damning report from the United Nations about the Government's approach to poverty and the policies that had actually been promoted that had actually increased poverty, in-work poverty and child poverty. He considered this to be a disgrace and was, therefore, happy to support the report and any measures the Council could put in place to alleviate the situation.

Councillor Anita Leech referred to the cuts to the Council's budget and its continuing budget pressures and informed that when Councillor Janette Williamson had discussed this initiative with the Cabinet it had agreed that it could benefit 9000 households who were extremely vulnerable. She was pleased to support the report.

RESOLVED: That:

- (1) the Cabinet recommends to the Council an amendment to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme for Wirral to reduce the minimum amount payable for non-protected groups from the current 22% to 12%; and**
- (2) the Cabinet recommends to the Council an amendment to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme for Wirral to allow notifications in relation to Universal Credit to be treated as a claim for Council Tax Reduction.**

53 MODERN SLAVERY STRATEGY FOR WIRRAL

Councillor Tom Usher introduced a report which informed that Wirral Council had set out a Strategy, Action Plan and Code of Conduct addressing Modern Slavery to ensure a coordinated approach together with partners and communities, to prevent criminals being able to prey on the most vulnerable people in the Borough.

The Cabinet noted that under Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act councils had a duty to do all that they reasonably could to prevent crime and disorder in their administrative areas, which included modern slavery and trafficking.

As part of Pledge 19; 'Wirral's Neighbourhoods are Safe', the Safer Wirral Partnership Board had already committed to protecting the most vulnerable

victims of crime. The Cabinet noted that the Wirral Modern Slavery Officers Group was meeting regularly to monitor progress of Wirral's Modern Slavery Action Plan and report to the Safer Wirral Partnership Board which would be responsible for the governance of Wirral's Modern Slavery Strategy.

Wirral's Modern Slavery Strategy had been scrutinised by the Elected Members Working Group in October 2018, where it also had considered the recommendations of the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting of November 2016:

The Elected Members Working Group had taken into account the borough wide concerns about Modern Slavery and had endorsed both the priorities laid out within Strategy and the recommendations from the Committee to be incorporated into a Modern Slavery Action Plan for Wirral.

This was a key decision.

Appended to the report were:

- Wirral Modern Slavery Action Plan 2018 - 2021;
- Wirral Modern Slavery Strategy 2018 - 2021;
- Wirral Council Supplier Code of Conduct; and
- Wirral Modern Slavery Scrutiny Report of the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee – November 2018.

Councillor Usher reported that the Modern Slavery Strategy had been presented to the Cabinet because Members wanted to do all that they could to respond to and combat modern slavery in all of its forms and that encompassed human trafficking, slavery, servitude and forced labour. Members noted that modern slavery was the fastest growing organised crime in the world and it was growing rapidly in the UK and regionally as well.

Councillor Usher informed that between 2011 and 2017 there had been a 300% increase in the number of modern slavery victims in the UK and on Merseyside the cases that had been identified had grown from 38 to 89 which was an increase of 134%. Often it was the most vulnerable and isolated people who had fallen victim to modern slavery and they either, did not recognise their situation, or had no personal connections in the country, other than with those who had been actually exploiting them.

Councillor Usher also informed that the Modern Slavery Act had been passed in 2015 to tackle the worst exploitation and that Wirral Council had signed up to the Co-operative Party's Charter against Modern Slavery in 2016. This was to ensure that the Council's procurement practices did not support modern slavery in any of its forms, to consider the wider impact of it and to ensure that it calculated its response in a strategic way. The Strategy had been the result of work by a Cross-Party Scrutiny Working Group. Originally, the Environment Overview and Scrutiny

Committee had looked at this. Councillor Usher thanked the Elected Members who had been involved and informed that they had called upon Officers, Academics, Third Sector Organisations and Expert Witnesses to contribute to the completed Strategy which was the end result.

Actions around the Strategy itself had been ongoing for the past year or so. Significant training had been rolled out throughout the partnership with all the Council's partners on the Wirral. The most recent development had been the Council's Supplier's Code of Conduct which had been introduced to hold the Council's suppliers to account, to ensure that they had stringent arrangements in place to make sure that they were modern slavery resistant and that they maintained high levels of employment and working standards.

Councillor Usher thanked the Council's Community Safety Planning Manager who had put significant work into this Strategy, along with the previous Cabinet Portfolio Holder, Councillor Paul Stuart for his important contribution.

Councillor Anita Leech informed that modern slavery was an absolutely disgraceful act, forcing people to work through mental or physical threat, owned or controlled by an abusive employer. This dehumanised people, they were physically constrained having restrictions placed on their freedom. She welcomed anything that could be done to combat this.

RESOLVED:

That the Cabinet adopts:

- (1) the Wirral Modern Slavery Strategy;**
- (2) the Wirral Modern Slavery Action Plan; and**
- (3) the Council's annually updated Modern Slavery/Human Trafficking Statement.**

54 EXEMPT INFORMATION - EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED:

That, under section 100 (A) (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined by paragraph 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A (as amended) to that Act. The Public Interest test had been applied and favoured exclusion.

55 MILTON PAVEMENTS BUSINESS CASE (EXEMPT APPENDICES)

RESOLVED:

That further to Minute No. 50 above the content of the exempt appendices circulated with the agenda be noted.