



# Minutes

## Policy Review Committee

- Venue: Committee Room
- Date: Tuesday 19 January 2016
- Time: 5.00 p.m.
- Present: Councillors J Deans (Chair), K Arthur, D Hutchinson, R Packham, C Pearson, and Mrs J Shaw-Wright.
- Apology for Absence: Councillor M Hobson
- Officers Present: Jonathan Lund - Deputy Chief Executive, Karen Iveson – Executive Director (s151), Ralph Gill – Lead Officer (Benefits and Taxation), Michelle Dinsdale – Policy Officer, Chris Watson – Assistant Policy Officer, Helen McNeil – Lead Officer (Debt Control and Enforcement), and Janine Jenkinson - Democratic Services Officer.
- Also in attendance: Councillor C Lunn

### **21. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **22. MINUTES**

The Committee considered the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 21 October 2015.

#### **RESOLVED:**

**To receive and approve the minutes of the Policy Review Committee held on 21 October 2015 for signature by the Chair.**

## **23. CHAIR'S ADDRESS**

There was no address from the Chair.

## **24. DRAFT BUDGET AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN**

Karen Iveson, Executive Director (s151) and Councillor C Lunn, (Executive Member for Finance and Resources) presented a report that outlined the Council's draft Revenue Budget and Capital Programme 2016/17 and Medium Term Financial Plan.

The Committee was informed that on 3 December 2015 the Executive had discussed and approved the draft budget for public consultation and submission to the Policy Review Committee for comment. The report set out the draft budget for the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account for 2016/17 and the following two financial years, along with proposals for capital investment and the Programme for Growth.

The Policy Review Committee was asked to review the Executive report and provide comments, prior to the Executive finalising the budget proposals for submission to Council on 23 February 2016.

In relation to Business Rates, the Committee noted that a forecasted £5.4 million surplus had been assumed for 2016/17. The Executive Director (s151) explained that the surplus was due to the retention of renewable energy Business Rates from a local power station; however Councillors were advised there was some uncertainty in relation to the future retention of 100% of Business Rates from renewable energy projects and it was not known if similar levels of receipts could be expected going forward.

It was explained that the anticipated £5.4 million surplus for 2016/17 would be allocated to the Programme for Growth with spending plans to follow in the coming months.

The Committee noted that the draft General Fund Revenue Budget for 2016/17 assumed a Council Tax rise of 2% for 2016/17. Councillor C Lunn advised Councillors that a 2% rise would take the Council average Band D charge from £162.00 to £165.22; a rise of 6p a week.

### **RESOLVED:**

**To note and endorse the Draft Revenue Budget and Capital Programme 2016/17 and the Medium Term Financial Plan, as set out in the report.**

## 25. WELFARE REFORM

Ralph Gill, Lead Officer (Benefits and Taxation) presented a report that provided a six month review detailing the impact of the Welfare Reform changes in Selby District.

The Lead Officer (Benefits and Taxation) addressed the following points that had been raised at the Policy Review Committee meeting held on 14 July 2014:

- In relation to the number of people affected by the Spare Room Deduction and level of tenant rent arrears, Councillors attention was drawn to point 2.1.4 in the report. The data provided indicated that the number of people affected by the Spare Room Deduction showed only a minor change to the position in June 2015 and the number of council tenants affected had reduced over time. The total value of arrears on the accounts of people affected by the Spare Room Deduction was £3,287.78 with an average value of £136.99. The Committee was advised that Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) were available to people in financial hardship due to the welfare reform changes and the Council continued to promote DHP to people most in need of support.
- Councillors were informed there were currently nine households in Selby District affected by the Benefit Cap.
- In relation to debt collection, the Committee was reassured that the Council went to great lengths to ensure that debt repayment arrangements were affordable and sustainable. Debtors were also referred to Citizen's Advice Bureau for help and support. Officers were in discussion with South Yorkshire Credit Union (SYCU) regarding further support they could offer individuals with rent and Council Tax arrears.
- Councillors were informed that Council Tax was paid in respect of 37,229 domestic properties across the District. Council Tax Support of £3.9 million was currently awarded at a discount on 4,621 accounts of which 2,320 were people in receipt of the state pension.
- In relation to forecast information regarding the impact of the Living Wage on Selby residents, the Lead Officer (Benefits and Taxation) reported that it was not technically possible for the Council to provide this information. However, a specialist agency could be commissioned to undertake a one off study for roughly £6,000. He advised that if the Committee wished to pursue this, the Executive would have consider whether to allocate the financial resources to facilitate the study.

The Committee thanked the Lead Officer (Benefits and Taxation) for a comprehensive report.

**RESOLVED:**

**To note the report.**

**26. REVIEW OF THE CORPORATE ENFORCEMENT POLICY**

Michelle Dinsdale, Policy Officer and Chris Watson, Assistant Policy Officer presented a report that set out the draft Corporate Enforcement Policy.

Councillors were informed that the existing policy had been reviewed and the revised policy now adopted an overarching approach, and had been updated to reflect the changes to the regulatory and legislative framework of the existing policy.

The Committee was asked to provide feedback in relation to the content, approach and tone of the draft policy.

Councillors agreed that the tone of the draft policy was concise and easy to read, the approach was consistent and proportionate, and the content was clearly set out for the reader.

**RESOLVED:**

**To note and endorse the draft Corporate Enforcement Policy, as set out in the report.**

**27. TENANCY FRAUD REPORT**

The Lead Officer (Debt Control and Enforcement) provided the Committee with an update on the Council's approach to tenancy fraud.

The Committee was informed that the Council did not have a single policy; but that fraud related issues were included in the following documents: Home Choice Allocations Policy, Tenancy Policy, Tenancy Agreement and the Enforcement Policy.

The Lead Officer (Debt Control and Enforcement) reported that the most common tenancy related frauds nationally related to the following:

- Misrepresentation of a household housing position in order to get an allocation
- Sub-letting a property
- Succession
- Right to Buy

Councillors were advised that the Council adopted pro-active, preventative measures to minimise potential tenancy fraud. Recently, Housing Officers had introduced a new measure, whereby new tenants were photographed

when they signed a tenancy agreement; the photograph was then used to verify the tenant when introductory tenancy visits were carried out.

The Lead Officer (Debt Control and Enforcement) reported that over the last three years, the Council had received 967 benefit fraud referrals from the public, 51 relating to residency issues. 29 cases had been progressed as far as prosecution and 2 of the cases had been for tenancy fraud.

Councillors were informed that the way the Council investigated Housing Benefit fraud would be changing, as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had been rolling out a nationwide Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS) which brought together all welfare benefit fraud investigations currently undertaken by the DWP, local authorities and HMRC under the new Fraud and Error Service (FES).

The Council was scheduled to transfer the Housing Benefit Fraud function to the DWP from 1 March 2016 and two members of the Enforcement Team would be transferred to the DWP. The Council was currently looking at how it would facilitate fraud investigation in the future, and the possibility of working with the Council's auditors, Veritau was being explored.

**RESOLVED:**

**To note the update provided at the meeting.**

**28. WORK PROGRAMME 2015/16**

The Committee considered the Work Programme 2015/16.

**RESOLVED:**

**To note the Committee Work Programme 2015/16.**

The meeting closed at 6.35 p.m.