

TONBRIDGE AND MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

**FINANCE, REGENERATION AND PROPERTY SCRUTINY SELECT
COMMITTEE**

MINUTES

Tuesday, 26th July, 2022

Present: Cllr R I B Cannon (Chair), Cllr F G Tombolis (Vice-Chair), Cllr P Boxall, Cllr T Bishop, Cllr C Brown, Cllr M O Davis, Cllr D Harman, Cllr N J Heslop, Cllr M A J Hood, Cllr B J Luker and Cllr H S Rogers

In attendance: Councillor M A Coffin was also present pursuant to Council Procedure Rule No. 15.21.

Councillors Mrs S Bell, M D Boughton, V M C Branson, S A Hudson, D Keers, Mrs A S Oakley, W E Palmer, M R Rhodes, J L Sergison and K B Tanner participated via MS Teams and joined the discussion when invited to do so by the Chair in accordance Council Procedure Rule No 15.21.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M C Base and C J Williams

PART 1 - PUBLIC

FRP 22/1 NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no substitute Members nominated for this meeting.

FRP 22/2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made in accordance with the Code of Conduct.

FRP 22/3 MINUTES

As this was first meeting of the Finance, Regeneration and Property Scrutiny Select Committee there were no minutes to be considered.

FRP 22/4 WORK PROGRAMME 2022/2023

In advance of the meeting, Members had been asked to submit suggestions to be considered for inclusion in the Work Programme for 2022/23. The following suggestions were received:

- Future occupation of retail units on Station Approach, Tonbridge
- Future of Temporary Accommodation units, Pembury Road, Tonbridge

- Medium Term Financial Strategy and Savings and Transformation Strategy and Cabinet proposals on how to address the funding deficit
- Revenue Estimates
- Capital Plan
- Closure of Tonbridge Post Office

MATTERS FOR RECOMMENDATION TO THE CABINET

FRP 22/5 BUSINESS RATES LOCAL SCHEME DECISION

The report of the Director of Finance and Transformation provided details of a new discretionary rate relief scheme for 2022/23 to replace Transitional Relief and Supporting Small Business Relief which had both ceased on 31 March 2022.

This new relief was introduced to help businesses who would have still qualified for the previous schemes if they had continued into 2022/23, as the revaluation had been delayed from 1 April 2022 to 1 April 2023.

Members had regard to the main issues, the financial and value for money considerations and the legal implications detailed in the report and sought clarity around potential levels of fraud and funding to support the Borough Council in administering this new grant. In response, Members were advised that the risk of fraud remained very low and the Borough Council had robust measures in place. With regard to additional funding, it was reported that new burdens funding had been received for previous schemes. However, there was uncertainty around any future new burdens funding to support these new schemes.

RECOMMENDED: That

- (1) a scheme for the Extension of Transitional Relief and Supporting Small Business Relief be adopted for small and medium properties for 2022/23; and
- (2) delegated authority be given to the Revenues Manager to award, revise or revoke relief in accordance with the adopted scheme, subject to any disputed entitlement to relief being referred to the Director of Finance and Transformation.

MATTERS SUBMITTED FOR INFORMATION

FRP 22/6 REVENUE AND BENEFITS UPDATE

Members noted the recent developments in respect of council tax, business rates, council tax reduction and housing benefits as detailed in the report of the Director of Finance and Transformation.

Collection rates for council tax remained above target. However, due to the current economic climate and the cost of living crisis it was not expected that this performance would continue into the latter half of this financial year. As a result, the collection target for council tax had been reduced to 98% for 2022/23. The collection rate for businesses remained unchanged at 98.5% due to the strong performance last year.

Finally, it was noted that the level of take up for direct debit payments had increased to 82% due to the energy rebate scheme.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION IN PRIVATE

FRP 22/7 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

The Chairman moved, it was seconded and

RESOLVED: That as public discussion would disclose exempt information, the following matters be considered in private.

PART 2 - PRIVATE

MATTERS FOR RECOMMENDATION TO THE CABINET

FRP 22/8 GIBSON BUILDING - HIGH LEVEL OPTIONS FOR LONG TERM OFFICER ACCOMMODATION

(Reason: LGA 1972 Sch 12A Paragraph 3 – Financial or business affairs of any particular person)

The report of the Director of Central Services and Deputy Chief Executive provided an update on progress being made with reviewing the Council's office accommodation requirements and presented high level options for consideration.

Members views were sought on where the Borough Council should have its main office, whether the co-location arrangement with Kent Police should continue and the approach to be adopted towards the removal of covenants on the Council's title.

There was in-depth discussion on where the main offices of the Borough Council should be located and whether there were any suitable alternative sites in the ownership of the Council that represented value for money, easy access for residents and provided appropriate facilities. On balance, the Committee were of the view that the main offices should continue to be located at Kings Hill on the grounds of reasonable transport links from the North and South of the Borough and its central location. It was also recognised that options around the current location had the potential to represent best value for money.

However, the Committee also expressed the view that other Members of the Council should have the opportunity to comment on any future location of the main offices. It was recommended that a short survey should be circulated to all councillors and responses reported to the next meeting of Cabinet.

Members were also of the view that co-locating with Kent Police had many benefits for residents and were supportive of the arrangement continuing if a suitable solution was identified.

Unfortunately, the opinion of Counsel in respect of the covenants was not available and the Committee requested that this matter be deferred until the advice had been received and circulated.

Finally, the Monitoring Officer committed to clarifying the position around access to the opinion of Counsel for those Members who also served as a County Councillor.

RECOMMENDED: That

- (1) the options set out in the report be noted;
- (2) the view of the Committee that the main offices of the Borough Council should continue to be located in Kings Hill be noted;
- (3) the view of the Committee that the co-location arrangement with Kent Police should continue, if a suitable solution was identified, be noted;
- (4) the view of the Committee in respect of the removal of covenants be deferred until legal advice had been received and circulated;
- (5) Officers be asked to carry out further investigation into the feasibility of Option 4 (as detailed in the report) including negotiating a settlement with Kent County Council on the alteration/removal of the covenants (subject to Member approval);
- (6) a short survey be circulated to all Councillors seeking their views as to where the main office building should be located and responses presented to Cabinet in due course;
- (7) a further progress report be brought back to the Finance, Regeneration and Property Scrutiny Select Committee in due course.

***Referred to Cabinet**

The meeting ended at 9.30 pm