

**Item CB 16/60 referred from extraordinary Cabinet minutes of 28 July 2016**

**CB 16/60 CONSULTATIONS: FAIRER CHARGING IN TONBRIDGE AND MALLING; AND CESSATION OF COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME GRANT TO PARISH COUNCILS**

The report of the Management Team gave details of the responses received in respect of the two consultations launched on 9 May 2016 for a six week period (Decision No D160037CAB). One consultation was with parish councils regarding the potential cessation of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) grant arrangements from 2017/18. The other involved the wider public in relation to “Fairer Charging”, the potential introduction of a Special Expenses Scheme in place of the (section 136) Financial Arrangements with Parish Councils Scheme, also with effect from 2017/18. The Director of Finance and Transformation introduced the report and made a presentation on the responses to each consultation and the suggested way forward.

It was noted in respect of the CTRS consultation that responses were limited in number and were generally accepting of the Borough Council’s financial position and the “discretionary” nature of the grants currently awarded. It was therefore recommended that such grants be withdrawn from April 2017, achieving a saving of £175,000.

Detailed consideration was given to the issues emerging from the Fairer Charging/ Local Charge consultation, the majority of parish councils supporting the approach, albeit with caveats, while the responses from residents were mixed with those from Tonbridge generally not in favour and those from parished areas generally supportive. Members debated the potential service areas to be included in any Special Expenses Scheme in the light of the responses, attention being drawn to a detailed representation received in respect of Tonbridge cemetery, the position concerning open churchyards and a suggested review of Christmas lighting grants by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It was noted that if the Council were to adopt a Special Expenses Scheme, savings of around £226,000 per annum could be achieved, subject to a decision on future support for open churchyards.

The report highlighted the outcome of an Equality Impact Assessment of both cessation of CTRS grants to parish councils and the implementation of a Special Expenses Scheme which indicated that there were no disproportionate effects needing to be addressed.

Finally, the Cabinet recorded thanks to the Director of Finance and Transformation and the cross-service officer team involved in preparation for and analysis of responses to the consultations.

**RECOMMENDED:** That

- (1) the responses received in respect of the consultation with parish councils regarding the cessation of CTRS grants and any potential equality impacts be noted and the grants be withdrawn from 1 April 2017 and parish councils notified accordingly;

- (2) the responses received in respect of the consultation regarding the potential introduction of Special Expenses and any potential equality impacts be noted and the introduction of such a Scheme from 1 April 2017 be commended to the Council;
- (3) on the basis that a Special Expenses Scheme is to be introduced, the following concurrent services should be incorporated within the Scheme:-
- Closed churchyards
  - Open spaces, parks and play areas maintained by TMBC in parished areas; excluding Leybourne Lakes Country Park (strategic site)
  - Open spaces, play areas, parks and sportsgrounds in Tonbridge; excluding Castle Grounds and Haysden Country Park (strategic sites)
  - Support given to Local Events
  - Allotments;
- and, in accordance with the agreed project timetable, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee review the Scheme, once it is drawn up, at its next meeting;
- (4) information be sought from the church authorities on the capacity status of open churchyards throughout the Borough to enable further consideration of whether grants (under section 214 of the Local Government Act 1972) should continue to be offered to support their maintenance in furtherance of the previous policy in this regard;
- (5) a review be undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee into the future funding of Christmas Lighting and High Street flower displays in readiness for 2017/18; and
- (6) on the basis that a Special Expenses Scheme is to be introduced, the Scheme of Financial Arrangements cease with effect from 1 April 2017 and parish councils be notified accordingly.

**\*Referred to Council**