

## **CABINET**

**19 JANUARY 2015**

Present: Mayor (Chair)

Councillors D Scudder, K Crout, S Johnson, I Sharpe and  
M Watkin

Also present: Councillors N Bell and A Khan

Officers: Managing Director  
Shared Director of Finance  
Head of Community and Customer Services  
Head of Corporate and Client Services  
Environmental Services Client Manager (Parks and Streets)  
Legal and Democratic Section Head  
Housing Project Manager  
Democratic Services Manager

44 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

No apologies were received

45 **DISCLOSURE OF INTEREST (IF ANY)**

There were no disclosures of interest.

46 **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 December 2014 were submitted and signed.

47 **CONDUCT OF MEETING**

Councillor Bell spoke on behalf of the Labour Group at this meeting. Councillor Khan attended as Chair of the Budget Panel.

The Cabinet agreed some changes to the order of the agenda items.

48 **WIFI CONNECTIVITY PROJECT - DELEGATION OF AUTHORITY TO PORTFOLIO HOLDER**

Following a recommendation by Cabinet on 1<sup>st</sup> December to proceed to procurement of a wireless concession contract it was originally proposed that the project be brought back to Cabinet for final approval following the procurement phase but before any contract was awarded. Due to conflicting timescales it was

now proposed to delegate the authority to the Portfolio Holder to make the decision to award the contract.

Councillor Sharpe commented that the proposal would need delegated authority to avoid any delays. The WiFi would help the town to support businesses and maintain competitiveness.

RESOLVED:

that the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Development be the delegated authority to award the contract.

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### **ADOPTION OF A FINAL SPORTS FACILITIES STRATEGY FOR WATFORD FOR 2015-2025**

A report was received from the Environmental Services Client Manager (Parks and Streets) which presented the final version of a Sports Facilities Strategy as well as a number of strategic goals and an action plan. Consultation had been carried out internally and externally and Cabinet was asked to approve the new 10 year strategy.

Councillor Scudder introduced the Sports Strategy which identified gaps in existing provision and the need for strategic development. The action plan would be implemented over the next 10 years. Consultation had taken place using three strands: face to face with groups and clubs during an event at Watford Football Club, an online survey and through individual feedback. At the consultation the strategy was well received, there was good feedback which had been incorporated into the strategy.

The Environmental Services Client Manager (Parks and Streets) explained that a key message from the strategy was 'surviving and thriving'. Whilst numbers of people playing football and the quantity of teams had decreased, rugby and hockey were strong in the town. The bowls clubs were also doing reasonably well. There was a positive reaction during the consultation and those who attended the meeting welcomed the Council's strategic approach.

The Head of Corporate Strategy and Client Services commented that the strategy would include collaborative work with stakeholders to attract investment into the town. The strategy would be a long term plan for sports facilities.

The Chair drew attention to the facilities in the proposed strategic sports sites. As an example, the Chair noted the recent relocation of the boxing club which she considered fitted the new approach; she commended Veolia's work to provide new facilities. The Council needed to be strategic about residents' participation in sport and how to encourage more people to be active.

Following questions from the Chair, the Environmental Services Client Manager (Parks and Streets) commented that traditional timings for playing football were difficult for people's changing leisure patterns. They would also be looking at emerging sports such as BMX.

The Chair described working with other Councils in order to deliver the strategy, for example the Watford Fencing Club which was located in Three Rivers district. The action plan needed to have annual activities and timescales which could be monitored.

Councillor Bell welcomed the review and commented on how sports sites could be protected through planning. He welcomed the hubs and co-operation across Boroughs, Hertfordshire County Council and with private companies.

Councillor Crout said that it came out through the consultation event that there could be a link between the number of people not playing sport and the amount of live sport on television and increased demands on family life. The consultation raised the issue of greater use of school facilities particularly during the week in the evening. The majority of people at the consultation welcomed the proposed hubs but there was some concern that the hubs could be dominated by one group. Councillor Crout commented that there needed to be continued engagement on a regular basis to encourage co-operation between groups.

The Environmental Services Client Manager (Parks and Streets) responded that some schools did engage with regards to use of their facilities, however, others have lost their own facilities and there were licensed agreements for them to use the Council owned pitches, With regards to the hubs, clubs wished to retain their own identities, which the Council understood and would not look to dilute through use of the hubs. In addition to the hubs there were other satellite sites for example at Leggatts field which also needed investment for new changing facilities etc.

The Chair thanked the Environmental Services Client Manager (Parks and Streets), Head of Corporate and Client Services and their team for the Sports Strategy.

## RESOLVED

That Cabinet:

- Approves the Final Sports Facilities Strategy
- Receives regular updates on the Sports Facilities Strategy progress and Action Plan.

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## **PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR DISCHARGE POLICY**

A report was received from the Housing Project Manager which put forward a draft Private Rented Sector Discharge Policy which set out how the Council would discharge its homelessness duty to the eligible Watford residents into the private sector. The draft policy was drawn up as a result of changes brought in by the Localism Act which meant that the Council was now empowered to discharge its homelessness duty and could set local criteria regarding this.

Councillor Johnson stated that the availability of social housing was very limited. There was now a new housing nomination policy which helped the Council to use a scarce resource in the best way possible. The housing team were currently trying to discharge people from temporary accommodation, but those being discharged did not have to take the properties being offered even though they were of a good standard.

The Chair commented that a change in government legislation had allowed the Council to discharge people to the private sector so they did not remain in temporary accommodation.

The Head of Community and Customer Services described how the policy created more opportunities to give people a home. It would also encourage more landlords to come forward as they knew that their properties would not remain void.

The Chair explained that building new social housing relied upon the planning system and developments which were larger than 10 new properties. The larger schemes, such as the Health Campus, were important as they were an opportunity to build greater numbers of social housing. There had been a gradual decline in social housing along with a decline in house building. Although it was sometimes difficult for residents to accept new housing developments, there was still a need for 1-2 bedroom properties.

Councillor Bell commented on the quality of properties and that Landlords had to meet a statutory policy to be considered suitable. Applicants were not expected to turn down properties as checks were carried out; he questioned whether these checks would always be followed up.

The Head of Community and Customers Services responded that landlords would have to satisfy a set criteria. Environmental Health worked with and checked on a large number of properties.

The Chair commented that the Council was rigorous about who was offered private rented accommodation. The private rented sector was buoyant because young professionals were unable to get on the property ladder. Once in social housing, people were unlikely to move which contributed to the small number of properties available. This strategy was part of the solution to the problem of lack of social housing and people in temporary accommodation but it would not be a solution for everyone. It would be necessary to review what happened when the policy was implemented.

Councillor Scudder echoed comments that quality was important and there was a strict criteria for landlords. However, as landlords wanted to have tenants in their properties it was also an incentive to maintain the standards.

RESOLVED

That Cabinet:

- Approves the Private Rented Sector Discharge Policy

- While noting the target approval date of 19<sup>th</sup> January 2015, Cabinet delegated authority for agreeing the detailed implementation plan and precise implementation date to the Head of Community and Customer Services in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing.
- Notes that minor changes to the Policy may be deemed necessary during implementation and that the Council's constitution delegates authority for these to be made by the Head of Community and Customer Services in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing.

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## **HOUSING STORAGE POLICY**

A report by the Housing Project Manager was presented to Cabinet and set out how the Council would deliver this function to the eligible homeless applicants. The policy was in line with 1996 Housing Act which required local authorities to take reasonable steps to prevent the loss of or damage to any personal property of the applicant where no other suitable arrangements had been made.

Councillor Johnson introduced the policy and described how it would support people and make them aware of the service available.

In response to a question from Councillor Scudder the Housing Project Manager commented that if someone was intentionally homeless the Council would still offer support and they would receive temporary accommodation. When a person moved on from temporary accommodation they would be expected to take their belongings with them. If items were put into storage this incurred a charge. Therefore, this policy worked with the Private Sector Discharge Policy, already discussed, as the earlier someone moved out of temporary accommodation the earlier their items could come out of storage.

Councillor Sharpe commented that Members, through casework, came into contact with constituents who had become homeless and who had the potential not just to lose their home but also their belongings. It was important to have an effective service and that storage costs were recovered once people were in a better situation. For the residents it would be preferable to pay a small amount for storage rather than having to replace their belongings.

The Chair confirmed that there was budget available for the service.

### **RESOLVED**

That Cabinet:

- Approves the Storage Policy
- While noting the target approval date of 19<sup>th</sup> January 2015, Cabinet delegated authority for agreeing the implementation and precise implementation date to the Head of Community and Customer Services in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing.
- Notes that minor changes to the Policy may be deemed necessary during implementation and that the Council's constitution delegated authority for these to be made by the Head of Community and Customer Services in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing.

## **FINANCIAL PLANNING - DRAFT REVENUE AND CAPITAL ESTIMATES 2015-18 AND THE TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2015-18**

A report was received from the Director of Finance Shared Services to enable Cabinet to consider service level expenditure, funding and council tax levels for the medium term 2015/16 to 2018/19 including consideration of the use of reserves and balances. This budget was a component part of the 2015/16 Council Tax calculations. The report included advice from the Director of Finance on the adequacy of general reserves and balances in the context of the three year planning horizon 2015-18 and set out:

- the draft revenue estimates for the period 2015-18, including a revised budget for 2014/15
- the draft capital programme for the period 2015-18
- the Treasury Management strategy 2015-18

The report had also been considered by Budget Panel at its meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> January and the minutes were circulated at the meeting.

The Chair introduced Councillor Khan, Chair of Budget Panel, and welcomed the Panel's role in the budget process to ensure that the budget was sustainable, prudent and well managed.

Councillor Khan described the Budget Panels' discussions over the last two meetings regarding reported over and under spends in the budget. The Panel had questioned these and were satisfied with the answers received. The Panel had also interrogated the reasons behind fluctuations in business rates and rental income. The Panel had recommended a freeze for charges for graffiti removal from private properties pending a review of the service.

The Chair asked whether Councillors understood the changes regarding business rates. The Director of Shared Services Finance had given a presentation on the topic. The Council still only received a small percentage of business rates. Previously there had been no incentive for Council to collect business rates, however, this had now been introduced.

The Director of Shared Services Finance responded that from a financial point of view the situation was becoming clearer but there were still some uncertainties nationally. Watford was in a 'safety net' position due to the rateable values decreasing as a result of a revaluation. If the Council wished to influence the position then it needed to bring in new business.

Councillor Khan commented that at previous Budget Panel meetings there was an ethos of looking at supporting economic growth and regeneration. The Panel had received a briefing from the Economic Development Manager. The Panel had also looked at the New Homes Bonus for the period until 2017/18.

The Director of Shared Services Finance responded that most Councils were making the assumption that the New Homes Bonus would be changed.

The Chair said that on paper it appeared that the Council received a good amount of funds through the New Homes Bonus but there were also funds taken away through different mechanisms so the position of the Council remained unchanged. The Chair welcomed Budget Panel's entrepreneurial approach. The less dependant the Council could be on government grant, the better and it enabled the funds to go to places where it was needed most.

The Chair continued, in response to a statement from Councillor Khan regarding the property review, that Lambert Smith Hampton had completed a review of the Council's property. The Council had introduced a market rate for its properties and then allowed third sector groups to apply for grants towards their rent, therefore making funding transparent. Hard decisions had to be made, for example charging for car parking on the Watford Business Park, but it meant that significant cuts to Council services had been avoided. The Chair questioned why private property graffiti removal charges should be frozen over other charges made by the Council. Many Councils do not offer the service.

Councillor Watkin commented that there was expected to be an underspend which would be put into the Council's reserves. There had been some growth within the budget and some loss of income. However, planning applications were increasing which contributed to a growth in revenue. There had also been a saving of just under £900k in overheads and costs which would not affect Council services. There was no need to increase Council Tax. The overall budget would decrease as the Council moved towards self-sustainable funding, over four years there would be a reduction in the reserves of £1million.

In response to a comment on the Council's car parks the Chair remarked that there would be investment in the car parks from an external partner. Councillor Scudder commented that the car parks were already outsourced but would now be managed by a different company. The Chair continued that the Council was separating satellite car parks from shopper car parks as keeping them all the same was not meeting the needs of the town.

There were two changes to the budget proposed: using a saving of £1,650 from Democratic Services Member training budget for tea and coffee refreshments for Members at meetings.

The second change was to the Capital programme, adding a one-off allocation of £250,000 to support match-funded bids for the refurbishment of community centres.

In accordance with the Local Authorities (Standing Orders) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2014, a recorded vote was taken.

Those voting in favour of the resolutions:

Councillors Crout, Johnson, Scudder, Sharpe, Thornhill and Watkin

The resolutions, as set out in the report, were CARRIED.

RESOLVED:

That Cabinet:

- Resolves in accordance with the *Local Authorities (Calculation of Tax Base) Regulations 1992*, the amount calculated by Watford Borough Council as its Council Tax Base for the year 2015/16 is 30,804.58 as outlined in paragraph 7.5 and summarised at Appendix 7.
- Approves the estimate of surplus and deficit position on the Collection Fund.
- Approves the 2015/16 savings of £869,650 as detailed at Appendix 1.
- Approves the 2015/16 growth of £581,260 and as detailed at Appendix 2A, 2B and 2C.
- Approves the proposed fees and charges for 2015/16, which are included in the base estimates and detailed at Appendix 4.
- Approves all the assumptions made within the Medium Term Financial Strategy at Appendix 5 which includes a council tax freeze for 2015/16.

**That Council be recommended to approve:**

- The General Fund Budget Requirement (Net Expenditure) (before use of grants and reserves) as outlined at paragraph 7.1 and detailed at Appendix 5 as follows:
  - Revised budget for 2014/15 as £13,990,215
  - Base budget for 2015/16 as £15,174,850.
- The Capital Programme as set out at Appendix 10.
- The financial risks set out in Appendix 9.
- The current Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme continues for financial year 2015/16 (paragraph 7.6.5 refers).
- The use of reserves and balances as identified in paragraph 7.8
- The Treasury Management Strategy for 2015-18 as set out in Appendix 11.
- That the Portfolio Holder, in consultation with the Director of Finance, is given the delegated authority to approve any variation to the Treasury Management Strategy during the year which may be brought about by

investigating the opportunity to invest for greater than 1 year and to invest in other investment instruments i.e Government bonds, Gilts and property with a view of maximising the Councils returns without significantly increasing risk.

- To delegate to the Director of Finance and Portfolio Holder the ability to amend the budget figures in accordance with decisions taken at the Cabinet meeting and any minor variations that may occur before the Council meeting on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2015.

Mayor

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm  
and finished at 8.00 pm