

## **CABINET**

**9 MARCH 2015**

Present: Mayor (Chair)  
Councillors D Scudder, K Crout, S Johnson, I Sharpe and M Watkin

Also present: Councillor N Bell  
Councillor K Collett (Chair of Controlled Parking Zones Policies Task Group)

Officers: Managing Director  
Head of Regeneration and Development  
Head of Revenues and Benefits  
Legal and Democratic Section Head  
Democratic Services Manager

61 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

No apologies were received

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

There were no disclosures of interest.

63 **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 February 2015 were submitted and signed.

64 **CONDUCT OF MEETING**

Councillor Bell spoke on behalf of the Labour Group at this meeting.

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

65 **DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS (DHP) FOR HOUSING BENEFIT**

A report of the Head of Revenues and Benefits was received. The government provides funding, called Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) on an annual basis to councils to help residents meet their rent liability where housing benefit does not cover the rental liability in full. The DHP was to provide short term financial support to residents who may have been

impacted by welfare reforms, including the 'benefit cap' and the 'spare room subsidy.'

The government had allocated a subsidy to Watford Borough Council for 2015/16 which showed a reduction of 31% from £208,470 to £143,518 despite the Council forecasting 100% spend of this year's allocation.

Councillor Watkin introduced the report and explained that the payments were made to people who were struggling. The Council's DHP policy set out a criteria for assessment which was very clear for claimants and they would know they are treated fairly. Under the policy a person can request a review by a senior officer.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits stated that a cut in the budget from Central Government had been anticipated but the size of the reduction had been greater than expected.

Councillor Bell commented that the key points of the policy were the right of appeal and the clear criteria which was set out. This meant the funding would be available for the most vulnerable who could apply.

The Chair commented that the chart on page 18 of the report (refusal reasons) demonstrated that there was genuine need in the town which the Council was meeting. It was noted that the largest number of people had their applications refused when they did not respond to requests for more information regarding their claim. With regards to the second largest group, it was found that they could afford their gap in payment with a change in lifestyle. The Chair stated that, as Councillors, they should be concerned that the most needy should benefit.

Following a question by the Mayor, the Head of Revenues and Benefits responded regarding people who rely on the DHP rather than it being a short term measure. Two years ago the Council became more rigorous in making people review their circumstances. A year ago this was further tightened by asking people who were over accommodated to move to smaller properties. There still remained a group of people who have not applied for work or downsized their property. Reviews of circumstances would need to be further toughened as a result of the decreased budget.

Councillor Johnson agreed that it was a short term payment and there was a need to address the group who relied on the payment and to help them move on.

The Chair commented that it was important to be realistic and responsible to tax payers. The number of people affected was 200.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits responded to a question from the Chair and informed that Watford had the second highest number of people in Hertfordshire who were affected by the benefit cap.

**ACTION:** Head of Revenues and Benefits to circulate to Cabinet members the comparison chart from Department of Work and Pensions.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits commented that although the rate of housing allowance had increased it was also possible that landlords would also increase their rents.

The Chair concluded that there was a reduced budget available and the Council must ensure it was used for the most vulnerable and also to have a right of appeal.

**RESOLVED:**

That Cabinet:

- Approves the revised DHP policy attached to the report
- Agrees that the revised policy is effective for all DHP claims effective from 01/04/15

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### **DISCRETIONARY AND HARDSHIP RATE RELIEF POLICIES FOR BUSINESS RATES (NNDR)**

A report was presented by the Head of Revenues and Benefits. Rate relief for Business Rates, also known as National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR) should be reviewed periodically depending on the length of the award. Businesses must be given a year's notice of any changes to a scheme, for the level of rate relief that could be claimed. Therefore in order to review rate relief notice must be given by 31/03/2015 for any changes that would come into effect from 01/04/2016.

The government had reduced the amount of grant to Councils outside London by 50%.

Councillor Watkin introduced the report and described how there were two elements: discretionary relief and a hardship category. Currently charities and sports organisations received 80% discretionary relief, if an additional amount was required then the government covered 75% of the discretionary costs and the Council 25%. That split is now 50% each, therefore requiring the council to meet the extra burden.

Councillor Watkin continued that the hardship category was about supporting small local firms who were struggling. The loss of these firms could cause local hardship to people working for the business and using its services. Therefore the business could apply for a decrease in rates to help their situation; this would be for one year only with no continuation.

The Head of Revenue and Benefits gave some examples of companies who could be assisted as it was deemed that they provided some local or community value. Previously, businesses would come forward under the discretionary rate system. Now the hardship category had been introduced

which would be for businesses not charities or sports clubs. Local scout and guide groups would not be affected by the change. It would affect multinationals who had large head offices and did not provide a direct link and benefits to the local community.

Following a question by Councillor Bell the Head of Revenue and Benefits gave examples of the type of businesses which would not be able to apply for hardship relief and explained that those businesses who were currently in receipt of discretionary relief would have to provide evidence of their social benefit in order to continue to receive the payment in the future.

RESOLVED

That Cabinet approves:

- A revised version of the Discretionary Rates Policy, that will come into force from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2016.
- A formal Hardship Rates Relief Policy, that will come into force from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2016.

67

## **PROPERTY REVIEW**

Cabinet received a report of Head of Regeneration and Development. In 2014, Watford Borough Council undertook to commission a Strategic Review of its property portfolio and property function. This was carried out by Lambert Smith Hampton (LSH) and looked at how the Council's property portfolio and investment assets were managed.

Councillor Sharpe explained that the review was a wide ranging piece of work which was designed to improve the property portfolio and function. The report recommended establishing a Property Improvement Board which would be a forum for making decisions. It was unlikely that central government funding to Councils would be increased so it would be important to be bolder with decisions relating to property than in the past. The Property Improvement Board would be able to make decisions quickly in order to be able to respond to the market.

The Head of Regeneration and Development made an amendment to the resolution:

That 2.1 be amended to read:

Cabinet is asked to approve the establishment of a Property Investment Board chaired by the Portfolio Holder with responsibility for property as set out in paragraphs 3.5 to 3.12

The Head of Regeneration and Development stated that more discussion would be needed regarding delegated powers and thresholds. If needed the constitution would be amended through discussion at Constitution Working Party then agreement at Full Council in July.

The Chair commented that it was imperative the Council became less dependent on central government. The work on the Council's property portfolio may lead to more funds available to spend in the town. It was important to give property a high profile within the organisation. Some decisions would be quite challenging. They would, however, be made openly and be available to scrutiny and subject to call-in.

Councillor Bell commented that more resources should be used on hostels. He supported the proposal but there was further work to be done.

The Chair stated that the proposal was to empower the Property Improvement Board but the final decision would still rest with the executive. The Managing Director responded that this was correct under the current regulations but that the Department for Communities and Local Government was consulting on the proposal to refer disposal of property assets to Full Council if their value was over £500,000.

RESOLVED

That Cabinet:

- approves the establishment of a Property Investment Board chaired by the Portfolio Holder with responsibility for property as set out in paragraphs 3.5 to 3.12
- commented on the wider LSH recommendations and agrees the direction of travel and notes that further reports will be made to Cabinet, Scrutiny and the Major Projects Board as appropriate as implementation plans are developed.

68 **EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

RESOLVED

that, under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business as it is likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, that if members of the public were present during consideration of the item there would be disclosure to them of exempt information as defined in Section 100(1) Schedule 12A of the Act for the reasons stated in the report.

69 **PROPERTY REVIEW - PART B APPENDIX**

The Part B appendix was discussed.

70 **PART A CONTROLLED PARKING ZONES POLICIES**

This item was deferred from the last Cabinet meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> February 2015. The Chair had been able to discuss some issues raised by the report with Councillors. The Chair thanked the Task Group for their work.

## RESOLVED

That Cabinet agrees:

### Vehicle Length Limits

The 5.25m length limit to be retained for all residential permits. *(For further details see page 9 of the Task Group's report)*

To extend the length limit for business permits (in CPZs) to 6.0m. *(For further details see page 9 of the Task group's report)*

### Business Permits

Criteria to be revisited. *(For further details see page 9 of the Task Group's report)*

Vehicles should be registered to the company address (i.e. Head office) but not necessarily at the CPZ address – not to an individual at a residential address. *(For further details see page 9 of the Task Group's report)*

Vehicles must realistically be usable for the stated operation. *(For further details see page 9 of the Task Group's report)*

Vehicles to be used during the day rather than parked throughout entire business hours. *(For further details see page 9 of the Task Group's report)*

### Blue Badge Drivers

Free permits be retained for drivers who hold a Blue Badge. *(For further details see page 10 of the Task Group's report)*

Extend free permit issue to cover parents caring for disabled children under 16 years old who hold a blue badge. *(For further details see page 10 of the Task Group's report)*

### One Permit per Person

The current Rule should remain: up to two permits to be available to each household but only one permit per person. *(For further details see page 10 of the Task Group's report)*

### Funerals

The policy to remain unchanged. *(For further details see page 10 of the Task Group's report)*

### Visitor Voucher Abuse

Amendment to the Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) to allow for the revocation of vouchers when they are abused and confirm that all minutes on Visitor Vouchers must be scratched, including zero. *(For further details see page 11 of the Task Group's report)*

### Doctor and Health Visitor (DHV) Permits

The price of DHV permits to be: £25 for the first five permits for any one organisation and subsequent permits to be priced at £55 each. Charges to be reflective of the residents' pricing structure. A formal criterion to be created and

a clause inserted in the TRO to reflect this. *(For further details see page 11 of the Task Group's report)*

All current DHV permits to be revoked and reissued to applicants under the new criteria and pricing structure. *(For further details see page 11 of the Task Group's report)*

#### Staff Permits

A formal criteria for use to be created and a suitable clause inserted in the TRO to reflect this. *(For further details see page 11 of the Task Group's report)*

#### Late Night Enforcement (Residential Roads)

To continue with the current arrangements and to be reactive to specific yellow line complaints in circumstances where safety or access concerns may exist. *(For further details see page 12 of the Task Group's report)*

#### Period of Residency (Vehicle Ownership)

Proof of residency to be produced for each renewal of permit. *(For further details see page 12 of the Task Group's report)*

The requirement for a V5 or insurance document to be produced each year should be removed if the renewal relates to the same vehicle. *(For further details see page 12 of the Task Group's report)*

#### Refunds

That a standard administration fee of £10 is deducted from the refund due on each permit and a pro-rata refund for the remaining months is provided by BACS upon application. This rule to apply only to those permits with more than three months remaining. *(For further details see page 12 of the Task Group's report)*

#### Driveway CPZ parking by permit holders

A suitable clause to be written into the TRO in order that persistent instances of abuse can be dealt with. *(For further details see page 13 of the Task Group's report)*

#### Residents' Permits – minimum tenancy period

To formalise the minimum six months tenancy period to qualify for a 12 month permit. All other residents remain entitled to visitor vouchers. *(For further details see page 13 of the Task Group's report)*

Mayor

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm  
and finished at 7.35 pm