

MINUTE
of
CABINET

Minute of meeting held at 10.00am in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Giffnock on 22 February 2024.

Present:

Councillor Owen O'Donnell (Leader) Councillor Danny Devlin
Councillor Andrew Anderson (Vice Chair)

Councillor O'Donnell, Leader, in the Chair

Attending:

Steven Quinn, Chief Executive; Caitriona McAuley, Director of Environment; Louise Pringle, Director of Business Operations and Partnerships; Margaret McCrossan, Head of Accountancy (Chief Financial Officer); Phil Daws, Head of Environment (Strategic Services); Alison Ballingall, Senior Revenues Manager; Suzanne Conlin, Senior Housing Manager; Erica Roche, Change and Governance Manager; John Burke, Democratic Services Officer; and Lesleyann Burns, Democratic Services Assistant.

Apology:

Councillor Katie Pragnell

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

743. There were no declarations of interest intimated.

DEBT MANAGEMENT FOR COUNCIL TAX, NON DOMESTIC RATES, SUNDRY DEBT INCOME AND HOUSING BENEFIT OVERPAYMENTS AND EMPTY PROPERTY RELIEF OF NON DOMESTIC RATES

744. The Cabinet considered a report by the Director of Business Operations and Partnerships which sought approval to write-off as irrecoverable sums associated with Council Tax, Non Domestic Rates, sundry debt income and Housing Benefit overpayments. The debts recommended for write-off had previously been included in bad debt provision and, therefore, the write-off had no net impact on the revenue accounts of the Council

The Senior Revenues Manager advised that every effort had been made to recover these sums and the decision to seek write-off was not taken lightly or without due cause. Should any future avenue become available by which to recover those monies, any decision taken by Cabinet would not prevent such opportunities being pursued, hence the recommendation of write-offs "up to" said amounts.

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The Senior Revenues Manager outlined the proposed write-off sums and advised that these were in accordance with the Council's Debt Recovery Policy.

The Senior Revenues Manager also explained that Empty Property Relief had been devolved from Scottish Government to local authorities on 1 April 2023, with the policy for dealing with this agreed by Cabinet at its meeting on 23 March 2023 (Page 447, Item 380 refers). It was proposed that the policy continue for the coming year, for the reasons set out in the report.

In responding to members questions, the Senior Revenues Manager confirmed that the write-offs were taken into account in budget planning and would not affect services and plans for the future. She also confirmed that a report would come to Cabinet in the future on the limit for sums being written off, which currently stood at £20.

The Cabinet:-

- (a) approved the write-off of the following sums, totalling up to £594,510.43 without prejudice to subsequent recovery procedure:
 - Council Tax arrears totalling up to £356,800.39
 - Non Domestic rates arrears totalling up to £129,670.68
 - Sundry debt income totalling up to £37,603.34
 - Housing Benefit Overpayments totalling up to £70,436.02;
- (b) noted that write-off of those sums would have no net impact on the Council's accounts as provision had been made for the debt, in full, in previous years;
- (c) noted that Water and Sewerage charges, totalling up to £122,703.32 were also being written off in discussion with Scottish Water; and
- (d) approved the continuation of the current policy for Empty Property Relief for Non Domestic Rate properties;
- (e) noted that a report would be submitted to a future meeting of Cabinet relating to the outcome of a review of the write-off limit amount.

WRITE-OFF OF IRRECOVERABLE FORMER TENANT RENTS AND COURT EXPENSES

745. The Cabinet considered a report by the Director of Environment seeking approval to write-off former tenant rent and court expenses debt that could not be recovered through the debt collection process.

The proposed write-off sums had previously been included in bad debt provision. Therefore, the write-off had no net impact on the revenue accounts of the Council. It was acknowledged that those debts could be pursued and recovered in future if additional information and opportunities arose.

In response to members' questions, the Head of Environment (Strategic Services) confirmed that the department were sensitive in respect of each individual's circumstances in terms of how debts were pursued. It was also confirmed by the Senior Housing Manager that while some grant funding was received from the Scottish Government to assist with temporary accommodation for homeless cases, this did not cover the full cost of provision.

The Cabinet:-

- (a) approved the write-off sum up to the value of £113,215.02 of former tenant irrecoverable rents and court expenses whilst acknowledging those could be pursued and recovered in future should additional information and opportunities arise;
- (b) noted that £55,412.04 of that amount was written off against the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and the remaining £57,802.98 was written off against the non HRA as it was accrued by homeless households placed in temporary accommodation; and
- (c) noted that the write-off of those historic unrecoverable debts would have no net impact on the Council's accounts as provision had been made for the debt, in full, in previous years.

PUBLICATION OF GET TO ZERO ACTION PLAN

746. The Cabinet considered a report by the Director of Environment seeking approval to publish the Council's Get to Zero Action Plan.

The Get to Zero Action Plan (GTZAP) detailed how the Council proposed to fulfil its obligation to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2045, for both direct (gas/water/fuel) and indirect (electricity) emissions. A draft of GTZAP had been approved to be submitted for public consultation at its meeting on 11 May 2023 (Page 511, Item 447 refers). Actions that had been undertaken during the consultation process were outlined in the report.

The key points raised in the public consultation were summarised in the report, and the changes from the previous draft outlined, with the amended document attached as Appendix 1 to the report.

The Cabinet approved the publication of the Get to Zero Action Plan, noting the summary of the public consultation responses and headline actions.

DRAFT LOCAL HEAT AND ENERGY EFFICIENCY STRATEGY

747. The Cabinet considered a report by the Director of Environment seeking approval to carry out a public consultation on the draft Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy (LHEES).

The Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategies (Scotland) Order 2022 required each local authority to produce LHEES and accompanying delivery plans every five years. LHEES was a long term plan for the entire local authority area to improve energy efficiency and transition away from burning fossil fuels for heating, which could directly contribute to fulfilling the Council's climate change duties.

The Scottish Government had provided £75,000 per annum until 2027/28 to allow the Council to complete LHEES and begin implementing the related Delivery Plan. This funding had been used to recruit a LHEES Officer, who had been in post since January 2023 and working to prepare the draft document.

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The draft LHEES was attached as Appendix 1 to the report and the key areas of the document were summarised in the report. It was proposed that it be made available for a period of 6 weeks to the public and key stakeholders, detailed in the report.

There was discussion around the difficulties in getting private property owners to participate in schemes to improve insulation and energy efficiency, and also some discussion around the variety of heating options, as well as heat pumps, that were available and the complicated and evolving landscape of sustainable solutions for individuals and the Council to consider.

The Change and Governance Manager also confirmed that it was intended to report back on the outcome of the consultation and subsequent changes made before the summer recess, if possible.

The Cabinet:

- (a) noted the content of the draft Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy attached as Appendix 1 to the report; and
- (b) approved the publication of the draft Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy for consultation with the public and key stakeholders until early April 2024.

NEC HOUSING – PROPOSED VARIATION OF CONTRACT

748. The Cabinet considered a report by the Director of Environment seeking approval to apply a variation to the replacement Housing Services IT contract with NEC Software Solutions UK Limited to extend supplier project management time to complete the project.

East Renfrewshire Council had approved the award of a contract to NEC Software Solutions UK Limited (NEC) to replace the Open Housing Management System (OHMS) in 2019. This new system would support all key service areas such as allocations, homelessness, estate management and repair requests.

The report outlined the phasing of the delivery of the new system, which had launched in April 2023, providing a fully digital and efficient housing application. It was explained that the contract was initially awarded for £565,740. However, a paper was subsequently approved by Cabinet on 15 September 2022 (Page 179, Item 131 refers) which raised the approved contract value to £626,940.

Internal resource constraints within Housing Services would mean that the second and third phases of project delivery would take longer than initially anticipated, with total additional accumulated costs for project management and out of hours support from the IT provider amounting to £76,371. In accordance with paragraph 14 of the Council's Standing Orders on Contracts, as this sum was greater than 10% of the original contract value, it required to be reported to Cabinet as soon as practicable, following approval by the Chief Officer – Legal and Procurement.

The Senior Housing Manager was heard in response to members' questions on the phasing of works and to provide assurances that further adjustments would not be required.

Thereafter, the Cabinet:

- (a) approved an immediate variation of £76,371 to be applied to the existing Housing Services IT contract with NEC Software Solutions UK Limited; and

- (b) delegated to the Chief Officer – Legal and Procurement, and the Chief Procurement Officer, authority to submit the necessary notice for publication in the UK e-notification service under Regulation 72(3) of the Public Contracts (Scotland) Act 2015.

CHAIR

