

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder's Meeting held on
Tuesday, 22 August 2017 at 6.00 p.m.

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Simon Edwards

Also in attendance:

Scrutiny and Overview Committee monitors
and Opposition spokesmen: Councillor Philippa Hart
Councillor John Williams

Officers:

Gemma Barron	Head of Sustainable Communities and Wellbeing
Katie Brown	Revenues Manager
Elizabeth Davy	Project Officer
Susan Gardner Craig	Head of People and Organisational Development
Dawn Graham	Benefits Manager
Daniel Hasler	Accountancy Assistant
Mike Hill	Health and Environmental Services Director
Siobhan Mellon	Development Officer
Wilma Wilkie	Democratic Services

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th July 2017 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder.

3. COMMUNITY CHEST: FUNDING APPLICATIONS

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder considered a report on recent applications for funding from the Community Chest grants scheme for 2017/18.

The Head of Sustainable Communities and Wellbeing reported that the total fund for 2017/18 had been £55,000, with £35,761.79 remaining for allocation. This included £30,000 which the Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder had agreed to vire from the Service Support Grant fund (minute 4 refers).

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder considered each application against the accepted criteria of the scheme.

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder **agreed** the following applications for Community Chest funding:

Name of Applicant	Project Description	Total Cost of Project (£)	Total Awarded (£)
Icklestock Festival	Start up costs for Icklestock Festival	£7,488.00	£425.00
South Cambs School Sport Partnership	Purchase of sports equipment	£999.99	£999.99
1 st Harston Scout Group	Purchase of a secure storage facility	£14,750.00	£1,000
Elsworth CE Primary School	Start up cost for a before & after school club	£4,000.00	£1,000
Cambridge Sport Lake Trust	Purchase of a 'stand up see saw' as part of the redevelopment of the play area at Milton Country Park	£898.18	£898.18
Cottenham Community Centre	Purchase of kitchen equipment as part of a wider upgrade	£75,000	£1,000
Dry Drayton Village Hall	Replacement LED lighting for the village hall	£1087.58	£500
Grantchester Village Hall Committee	Purchase of equipment for a computer club	£1001.39	£1,000

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder **deferred** the following application:

Name of Applicant	Project Description	Total Cost of Project (£)	Total Requested (£)	Reason for Deferral
SJ Judo Club	Purchase of judo & crash mats	£5,433.60	£1,000	More information required

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder **refused** the following applications:

Name of Applicant	Project Description	Total Cost of Project (£)	Total Requested (£)	Reason for Refusal
Over Parish Council	Purchase of signs	£1,118.90	£1,000	Did not meet criteria
West Wrating Parish Council	Repairs to the playground fencing	£1,408.60	£1,000	Did not meet criteria

4. GRANTS TO THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR: 6-MONTHLY UPDATE

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder considered a report on the delivery of grant programmes funded by the Council during the second six months of 2016/17.

It was noted that the closed Capital Grants programme retained a financial commitment to one project, the Hardwick Scout Group's new community building. The original grant agreement, dated 2nd November 2012, stated that the £30,000 grant should be claimed within 24 months of the date of the letter and that if it was not claimed within 3 years it may be withdrawn. On 21st June 2016 the Portfolio Holder agreed to keep the capital grant award relating to the Hardwick South and Guide Community Building 'live' for a further 12 months. No update had been received from this group since November 2016.

With reference to the open grant programmes, all recipients were being actively monitored. It was noted that all organisations receiving grant support had delivered the agreed outputs to time and to budget, achieving the objectives of the individual grant programmes. The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder asked to receive further information on how the Citizens Advice Bureaux were funded; in particular which other bodies provided grant funding to these organisations.

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder **agreed**:

- (a) To approve the continued provision of grant assistance to the current grant recipients supported through the Service Support Grant fund (subject to three year funding agreements) as agreed (Leader's Portfolio Holders Meetings, 16 December 2015 and 28 January 2016);
- (b) Not to extend the deadline for the Hardwick Scout Group to spend its allocated grant;
- (c) To vire the £30,000 released as a result of not proceeding with the Hardwick Scout Group grant from the Capital Grants Programme to the Community Chest fund; and
- (d) To note the delivery of all other grant programmes within the scope of this report, as currently delivered.

5. TREASURY MANAGEMENT REVIEW

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder received a report on the performance of the treasury management function. Regular monitoring was a requirement of the Council's Borrowing and Investment Strategy.

Risk was being managed by spreading investments across available counterparties. It was noted that the current counterparty investment limit for Ermine Street Housing was £35m. This had enabled the Council to receive higher levels of interest than were currently available from other approved parties, with minimal risk. At 31st March 2017 Ermine Street's Property portfolio and other non-current assets was valued at £24.7million, supported by loans from the Council of £24.7million. The investment limit of £35million was expected to be reached during Quarter 3 of 2017/18. If the limit was increased to £45 million, predicted cash flow could sustain lending to Ermine Street until Quarter 2 of 2018/19. At the 31 March 2017 level of investment balances, this would represent 60% of the total invested.

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder **agreed**:

- a) To note the performance of the treasury management function; and

- b) To increase the maximum investment limit with Ermine Street Housing from £35million to £45million while retaining maximum 60% proportion of portfolio.

6. **WRITE OFF - SCOTIA AID**

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder considered a request to write off a debt of £68,600.27 in respect of Scotia Aid - Sierra Leone SC041617. All reasonable efforts to recover the debt had been tried and had proved unsuccessful. There was no likelihood of the debt being recovered and it was considered appropriate to write it off at this time, in line with good accounting practice.

With reference to Business Rates avoidance, the Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder suggested that the Government should be asked to consider introducing legislation to limit this and he undertook to take this up with the Member of Parliament.

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder **agreed** to the write off the debt of the amount of £68,600.27 in respect of Scotia Aid - Sierra Leone SC041617.

7. **WRITE OFF - M PORTS LTD.**

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder considered a request to write off a debt of £40,381.51 in respect of M-Ports Ltd. (Dissolved). All reasonable efforts to recover the debt had been tried and had proved unsuccessful. There was no likelihood of the debt being recovered and it was considered appropriate to write it off at this time, in line with good accounting practice.

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder **agreed** to write off the debt of the amount of £40,381.51 owed by M-Ports Ltd (dissolved).

8. **NNDR DISCRETIONARY RELIEF POLICY**

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder considered a revised policy for the granting of Discretionary Rate Relief to Business properties. The aim of the policy was to ensure that billing and collection was carried out in accordance with the law and government requirements. It would benefit and support businesses who met the criteria, whilst minimising the risk of legal challenge.

As part of the Budget announced on 8th March 2017, the Chancellor announced that the Government would establish a £300m discretionary fund over four years from 2017/18, to support those businesses that faced the steepest increases in business rates bills as a result of re-evaluation. Billing authorities were expected to use their proportion of the funding to develop a new discretionary relief scheme to deliver targeted support to the most hard-pressed ratepayers.

It was noted that the scheme was based on the funding criteria set out by Government. This formed the basis for the award criteria, which was then modelled across the Council's own rating list in order to develop a scheme that provided real benefit to the ratepayers across the district. Based on the criteria it was estimated that approximately 300 ratepayers could benefit from Revaluation Relief, with an average award of £1200.00 in 2017/18. It was also proposed to create a separate fund of £50,000 to form a Revaluation Hardship Fund. This would be used to support ratepayers in the district that fell outside of the qualifying criteria but could demonstrate hardship caused by revaluation. It was acknowledged that whilst the scheme criteria and amounts that could be awarded were

set out within the policy, every case would be considered on its merits. Therefore there may be occasions when a decision was taken to award more than the guideline amount.

Any relief under this scheme would be granted for one year only. It was not yet clear if billing authorities would be able to flex award amounts across years. Once this was clarified, officers would consider how the scheme may operate in future years.

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder **approved** the "Discretionary Business Rate Relief Policy" as shown in Appendix A of the report.

9. LOCALISED COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder reviewed the operation of the 2016/2017 and 2017/18 Localised Council Tax Support Scheme (LCTS) and considered how it should be changed to take account of the impact of Universal Credit.

The current LCTS had been in operation since April 2013 and remained almost unchanged since implementation. The general principles of the scheme, based on a maximum of 91.5% LCTS for those who were not in protected groups, remained currently viable. It was proposed to continue the scheme with some minor technical changes to allow time to evaluate the impact of the full service roll out of Universal Credit (UC), which for the majority of South Cambridgeshire residents would begin in June 2018. The roll out of UC was likely to be unpredictable and the impact on all teams would be carefully monitored during 2018/19.

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder **agreed**:

- (a) To note the report; and
- (b) To consult on amending the current scheme with minor necessary technical changes which relate only to Universal Credit for operation in 2018/19.

10. REVENUES AND BENEFITS PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder **received and noted** a report on the current performance of the Revenues and Benefits Section.

It was noted that at the end of the first quarter of 2017/18, the Council Tax collection rate was 34.5%, against a target of 30.7%. Net payments collected totalled £36.8m, compared to £35.8m in 2016/17. The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder noted sustained performance levels and asked if it was appropriate to introduce a more challenging target. In response, the Housing Benefits Manager explained that the service faced a number of challenges and maintaining performance at this level would be challenging.

In response to a request from the Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder, the Housing Benefits Manager agreed that the collection analysis (Appendix 1) would include details of target collection rates.

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder congratulated the Revenues Manager and Benefits Manager for another excellent performance report.

11. SICKNESS ABSENCE

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder **received and noted** the quarterly monitoring report on sickness absence for the period 1st April 2017 to 30th June 2017.

The first quarter performance had shown a decrease on the previous quarter's figure. However, this still represented an increase compared to the same reporting period last year. It was however encouraging to see a reduction in absence levels or, maintenance of good attendance levels in all but one service area across the Council. The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder welcomed progress made.

A key area of concern was continued delays in the notification of absences and completion of return to work meetings. The report contained details of this at service level. The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder stressed the need to reinforce the requirement for service managers to be aware of their responsibilities for active attendance management in line with the Attendance Management policy. He indicated he would use the information on service level performance as a basis for discussion with portfolio holder colleagues.

12. RETENTION AND TURNOVER

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder **received and noted** a report analysing the turnover of staff between 1st April 2017 and 30th June 2017. The report emphasised that regular reporting of turnover was intended to highlight trends, inform recruitment decisions and where necessary, promote change within a team or service in order to achieve the Council's objectives.

13. WORK PROGRAMME

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder **noted** the work programme which identified items for discussion at future meetings. A report confirming proposed changes to the Localised Council Tax Support Scheme would need to be added to the agenda for the November meeting.

14. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting would take place at 6.00 p.m. on Tuesday 19th September 2017.

**The Meeting ended
at 8.05 p.m.**
