

CABINET

THURSDAY, 16 APRIL 2009

DECISIONS

Set out below is a summary of the decisions taken at the meeting of the Cabinet held on Thursday, 16 April 2009. The wording used does not necessarily reflect the actual wording that will appear in the minutes.

If you have any queries about any matters referred to in this decision sheet please contact Richard May, telephone (01954) 713016 e-mail Richard.may@scambs.gov.uk.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL

1. HOUSING RENTS REVIEW

Cabinet **RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL** that a commitment be made to revise rent levels for 2009-10 in line with the final recommendation from the CLG, the final level to be notified to Members via the Weekly Bulletin once agreed.

Other Options Considered: Not to have revised rent levels in line with the CLG's recommendation. This option would have avoided the cost and effort of implementing a change and the adverse impact on the sale value of the Council homes in the event of a transfer. However, Cabinet considered that this would lead to justifiable criticism of the Council from the Tenants, Central Government and the Media.

Cabinet did not consider reducing the rent increase by a lesser amount than recommended by the CLG on the grounds that there would be no compensation from the Government for the loss of rental income, and any such loss would be compounded in future years.

Reason For Decision: Cabinet recommended annual rent increases be reviewed in line with the announcement on 6 March by the Minister for Housing that she proposed to halve the recommended increase for local authority rents from 6.2% to a national average of 3.1%; this intention had been confirmed soon after by the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG).

Members of staff currently involved in visiting tenants in connection with the Housing Futures Project had reported that tenants were expressing concern over the high level of the 2009-10 rent increase agreed by Council on 26 February 2009.

2. CORPORATE PLAN 2009/10

Cabinet commented on the draft Corporate Plan, taking into account the questions at paragraph 6 of the report before

(a) **RESOLVING** that the draft Corporate Plan 2009-10 be approved, and

(b) **RECOMMENDING TO COUNCIL** that a final version of the Corporate Plan 2009-2010 be adopted, incorporating changes put forward at the meeting and further changes to be agreed by the Chief Executive in consultation with the Policy, Improvement and Communications Portfolio Holder and notified to Council.

Other Options Considered: To have deferred or rejected the draft plan. These options were not followed, for the reasons identified below.

Reason For Decision:

In recommending adoption of the plan by Council, Cabinet was satisfied that:

- a) The Corporate Plan provided an accurate overview of the issues and challenges facing the Council.
- b) The Plan gave a fair representation of Members' views of the aims and direction of the Council.
- c) The appendices identified the most important things which Members wished to be delivered in 2009/10? The appendices focussed on Council Actions, Local Area Agreement targets, and other important actions or National Indicators resulting from service plans.
- d) The Plan was realistic, representing a programme that would be achievable and could be used by the Audit Commission and auditors to assess progress by the Council.

3. COMPREHENSIVE EQUALITIES POLICY 2009-2012

Cabinet **RESOLVED** that the Comprehensive Equalities Policy 2009-2012 be adopted, subject to the Portfolio Holder for Equalities being authorised to make further minor editing changes prior to final publication.

Other Options Considered: To have deferred or rejected the draft policy. Rejected, for the reasons set out below.

Reason For Decision: The Council had identified equalities as a priority area in which progress was required in order to address a key area of weakness previously identified by the Audit Commission, achieve compliance with statutory requirements and deliver relevant Council Aims and Actions. The Improvement Board had also identified equalities as a key area for the Council. It was also considered that the Council needed to be more in step with its partners in the Local Strategic Partnership and Local Area Agreement. Equality and diversity would be an area of focus for the new Comprehensive Area Assessment of the Council.

4. LAND CHARGES FEES 2009-10

Cabinet **RESOLVED:**

(1) That the menu of changes set out in the schedule of registers and information for local enquiries searches, attached at Agenda pages 89-112, be agreed as the charges to be payable by third parties for access to that information.

(2) That the revised schedule of Local Land Charges fees be agreed as set out in Appendix A to the report, incorporating the correction of the CON29R fee set out on Agenda page 87 and the detailed breakdown of individual elements of the CON29R charge of £63.50, tabled at the meeting.

Other Options Considered: A review of the fees for an 'official' search was essential to comply with the Charges Regulations.

Cabinet might have decided not to impose any charges for access by third parties;

however, it was considered that the charges specified on the schedules attached to the report could be justified as reasonable and fair in light of the principles set out in the Charges Regulations.

Reason For Decision: The changes were required to comply with the Local Authorities (Charges for Property Searches) Regulations 2008 ('The Charges Regulations'). Specifically:

- (a) Local authorities must now provide access to all information required to complete a property search including information not found on public registers.
- (b) Private search companies will no longer be able to obtain insurance cover where information is missing or they have not sought access to it.
- (c) Third parties can only be charged on a cost recovery basis. This cost must be the same whether the information is supplied to the Local Land Charges team or the Personal Search Company.

5. RESPONDING TO THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN AND REVIEW OF NNDR HARDSHIP RELIEF POLICY

Cabinet **RESOLVED:**

- (d) To note ongoing work and actions which will be completed during the next financial year.
- (e) To authorise the presentation of a report to the Planning and New Communities Portfolio Holders bringing forward options for the preparation of planning policy documents (SPD or DPD) to address the needs of business and economic development in the district.
- (f) To approve the revised policy for NNDR hardship relief, as attached at appendix B to the report, to apply to applications relating to the current rating year, including backdating where appropriate.
- (g) To request that Councillor Loynes submit quarterly updates on the progress of actions to future meetings, including a year-end report in April 2010 evaluating the work undertaken.
- (h) To instruct the Interim Executive Director for Corporate Services to take steps to promote fuller take-up of the Rural Rate Relief scheme.

Other Options Considered: None. Cabinet considered that all the recommendations agreed were essential to enable the Council to continue to support the community through the current economic downturn.

Reason For Decision: (a) For information only.

(b) Cabinet considered the investigation and agreement of planning policy documents to be potentially beneficial as a means of bringing together the various economic development strands set out elsewhere in the Council's Local Development Framework to provide a single point of policy guidance.

(c) Cabinet considered that revisions to the policy were necessary to simplify the process for hardship relief and make it more responsive to the current economic situation, without exposing the authority to unnecessary risk or providing support to businesses for whom the receipt of NNDR relief would be unlikely to make a difference in terms of future commercial success.

(d) To ensure appropriate prominence continued to be given to the progress of initiatives to support the local community.

(e) Cabinet agreed this recommendation in response to anecdotal evidence that some rural businesses were unaware of the support available via the scheme providing rate relief for essential community businesses in rural areas such as post offices, local shops

and public houses.

