

Appendix 2 to the Minutes of the Meeting of the Council held on 21 February 2019

Written Response to Councillors Questions

- (i) Minute 9(e) – Medium Term Financial Strategy, General Fund Budget 2019-20 (including Council Tax setting), Housing Revenue Account Budget 2019-20 (including housing rents), Capital and Investment Strategies and Treasury Management Strategy – Question from Councillor Mark Howell

(1) Can you guarantee that the right to buy receipts will all be used within the specified time and won't have to be paid back to Government?

Response from the Lead Cabinet Members for Finance and Housing

As Councillor Howell knows from his time as a portfolio holder, this is a complex, competitive market. We have sufficient resource built into the HRA Business Plan to ensure that we can re-invest RTB receipts appropriately, and have schemes in the pipeline that could meet the investment need.

The authority continues to offer the same degree of reassurance as it has in previous years that the pipeline will be developed alongside the continued exploration of ad hoc opportunities to spend Right to Buy receipts. Work is expected to begin on a New Build and Development strategy which will set out the authority's longer term plans for development, including the way in which Right to Buy receipts are dealt with. In the interim, staff are continuing to pursue opportunities for ensuring the timely expenditure of Right to Buy receipts.

(2) Rent arrears have increased dramatically for former tenants - what action is being taken to address this?

Response from the Lead Cabinet Members for Finance and Housing

During the period 1st April 2018 – 31st December 2018, there were 12 tenancies subject to eviction proceedings, 5 of which resulted in the tenancies being ended. The termination of these tenancies added just over £18k of additional former tenant arrears, around 36% of the total.

The remainder of the increase in "former tenant arrears" was due to tenancies ending for other reasons whilst still owing rent. These will include the sad occasions when a tenant dies when there is a notional period of arrears for accounting purposes until keys are returned, or if a tenant hands in keys and gives up a tenancy without giving 4 weeks notice.

It is widely recognised that arrears from former tenants are difficult to recover due to the limited legal remedies available, although new processes were introduced in October 2018 with a view to improving performance in this area. It is important to note that those owing rent from former tenancies can be some of the most vulnerable in society, and so whilst all reasonable attempts are made to collect balances due, this is an incredibly challenging process. As a result we make a bad debt provision of 95% in accounts to cover these.

Whilst the increase of former tenant arrears as a percentage appears high, it is important to remember that the total owing on former tenant arrears still represents less than 0.6% of the annual rent debit.

(3) The mobile warden scheme budget has decreased by half - is this because we are meeting the cost of the mobile warden scheme from another fund or have cuts been made to the service?

Response from the Lead Cabinet Members for Finance and Housing

The total budget for ageing well and the mobile warden service has reduced from £78,100 in 2018/19 to £44,210 in 2019/20. This is due to a reduction in staff costs and recharges of £34,460, following a change in the allocation methodology. Previously staff have been able to allocate their time across several cost centres but from 2019/20 the policy changed so that a person is charged to the activity they spend most of their time doing. This particular instance is something of an anomaly as previously there were 6 staff all charging relatively small amounts of their time to this cost centre.

In summary, there have been no cuts to the service.

(ii) Minute 16(e) – Question from Councillor Sue Ellington

I have been made aware that the commercial paper recycling bin is to be removed from Swavesey church car park. This would indicate that there has been a change in policy which would previously have been discussed at a portfolio meeting and circulated as a decision. As this is no longer the practice, can the Leader enlighten us as to all the changes in waste and recycling policy and what efforts have been made to identify the implication?

Response from the Lead Cabinet Member for Environmental Services and Licensing

The Council has improved the service for residents making it easier for them to be able to recycle at home with the provision of additional blue bins, for residents that have additional recycling. Since this was introduced 1,000s of additional blue bins have been provided to residents, thus removing the need for them to have to use the paper only recycling bank at a limited number (less than 40) of locations across the district.

Several of the 'paper only' bring banks were being abused by residents and businesses by putting in additional items other than paper thus contaminating the load. Such contamination leads to the material not being recycled, with material ending up in landfill. These 'paper only' banks were collected by a separate vehicle, generating vehicles miles and increased traffic and emissions. The banks were only ever designed for residents and not businesses, however to support local businesses to recycle the Shared Waste Service can now offer an enhanced recycling service for all businesses in the District at a very competitive rate.

Despite no PFH meetings, a full revised and comprehensive waste collection policy including information about additional recycling options was presented to Scrutiny and agreed at Cabinet in October 2018, giving more than ample opportunity for Members to raise questions about the household waste policies. In addition to the policy document, Parishes and Councillors were

informed about the proposed changes in December 2018 with the opportunity to raise concerns, text from the notification detailed as follows:-

'We are writing to give you notice of our intention to remove the bins that collect separate paper from your Parishes by the end of January 2019. As you will recall we stopped separate paper collections from households in December 2017 due to market changes, so these changes are in keeping with that Policy change. Residents can add paper to their recycling bins and if they have insufficient space they can order an additional bin or, if they only have occasional excess recycling, place this in one clear sack beside their recycling bin. Removal of paper bins will reduce unnecessary Council expenditure in terms of collections and fly-tipping management and release staff to maintain services elsewhere. In terms of communications we will leave signs at the sites affected giving residents notice of the removal, update our website and inform our Customer Service Centre of the changes. Following removal of the paper bins we will work with our Street team to monitor and clear any paper that is left at the site where people have missed the messages in the weeks following the change. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about the change.'

The Council's recycling rate is currently 53.35% compared 51.93% for the same period last year, with residents recycling in the region of 100 tonnes a month more than last year. Contamination has also fallen by over 3% from last year, however the Service will soon be launching a communication programme to remind residents not to put textiles and tissues/kitchen towel in to the blue bin and ensure that containers are washed, reducing contamination from food waste. Over the last year the service has collected about 23,500 tonnes of dry recycling, this material has been sold for over £960,000, with the Council gaining half of this amount (£480,000) to offset the cost of providing the service.

The Service would be delighted to work with any Parish Council on schemes to increase the amount of high quality recycling collected and reduce the amount of general waste generated, and welcome them to contact the service or speak to Trevor Nicoll, Head of Share Waste Service.

(iii) Minute 16 (f) - Question from Councillor Ruth Betson

The shared finance service between this Council and the City of Cambridge Council appears to have been terminated, with the majority of the officers being repatriated to the City of Cambridge. What officer resource exists going forward to support this council in its financial and budgetary obligations?

Response from the Lead Cabinet Member for Finance

The finance officers employed by Cambridge City Council who currently spend some time working on this Council's accounts will revert to working solely for the City with effect from 1 April 2019. This equates to a reduction in resource of 6 person days per week. To address concerns over supervision of the finance service, this Council had already gone out to recruit a full time deputy 151 officer. An appointment has been made and the individual should be starting with the Council by mid-April. To provide a smooth transition and cover in the intervening period an experienced interim accountant has been recruited on an initial 3 month contract. The longer term needs to support the Housing Revenue Account and the Council's companies is still being assessed and an additional permanent recruitment may follow.

I am very clear that going forward the finance service will be properly resourced and in a position where it is able to perform at a higher level and fully meet its obligations. It is a false economy to under resource the finance section and, as a direct consequence, incur higher audit fees.

(iv) Minute 16 (g) – Question from Councillor Graham Cone

Following recent changes in the communications department where will responsibility of reprographics and print services be located?

Response from the Lead Cabinet Member for Customer Services and Business Improvement

Following a consultation with staff, the Head of Paid Service agreed a change to bring together printing and finishing of all products in one place. In the past this has been split with large printing carried out in the Communications Team and standard items in the Print Room. All items are now carried out in the Reprographics Office, formally the Print Room. This is fairly standard for most organisations and will hopefully simplify the process for all. The Council's Intranet has been updated and the Communications Team can provide members with help if they are unsure on who to speak to.

(v) Minute 16 (i) – Question from Councillor Shrobona Bhattacharya

Why Is the Council deliberately downplaying the success of the Cambourne Electronics and Robotics Club (CERC) that was supported by SCDC? The club has featured on BBC and ITV news channels and was shortlisted for national awards, and brings together 250 families, yet the previous South Cambs magazine for residents has not found a space to report its success. Can the lead member for communications explain this”?

Response from the Lead Cabinet Member for Customer Services and Business Improvement

There is a cross party editorial board for South Cambs Magazine. All ideas put forward for the magazine are considered by the board and as there are always more suggestions than space available these must be prioritised.

An item on Councillor Dr. Bhattacharya's recent nomination for an award relating to her work on the Cambourne Electronics and Robotics Club was considered, but due to space restrictions it could not be featured. The board has not considered a submission based on more information about the positive outcomes of the club, and how people can get involved, only the award nomination for Councillor Dr. Bhattacharya. The board warmly welcomes suggestions from all members. The Communications Team will contact members in March as the process starts for the following edition that comes out in May.