



MINUTES

Finance and Democracy Committee

Date:	Tuesday, 21 March 2023
Venue:	Council Chamber, Town Hall, St Annes Road West, St Annes, FY8 1LW
Committee Members Present:	Councillor Karen Buckley (Chairman) Councillor Vince Settle (Vice-Chairman) Councillors Peter Anthony, Peter Collins, Ellie Gaunt, Liz Oades, David O'Rourke, Richard Redcliffe, Elaine Silverwood, Michael Withers.
Officers Present:	Fylde Council Officers: Allan Oldfield, Paul O'Donoghue, Christine Wood Blackpool Council Officers: Louise Jones, Graham Ruse

Public Platform

There were no speakers on this occasion.

1. Declarations of Interest

Members were reminded that any disclosable pecuniary interests should be declared as required by the Localism Act 2011 and any personal or prejudicial interests should be declared as required by the Council's Code of Conduct for Members. There were no interests on this occasion.

2. Confirmation of Minutes

RESOLVED: To approve the minutes of the Finance and Democracy Committee meeting held on 20 February 2023 as a correct record for signature by the Chairman.

3. Substitute Members

There were no substitute Members in attendance.

Decision Items

4. Council Tax Premiums 2024/25

Ms Louise Jones, Head of Revenues and Benefits (Shared Service) was invited to present the report which requested that the Committee consider the options as set out in sections two and three of the report relating to Council Tax Premiums for the period 2024/25.

Appended to the report at Appendix 1 was a Frequently Asked Questions document (including responses) relating to Council Tax Premiums on Empty Properties and Second Homes which had been compiled following the Finance and Democracy Committee meeting held on Monday, 30 January 2023 in which it had been resolved to defer the item to allow for further consideration. Also appended to the report at Appendix 2 were details of National Council Tax Exemption Categories.

The Committee was requested to consider the options as set out in the report and make a recommendation to Council in respect of:

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- a. The application of the Council Tax premium of 100% in respect of empty properties from the date at which the property had been empty for one year, rather than after two years as at present; and
- b. The introduction of a new 100% Council Tax premium for all properties that are classed as second homes.

The Committee was advised that both changes were dependent upon the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill receiving Royal Assent within the required timescale. The report further advised that as at 9 March 2023, this had been at Committee stage at the House of Lords and further outlined the stages still to be completed.

Following presentation of the report, the Chair invited questions/comments from Committee Members which were responded to by Ms Louise Jones, Mr Graham Ruse, and Mr Paul O'Donoghue.

Following a detailed discussion, it was RESOLVED:

To defer the item on Council Tax Premiums 2024/25 and to re-evaluate the position once the relevant legislation has been approved.

5. Write-Off of Uncollectable Debts 2022/23

Mr Paul O'Donoghue, Chief Financial Officer introduced the report which detailed the proposed write-off of debts in relation to Business Rates, Council Tax, and the recovery of Housing Benefit overpayments. It was reported that under Fylde Council's Constitution, the Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services had delegated authority to write-off uncollectable Business Rate debts up to £10,000 and uncollectable Council Tax debts of up to £5,000. Additionally, the Council's Constitution provided delegated authority to the Chief Financial Officer (Section 151 Officer) to write-off uncollectable debts in excess of those levels up to £25,000 per individual debt, such write offs to be subsequently reported to the Finance and Democracy Committee for information purposes.

Mr O'Donoghue reported that the delegated power had been utilised by writing-off two uncollectable Business Rate debts, two Housing Benefit overpayments and four Council Tax debts. It was reported that to meet the requirement, the written-off sums were required to be reported to the Finance and Democracy Committee. Details of the debts were appended to the report at Appendix A.

The report advised that writing-off of debts in excess of £25,000 required the approval of the Finance and Democracy Committee and that there were two uncollectable Business Rates debts in excess of the £25,000 limit for which write-off was requested. Details of the two uncollectable debts were provided at Appendix A. It was reported that there were no uncollectable debts in excess of the £25,000 limit in respect of any other category of debt.

The report also advised that all the uncollectable debts for which write-off was requested (or being reported) related to the period to 31 March 2023. The cost of writing off these debts would be met from the appropriate bad debt provision. In respect of Business Rates and Council Tax the provision was funded by contributions by all the recipients of Business Rate or Council Tax income (those being Lancashire County Council, the Lancashire Combined Fire Authority and the Police and Crime Commissioner for Lancashire, together with Fylde Council).

Mr O'Donoghue advised that debit write-off was only considered in exceptional circumstances when other recovery options had been exhausted and that although the report sought approval to write-off a number of uncollectable debts, any debt that was written-off could be re-instated at a later date should there be a further opportunity to recover part or all of the debt.

Ms Jones advised the Committee that there had recently been involvement in a Cabinet Office pilot/HMRC pilot initiative which included work around data sharing and attachment of earnings which would be rolled out in the future.

Following presentation of the report, the Chair invited questions/comments from Committee Members which were responded to by Ms Louise Jones, Mr Graham Ruse, and Mr Paul O'Donoghue.

Following discussion, it was RESOLVED (as per the report recommendations) to:

- 1. Approve the write-off of the two uncollectable debts in excess of £25,000 details of which were provided at Appendix A of the report; and**
- 2. Note the write-off by the Chief Financial Officer under delegated powers of the eight uncollectable debts below £25,000, details of which were also set out in Appendix A to the report.**

6. Budget Working Group – Closure Report

This report advised that the current term of office for the Council would end in May 2023 with the Borough elections and the return of a new group of elected Members. Following the Boundary Review, there would be a reduction in the number of elected Members (51-37) and the Governance Review that had been undertaken in response to the reduced membership of the Council which would see the creation of an Executive Policy Committee and scrutiny arrangements.

The report also advised that at the final meeting of each Committee for the current term of office, the Working Groups and Boards that had been established and appointed by that Committee would be formally closed and disbanded where appropriate to create the opportunity for the new Council to review and determine the most appropriate arrangements under the new Governance structure.

It was RESOLVED (as per the report recommendations) to:

- 1. Disband the Budget Working Group and;**
- 2. Acknowledge that Members of the Group appointed by the Committee had fulfilled the intended objectives and aims set by the Committee in delivery the budget for the Authority.**

7. St Annes Programme Board – Closure Report

As per item 3, this report advised that the current term of office for the Council would end in May 2023 with the Borough elections and the return of a new group of elected Members. Following the Boundary Review, there would be a reduction in the number of elected Members (51-37) and the Governance Review that had been undertaken in response to the reduced membership of the Council which would see the creation of an Executive Policy Committee and scrutiny arrangements.

The report also advised that at the final meeting of each Committee for the current term of office, the Working Groups and Boards that had been established and appointed by that Committee would be formally closed and disbanded where appropriate to create the opportunity for the new Council to review and determine the most appropriate arrangements under the new Governance structure.

It was RESOLVED (as per the report recommendations):

- 1. That the Committee disband the St Annes Programme Board;**
- 2. And acknowledges the work of the Members of the Board has undertaken to establish a long-term vision for the regeneration of St Annes.**

8. Fully Funded New Capital Scheme Addition – Improvement to Sustainable Transport Facilities/Initiatives and Public Transport Facilities, Clifton Drive, St Annes

The Planning Committee on 8 March 2023 resolved to request the release of Section 106 developer funds originally paid to Fylde Borough Council as a contribution towards 'improvements of bus services/facilities in the vicinity of the site' (development site at Crossacres) and 'improvement of public transport facilities and sustainable transport initiatives' (development site at Orchid Court).

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The report advised that Lancashire County Council in its role as a highways authority had requested the money that has been paid to the Fylde Council by the developers of the two sites, be paid to fund the provision of additional refuge islands on Clifton Drive North to aid pedestrians in crossing the highway.

It was reported that the improvements to the public transport facilities would make crossing Clifton Drive North easier for residents accessing the bus stop in either direction and provide improved, safer pedestrian routes to local community facilities.

Following discussion, it was RESOLVED (as per the report recommendations):

- 1. That Finance and Democracy Committee approve a fully funded new capital scheme addition in the sum of £35,732 in 2022/23 to be met by Section 106 monies held by the Council, towards the provision of refuge islands on Clifton Drive North, to provide improved links to a greater area for the residents; and**
- 2. That the sum of £35,732 be paid to Lancashire County Council, for the provision of two refuge islands (this could increase to 3 refuge islands if it could be delivered as part of a larger scheme).**

Information Items

The Committee received the following information items

9. Council Tax Support Fund 2023/24 – Note of Urgent Decision Taken

This report set out details to the Committee of an urgent decision taken to allocate Council Tax Support Funding for 2023/24. The report advised that power to make an emergency (urgent) decision rested with the Chief Executive in consultation with the relevant Committee Chairman (or Vice-Chairman in their absence) together with the Leader of the Council.

The report also advised that accordingly, the Chief Executive, having consulted with Councillor Karen Buckley, had approved the decision as set out in the report.

10. The Residents Survey 2022

This report provided details to the Committee of the background to the Residents Survey combined with the 2022 data set which had been parked during covid pandemic. Satisfaction with services, the Council and the local community was compared in the report against previous data sets as well as the cumulative outcomes. The report also included any proposal to learn from the process or act in response to the findings.

11. Reports of the Various Outside Bodies

The reports from Members appointed to the various Outside Bodies within the remit of the Committee were appended to the report for information.

The report also advised that from May 2023, the Committee structure would change and that it had been proposed that nominations would now be considered at the first available Executive Committee meeting and appointments would be made at the first available Council meeting following the annual meeting. Until May 2023, existing appointments would remain in place.

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