

COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES - 30 JANUARY 2024

Present: Councillor Page (Mayor);

Councillors G Dennis (Deputy Mayor), Asare, Ayub, Ballsdon, Barnett-Ward, Brock, Challenger, Cresswell, Cross, Davies, Eden, Edwards, Ennis, Gavin, Gittings, Griffith, Goss, Hacker, Hornsby-Smith, Hoskin, Juthani, Keane, Keeping, Kitchingham, Lanzoni, Leng, Lovelock, Magon, McCann, McElroy, McEwan, McGoldrick, Moore, Mpofu-Coles, O'Connell, Robinson, Rowland, R Singh, Tarar, Terry, Thompson, White, Williams, Woodward and Yeo

Apologies: Councillors Emberson and Mitchell

29. MAYOR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

(a) Holocaust Memorial Day

The Mayor invited the Council to join him in a minute's silence in respect of Holocaust Memorial Day which was held on 27 January and to provide a period of reflection for the victims of the all too many wars that were currently being waged around to world. He also wanted to provide an opportunity for the many Councillors who were unable to attend the Holocaust Memorial Day Event to pay their respects.

(b) Bet Tickner

The Mayor paid tribute to former Mayor and Abbey ward Councillor, Bet Tickner who had sadly died recently. The Mayor said "Bet was not only a colleague but also a long-standing personal friend. We worked closely together over the years to represent the interests of Abbey ward. Besides her obvious passion for Reading and supporting the Royal Berkshire Hospital and local NHS, Bet was also a committed internationalist and a keen supporter of the Refugee Support Group, of which she was a trustee for some years. Her enthusiasm and passion will be sadly missed."

The Council stood for a minute's silence in Bet's memory and as a mark of respect.

30. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 17 October 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

31. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

	Questioner	Subject	Answer
1.	Dr Sunila Lobo	Licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation	Cllr Brock on behalf of Cllr Emberson

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(The full text of the question and reply was made available on the Reading Borough Council website).

32. QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

	Questioner	Subject	Answer
1.	Cllr Moore	Cyber Security	Cllr Terry
2.	Cllr White	Glass Recycling	Cllr Rowland
3.	Cllr White	Israel Gaza War	Cllr Brock

(The full text of the questions and replies was made available on the Reading Borough Council website).

33. COUNCIL TAX EMPTY & SECOND HOMES PREMIUMS

The Director of Finance submitted a report recommending changes to the Council's approach in respect of certain discretionary areas within Council Tax legislation in relation to empty and second home premiums. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act allowed the Council to make further amendments to the levying of Council Tax premiums within the Borough with effect from both 1 April 2024 and 1 April 2025. A large part of the Council Tax legislation was mandatory on all billing authorities within England. However, there were areas where each Council may determine the type and levels of charge to be made. The main discretionary areas in place currently were as follows:

- Second homes (premises which were no-one's sole or main residence but were furnished)
- Unoccupied and substantially unfurnished premises
- Unoccupied and substantially unfurnished premises which required or were undergoing structural repairs; and
- Currently, premiums where premises had been unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for a period exceeding 2 years.

When determining its policy, each billing authority had to decide the level of discount (if any) to be granted and the amounts (percentage) of any premium by 31 March prior to the financial year in which it wanted to introduce the changes. Where a change was proposed, there was a requirement to determine the level of any discount or premium and a decision was required to be made by Council under Section 11A, 11B and the new 11C of the Local Government Finance Act 1992.

The following motion was moved by Councillor Brock and seconded by Councillor Terry and CARRIED:

Resolved -

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- (1) That from 1 April 2024, the maximum level of Empty Homes premium be levied as follows:
 - (a) 100% for dwellings which were unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for more than 12 months and up to 5 years;
 - (b) 200% for dwellings which had been unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for between 5 and 10 years; and
 - (c) 300% for dwellings which had been unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for 10 years or more.

- (2) That from 1 April 2025:
 - (a) The continued application of Empty Homes premiums as set out above be approved; and
 - (b) The application of a Second Homes Premium of 100% for all dwellings that were no one's sole or main residence and which were substantially furnished be approved;

- (3) That, subject to the outcome of the Government consultation which was recommending exceptions to Empty Home premiums in certain circumstances (as outlined in paras 1.28 - 1.30 of the report), the Section 151 Officer be given delegated authority to implement the Council's policy on premiums in line with statute, the Council's requirements and any guidance given by the Secretary of State.

34. APPROVAL OF THE LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME AND THE COUNCIL TAX BASE FOR 2024/25

The Director of Finance submitted a report regarding the Council Tax support scheme, estimated Council Tax collection rate and Council Tax base for the 2024/25 financial year. The report explained that Section 33 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 and the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012 required the Council, as the Billing Authority, to calculate a Council Tax Base for its area by 31 January each year.

The Tax Base for 2024/25 was calculated for the above purposes as being 58,944.73 (band D equivalent) properties - an increase of 1.93% on the 2023/24 Tax Base of 57,826.56. The declared surplus/deficit on the Council Tax Collection Fund balance would be paid out/recoverable by the Collection Fund in full in the following financial year. The estimated balance as at 31st March 2024 on the Council Tax Collection Fund was a projected net deficit of £1.998m. The Council's overall share of this deficit was £1.701m.

Each year, the Government amended the Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Prescribed Requirements) (England) Regulations 2012 to ensure that pension-age Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) schemes were updated in line with changes in the wider benefits system. The annual update also provided an opportunity to ensure that the residency requirements for accessing both pension-age and working-age LCTS remained consistent

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with the UK's immigration policy. These updates would be incorporated into the Council's 2024/25 Scheme in accordance with the principles of the Council's original Local Scheme.

The report also stated that the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and Local Government Finance Act 2012 had replaced the Council Tax Benefit scheme with a locally determined Council Tax Reduction Scheme, which was effectively a type of Council Tax discount. The legislation required the Council to approve the scheme by the end of January preceding the start of the financial year. The recommended Scheme for 2024/25 was unchanged from the Scheme agreed by Council for 2023/24.

The following motion was moved by Councillor Brock and seconded by Councillor Terry and CARRIED:

Resolved -

- (1) That the existing Council Tax Reduction Scheme be retained for 2024/25;**
- (2) The Tax Base calculation for 2024/25 of 58,944.73 band D equivalent properties be approved;**
- (3) The assumed Council Tax collection rate of 98.75% for 2024/25 be noted;**
- (4) That the 2024/25 Council Tax Reduction Scheme would be updated in line with the Scheme's regulations be noted;**
- (5) That the estimated balance of the Council Tax Collection Fund as at 31st March 2024 was an overall net deficit of £1.998m and the Council's overall share of this deficit was £1.701m be noted.**

35. REVIEW OF THE STATEMENT OF GAMBLING LICENSING PRINCIPLES

Further to Minute 6 of the Licensing Applications Committee held on 1 February 2022, the Executive Director of Economic Growth & Neighbourhoods submitted a report on a revision to the Statement of Gambling Licensing Principles. The minor change would be to refer to the new section about gambling premises in the proposed update to the Local Area Plan. This would help ensure that the Statement of Gambling Licensing Principles and the Local Area Plan remained aligned and cross-reference readers to both policies. The amendment was being made now as the update to the Local Area Plan had not been made when the latest three-year Statement of Gambling Licensing Principles had been approved in February 2022. A copy of the full Statement of Gambling Licensing Principles 2022-25 was appended to the report for approval.

The following motion was moved by Councillor Rowland and seconded by Councillor Woodward and CARRIED:

Resolved -

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- (1) That the updated Statement of Gambling Licensing Principles 2022-25 be approved, as attached to the report at Appendix 1;
- (2) That the Assistant Director of Planning, Transport & Public Protection Services be authorised to make minor amendments to the Statement.

36. READING YOUTH JUSTICE PLAN 2023-2024

Further to Minute 16 of the Adult Social Care, Children's Services & Education Committee held on 18 October 2023, the Executive Director for Children's Services submitted a report on the Youth Justice Plan 2023-24. The report explained that the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and a condition of the Youth Justice Board Grant, had placed a duty on the Local Authority to produce an annual Plan and for it to be ratified by Council. The Plan had already been signed off by the Youth Justice Partnership through the Youth Justice Management Board, which was independently chaired. The plan reported the performance of Youth Justice Service for 2022/23 against the national and statistical family comparators in the period.

A peer review, requested by the Youth Justice Board, had taken place in November 2022 and the recommendations had been incorporated into the Plan. The Plan had also included information on the youth justice cohort for 2021-23.

The annual report identified the following areas as priorities for 2023-24:

- Reducing first time entrants into the criminal justice system
- Addressing disproportionality within the justice system
- Reducing the impact of serious violence
- The increased participation and engagement of children, young people and their families in the service.

It was reported that the Youth Justice Management Board had oversight of the Plan and performance against the targets, and these were reported through the mechanisms of the management board structure. A copy of the Plan was appended to the report for Council's formal approval.

The following motion was moved by Councillor Hoskin and seconded by Councillor Mpofu-Coles and CARRIED:

Resolved -

That the Youth Justice Plan 2023-2024 be adopted, as attached to the report at Appendix 1.

(Councillor Ennis declared a prejudicial interest in the above item on the basis he was employed in the Probation Service and was the Chair of the Youth Justice Board. Councillor Hacker also declared a pecuniary interest in the above item on the basis that she was employed by Alanis House. They both left the meeting and took no part in the debate or decision)

37. PAY POLICY STATEMENT 2023/24

The Executive Director of Resources submitted a report on the draft Pay Policy Statement for 2023/24. The report stated that Local Authorities were required under Section 38(1) of the Localism Act 2011 (the Act) to prepare a Pay Policy Statement that articulated the Council's policy towards the pay of the workforce, particularly senior staff and the lowest paid employees.

The report explained that each local authority was an individual employer and had the autonomy to make decisions on pay that were appropriate to local circumstances and which delivered value for money for local taxpayers. The Pay Policy Statement met the statutory duty to provide the Council with a description of the policy on staff remuneration for annual approval. It provided information on remuneration arrangements for staff directly employed by the Council, excluding staff in schools. Sections 38 - 43 of the Act 2011 required that the authority produce a Policy Statement that covered several matters concerning the pay of the Authority's staff, principally Chief Officers. This Policy Statement had met the requirements of the Act in this regard and the requirements of guidance issued in February 2012 and February 2013 by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to which the authority was required to have regard under Section 40 of the Act.

The Pay Policy Statement for 2023/24 was broadly unchanged from the previous year's statement other than it had been updated with the recent nationally agreed pay settlements. The 2023/24 Pay Policy Statement was appended at Appendix A to the report together with revised pay scales.

The following motion was moved by Councillor Terry and seconded by Councillor Brock and CARRIED:

Resolved -

That the Pay Policy Statement for 2023/24, as set out in Appendix 1 of the report, be approved.

38. COUNCILLORS' ALLOWANCES SCHEME 2024/25

The Executive Director of Resources submitted a report setting out the recommendations of the Independent Remuneration Panel, following its meeting on 22 November 2023, in relation to the scheme of Councillors' Allowances for 2024/25. The Panel's recommendations were set out in Appendix A to the report and had been reflected in the updated allowances scheme at Appendix B to the report. The Panel would continue to review the scheme each year of the four-year term until 2026/27.

The following motion was moved by Councillor Brock and seconded by Councillor Terry and CARRIED:

Resolved -

- (1) That the Councillors' Allowances Scheme 2024/25, as set out in Appendix B to the report, be adopted;**

- (2) That the Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services be authorised to administer the Councillors' Allowances scheme in accordance with the provision in the base budget for 2024/25.

39. READING FOOTBALL CLUB

Pursuant to Notice, a motion was moved by Councillor Ennis and seconded by Councillor Barnett-Ward and CARRIED:

Resolved -

That this Council expresses its concern and indignation at the ongoing failure of the owner of Reading FC, founded in 1871, to run the club in a sustainable and proper way, as evidenced by ongoing and repetitive English Football League sanctions against both the club and the owner.

This Council also puts on record its support for the fan-led campaign, including 'Sell Before we Dai', and calls on the EFL and the future Independent Regulator to take the necessary action to end Dai Yongge's ownership of Reading FC, obliging him to sell the club to new owners with a long-term interest in the club and the town.

This Council asks that the Chief Executive writes to the EFL to convey this motion and asking them further to take all possible actions towards developing a sustainable future for Reading FC and delivering a more robust model of football governance. The Chief Executive is also asked to make Berkshire's MPs aware of the same so that they may be encouraged to lobby on behalf of the club.

(The meeting closed at 7.46 pm)