

COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES - 26 JANUARY 2021

Present: Councillor Stevens (Mayor);

Councillors David Absolom, Debs Absolom, Ayub, Ballsdon, Barnett-Ward, Brock, Carnell, Challenger, Davies, Duveen, Eden, Edwards, Emberson, Ennis, Gittings, Grashoff, Hacker, Hoskin, James, Jones, Khan, Leng, Lovelock, Manghnani, Maskell, McEwan, McGonigle, McKenna, O'Connell, Page, Pearce, Robinson, Rowland, Rynn, R Singh, Sokale, Stanford-Beale, Terry, White, Whitham, J Williams, R Williams and Woodward;

Apologies: Councillors D Singh and Skeats.

10. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 20 October 2020 were confirmed as a correct record and would be signed by the Mayor.

11. QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS IN ACCORDANCE WITH STANDING ORDER NO 10

	Questioner	Subject	Answer
1.	Cllr Ennis	Return to School	Cllr Pearce
2.	Cllr McGonigle	Climate and Ecological Emergency Bill	Cllr Brock
3.	Cllr White	Rough Sleeping in Reading	Cllr Ennis

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

12. APPROVAL OF THE LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME AND THE COUNCIL TAX BASE FOR 2021/22

The Executive Director of Resources submitted a report regarding the Council Tax support scheme, estimated Council Tax collection rate and Council Tax base for the 2021/22 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 report explained that the estimated balance as at 31 March 2021 on the Council Tax Collection Fund was a projected deficit of £2.862m, which reflected the reduced collection rates which had been reported during the year. The Council's share of this deficit was £2.451m. Ordinarily, the declared surplus/deficit was paid out/recoverable by the Collection Fund in full in the following financial year. However, Government had introduced new legislation that required any 2020/21 in year deficit to be spread equally across the three financial years 2021/22 - 2023/24, to help ease the financial impact of Covid-19 on Local Authorities.

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

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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 following motion was moved by Councillor Emberson and seconded by Councillor Brock and CARRIED:

Resolved -

- (1) That the existing Council Tax Local Reduction Scheme be retained for 2021/22;**
- (2) That the Tax Base calculation for 2021/22 of 55,847.73 band D equivalent properties, be approved;**
- (3) That a Council Tax collection rate of 98.5% for 2021/22 be noted;**
- (4) That the 2021/22 Council Tax Reduction Scheme allowances 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 31 March 2021 was a deficit of £2.862m, of which the Council's share would be £2.451m, be noted; and**
- (6) That, for those properties empty for 10 years or more, a 300% Council Tax premium would be levied from 1 April 2021, as approved by Policy Committee on 14 January 2019 (Minute 60 refers), be noted.**

7. UNION LEARNING FUND

Pursuant to Notice, the following motion was moved by Councillor Leng and seconded by Councillor Hacker and CARRIED:

Resolved -

This Council Notes:

- On Tuesday 6 October, the TUC received a letter from the Department for Education saying that ministers have decided to end the Union Learning Fund from March 2021.**
- The Union Learning Fund [ULF] was set up in 1998 to support trade unions to widen access to learning and training in workplaces for both union members and non-members. The fund supports workplace projects across England, and is coordinated by the TUC.**
- Each year around 200,000 workers are supported into learning or training with union support through the ULF and the TUC. These learners undertake all sorts of job-relevant learning and training, including basic literacy and numeracy, ICT skills, apprenticeships and traineeships, vocational training, continuing professional development and many other informal and formal courses.**

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- In 2019-20, the ULF was worth £12m. If upheld, this decision will effectively end union-brokered skills training, and will undermine key government skills and retraining priorities at a crucial moment for our economy.

This Council understands that:

- Union learning reaches people that other DfE programmes do not reach.
- There is an independent evaluation of the Union Learning Fund every two years. It was most recently evaluated by the University of Exeter in 2018. They spoke to 2,459 learners, and found:
 - Over two-thirds (68 per cent) of learners with no previous qualifications got a qualification.
 - 47 per cent of those with entry level or level 1 qualifications got a qualification at a higher level.
 - Four in five (80 per cent) said they had developed skills that they could transfer to a new job.
 - Two in three (62 per cent) said their new skills made them more effective in their current job.
 - One in five (19 per cent) said they had been promoted or given increased responsibility and one in 10 (11 per cent) got a pay rise.
- The 2018 independent evaluation found that union learning provided excellent value for money:
 - For every £1 spent on the Union Learning Fund, there is a return of £12.30: £7.60 to the worker, £4.70 to the employer.
 - The Union Learning Fund delivers an estimated net contribution to the economy of more than £1.4bn as a result of a boost to jobs, wages and productivity.
 - The return to the exchequer (through reduced spending on welfare benefits and other factors resulting from the boost to jobs and wages) is £3.57 for each £1 spent on the Union Learning Fund.
 - The £12m government funding levered in an additional £54m from employers, unions and training providers in 2019-20.
- The government has said it will put reskilling workers at the heart of its economic recovery plans after the pandemic. In September 2020, the government announced a new fully funded entitlement to achieve a first level 3 qualification, delivered through the National Skills Fund. Union learning is ideally placed to support this aspiration, in the following ways:
 - directly, through delivering relevant level 3 courses to workplace learners, which is already a core function of the Union Learning Fund and was assessed as highly effective by the 2018 independent evaluation

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- directly, through enabling those with basic skills to learn and develop, putting them in a position to progress to level 3 skills
- Successive governments of all parties have valued this role - and have supported the Union Learning Fund. As government funding, it is paid as a contract and is subject to stringent monitoring requirements. Union Learning Fund money can only be spent on the direct costs of getting working people into learning and skills training, and the associated costs of delivering this programme.
- ULF projects adapted quickly to delivering online learning and training for workers during the pandemic and have actually surpassed the number of outcomes expected by government since the beginning of April.

Consequently, this Council resolves to:

- Express its public support for the continuation of the Union Learning Fund;
- Raise this issue with our local MPs and encourage them to call on the government to reverse its decision.

(The meeting closed at 7.25 pm).