

Cabinet

A meeting of Cabinet was held on Thursday, 18th November, 2021.

Present: Cllr Robert Cook (Chair), Cllr Jim Beall, , Cllr Nigel Cooke, Cllr Lisa Evans , Cllr Mrs Ann McCoy, Cllr Steve Nelson, Cllr Michael Smith

Officers: Julie Danks, Margaret Waggott, Nigel Hart, Gary Woods (MD), Beccy Brown, Jonathan Nertney (HR&L), Martin Gray (CHS), Jamie McCann (CS&T), Reuben Kench (CL&E), Garry Cummings, Michelle Connolly (FD&BS), Emma Champley (AH).

Also in attendance: Cllrs Clark, Hall and Stephenson O.B.E.

Apologies: None

CAB 43/21 Evacuation Procedure

The Evacuation Procedure was noted.

CAB 44/21 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest recorded.

CAB 45/21 Minutes of the Meeting held on 14th October 2021 - For Approval/Signature

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 14th October 2021 were approved and signed as a correct record.

CAB 46/21 Adult Social Care and Health Select Committee - Scrutiny Review of Multi-Agency Support to Care Homes during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Task & Finish)

Consideration was given to the final report that presented the outcome of the Adult Social Care & Health Select Committee review of Multi-Agency Support to Care Homes during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

RESOLVED that:-

1) Further to existing arrangements already in place regarding engagement with service-users and their loved ones, any current and future multi-agency professional group that is convened to support care homes ensures that the voice of residents and their families / carers is clearly articulated (whether through direct representation or via another appropriate mechanism). This should continue to include:

- How care home providers gain information and feedback from clients and their families
- How the Care Quality Commission (CQC) gains information and feedback from clients and their families
- How the Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) contracting team gains information and feedback from clients and families
- How Social Workers and other Adult Social Care professionals gain information, views and feedback in their assessments / ongoing contact /

reviews

- How the safeguarding teams gain information and feedback
- How the Care Home Protection Group gains information and feedback

2) Mindful of potential developments in vaccination requirements for the care sector as a whole, efforts continue by SBC and its partners to reach-out to those staff who remain reluctant to receive a COVID-19 vaccination.

3) The Care Home Protection Group continues on a permanent basis.

CAB 47/21 Council Plan 2021/24 Update

Cabinet were provided with an update on the Council Plan and the priority actions for 2021/22.

In addition to the focus on delivery of the key agreed priorities, the Council continues to respond to the ongoing challenge of COVID-19 both in terms of response and longer term recovery. Key ongoing actions in this area included;

- a. Ongoing delivery of testing provision;
- b. Management of outbreaks;
- c. Advice and information to residents, businesses and organisations;
- d. Supporting the vaccination programme, including a focus on inequalities in take up;
- e. Collation and analysis of data and intelligence to support targeting of actions and mitigation of impacts, with a particular focus on those already with poorer health and / or economic outcomes (at population level) including those living in deprivation; people with a disability / learning disability; people from BAME communities; people who have existing poor health / are at risk of poor health e.g. existing chronic conditions, overweight / obese, those who use substances or tobacco
- f. Working in partnership with Catalyst on the Community Support Team and the Shielding Hub.
- g. COVID-19 Marshalls
- h. Enforcement role;
- i. Supporting staff to return to the office;
- j. Responding to the challenge of Long COVID

Longer term recovery was a key element in the Council Plan and a number of actions in the Council Plan were targeted at supporting long term recovery including:

- a. The early years strategy focused on tackling development day in speech , language and communication;
- b. The ongoing support to care homes in managing long term implications;
- c. The Fairer Stockton on Tees Framework;
- d. The emphasis on the employment skills hub;
- e. Supporting business recovery and the emphasis on town centres;
- f. Restoring the events programme;
- g. Managing the Council's finances through the MTFP

Cabinet were also provided with an overview of the work being undertaken to

address the four key service areas identified in the 2019 residents survey as priority areas for improvement:

- a. Community Safety including the additional £410K to allow for the recruitment of additional community enforcement officers to support post COVID-19 economic recovery across the Borough.
- b. Road and pavement maintenance and repairs including the additional £250K funding approved for targeted grounds maintenance and pavement and kerbside maintenance.
- c. Support services for elderly people building on the Adult Social Care Strategy recently agreed.
- d. Family hubs, where as noted in the September report a major restricting of family support functions is currently being undertaken, including a commissioning exercise for a strategic partner to support aspects of delivery.

**CAB
48/21**

Inclusive Growth

Cabinet was provided with an update on initiatives and development that contributed towards inclusive economic growth led by the Inclusive Growth & Development service area. This included introducing the Council's new Inclusive Growth Strategy which would replace the current Economic Growth Strategy as one of the Council's key policy documents as outlined in the Council Plan.

The Strategy aimed to support all types of business across the Borough but there would continue to be a strategic focus on the high value and growth sectors across the Borough that were defined in the Economic Strategy, and were as follows:

- i. Energy & Environment,
- ii. Life Sciences & Biotechnology,
- iii. Manufacturing & Engineering,
- iv. Logistics,
- v. Office Based Services,
- vi. Digital & Creative Services and
- vii. Chemical & Process.

The proposed Strategy would also focus on three key areas of intervention:

- i. Business Support – providing advice, guidance and support that meets the needs of existing businesses to create resilience and facilitate growth,
- ii. Employment & Skills – work with businesses to understand their employment and skills needs both now and in the future, and work with residents to provide the necessary skills to maximise their potential and access those employment opportunities,
- iii. Inward Investment & Development – attract inward investment to the Borough by targeted marketing, providing appropriate land and infrastructure and taking a wholistic view of place development.

Cabinet noted the progress made with regard to Business Support, Employment & Skills, Inward Investment, including large scale investments such as those referenced at Fujifilm, a 2m sq. ft logistics facility at Wynyard Business Park,

and the multi-million acquisition by Wilton Universal Group of a manufacturing facility spanning 58 acres adjacent to its current Stockton-on-Tees base at Haverton Hill.

The focus of the support that will continue to be provided as the next part of the Inclusive Growth Strategy is rolled out was summarised for members.

**CAB
49/21** **Procurement Plan / Higher Value Contracts**

Cabinet approval was sought for the award of a number of planned higher value contracts, where the value exceeded the limit on officer delegated authority and which were either funded within the approved MTFP, or were subject to a bid for external funding.

The Council's Constitution defined a range of decisions that required a specific Cabinet approval, the financial threshold for which was set at a level of £500k or more. Details of the known procurement projects over £500k that were underway and due for contract award were detailed at Annex 1 to the report.

RESOLVED that Cabinet:

1. Approves the contracts listed in Annex 1 to the report;
2. Delegates authority to the relevant Director or Assistant Director to make the specific contract award decisions and any subsequent contract variation and extension decisions in accordance with the delegations listed in Annex 1.

**CAB
50/21** **Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2021**

Cabinet was invited to note how the Local Authority (LA) was meeting its duty to secure sufficient childcare, which included information about the supply of and demand for childcare, details on any gaps in provision and an action plan on how they would be addressed.

The Childcare Act 2006 and 2016 and the associated statutory guidance for local authorities on Early Education and Childcare – June 2018, required the Council (the Local Authority) to secure sufficient childcare, as far as was reasonably practicable and within available resources, for working parents, or parents who were studying or training for employment, for children aged 0 – 14 (or up to 18 for disabled children). Local authorities were also required to report annually to elected council members on how they were meeting this duty.

Cabinet noted that take-up of universal 3 & 4 year places continued to be high with 98% take-up, which was slightly down on the previous year (99%) and 30 hour free childcare places for working parents of 3 & 4 year olds was down by 2.35% from the previous year, although take-up of places in maintained nursery classes had increased.

Stockton continued to maintain a high percentage take-up of 2 year funded places (87%), although there had been a slight drop on previous years due to

Covid-19. This was still above the national average of 69% and regional average of 73%.

Reports on 2 year old take-up were issued by the DfE on a termly basis, based on data submitted to DfE by LAs at mid-point in a term. As per the summer term report Stockton-on-Tees was ranked nationally 20 out of 151 LAs.

Stockton, in keeping with the North East region maintained a higher percentage of funded children than England as a whole.

At the present time, there were 1,554 recorded vacancies in registered provision. Vacancies were monitored on a termly basis to ensure there were sufficient places available for parents. If there was a significant reduction in places steps would be taken to ensure parents had access to alternative places in close proximity to either work or home.

Childcare costs in Stockton were lower than regional and national charges. A full-time place in a nursery averaged £191.88 per week in Stockton, regional £227.29 and national 258.08. A full-time place with a childminder was £155.54, regional £209.40 and national £230.03.

CAB **School Organisation Plan 2021**
51/21

Cabinet were advised that although the statutory requirement to publish an annual School Organisation Plan was abolished in 2004, the Council had continued to publish an updated plan to inform schools, parents, and the public.

The Plan gave information about the number, types and sizes of schools maintained by the Council, Academies and Free Schools. It recorded the number of places available in those schools and included forecasts of pupil numbers over the next five years. This information was an important resource to support the Council in carrying out its statutory duty to ensure a sufficient supply of school places to meet the needs of children and young people in the borough.

When taken together with documents relating to the condition of school buildings and their suitability for purpose, the information in the plan may help to inform decisions about capital investment in existing or new school buildings.

Cabinet was invited to approve the draft School Organisation Plan 2021 which described two specific issues to be confronted over the next five years, namely:

Falling numbers of four-year-olds starting school;

The beginning of the end of increased numbers in our secondary schools.

RESOLVED that:-

1. Cabinet note the information in the draft plan;
2. Cabinet agree that the 'School Organisation Plan 2021 be published on the Council website and made available to partner organisations.

Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2022/23

Further to consultation approved by Cabinet in June 2021 in respect of proposed changes to the Council's Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTR), formal consultation had now completed and responses analysed. Cabinet was invited to recommend to Council formal approval to introduce a new income banded Council Tax Reduction Scheme for working age customers with effect from 1 April 2022.

The proposed new scheme approved for consultation in June 2021 included a number of features, examples included:

- More support shall be given to those households on the lowest of incomes than in the current scheme;
- Those on the lowest incomes paying no council tax at all;
- Households with higher levels of income will receive less/no CTR;
- The current means-tested schemes will be replaced by a simple income grid model;
- Protection for low-income families with non-dependants living at home;
- Income such as child benefit, disability benefits and personal independent payments will be disregarded;
- An earnings disregard to encourage work will be retained however this will be standardised at £25 per week;
- The current savings allowance of £6,000 will continue but where savings are held above this threshold there will be no entitlement to CTR; (note proposed further change to capital allowance referred to at paragraph 6 of the report).

The consultation produced responses from organisations, major preceptors and the public; with 133 completed questionnaires, a summary of which was included in Appendix B to the report and revealed that the consultees supported the recommended new CTR scheme with a majority in agreement with all 9 principles. Only two of these principles returned a less than 6% majority, the details of which were summarised.

Cabinet noted that the number of households claiming CTR increased suddenly as a result of Covid-19 rising from 11,421 working age claimants in March 2020 to 12,597 in July 20. Numbers were now showing a steady decline with the total number reducing to 11,681 at 30 September 2021. Since the full roll out of Universal Credit commenced in Stockton in 2018, the make-up of the claimant base had seen a shift from a majority of claimants receiving housing benefit to a majority receiving universal credit.

One of the features of universal credit was that it was responsive to changes in household income month by month. This meant that people might find that their universal credit was adjusted on a near monthly basis and each time universal credit is adjusted, there is an impact on CTR, resulting in a new council tax bill being sent. The proposed new income banded CTR scheme addressed this issue with small changes no longer triggering an adjustment. This made it much less volatile to claimants and much easier to understand.

The proposed scheme also provided additional support for the most financially

vulnerable residents, providing 100% reduction to the lowest income households. Modelling had continued since the last report to Cabinet in June 2021; the reducing caseload now suggesting that under the proposed scheme 8,707 (72.5%) will receive more support including 7,437 households that will no longer have to pay council tax at all. With the scheme targeting the lowest income households, some households with higher levels of income will be adversely affected; modelling suggests this would be 2,665. Of the 2,665 households that are adversely affected, 2040 (76.5%) will still be eligible for a reduction of either 50% or 25% depending on their household income; 625 (23.5%) will no longer be eligible for CTR these being households with higher income levels.

Under Section 13A (1)(c) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, the Council's exceptional hardship scheme already exists to support households whose financial circumstances impact their ability to pay council tax. In order to protect households that are adversely affected by the changes and where any applicant is likely to experience exceptional hardship, they will be encouraged to apply for an exceptional hardship payment. The Council will consider all applications for exceptional hardship on an individual basis, taking into account available income and essential outgoings.

Ahead of the proposed scheme coming into force on 1 April 2022, households that are adversely affected will be identified and contacted with details of the changes and offering support as appropriate.

In addition to this support for residents experiencing exceptional hardship, residents will be supported through the Council's welfare support team to maximise their income and through the Employment and Training Hub to help support people into employment.

RECOMMENDED to Council that:-

1. Council approves that the Council Tax Reduction scheme, included at Appendix A to the report, be adopted for working age customers with effect from 1 April 2022.

2. Council approves that the Director of Finance, Development and Business Services be authorised to amend the Council's Council Tax Reduction scheme for working age customers to adjust the appropriate calculative elements of the scheme to give effect to national changes.

3. Council note that the impact of the changes will be monitored and where necessary the scheme will be adapted in future years.