

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET 5 DECEMBER 2023 FROM THE CORPORATE PERFORMANCE PANEL HELD ON 13 NOVEMBER 2023

CP79 **CABINET REPORT: COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME - FINAL SCHEME**

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In presenting the report, the Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that the Council operated a scheme to help working age people on low incomes with the cost of their council tax by reducing their council tax bill. This was known as the Council Tax Support (CTS) Scheme. There were national regulations for a CTS Scheme for customers who had reached pension age, but the Council were free to decide the rules for its own CTS schemes for working age people in our area, taking into account certain government requirements. It was highlighted that the report only referred to the Council's own CTS Scheme for working age group.

The Revenues and Benefits Manager advised that the report followed on from the Corporate Performance Panel (CPP) report of 24 July 2023 outlining the options for a draft CTS Scheme to go to public consultation and recommending Option 1. It was noted that at its meeting on 1 August 2023 Cabinet agreed that Option 1 was their preferred scheme to consult on and a public consultation ran from 21 August 2023 to 1 October 2023. Members were advised that the results were summarised at section 3 and Appendix C.

The Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that the final CTS scheme for 2024/2025 must now be agreed by January 2024 ready for implementation on 1 April 2024.

The Revenues and Benefits Manager drew attention to the four options set out in the report.

The Panel's attention was drawn to section 3 – Consultation and the Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that in response to feedback from the 2023/2024 scheme consultation, the survey questions had been refreshed and reworded to make them clearer and to attempt to promote more engagement and responses. The updated questions are shown in Appendix C. The consultation was widely publicised with press and radio coverage and promotions on social media. Members were also advised that the consultation also included an online calculator so people could check if they would be eligible to claim CTS, or if their CTS would increase under the Council's proposals. The Panel was reminded that the consultation went live on 11 September 2023 and six people had used the service. The public consultation ran for six weeks from 21 August 2023 to 1 October 2023 and the consultation webpage received 2,345 hits and 41 surveys were

completed, a 64% increase compared to the 25 responses received in 2023/2024.

The Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that the consultation response from Norfolk County Council was included in the CPP and Cabinet reports for the draft CTS scheme. Norfolk Police's and Crime Commissioner had not responded.

It was noted that the CTS caseload had reduced over the past year and was having less of a financial impact than was estimated in the Financial Plan. This means there is sufficient scope to cover the additional cost of a more generous scheme without having to specifically raise council tax or spend less on other services.

The financial implications were outlined as set out in the report.

The Chair, Councillor Dark thanked the Revenues and Benefits Manager for the report and invited questions and comments from the Panel, a summary of which is set out below.

Councillor Long drew the Panel's attention to section 3.5 results of the consultation and added that 37% agreed with the proposal and 51% disagreed and asked why the recommendation was to go ahead with Option 1 and outlined the reasons why he could not support the proposal.

Councillor Blunt asked why did the Council undertake the consultation exercise when the Council's proposal was to ignore the results of the consultation. In response, the Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that the consultation was part of the Regulations which required the Council to undertake the consultation exercise. The Panel was advised that as part of the consultation views were sought from Norfolk County Council (NCC) and the Police and that to date a response had been received from NCC but no response had been received from the Police.

The Chair, Councillor Dark asked for details of the NCC response. The Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that NCC supported a scheme across Norfolk for 75% support model.

The Vice Chair, Councillor Osborne outlined the reasons and referred to national policy as to why he supported option 1 to assist households as set out in the recommendation and urged the Panel to support option 1.

Councillor Rose gave an overview of the current consultation being undertaken by the Police and Crime Commissioner in Downham Market on a proposed increase on Band D properties in 2024/2025 which ended on 24 November and undertook to forward the information to the Revenues and Benefits Manager.

Councillor Devulapalli commented that she supported the Council Tax Scheme but also agreed with the points made regarding the democratic deficit from the consultation and asked if the Council had considered how this may be changed going forward to look at the actual benefits. Councillor Devulapalli added that there was nothing worse than undertaking consultation and not taking notice of the results.

The Chair, Councillor Dark stated that he was conflicted about the report and highlighted that the previous Administration had looked at other Council's schemes and had increased the support from 75% to 84% which was a move forward to support those people who needed it. The Chair added that he was conscious that not all the schemes were the same and explained that his personal view was around the impact on others such as NCC and the Police.

The Chair commented on the consultation which had been undertaken and asked if the reasons were available as to why people disagreed with the proposal. The Chair added that a lot of work had been undertaken this year prior to the consultation and articles had been published in the press.

The Chair referred to the email received from Councillor Morley, Portfolio Holder for Finance which had been copied to all Members of the Panel.

The content of the email received from Councillor Morley is set out below.

"However, I would like to add an aspect, not included in this factual report, regarding the consultation process. We changed the format of the questions this year to make it easier to follow and widely promoted the scheme.

This resulted in 41 surveys being completed, which, in itself, is a small number but represents a 64% increase over the previous year. Nevertheless, the web site had 2,345 hits and I hypothesise, that with only 41 completed surveys, nearly all people who looked at the scheme were content for it to go ahead as recommended.

I would also wish to draw the Panel's attention to Para. 3.7 explaining that, as for Universal Credit beneficiaries, a large number of working age people are eligible for CTSS. This surely says something about health, jobs and wages in West Norfolk and the need for support in these difficult times.

Paragraph 4.7 explains that, as we have more Band D equivalent properties in the tax base, the scheme can be accommodated within the current Financial Plan.

All in all, I trust your Panel will recognise that this move to offer 100% support to working age people is needed, perhaps more than any period since, in my view, 1945, and support a positive recommendation.”

The Chair stated that he could not support Councillor Morley’s hypothesis that anyone who looked at a consultation but does not respond to it should automatically be considered in favour of the recommendation as the Council do not do it elsewhere.

The Chair outlined the other issues to consider, for example, the proposal to look at a King’s Lynn Town Council and if that was established that would there be a precept. The Chair added that personally he looked at option 1 and commented that he would go against or abstain as the proposal went against the responses received from the consultation. The proposal would be debated at Cabinet and Full Council. In conclusion, the Chair, Councillor Dark stated that he would abstain as he was not comfortable with the proposal.

Councillor Nash outlined the reasons why he could not support the proposal for option 1. Councillor Nash commented that his personal view was that there was a lot of working people struggling and paying the full amount. The Council was already generous giving an 84% allowance as opposed to the 75% proposed by the County Council. Councillor Nash added that there was a 100% scheme available to those where there was a need so there was an opportunity to seek assistance.

In response to a question from Councillor Long if 100% discount was given were bills issued, the Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that a bill was still sent out for people to check and confirm if the information held by the Council was correct or required amendment.

Under Standing Order 34, Councillor Joyce addressed the Panel and outlined the reasons why in his opinion that help should be given to those who required assistance.

The Leader, Councillor Parish referred to the questions set out in the consultation exercise and the replies received. The Leader added that consultation had been undertaken with other interested parties including NCC and the Police listen to recording and the Council made efforts to provide provision in dire circumstances which would impact on the Borough Council.

RESOLVED: That the Corporate Performance Panel noted the consultation responses and decided to recommend to Cabinet and Council that the changes detailed Option 1 are adopted as the final CTS Scheme for 2024/2025 (**Votes: 3 For, 1 Against, 4 Abstentions**).