

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET 7 MARCH 2023 FROM THE CORPORATE PERFORMANCE PANEL 4 JANUARY 2023

CP85 **COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT - FINAL SCHEME FOR 2023/2024**

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In presenting the report, the Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that the Council must implement a Council Tax Support (CTS) scheme for its working age residents for each financial year. The Panel was advised that the Council must first decide on a draft CTS scheme which was open for public consultation, and then must agree a final CTS scheme, considering the consultation responses.

The Revenues and Benefits Manager highlighted that the final CTS scheme for 2023/2024 was a continuation of the 2022/2023 CTS scheme, with two minor amendments to reflect welfare reform changes during 2022/2023.

The key issues were outlined as set out in the report.

Under Standing Order 34, Councillor Jones addressed the Panel and made the following statement:

“To me it appears strange that a delegated decision to consult on the Council Tax Support Scheme was taken in early Autumn, but a Motion to Council should be put on a long back burner.

This Motion to Council was referred to Cabinet on 1 September last year. What and why has it taken so long to come before this Panel. Would it be too cynical to suggest a delaying tactic has been deployed with an obvious intent.

It still has to go to Cabinet where the defence to reject it will likely be “other bodies will have set their budgets for the coming financial year”.

Taxpayers in West Norfolk pay more to the county council and police than any other district. It is most welcome that a new leader and portfolio holder for finance raised the level of Council Tax Support last year to 84% from its previous minimum allowed under the law. Yet In Norwich the City Council have a 100% Council Tax Support Scheme.

Is there any councillor representing anywhere in West Norfolk who believes Norwich does not receive the lion's share of resources from the county council and police? There is a widespread opinion that West Norfolk always seems to be left out when it comes to county council and police services. Yet local West Norfolk taxpayers contribute the most.

The report for some reason separates families from lone parents. This seems in today's modern age an antiquated view. But what the report does show is that around 45% of non-protected lone parents in receipt of Council Tax Support are employed. Still they are expected to pay. Most lone parents are women. Is this why they must pay?

Everyone is struggling this year with the cost of living spiralling out of control. Only this month energy bills have been increased even though the price of natural gas has fallen below the pre Russian invasion of Ukraine level. Oil prices have also fallen substantially, but only moderately has petrol and diesel fallen at the pumps. Increases in food prices are both eye watering and frightening as many people miss meals.

Everyone can be assured that a Labour council would have a 100% Council Tax Support Scheme. But this is not about Labour versus Conservative. The cost of living crisis is a common foe. We should all stand together united. Because this is about doing right by the people we all claim to represent.

We should not be looking to add to problems local taxpayers face. The projected cost to this Council is £17,000. A not insignificant sum, but one I am confident can be found. This Council should be encouraged by this Panel voting to help local people by having a 100% Council Tax Support Scheme.”

The Chair invited the Revenues and Benefits Manager to answer the questions raised by Councillor Jones in relation to families and lone parents.

The Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that there was no intention to separate the categories of families and lone parents and added that she was happy to merge the two categories into one. The Panel was informed that both families and lone parents with a child under 5 were within the protected group and could receive up to 100% support.

Councillor Morley outlined the problems with the current process and commented that it would be beneficial to consult with the preceptors first before going out to consultation.

The Leader responded to the key points raised by Councillor Jones and reminded the Panel that in the previous year the Administration had raised the level of Council tax relief which was not because of a notice of motion. The Leader outlined the reasons why 100% council tax support had been applied.

The Chair commented the increase in the response rate to the consultation was 250%.

Under Standing Order 34, Councillor Joyce addressed the Panel and commented that the Labour Administration would apply 100% relief and referred to the comments made by Councillor Jones. Councillor Joyce stated that the cost to the council of 100% relief would be £17,000 which was a small amount of its budget.

In response to comments made by Councillor Nockolds on potential difficulties in understanding the scheme in order to respond to the consultation exercise, the Revenues and Benefits Manager agreed that this was a fair point and undertook to review the consultation questions for 2024.

Councillor Morley made the following comment – a protocol be included within the process to consult within the Borough before going out to preceptors. Councillor Morley wished it to be recorded that he did not support the recommendation set out below.

RESOLVED: The Panel noted the consultation responses as detailed in Appendix C and agreed the draft CTS scheme for 2023/2024 which went to public consultation was recommended to Cabinet and Council as the final CTS scheme for 2023/2024.

CP88 **REPORT OF THE INFORMAL WORKING GROUP - COUNCIL MEETING ARRANGEMENTS**

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The Chief Executive presented the report which invited the Panel to consider the findings of the Council Meeting Arrangements – Informal Working Group.

The Panel's attention was drawn to the key issues set out in the report and Section 2 on page 81.

Councillor Mrs Spikings explained that she was not present at the second meeting of the Informal Working Group (IWG) but reiterated that 6 pm was considered too late to hold a Full Council meeting at 6 pm as it was too late to attend a 3 hour meeting plus travelling home.

The Chair and Councillor Morley drew the Panel's attention to page 89 5) That Full Council be held at 6 pm.

Councillor Spikings commented those present had agreed 6 pm and that she was not involved in the last discussion and added if she had been able to attend would have objected to a 6 pm start and explained that Councillors and workers had caring responsibilities for elderly relatives as well as children.

Councillor Hudson concurred with the comments made by Councillor Spikings and explained that the whole Labour group confirmed they

wished to remain with a 4.30 pm start time. Councillor Hudson added that employers were obliged to grant time off to attend Council meetings and that a meeting finishing at 10 pm was not acceptable and some Councillors had to travel a long distance home.

The Chair added that he did not agree with the comments made by Councillor Hudson and drew the Panel's attention to page 81, 2.5 – The IWG considered the start time for full Council meetings. There was no agreement by the IWG on a recommended start time.

Councillor Mrs Spikings asked for clarification on the recommendation from the IWG on the proposed start time for Full Council meetings.

The Chief Executive provided clarification and outlined the discussions held at the two meetings of the IWG and advised that there was no agreement reached for either a 4.30 pm or 6 pm start time. In conclusion, the Chief Executive drew Members' attention to page 81, section 2 Findings of the IWG and invited the Panel to put forward a recommendation that could be include in the report to Cabinet.

The Chair proposed that the Panel recommend page 81 as outlined by the Chief Executive.

Councillor Mrs Spikings sought clarification and added she did not support the recommendation.

The Chief Executive explained that 6 pm was referred to in the minutes of the second meeting of the IWG when some members of the IWG were not present, page 81 of the report stated that the question to the Panel was there any recommendation they wished to put forward to Cabinet as the IWG minutes did not agree a start time for Panel or Full Council meetings.

Councillor Mrs Spikings and asked if she could propose 4.30 pm start time for Full Council. The Chair asked Councillor Mrs Spikings if she wished to press ahead with her amendment. Councillor Mrs Spikings confirmed that she did. The proposal was seconded by Councillor Mrs Nockolds.

The Monitoring Officer confirmed that the Panel could determine to override the findings of the IWG.

Councillor Nash commented that the general public could not always attend a meeting before 6 pm and added that he supported a 6 pm start time and would vote against the amendment.

Councillor Mrs Nockolds stated that the statement made by Councillor Nash regarding attendance by members of the public was not substantiated and explained that other Councils held meetings at 10 am and members of the public attended.

Councillor Nash commented that the above point was taken.

Under Standing Order 34, Councillor de Whalley commented that his perception of public participation fell away as a consequence of the Pandemic and social changes as the population moved out of the Pandemic will see more in the way of public attendance at Council meetings and added that he had encountered difficulties with employers as they had not understood other government related activities. In conclusion, Councillor de Whalley stated that it was not just for this Administration but in May 2023 following the Elections there might be a different set out Councillors in post and it would therefore be wrong for the current Councillors to make it more difficult for candidates to stand as Councillors.

Councillor Hudson explained that if a member of the public was not able to attend a meeting in person then they could watch on You Tube at their own convenience and therefore did not require time off work to attend a meeting. Councillor Hudson added that any potential candidate standing for Election should take into account the roles and responsibilities as would be expected if applying for any job. Councillor Hudson stated that 4.30 pm had been an acceptable time for Panels to meet, if a Panel did not want to meet at 4.30 pm they could determine their own start time and the only meeting which had to be set in perpetuity was Full Council.

The Leader addressed the Panel and explained that Councillors over the period of 4 years had been faced with the Pandemic and could not hold face to face meetings but met via Zoom/Teams commencing at different times. The Leader advised that there were not many meetings left until the May 2023 election and that any recommendations put forward setting times would put a requirement on the class of 2023 when a number of Councillors were voluntarily retiring, not elected or in difference places and commented that if the Panel could not agree the recommendations from the IWG which seemed to be the case, should the Council continue operating under the current arrangements if there was no recommendation from the Panel the item possibly placed on the Cabinet Forward Decisions List/Panel Work Programme following the May 2023 Election.

The Chair referred to 2.5 – The IWG considered the start time for Full Council meetings. There was no agreement by the IWG on a recommended start time and asked the Panel if it wished to insert an additional sentence along the lines of CPP would however like to recommend to Cabinet that Full Council meetings start at 4.30 pm.

The Panel voted on the amendment set out above proposed by Councillor Mrs Spikings, seconded by Councillor Mrs Nockolds. The vote was carried (7 votes for, 3 against).

RESOLVED: The Panel recommended to Cabinet that Full Council meetings commence at 4.30 pm.

CP90 **REVIEW OF THE UNREASONABLE COMPLAINANTS POLICY**

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The Monitoring Officer explained that the purpose of the report was to report back on the work of the Informal Working Group (IWG) established to consider the Unreasonably Complainants Policy (UPC) so that the Panel may consider whether to recommend some or all of the proposed changes to Cabinet.

The Panel was advised that the majority of the proposed changes were agreed in meetings held by the IWG in 2021 and approved by CPP on 1 February 2022. Following the Cabinet meeting of 15 March 2022 at which the proposed changes to the UPC were considered, the matter was returned to the CPP/IWG to consider comments by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

The Monitoring Officer advised that the sections of the tracked changes UPC was attached at Appendix 1 (shown in yellow highlighting) had been added to reflect the IWG's consideration of the Ombudsman's comments.

The Panel's attention was drawn to the key issues set out in the report.

RESOLVED: The Panel considered the changes set out at Appendices 1 and 3 and resolved to recommend all of the proposed changes onwards to Cabinet.