

Minutes of a meeting of the **CABINET** held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Priors Road, Spalding, on Tuesday, 12 September 2023 at 6.30 pm.

PRESENT

C N Worth (Leader)

G J Taylor (Deputy
Leader)
T A Carter (Deputy
Leader)
J R Astill

H J W Bingham
A Casson
P A Redgate

E J Sneath
J Tyrrell

Apologies for absence were received from the Joint Chief Executive.

The Deputy Chief Executive – Corporate Development (S151), the Assistant Director – Strategic Growth and Development, the Group Manager – Communications and Engagement, the Head of Revenues and Benefits (PSPS), the Team Leader (Revenues and Recovery) (PSPS), the Housing Development Manager, the Democratic Services Manager and the Democratic Services Team Leader.

In Attendance: Councillor B Alcock (Chairman, Performance Monitoring Panel), Councillor A C Beal (Chairman, Governance & Audit Committee), Councillor R A Gibson (Leader, Independent Group) and Councillor A R Woolf (Chairman, Policy Development Panel).

12. **MINUTES**

The following minutes were agreed and signed by the Leader. There was no requirement to discuss the content of the exempt minute attached to the agenda at item 15 and these were therefore also agreed at this point:

- Cabinet – 6 June 2023
- Cabinet – 6 June 2023 (exempt minute)

13. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.**

There were no declarations of interest.

14. **QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE PUBLIC UNDER THE COUNCIL'S CONSTITUTION (STANDING ORDERS).**

There were none.

15. **TO CONSIDER ANY MATTERS WHICH HAVE BEEN SUBJECT TO CALL-IN.**

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There were none.

16. **TO CONSIDER MATTERS ARISING FROM THE POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE MONITORING PANELS**

There were none.

17. **PARTNERSHIP COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY**

Consideration was given to the report of the Assistant Director – Corporate, which asked the Cabinet to consider a South and East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership Communications Strategy.

The Portfolio Holder, Corporate and Communications presented the report. The following points were highlighted:

The Leader commented that this was an important document and acknowledged the work that had been undertaken to produce it.

DECISION:

- 1) That the Partnership Communications Strategy at Appendix A to the report be approved; and
- 2) That the feedback from scrutiny committees at 2.6 within the report be noted.

(Other options considered:

- *Do nothing – this was possible but would not support the aspirations of the Partnership to align functions or support the Partnership in delivering a consistent and co-ordinated approach to communications.*

Reasons for decision:

- *To provide an aligned and consistent approach to Partnership communications with internal and external audiences).*

18. **REVIEW OF HRA CAPITAL PROGRAMME AND PURCHASE OF S106 HOMES IN WESTON**

Consideration was given to the report of the Assistant Director – Strategic Growth and Development which reviewed the HRA Capital Programme relating to housing delivery and presented a business case for the acquisition of 17 S106 Affordable Homes.

The Portfolio Holder for Strategic Housing, Leisure Centre Delivery and Spalding Town Improvement presented the report. The following points were highlighted:

- The Portfolio Holder for Communities and Operational Housing commented that as operational housing came within her remit, that the additional rental properties were very welcome.

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- Members asked what forms of heating were in the properties – was the Council seriously considering other forms of renewable heating sources within future property purchases?
 - Officers responded that these properties had gas boilers. The Council would be looking at alternatives in the future – the Assistant Director for Housing would be able to provide members with more information on this topic.
- Members responded asking if, in purchasing properties, the Authority was seeking to lead the way by influencing developers to consider alternative energy sources in future properties that they built.
 - The Leader did not disagree with this sentiment for the future. Currently cost and affordability were the main issues – officers would be able to answer members questions regarding detail on the way forward.

At this point, members agreed that under section 100a (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following debate on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of part 1 of Schedule 12A of the act.

- Members asked for confirmation that the developer whom the Council was buying the properties from had built all the affordable housing that they had been required to?
 - Officers provided information on what they believed the situation to be but commented that they would clarify the position with the relevant officer.
 - Members commented that regardless of whether the properties were affordable homes or not, it was important that they were acquired for those that required them and that the Council was seen as the landlord of choice.

Following this discussion, the press and public returned to the meeting, prior to consideration of the recommendations detailed within the report.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET:

That Cabinet recommends to Council:

- 1) To approve the business case and approve the acquisition of 17 affordable homes within Weston, for the HRA, subject to Council approval;
- 2) To approve, and recommend to Council, the revised HRA capital programme as shown at Appendix B, including this scheme and the reprofiling of future years schemes, subject to Council approval;
- 3) To approve and recommend to Council the reprofiling of funding for the HRA capital programme, subject to Council approval;
- 4) To delegate to the Assistant Director Strategic Growth and Development, in consultation with the Deputy Chief Executive (Corporate Development) and S151, to agree the contractual matters (including the terms and conditions which may

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represent a minor variation to the scheme approved in the business case) such as signing the contract/transfer document and other incidental actions that may be required, and approving the associated due diligence and valuation required to purchase the properties, subject to Council approval .

RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL:

- 1) To approve the business case and the acquisition of 17 affordable homes within Weston, for the HRA;
- 2) To approve the revised HRA capital programme as shown at Appendix B, including this scheme and the reprofiling of future years schemes;
- 3) To approve the reprofiling of funding for the HRA capital programme;
- 4) To delegate to the Assistant Director Strategic Growth and Development, in consultation with the Deputy Chief Executive (Corporate Development) and S151, to agree the contractual matters (including the terms and conditions which may represent a minor variation to the scheme approved in the business case) such as signing the contract/transfer document and other incidental actions that may be required, and approving the associated due diligence and valuation required to purchase the properties.

(Other options considered:

- *Do nothing – in this event, the authority would not proceed to purchase the properties. As a consequence, the expected benefits set out in the Reasons for Recommendations section of the report would not be realised. Officers would seek to identify alternative, appropriate schemes for consideration by the Executive or Council.*

Reasons for decision:

- *To enable new affordable homes to be delivered which met identified housing need in the district;*
- *To provide a return on investment as set out in the financial evaluation provided at Appendix A to the report;*
- *To replace homes sold to tenants via right to buy*
- *To deliver housing solutions which met local needs and aspirations to ensure that residents had access to a range of housing options in the district).*

19. LOCAL AUTHORITY HOUSING FUND

Consideration was given to the report of the Assistant Director – Strategic Growth and Development. Following invitation from Government to seek agreement for the Council to take part in the Local Authority Housing Fund programme Round 2, the Cabinet was requested to consider acceptance of government funding to support the delivery of eight new homes in the district to meet short, medium and long term housing need.

The Portfolio Holder for Communities and Operational Housing presented the report. The following points were highlighted:

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- Whilst supporting the proposals, members asked whether the requirement to house Afghan refugees in the area would be imposed if the proposals within the report were not supported at this stage?
 - Officers were unable to answer this question – this was a decision for the Government, and currently all that could be considered were the proposals detailed.
- Members asked whether the Afghan refugees would be expected to leave the property they were housed in once their visas had expired, or would they be able to remain.
 - It was clarified that, based on what we currently know, it was not the intent that any persons be asked to leave whilst they had the legal right to remain, and should they wish to remain at a property.
- Members asked whether the intention was to purchase new build properties, or properties from the existing general market?
 - The Portfolio Holder responded that the quickest route would be sought – the money had to be spent and the properties owned by March 2024. The intention would be to go to the new market first however, as the report suggested, this did not necessarily mean that those would be the properties to be used for temporary accommodation or to house the Afghan families – the Authority’s own stock could be used as a better fit for either of these groups. The scheme did not specify that the houses bought had to be the ones used.
- Members responded that care needed to be taken in buying older house and what any potential upgrade costs could be.
- The Leader of the Opposition summarised that Government monies, to be match funded to buy properties to house Afghan families and three local families was a very good way forward and congratulated the team for its work on this to date.
- The Leader agreed that there was a need to support Afghan families that had supported our armed services, and that the proposals also provided the opportunity to provide housing solutions for local people aswell.

DECISIONS:

1. That Cabinet formally agree to take part on the Local Authority Housing Fund Round 2 programme with a view to bringing eight properties in the council’s ownership to meet short, medium and long term housing needs within the district;
2. That it be recommended to Council that the 2023/24 capital programme be amended to reflect the LAHF project as set out at Appendix A;
3. To delegate to the Assistant Director – Strategic Growth and Development, in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Operational Housing, the authority to conclude contractual and grant agreement arrangements with Government in respect of the scheme.

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RECOMMENDATION TO COUNCIL:

4. That the 2023/24 capital programme be amended to reflect the LAHF project.

(Other options considered:

- *Do nothing – Under this option, the council will not accept the funds from government, nor to seek to make properties available. The purpose of the fund is to support local authorities in meeting the housing needs arising in their area. Therefore, under the ‘do nothing’ option, the potential benefits referenced within the report would not be realised.*

Reasons for decision:

- *To accept an offer of up to £880,000 in government funding to support in making eight properties available to meet short, medium and long term housing needs within the district. To recommend to Council the inclusion of funds in the 2023/24 capital budget to deliver the project, captured within the capital programme set out in Appendix A. To delegate authority to officers to conclude contractual agreements with government).*

20. **DEBT WRITE OFF**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of the Deputy Chief Executive – Corporate Development (S151) which sought approval for the write off of uncollectable debt.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Commercialisation, UKSPF and Levelling Up presented the report. The following points were highlighted:

- Members asked what the cost was to attempt to collect the debt?
 - Officers explained that all services that were part of the collection fund were contracted to be collected by PSPS. The cost of collection had to be balanced against the amount of the debt. Debts would be pursued as much as they possibly could be – some would be unenforceable, some individuals had absconded etc. All costs of collection were set out in the contract with PSPS, with figures available to all members. There was a collective cost for pursuing all debt rather than the finer cost per individual debt.
- Members commented that SHDC collected on behalf of others, including Lincolnshire County Council – where we were successful in collecting any debts, were costs offset in this respect?
 - Officers advised that as part of the collection fund, the costs of collection were part of that, and spread across all beneficiaries.
- Members commented that the funds recommended for write-off covered a relatively long period of time with much of the debt due to only two debtors. They were confident that all efforts had been made to collect as much of the debt as possible, whilst being realistic about outcomes.

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- Members commented that as an authority, we were now much better at collection however, it was difficult to understand how the sum of some debts could accrue over a number of years. How was it possible for some individuals to continue to accrue debts over multiple years, and what action could be taken to stop this?
 - Officers confirmed that some debts could range over a number of financial years, and that write-offs were not presented until all steps to pursue monies had been taken. There could sometimes be a delay, for a number of reasons, before the point was reached at which a decision had to be taken as to whether the continuation of collection was still cost-effective. There were plenty of tracing activities that could be undertaken, sometimes over several years.
- Members acknowledged the response but asked how certain individuals living at the same property for a number of years could continue to accrue debt.
 - The Leader responded that officers should assist with members queries in this regard outside of the meeting.
- Members asked whether, should an individual with debt that had been written off present to the Council with a housing need, would the previous debt be pursued.
 - Officers commented that in a situation such as this, any outstanding debt that had been written off would be written back on.
- The Leader commented that he agreed with most of the comments that had been made and reiterated that the authority was getting much better at effecting recovery of debts, and that he had full confidence in officers pursuing all debt wherever possible. It was highly likely that more insolvency would be seen over the next few years, due to the after-effects of the Covid pandemic and the current poor economic situation.

DECISION:

That the amounts identified in the report, as detailed below, be approved for write off:

Council Tax	£63,470.77
Business Rates	£1,167,971.57
Housing Benefit Overpayment	£32,711.05
Sundry Debt	£84,979.96
Total	£1,349,133.35

(Other options considered:

- *Not to approve the amounts for write off, however this would leave uncollectable debt showing on the council records;*

Reasons for decision:

- *All recovery methods have been considered and where appropriate pursued, before making the decision to write off. Debts would be written off against provisions in the Council's accounts.*
- *Officer time could be maximised on greatest returns, at the same time as ensuring robust procedures for debt management were in place across all revenue streams).*

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21. **ANY OTHER ITEMS WHICH THE LEADER DECIDES ARE URGENT.**

There were none.

(The meeting ended at 19.07)

(End of minutes)

Any **RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL** detailed above will be submitted for consideration to the meeting of the full Council on 27 September 2023.