

## **Minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held as online meeting on Thursday 17 December 2020 at 2.30 pm**

**Present:** Councillor David Hitchiner, Leader of the Council (Chairperson)  
Councillor Felicity Norman, Deputy Leader of the Council (Vice-Chairperson)

Councillors Ellie Chowns, Pauline Crockett, Gemma Davies, John Harrington, Liz Harvey and Ange Tyler

Cabinet support members in attendance Councillors Jenny Bartlett, John Hardwick and Peter Jinman

Group leaders in attendance Councillors Jonathan Lester, Bob Matthews and Trish Marsh

Scrutiny chairpersons in attendance Councillors Elissa Swinglehurst, Carole Gandy and Jonathan Lester

Officers in attendance: Director for economy and place, Director for children and families, Solicitor to the council and Chief finance officer

### **43. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

There were no apologies from members of the cabinet.

Councillor Tyler explained that she would need to leave to attend another urgent meeting following the announcement of the change to the coronavirus restrictions. The leader of the council agreed that item 6 on the agenda be taken at the end of the meeting so that Councillor Tyler could be present to introduce the report.

### **44. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None.

### **45. MINUTES**

**Resolved:** That the minutes of the meeting held on 26 November 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairperson.

### **46. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC**

There were no questions from members of the public.

### **47. QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS**

There were no questions from councillors.

### **48. RECOMMENDATION FOR THE FIRST PROCEEDABLE AFFORDABLE HOUSING SCHEME**

The cabinet member housing, regulatory services and community safety introduced the report. She reminded cabinet members that a decision had been taken in November for the council to deliver up to 2,500 affordable homes in the county over the next 10 years. This subsequent paper sought agreement to work up outline proposals on the first development site, using funding from the Development Regeneration Programme (DRP), to establish the optimal mix.

A correction to the wording of the recommendation was noted, that the housing should be 'net zero carbon.

Cabinet members welcomed the proposal and noted that:

- It had been identified that the site could deliver affordable housing and community space with approximately 180 units depending upon the ultimate type and style;
- The environmental impacts had been considered including flood alleviation and integration with pedestrian routes to local services and other transport infrastructure;
- The next stage would assess the deliverability of the site and present a number of options in terms of density of use, size of individual units and partners who might be interested in supporting the council, as well as a commercial review and viability assessment to identify the optimum mix of tenures;
- As the council owned the site it could retain full control of what was built which would ensure the council's sustainability policies and objectives were met and contribute to the proactive approach to ensure the right properties were available in the right location and built to a high specification.

Group leaders and representatives were invited to present the views and queries of their groups. The provision of affordable housing was generally welcomed although there were differences of opinion as to whether the council should be the body to provide this. It was noted that:

- Value for money was important, and it might be necessary to sell some units to cross subsidise the affordable units;
- The need to manage flooding on the site was recognised and the next stage would build on previous work to establish how this could be alleviated.

**It was resolved that:**

**(a) Cabinet approve to spend up to £68k to work up outline proposals for a net carbon zero affordable housing scheme on Sites 1b, 1c, 2a and 2b Station Approach for further review and approval by Cabinet.**

#### **49. REVIEW OF FOSTERING ALLOWANCES AND FEES FOR FOSTER CARERS**

The cabinet member children and families introduced the report. She explained that it was hoped an increase to allowances would increase the choice of placements available and reduce the chance of placements breaking down. Having a wider choice of local placements would improve outcomes for children and young people in foster care and reduce reliance on more expensive private arrangements and out of county placements.

The head of service for care experienced children and young people highlighted the key points of the report. She explained that a review had shown Herefordshire had fallen behind the allowances paid by other councils. The recommendations in the report would address this and ensure that Herefordshire did not fall behind again. The recommendation to provide a discount on council tax was a way to provide a benefit to council foster carers that private foster care agencies could not offer. It was hoped this would attract potential foster carers to work with the council rather than join a private agency.

Cabinet members were fully supportive of the proposals and noted that:

- Efforts to recruit more foster carers were ongoing but numbers remained similar to the previous year for general carers although there had been an increase in the number of kinship carers;
- There had been an increase in the number of children and young people placed in residential care because the council could not find a placement for them, at the time of the meeting there were 23 children in residential care whose needs would be best met in a foster family;

- Additional support had been added to the HIPPS scheme in terms of finance and wrap around care, covid had made the situation more difficult but pressures did exist before the pandemic;
- It was a priority that children received stability, support and guidance when it was deemed necessary for them to be in foster care;
- It was hoped that the additional allowance and discount on council tax would allow potential carers to adjust their work commitments;
- Every foster carer had an allocated social worker in addition to the social worker allocated to their child in care, there were offers for regular respite, support groups for peer support and a well-developed training programme;
- The holistic package of support was important - conversations took place regularly with foster carers to understand what additional support they needed and the reasons for carers leaving, all carers had an annual review where they could feed back on their experiences and foster carer representatives were included on the corporate parenting panel;
- Independent foster care agencies were approved and regulated by Ofsted in the same way as the council, a regional framework of independent agencies was in place but the council would always look to use in-house placements first;
- Where a child was placed with an independent foster carer they remained the responsibility of the council;
- It would be hard for the council to compete with independent agencies on a financial basis and if the council were to increase allowances further to match those currently paid by independent agencies then it might simply drive private allowances up further;
- the proposed uplift in council allowances would bring Herefordshire back into line with average payments from neighbouring councils and the council would look at ways to attract potential carers through the holistic package provided;
- potential foster carers were encouraged to work with their local council and there were reciprocal arrangements in place with neighbouring councils to redirect enquiries;
- the sufficiency of placements was reviewed at least annually as the financial impact of insufficient placements was significant, the council was constantly reviewing what more could be done to recruit additional foster carers.

The head of service for care experienced children and young people explained that anyone interested in becoming a foster carer could find information on the council website and make an online enquiry to the recruitment officer who would be happy to talk to anyone interested with no commitment.

Group leaders and representatives were invited to present the views and queries from their groups. There was general support for the proposed increases and recognition of the important work done by foster carers. It was noted that:

- it was not a case of recruitment becoming more difficult although it was a constant challenge to recruit sufficient foster carers;
- it was most difficult to recruit carers for older children, for sibling groups and for children with disabilities;
- allowances should be kept under review to ensure they did not fall behind other councils again;
- the council tax discount could benefit wealthier carers more than less well-off ones although there was support for the principle of the discount.

The chair of the children and young people scrutiny committee highlighted that the issue of payments to foster carers had been explored by the committee in the past and that the proposals in the report were welcomed. There was likely to be more that could be done to improve recruitment and retention of carers.

The cabinet member environment, economy and place proposed that the discount on council tax be increased to 100% in order to recognise the value of what foster carers did and provide even more encouragement for potential council foster carers. This proposal was seconded by the cabinet member health and adult wellbeing.

The section 151 officer was asked what the financial impact would be of increasing the council tax discount for council foster carers to 100%. He confirmed that this would create an additional £87k revenue pressure and that he believed this could be managed within the budget.

**It was resolved that:**

- (a) Fostering fees and allowances are increased to the amounts detailed in Appendix A from 1st January 2021;**
- (b) The Director of Children and Families is given delegated authority to approve annual increases in fostering fees in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children and Families and the section 151 Officer;**
- (c) The fostering fees and allowances policy is approved and implemented from 1st January 2021 (Appendix B); and**
- (d) Council approved foster carers receive a 100% exemption to their Council tax from 1st April 2021.**

**50. LOCAL AUTHORITY SCHOOL BUILDINGS MAINTENANCE WORKS 2021-2023**

The cabinet member commissioning, procurement and assets introduced the item. She explained that it was essential that works were planned maintenance rather than remedial work as reactive measures usually costed more and meant that children were not learning in good quality buildings. It was imperative to build back better and that commissioning for works took place in ways that did not exclude local tradespeople.

The cabinet member children and families supported the proposals and stressed the importance for children and staff of maintaining school buildings and the impact on reducing carbon emissions and improving air quality. Investment would save costs in the future.

The head of educational development explained that the report sought approval for a schedule of maintenance works for financial years 2021/22 and 2022/23. As the schedule was based on a projected capital grant it was recommended that the assistant director educational development and skills be given delegated authority to adjust the final programme of works to fit the grant actually received. The grant from government was ring fenced for schools maintenance but the council could choose to supplement this.

The sufficiency planning and capital investment manager explained the process for producing the priority list of works based on condition surveys. The overall rating from the matrix identified which works needed to be undertaken first, although individual elements would be packaged together where sensible.

In discussion of the report cabinet members noted that:

- Surveys would identify risks of issues such as asbestos in school buildings and remedial work would be commissioned as necessary, a contingency pot was also available for unexpected extra costs;
- Scheduled works to fire alarms would be planned upgrades, any urgent works to faulty systems would be dealt with as an immediate priority;

- Planned works included maintenance to mobile classrooms which were needed to keep the buildings usable.

Group leaders welcomed the planned investment and stated that it was unfortunate there was such a gap between the funding received for capital maintenance of school buildings and the level of need. It was noted that academy schools had a separate process to bid for capital maintenance funds through the Education and Skills Funding Agency. These bids were not always successful and the council had supported some schools to improve their bids for future rounds.

**It was resolved that:**

- (a) The school maintenance schemes as set out in appendix A be approved for implementation in 2021/22 and 2022/23;**
- (b) The Assistant Director Education Development and Skills be authorised to take all operational decisions necessary to implement the approved schemes, and any other urgent contingency schemes required, within the approved budget of £2.940m for maintenance;**
- (c) The Assistant Director Education Development and Skills be authorised to take all operational decisions necessary to vary the approved schemes should the amount of funding received from the Department for Education differ from that used to determine the proposed schemes.**

The meeting ended at 4.23 pm

**Chairperson**

