

RESOURCES POLICY ADVISORY GROUP (SBDC)

Meeting - 26 September 2017

Present: T Egleton (Chairman)
D Dhillon, B Gibbs and P Hogan

Also Present: D Smith

Apologies for absence: S Chhokar and R Sangster

10. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Policy Advisory Group (PAG) held on 15 June 2017 were received.

11. DISCRETIONARY BUSINESS RATE RELIEF

Following the announcement in the Spring Budget 2017 of central government funds for Discretionary Business Rate Relief, the Committee were advised that each local authority had to design its own scheme for distributing the funds. The proposed scheme in consultation with other Buckinghamshire local authorities, focussed on small and local businesses with exclusions for certain types of business. The proposed target was to assist local businesses with not more than 2 premises and a rateable value under £200,000. It was estimated that about 165 businesses would benefit. It was anticipated that the percentage tax relief would be about 35% but depending on the applications received it may be possible to increase the award later in the year as the Council wants to use as much as possible of the Government funding. Councillors asked if there would be a further meeting to discuss the percentage when the study was complete but it was advised that there was a requirement for Council's to proceed in a timely fashion or it could result in negative publicity. It was agreed that a note could be circulated to Members if necessary.

It was asked why the scheme had been set for those small businesses with not more than 2 premises and it was advised that this mirrored the current small business rate relief scheme. It was noted that the scheme would be consistent across the 4 districts.

Having considered the advice of the PAG, the Portfolio Holder **RESOLVED** to **RECOMMEND** to Cabinet:

1. That the discretionary scheme set out in Appendix A be agreed.
2. To delegate authority to the Head of Customer Services in consultation with the Portfolio Holder to agree the final percentage award for the

financial years 2017/18 and 2018/19, and future changes with regard to Government guidance, the Council's financial position and other such considerations as they may think fit.

3. That authority for all awards made in accordance with para 4.2 a) (all ratepayers matching agreed criteria (outlined below) to qualify for an award equivalent to a percentage of the increase they have faced (% to be agreed, based on affordability) be delegated to the Head of Customer Services. All awards under 4.2 b) (Applications from ratepayers falling outside the criteria to be considered on a case by case basis and assessed on need and local impact.) will be made in accordance with the Council's existing Discretionary Rate Relief Policy.

12. AFFORDABLE HOUSING ACTION PLAN

The Affordable Housing Action Plan set out several recommended actions in line with those already in place in a number of other District Councils. There were still uncommitted funds received under the affordable housing section 106 agreements that needed to be allocated.

There were currently pressures from the Ombudsman to reduce the numbers in Bed & Breakfast emergency accommodation for more than 6 weeks and there could be substantial fines if a reduction was not achieved. Currently the affordable housing stock is limited with an average of 2 properties per week being advertised through Bucks Home Choice, the Councils choice based letting system, resulting in a 2 year waiting list for a 2 bedroom property in the district.

The need to borrow for the acquisition of residential properties was noted but it would avoid the emergency housing costs which have risen significantly in recent years. The properties would be managed by a housing association but the Council would retain the capital value of the property.

Members discussed why there was an increase in homelessness. It was in line with the national trends, the supply of suitable accommodation to rent had decreased and there was the effect of changes in the housing benefits system which reduced amounts paid. It was advised that there was a Member Task & Finish group looking at the issue of homelessness in detail and it would be reporting to Overview & Scrutiny Committee in October.

It was asked why there had been some Bed & Breakfast debts written off and it was advised that this referred to only a few old cases, one of which was being investigated as a potential fraud. It was advised that this had resulted in procedures being tightened up and new actions put into place. The Task and Finish group would report to Overview & Scrutiny Committee more fully on this matter.

Members of the PAG agreed that it was important to consider the many options and to reduce temporary accommodation costs.

Having considered the advice of the PAG, the Portfolio Holder AGREED to RECOMMEND to Cabinet that

1. Cabinet considers the theoretical business case for the acquisition of residential properties for use as affordable housing and seeks a further report.
2. Cabinet comment on the Affordable Housing Action Plan in seeking to end the long term use of nightly let and B&B accommodation for homelessness.

13. GERRARDS CROSS STATION ROAD MULTISTOREY CAR PARK PROJECT UPDATE

Members noted the updated report and that following the planning consultations and reviewing the comments received the decision had been made to withdraw the planning application for the current scheme. There was still a need for additional parking capacity at Gerrards Cross as identified by the surveys. The options to take the project forward would now be reviewed and reported back to Members. There would be further meetings with stakeholders including the Town Council, Chiltern Railways and Network Rail to discuss the way forward.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

14. TREASURY MANAGEMENT REPORT - QUARTER 1 2017 - 18

The average return on fixed rate investments in the quarter was 0.63%. It was noted that the Council was maintaining a reasonable cash position.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

15. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

An email had been received from Councillor Ray Sangster who had been unable to attend, posing the following questions:

1. Requesting information on the amount lost on the homeless account as discussed above. This information had been circulated to all members of the PAG in advance of the meeting.

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2. Measures to address the situation in the future. It was reported that the task and finish group had investigated and agreed suggested changes to future processes and an action plan. It would be discussed at the next Overview & Scrutiny meeting (16 October 2017) and the recommendations would be considered at the following Cabinet meeting (25 October 2017). All members of the Council would have access to the report and be able to attend the O&S Committee meeting.
3. How much has SBDC spent on the Gerrards Cross car park project to date?

It was advised that the costs incurred would be circulated when available.

16. EXEMPT INFORMATION

"That under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 following item of business is not for publication to the press or public on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act."

(para 3 – Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information))

17. APPLICATION FOR DISCRETIONARY RATE RELIEF

The Chairman requested that the following item be considered next and the Committee agreed.

Councillor P Hogan left the room at 6.14 pm whilst this item was considered as he declared a prejudicial interest in this item, as he was a Director of the Bekonscot Foundation.

It was explained to the meeting that Bekonscot was a "not for profit" organisation that was currently applying for charitable status. Unfortunately, there had been a delay in achieving that status which would automatically qualify for an 80% mandatory relief. The Members were asked to consider an interim decision to award Discretionary Rate Relief up until 31 March 2018 to the same value as the mandatory relief. It was noted that the Council had always supported the Foundation in the past and agreed to

Having considered the advice of the PAG, the Portfolio Holder AGREED to RECOMMEND to Cabinet

That the Discretionary Rate Relief be awarded to 31 March 2018 pending an update on the company gaining charitable status.

18. **CAPSWOOD OFFICES**

It was advised that a tenant had been found for Capswood 1 on the First Floor. The ground floor may also be taken. There was therefore a request for funds to be released for a refurbishment of the floor from allocated capital project for this work. It was hoped that they could occupy the space quite quickly but it was advised that they were giving notice at their present premises and wouldn't be able to move in until February. There was also concern regarding the impact on parking at Capswood, but there was reassurance that they would only use the basement parking and no material impact was anticipated.

Having considered the advice of the PAG, the Portfolio Holder AGREED to RECOMMEND to Cabinet

1. That the progress made be noted and
2. That the allocated capital expenditure of £115,000 for the refurbishment of the ground floor of Capswood 1 be released and the ground floor be let as soon as possible with authority delegated to Head of Environment in consultation with the Portfolio Holder to agree terms.

19. **EMERGENCY HOUSING UNITS FOR TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION - BATH ROAD DEPOT**

The PAG considered the interim development opportunity for temporary housing for use as emergency accommodation at Bath Road Depot. It was currently vacant but had planning permission for employment use. It was proposed to use units of modular construction for a 5 year period. If at the end of this the planning permission was not extended then they can be relocated to another site. The Project Manager and Contractor could be appointed under the Scape agreement to comply with procurement rules to avoid costly delays. Consultations would be made with the Parish Councils.

Members fully supported the scheme in the context of being part of an approach to dealing with the homelessness issue referred to in the report earlier in the agenda. Members considered that the project would be even more worthwhile if more than a 2 storey building could be accommodated on the site. It was advised that it was uncertain whether development in the Green Belt would allow building greater than 2 storeys but the matter would be raised with Planning. The site was considered suitable as a sustainable location for housing, with shops and buses, close proximity to the train station and walking distance to Burnham Town Centre.

It was noted that a project group had been set up to expedite the matter. It was advised that this comprised the Director of Services and the Portfolio Holders for Healthy Communities and Resources, with the assistance of Legal and Finance Officers.

The PAG agreed to support the proposal and looked forward to a further report once the figures were available.

Having considered the advice of the PAG, the Portfolio Holder AGREED to RECOMMEND to Cabinet

- 1 To agree the proposals to design, build and install temporary accommodation units at Bath Road Depot for a period of 5 years.
- 2 That, subject to contract, the Council purchases 801 Bath Road, Taplow and adjacent land, using money available from the approved capital programme and the Head of Environment in consultation with the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and the Portfolio Holder for Resources be authorised to finalise the terms and conclude the purchase.
- 3 To note that Management Team has agreed an exception to the Contract Procedure Rules to appoint a Project Manager or other consultants through the Scape framework to undertake a feasibility study to design, build and install the temporary accommodation units at Bath Road Depot.
- 4 Subject to planning consent and the final business plan to delegate to the Head of Healthy Communities in consultation with the Portfolio Holders for Healthy Communities and Resources the authority to proceed with the development of temporary units for use as emergency accommodation on the Bath Road Depot site including authority for the Head of Environment in consultation with the Head of Legal and Democratic Services to negotiate and conclude any necessary agreements to allow the development to proceed through to completion..
- 5 To authorise the appointment of a Registered Provider to manage the emergency accommodation provided on the Bath Road site and any adjacent land for a period of up to 5 years on terms to be agreed by to the Head of Healthy Communities in consultation with the Portfolio Holders for Healthy Communities and Resources.
- 6 To authorise the Director of Services in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Healthy Communities to draw down up to £2.7m of s106 funding to enable the Bath Road temporary housing project to progress.

The meeting terminated at 7.50 pm