

## **Special Cabinet – Meeting held on Thursday, 14th November, 2024.**

**Present:-** Councillors Smith (Chair), Chahal (Vice-Chair), E. Ahmed, Kelly (from 6.10pm), Manku, Shah (from 6.22pm), Shaik and Wright (from 6.24pm)

**Also present:-** Councillors Hulme and Muvvala

**Apologies for Absence:-** Councillor Bedi

### **PART 1**

#### **59. Declarations of Interest**

No interests were declared.

#### **60. Review of the Council Tax Support scheme for 2025/26 Financial Year**

The Cabinet considered a report on the draft Council Tax Support Scheme (CTS) for 2025/26 for the purposes of consultation.

The Council had a responsibility to make a Council Tax Support scheme specifying the reductions which were to apply in respect of dwellings by people or classes of people who are considered to be in financial need. For each financial year the Council must consider whether to revise its scheme or to replace it with another scheme. If proposing to revise or replace the scheme, the Council must follow a statutory process which includes consulting interested parties and considering what transitional arrangements should be in place if the new scheme has the effect of reducing or removing a reduction.

The draft CTS scheme proposed as at Appendix B to the report included revisions requiring public consultation. A request for a scrutiny call-in waiver had been agreed by the Chair of the Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee (CISC) to enable the public consultation to commence immediately after the Cabinet decision. CISC would be able to review the draft scheme during the consultation period.

The Council currently had the most beneficial CTS scheme within Berkshire and the scheme was more generous than many other councils in the local area and statistical neighbours. The financial pressures facing the Council meant that the authority had to consider all options to close its budget gap, including reducing support provided through the CTS scheme.

The proposed changes were summarised. It was noted that the Council had not made reductions to the support provided under its CTS scheme for many years and in 2023/24 it increased the level of support offered to offset the impact of Council Tax increases. The Council was the only authority in Berkshire that offered a maximum discount of 100% to working age

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applicants. There would not be any changes to the pensioners scheme as this was set nationally.

The Council's current CTS scheme cost £11.5m, of which £7.8m related to working age households. The proposed changes to the scheme were outlined and the option to be consulted on was detailed in Table 4, paragraph 2.20 of the report. If agreed, the proposed scheme could deliver a net saving of £1.7m and align the scheme more with other local authorities. The Council would also utilise a hardship fund to support those in financial need. Other changes proposed were to make it easier for people on Universal Credit by not requiring a separate application for CTS; and backdating for working age customers would be extended from 1 month to 3 months. Following the consultation the feedback would be considered and report would be provided to Cabinet in January and then to full Council for decision.

*(Councillors Kelly, Shah and Wright joined the meeting)*

Members asked about the plans for consultation and it was responded that all 6,500 households currently in receipt of CTS would be written to and there would be a wide range of other actions including engagement with the voluntary and community sector, public events, an online consultation and media activity.

Following a request to speak, Councillor Hulme was invited to address the Cabinet. She expressed concern that the proposed six-week consultation was too short for a decision of this scale and that it should have taken place earlier in the year when there would have been more time to consult and consider the feedback. She commented that the proposed reductions in support across all income bands, including from 100% to 70% in Income Band 1, would have a significant impact on thousands of the poorest households in Slough. Councillor Hulme also asked about whether the impact on arrears had been assessed. Officers responded to the points raised. In terms of the consultation period it was noted that they usually ranged from between four to twelve weeks therefore the proposed six weeks was considered adequate. Assumptions had been factored into the proposal on the anticipated level of collection. The hardship fund proposed to be £175k would be in place to help mitigate the impact for those experiencing financial hardship and the budget for the Household Support Fund was £2.4m in 2025/26.

Lead Members raised a number of issues during the course of the discussion including the adequacy of the hardship funding and the importance of a meaningful consultation process. It was recognised that reducing support available through the scheme would be a difficult decision but that the current scheme was generous in comparison to other local authorities and the Council's financial sustainability and the interests of all Council Taxpayers needed to be considered.

After due consideration, the Cabinet agreed the recommendations to commence a consultation on the draft CTS scheme for 2025/26.

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### **Resolved –**

- (a) That the draft Council Tax Support Scheme at Appendix B be approved for the purposes of consultation.
- (b) That it be noted that a report would be submitted to Cabinet in January 2025 with a recommendation to be made to full Council to agree a scheme before 11 March 2025.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.00 pm and closed at 6.49 pm)