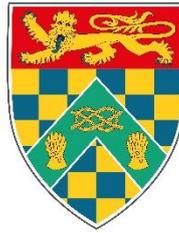


# Minutes

Cabinet

Thursday, 13 January 2022



SOUTH  
KESTEVEN  
DISTRICT  
COUNCIL

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**The Leader:** Councillor Kelham Cooke, The Leader of the Council (Chairman)

**The Deputy Leader:** Councillor Adam Stokes, The Deputy Leader of the Council (Vice-Chairman)

## Cabinet Members present

Councillor Barry Dobson, Cabinet Member for Leisure  
Councillor Annie Mason, Cabinet Member for People and Safer Communities  
Councillor Robert Reid, Cabinet Member for Housing and Property  
Councillor Linda Wootten, Cabinet Member for Corporate Governance and Licensing  
Councillor Breda-Rae Griffin, Chairman of the Council  
Councillor Jacky Smith

## Non-Cabinet Members present

Councillor Breda-Rae Griffin  
Councillor Jacky Smith

## Officers

Karen Bradford (Chief Executive)  
Alan Robinson (Deputy Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer)  
Nicola McCoy-Brown (Director of Growth and Culture)  
Andrew Cotton (Director of Housing and Property)  
Gary Smith (Director of Commercial and Operations)  
Richard Wyles (Assistant Director of Finance and Section 151 Officer)  
Anne-Marie Coulthard (Assistant Director of Operations and Public Protection)  
Alison Hall-Wright (Head of Finance and ICT)  
Graham Watts (Head of Democratic Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer)  
Debbie Roberts (Interim Organisational Development and Change Manager)  
Patrick Astill (Communications)

## 73. Register of attendance and apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Nick Robins and Rosemary Trollope-Bellew.

## 74. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 7 December 2021 were confirmed as a correct record.

## **75. Disclosure of Interests**

No interests were disclosed.

## **76. Review of the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Policy (English language skills test)**

### Purpose of report

To present information for consideration following feedback on the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Policy that took effect from 1 April 2021 and seek approval to amend the pass mark for the English language skills test.

### Decision

That Cabinet:

1. Approves the amendment of the pass mark for the English language skills test as detailed in the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Policy, to a Versant test score of 47 out of 80, for a period of six months with immediate effect.
2. Delegates to the Director for Commercial and Operations, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Corporate Governance and Licensing, to undertake a review at the six month period and either:
  - Maintain the score of 47 out of 80; or
  - Revert to the original score of 58 out of 80.
3. Approves the minor amendment to the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Policy to clarify the intent of the Policy in respect of the Certificate of Good Conduct.

### Alternative options considered and rejected

Cabinet could have considered that the English language skills test score required revision and conclude that some other score may be more appropriate, or continue with the existing Policy without any of the outlined amendments.

### Reason for decision

As part of the review of the Council's Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Policy the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommended that an English language skills test should be implemented for new driver applicants as recommended in the Department for Transport Statutory Taxi and Private Hire Standards issued in July 2020.

Following approval of the Policy by Cabinet on 12 January 2021, where an applicant was unable to demonstrate that they held a relevant qualification taught and examined in English, they must pass an English language skills test. To ensure an unbiased and consistent approach, the tests were purchased from Versant, which

was based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which was an international standard for describing language ability, from A1 (basic) to C2 (proficient).

The current Policy set the pass mark in South Kesteven at a Versant Score of 58 out of 80. The Licensing Committee considered the pass mark at its meeting on 12 November 2021 and recommended that the pass mark be reduced to 54 out of 80, which was equivalent to the entry level for a B1 Independent User. Further consideration was undertaken by the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee where it recommended that the pass mark be reduced further to 47 out of 80 which was still an equivalent to the entry level for a B1 Independent User, and that this be reviewed in six months.

A B1 Independent User would be able to understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school and leisure and could deal with most situations likely to arrive whilst travelling in areas where the language was spoken.

## **77. Draft Budget Proposals for 2022/23**

### Purpose of Report

To present to Cabinet the draft budget estimates for 2022/23, revenue and capital, for both the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account and provided the details that had been included in the budget proposals.

### Decision

Cabinet:

1. Supported the budget proposals for 2022/23 in respect of:
  - General Fund – Revenue and Capital
  - Housing Revenue Account – Revenue and Capital
2. Approved consultation in respect of proposed Council Tax levels for 2022/23 for the period 14 – 28 January 2022 (inclusive).
3. Supported the removal of the Bourne Special Expense Area budgets from 1 April 2022.
4. Supported the proposed fees and charges for 2022/23 as set out in Appendix B of the report.
5. Approved the following proposed movements in reserves:
  - £1.581m from the Budget Stabilisation reserve in order to transfer resources to:
    - £1m to the Regeneration reserve

- £331k to the Maintenance reserve
  - £250k to the Invest to Save reserve
- Removal of the Commercialisation reserve and transfer the balance of £250k to the Invest to Save reserve
  - Use of the additional 2022/23 grants totalling £604k be transferred to the maintenance reserve.

### Alternative options considered and rejected

The report presented several options which Cabinet considered.

### Reason for decision

The budget setting process commenced in September 2021 and the proposals had been formulated by the Cabinet, working closely with senior officers, through a number of budget sessions. The workshops focussed on the spending ambitions of the Council to drive forward the Corporate Plan within the financial parameters and budget discussions had also been held in the context of a financially challenging 2021/22 where the Council continued to forecast a General Fund deficit position.

The report comprehensively covered the following aspects of the budget:

- The funding position for the General Fund.
- The draft General Fund budget proposals.
- The Housing Revenue Account position.
- Fees and charges.
- The Capital Programmes 2022/23 to 2024/25.
- The Capital Financing Statement.
- Reserves and balances.

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Waste Services presented the report and explained each of the respective sections of the report. The following points were noted:

- The Budget Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 12 January 2022 had considered the budget proposals. No amendments or recommendations from the Committee were proposed.
- The Government had only announced a one-year financial settlement which had presented challenges in terms of considering budgets for future years. The elements of the financial settlement announced by the Government on 15 December 2021 for 2022/23 had not resulted in any changes to the Council's proposals.
- Table 3 set out an unbalanced position for future years, however, this would be subject to subsequent Government financial settlement announcements. It also reflected changes to the Government's funding formula and borrowing costs due to the investment in the Deepings Leisure Centre.
- The Companies Committee would consider specific objectives relating to respective companies at its meeting on 25 January 2022.

- Food waste collections would be suspended until rolled out nationally so there was no provision for this in the 2022/23 budget.

During discussion the following comments were noted:

- Local Authorities continued to face financial challenges on a nation-wide basis, with some having to issue Section 114 Notices. South Kesteven District Council was not in that position as it was being fiscally responsible in terms of its budget and corporate ambitions and objectives.
- The Council remained ambitious, and the budget proposals emphasised this with commitments to Council home improvements, the challenge of addressing climate change, improving mental health and driving forward the local economy.
- The proposed budget represented sustainability but also value for money.
- There remained an ambition to increase the number of electric car charging points across the district, particularly faster charging points. The main problem, however, was that the national grid did not have sufficient capacity with upgrades required which was outside of the Council's control.
- The increase in personnel and fuel costs remained a general concern in relation to the grounds maintenance contract uplift.
- The proposed increase in Council Tax could have a significant impact on some households already struggling. It was noted that the Council Tax Support Scheme was in place which people could access if they were eligible for such support. An assurance was also provided that the Council's staff in the Customer Services and Revenues and Benefits Teams would also signpost people to the relevant support should they be identified as being in financial hardship.

In closing the Leader, on behalf of Cabinet, thanked the Assistant Director of Finance and Section 151 and his team for the significant amount of work they had undertaken on the budget proposals.

## **78. Housing Voids Policy**

### Purpose of Report

To provide Cabinet with an opportunity to approve a Housing Service Void Policy and Re-let Standard which sought to efficiently minimise rent lost whilst delivering high rates of tenant satisfaction and value for money.

### Decision

Cabinet:

1. Notes the content of the report in relation to the current management of void properties and the changes already implemented.
2. Approves the proposed Housing Service Void Policy and Re-let Standard.

3. Delegates to the Director of Housing and Property authority to make minor changes to the Policy and Re-let Standard as required by changes in legislation, regulatory standards and tenant feedback.

#### Alternative options considered and rejected

The only other alternative set out in the report was to do nothing. This would entail continuing with no Void Policy or approved re-let standard in place. This was rejected as there were no perceived benefits of progress with no such policy or standard in place and such an approach would impose a greater risk on non-performance.

#### Reason for decision

A key measure of the effectiveness and any landlord was the way in which they managed how tenancies ended and properties were re-let. These vacant properties were known as voids. The Council managed approximately 6,000 rented homes, of which around 5% became vacant each year based on the existing financial year.

Turnaround times and void rent loss remained a challenging area, despite recently combining the minor and major voids into one service area, implementing an interim service delivery structure and revising a number of void processes. It was reported, however, that the number of properties in the voids process had reduced from 113 in October 2021 to 85 properties as at 16 December 2021, with 26 further properties due to be signed up by the end of December 2021. Additional performance improvement measures were set out at paragraph 1.5 of the report.

The draft Void Policy had been drafted in accordance with the latest statutory and regulatory requirements and best practice within the sector. It confirmed the overall policy aim of 'delivering a clean, safe and secure property to incoming tenants, within our targets for turnaround times, standard and cost'. It was therefore a high-level commitment to meeting customer expectations and the Authority challenging itself in relation to turnaround times between vacancies.

The re-let standard provided clear guidance for Officers and new tenants on the offer for tenants at the commencement of their tenancy, ensuring consistency in the standard of properties the Council let to its tenants.

It was noted that the team had been working very hard to address the issues associated with voids, which was a significant undertaking and had been longstanding for the Authority. As the largest social landlord in the district the Council had to take responsibility and ensure that it worked to a consistent standard.

### **79. Key and Non-Key Decisions taken under Delegated Powers**

Cabinet noted that the following Non-Key Decision had been taken under delegated powers by the Cabinet Member for Finance and Waste Services:

- Invest to Save Reserve

## **80. Cabinet's Forward Plan**

Cabinet noted the latest version of the Forward Plan, subject to the following updates:

- An item on InvestSK to be added to the agenda for the meeting of Cabinet scheduled to be held on 8 February 2022. This item would be submitted to Companies Committee on 25 January 2022.
- The Council's Corporate Plan would be considered at the meeting of Cabinet scheduled to be held on 29 March 2022.
- The item titled 'future ways of working and making the best use of corporate assets' would be deferred to a later date, which would be confirmed in due course.

The meeting closed at 14:28.