
BUDGET SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Virtual Meeting held via Skype on Wednesday, 26 January 2022 from 7.00 pm - 10.02 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Lloyd Bowen (Chairman), Steve Davey, Mike Dendor (Vice-Chairman), Oliver Eakin, Tim Gibson, James Hall, Mike Henderson, Carole Jackson, Denise Knights, Pete Neal, Ken Pugh, Bill Tatton and Corrie Woodford.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Martyn Cassell, David Clifford, Philippa Davies, Lisa Fillery, James Freeman, Charlotte Hudson, Joanne Johnson, Kellie MacKenzie, Larissa Reed, Emma Wiggins and Phil Wilson.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Mike Baldock, Cameron Beart, Monique Bonney, Derek Carnell, Roger Clark, Simon Clark, Alastair Gould, Angela Harrison, Alan Horton, James Hunt, Elliott Jayes, Peter MacDonald, Peter Marchington, Ben J Martin, Richard Palmer, Hannah Perkin, Julian Saunders, David Simmons, Paul Stephen, Sarah Stephen, Eddie Thomas, Roger Truelove, Tim Valentine, Ghlin Whelan, Mike Whiting and Tony Winckless.

553 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 19 January 2022 (Minute Nos. 541 - 546) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

554 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Mike Henderson declared a Disclosable Non-Pecuniary Interest in respect of the Medium-Term Financial Plan and 2022-23 Budget item, if there was discussion on leisure centres, as he was a trustee of Faversham Swimming Pools.

Part B Minutes for information

555 FEES AND CHARGES 2022-23

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance introduced the report which invited the Scrutiny Committee to note the proposals for the level of fees and charges to be levied for the next financial year 2022/23. Charges would take effect from April 2022. He drew Members' attention to page 79 of the report, which set out headline changes throughout the service areas. The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance explained that fees and charges were an essential part of the revenue and expenditure budget, and that any recommendations would impact on the overall budget. He also drew attention to paragraphs 1.4, and 3.2 where Heads of Service had been advised to base any indexation on the Consumer Price Index (June 2.5%) and be rounded-up to the nearest 10 pence.

In response to a question, the Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance said that he did not consider it made a material difference that fees and charges were being

considered in January, rather than the previous November, and that there was still time to consider valuable amendments.

The Chairman invited Members to give general observations on the fees and charges.

In response to a question, the Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance explained that Heads of Service had prepared the fees and charges on the index level of 2.5%, not on an assumption that inflation would rise, and it was not reasonable to re-index the recommendations on the basis of an expectation of a rise in inflation. A Member asked for the reasoning behind there being a variety of increases, with some at 2.5%, and others at 5% or 8%. The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance said that this was dependent on the particular fee, and the Director of Resources added that in cases where there was an above 2.5% increase, this was when a particular charge had lagged behind from previous years and had been increased this year to catch-up.

The Chairman thanked the Director of Resources and the Finance Team for producing a clearly presented report.

Members were invited to make comments and ask questions on Appendix I of the report.

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The Director of Resources agreed to report back on the £150 charge for private disabled works and how long it had been set at that amount.

Page 10

There was some discussion on the level of fees set for pre-application planning advice, and the following points were raised:

- Pre-application advice was very useful for householders and small organisations;
- considered the charge for major applications was too high and might put people off asking for advice;
- suggested there be discretion so the householder could ask informal questions;
- was advice given remotely or in-person and was it the same cost?;
- clarification was needed on the increase in charge for the very large majors, including any comparisons with other Local Authorities;
- a one property increase could trigger a jump in charges;
- suggested a more level amount throughout the fee structure;
- the percentage increase for large majors was less than that for a major;
- suggested there be an intermediate between minor and major applications; and
- comparisons had been made with other Local Authorities already and the charges were increased to bring them in-line with them.

In response, the Cabinet Member for Planning explained that this was a balancing act, and for much of the advice there was no change to the charges. He said that it was important that people engaged in, and did not skip, pre-application advice. The Head of Planning explained that since the Covid-19 Pandemic, quite a few of the pre-application advice meetings were held virtually, but this was likely to be more face-to-face in the future. He added that major applications had moved to Planning Performance Agreements (PPA's), where the Council's costs were recovered. The Cabinet Member said that a cut-off point was needed at some point in the different categories, and that comparisons had been made with other Local Authorities.

The Chairman moved the following motion: That the appropriate committee, post May 2022, considered the creation of an intermediate fee for pre-application advice. This was seconded by Councillor Pete Neal.

There was some discussion on the proposal and whether the matter could be looked at by the Cabinet Member now, rather than wait until the new municipal year.

Councillor Mike Henderson moved the following amendment: That charges for individual households also be considered. This was seconded by Councillor Tim Gibson. The proposer and seconder of the original motion accepted the amendment. There was some discussion on including a review of the whole pre-application advice charging structure. The Chairman amended his proposal to reflect this and this was accepted by Councillor Neal. On being put to the vote the motion was agreed.

Resolved to recommend to Cabinet:

(1) That the appropriate committee, post May 2022, consider the creation of an intermediate fee between minor and major applications for pre-application advice; reviewed the whole pre-application advice charging structure; and charges for individual households also be considered.

Page 11

A Member spoke on the Planning Portal charge of £20 and considered this should be incorporated into other fees, rather than being a separate entity. The Cabinet Member for Planning explained that this was not the Council charging, but the Portal itself and to separate it out into other fees would make it more complex. The Head of Planning explained that the Planning Portal was used by most Local Authorities and Swale Borough Council (SBC) had no control over it.

Page 14

There was some discussion on parking charges and the following points were raised:

- The increase in parking charges penalised traders;
- the charges need to be competitive;
- suggested long stay charges be increased;
- Leysdown parking charges had increased by 130% and this was the main parking place in the Summer months for day trippers;

- did people have to pay for their Electric Vehicle (EV) charging as well as their parking charge?;
- considered all car parks should be free so that there could be savings made in the employment of Civil Enforcement officers;
- concerned with the cost of replacing the pay machines to take cards as well as cash;
- did not agree in increased car parking charges in areas where it was hoped there would be more tourism;
- the figures seemed to meet budget challenges, rather than being evidence based;
- there had been a scheme at Christmas time where there was free parking, but people had not increased their shopping;
- considered increased parking charges did not fit in with the ambition to increase tourism;
- the increase in car parking charges could put people off visiting;
- the figures should be rounded up to 50 pence/£1;
- this penalised people on low incomes;
- needed to consider that the Council had signed-up to the Climate Change and Ecological Emergency Action Plan: discouraging the use of vehicles and promoting active travel;
- needed to recognise that maintenance costs were increasing;
- should compare charges with other Local Authorities; and
- a small increase made sense.

The Cabinet Member for Community responded to the points that were made. He explained that there was no charge for parking when EV charging; that Civil Enforcement Officers were employed in other matters apart from off-street parking; and free parking for all would mean those with no vehicles would be subsidising those with them. The Council had to cover its running costs through fees and charges or by increases in Council Tax or making people redundant. The Cabinet Member explained that the 20% increase came to 20p per hour, and he considered the charge to be reasonable and noted that other Local Authorities tended to have higher car parking charges. He said that there was a roll-out of new machines in the Borough and the level of income would exceed what it cost to replace the machines. The Council could not afford to give free parking everywhere and car parks would become full of local residents and shop workers, resulting in shoppers unable to find a space and going elsewhere to spend their money.

In response to a question, the Head of Environment and Leisure explained that, unlike the main surface car parks, there was a barrier entry system in the multi-storey car park in Sittingbourne, and the customer was therefore charged for parking, but the EV charge was free. Tickets from people using the Travel Lodge and cinema in Sittingbourne were validated so they received concessions for their parking.

Page 15

The Cabinet Member for Community confirmed that the cost of EV charging was neutral, with neither a profit or loss to the Council.

Page 17

In response to a question, the Cabinet Member for Community outlined the prices for parking at Leysdown and he considered them to be reasonable. He said that free parking attracted people to a car park and others who had come for a particular attraction were unable to park there and that would result in a loss of spending potential.

In response to a question, the Head of Environment and Leisure explained that motorcycles could park for free as there was not a secure place to adhere a parking ticket.

A Member considered that coastal car parks in other parts of the country were often more expensive, and that these charges seemed reasonable.

Page 24

A Member considered the charges for burials should be rounded up. The Head of Environment and Leisure explained the index of 2.5% had been used rather than rounding-up. These figures were regularly compared with fees and charges across Kent, and he considered them to be a reasonable rate.

Page 27

A Member suggested a daily rate for beach huts might be a good option. The Cabinet Member for Economy and Community said that a weekly rate had been introduced, but there was an impact on management liability with increased changeovers on shorter lettings. The Head of Environment and Leisure said that all the beach huts were occupied by purchasers or by rental and there was a waiting list. It was hoped that more beach huts would be built in the future.

Page 31

A Member raised concern with the lack of payment of the charges at Faversham Town Quay, as there was not a workable system to collect the fees. The Head of Environment and Leisure acknowledged the issues and said that the system was based on honesty and he was happy to discuss the matter further with the Member outside the meeting. Another Member said the sign with the charges was currently out-of-date.

Page 32

There was some discussion on replacement bins and the following points were raised:

- Not happy that there was a charge when a bin was stolen or got taken away accidentally by the contractors when the bin fell into the lorry;
- this was not a fair system, and people had no control of the situation if they were not present at the time of the refuse collection;
- there was an element of householder responsibility;
- many local authorities charged for replacement bins;

- could the bins have postcodes printed on them?;
- some properties had nowhere to store their bins securely;
- this was an unfortunate additional charge and more work needed to be done on this;
- it was difficult to prove loss of a bin and whose fault it was;
- if a resident had to pay for a replacement bin, they should be allowed to choose the size of bin they wanted;
- bins could get stolen;
- needed to clarify the ownership of the bins and whether it was SBC or the resident?;
- there was an issue if the resident could not see their bin due to where they were required to leave it; and
- SBC insurance should cover lost bins.

The Cabinet Member for Environment explained that this was a new charge as a result of the service incurring considerable costs for replacement bins. He said new developments were charged for their initial bin and it was standard to charge for a replacement bin and SBC's proposed charges for this were one of the lowest in the county. He acknowledged the concerns, but said this would be introduced carefully, with Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for residents, and the service would be monitored.

In response to some of the issues raised, the Head of Environment and Leisure explained that the FAQs would include suggestions such as residents marking their bin so that they could identify it easily. There were 360 degree cameras at the back of the refuse lorries which could help to determine the loss of a bin and if the contractor was at fault, they would pay for the replacement. He said that in light of the need to decrease the amount of waste, residents were encouraged to have the smaller size of refuse bin to help reduce waste and increase recycling. The Head of Environment and Leisure said that the bins were not listed as individual assets and were not covered by SBC insurance. He said the Council was required to carry out the waste collection, but not to provide the bin, although they had done historically. The costs to replace bins had gone up in the last five years from £130,000 to £312,000. He was aware of multiple requests for bins, but hoped that by charging, this would be a deterrent.

Members made further comments as set-out below:

- With no bin residents might just leave out their rubbish;
- £30 for a replacement bin was a lot of money for some people;
- it could be difficult to claim on household insurance for damage or stolen bins;
- there should be concessions for those residents on benefits, low incomes and for old age pensioners;
- Council Tax payments already paid for this, should not have to pay again;
- the payment should be scrapped; and
- what was the cost to the budget if the scheme was scrapped?;

The Cabinet Member for Environment acknowledged the concerns and said that other councils had these costs in place, working effectively. He said the scheme

would be introduced sensitively and it was key for it to go ahead to cover the cost of bins. The Head of Environment and Leisure said that the Customer Service Centre had examples of different scenarios in terms of lost/damaged bins and this would help in the guidelines and FAQs that would be issued. He said the cost to the budget would be approximately £85,000.

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance said that the removal of the charge would extend the need for the use of reserves to balance the budget which the Council did not want to do.

Councillor Oliver Eakin moved the following motion: That the fee for replacement bins be removed. This was seconded by Councillor Mike Dendor. On being put to the vote the motion was agreed.

Resolved to recommend to Cabinet:

(1) That the fee for replacement bins be removed.

Page 34

A Member noted that some of the Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN) that were on last year's table were not on this year's, and the Head of Environment and Leisure said they had moved to the set-by Government table.

Page 38

The Head of Environment and Leisure agreed to provide further information on the costs in relation to transport fees for returning a dog to its owner.

Page 44

Members noted that the licensing fees and charges formed part of a licensing review to be undertaken shortly.

Pages 46 & 47

A Member welcomed that the fees for the family entertainment centres were being kept down and slightly reduced to the Government limit.

Page 54

A Member asked why King George's Pavilion, Sittingbourne was kept separate and not included on this page. The Head of Environment and Leisure explained that this was because it was linked to the park and was part of his service area.

Page 55

A Member said clarity was needed to show that this referred to Queenborough Guildhall, not Faversham Guildhall.

The Chairman thanked the Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, the Finance Team and all those present for attending the meeting.

Resolved:

(1) That the proposed fees and charges 2022/23 as set out in the report be noted.

(2) That delegated authority be given to the Head of Housing and Community Services in consultation with the Director of Resources and the Cabinet Member for Community Services to amend the Taxi Licensing fees and charges as a result of a review of the charges in 2021/22 be noted.

556 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN AND 2022-23 BUDGET

This item was considered by the reconvened Scrutiny Committee on 2 February 2022.

557 ADJOURNMENT OF MEETING

The Meeting was adjourned at 8.31 pm to 8.36 pm.

558 SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

At 10 pm Members agreed to the suspension of Standing Orders in order that the Committee could complete the Fees and Charges 2022-23 item.

The meeting was reconvened until 7pm on Wednesday 2 February 2022 to consider the budget item.

Chairman

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All Minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel