

**EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE**

A meeting of the Executive Member for Finance and Governance was held on Wednesday 20 March 2024.

**PRESENT:** Councillors N Walker

**OFFICERS:** J McNally, L Hamer, D Ingoldsby and J Savage

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:** None

**23/12 CORPORATE EQUALITY AND INCLUSION POLICIES - TRIENNIAL REFRESH**

The report presented and sought approval of the proposed revisions to four of the Council's equality and inclusion policies following their scheduled triennial review in order to ensure our continued compliance with the Equality Act 2010.

The Equality Act 2010 places a Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) on the Council and was supported by specific equality regulations that the Council must also comply with.

The PSED requires that when taking decisions the Council must have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation;
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it; and
- foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

Furthermore, the Act states that compliance with this duty may involve:

- removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic;
- taking steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it; and
- Encouraging persons who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.

The PSED states consideration should also be given to the steps involved in meeting the needs of disabled persons where they are different from the needs of people who are not disabled including, in particular, steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities.

The protected characteristics set out in the Equality Act 2010 are:

- Age
- Gender reassignment
- Race
- Disability
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Religion or belief
- Sexual orientation
- Sex

The Act was supported by specific regulations, which place additional duties upon the Council. It was required to publish information to demonstrate compliance with the PSED. The Council must also prepare and publish one or more specific and measurable objectives it thinks it should achieve to enable it to meet the general PSED.

**ORDERED:**

**That the Executive Member for Finance and Governance approves the triennial review of the Corporate equality and inclusion policies. Equality and Inclusion Policy (Appendix 1), Equality Monitoring Policy (Appendix 2), Impact Assessment Policy (Appendix 3) and the Monitoring of Hate Incidents Policy (Appendix 4).**

**OPTIONS:**

**The Council could choose not to adopt corporate policies on equality and inclusion, however legal duties would remain in place and in the absence of a standard approach there would be an increased risk of making decisions that fail to meet those legal duties. Given these duties are in place this option is not recommended.**

**REASONS:**

**Consideration of policies required to ensure compliance with the Equality Act 2010 is a duty reserved to the Executive Member for Communities and Education within the Executive Scheme of Delegation.**

23/13

**DEBT MANAGEMENT POLICY**

The report presented and sought approval for the proposed amendments to the existing Corporate Debt Management policy to incorporate the recently updated Financial Procedure Rules following the approval of the refreshed Council Constitution and to address some inconsistencies and presentational issues that require minor amendments to the policy.

The objective of the Corporate Debt Management policy was to ensure all income due to the Council is collected promptly, efficiently, and effectively in order to optimise the Council's financial position.

The policy applies to all debts and income owed / due to the Council and enables the Council to have 'one view' of all Council debt that was managed and controlled centrally. All Directorates must operate in accordance with this policy.

All Directorates must follow this policy to allow the Council to maximise the collection of debts and income by using a co-ordinated approach and by having due regard to the customer's ability to pay.

The policy also sought to address other matters such as credits and how these would be offset with other debts across the Council, pre-contractual checks to ensure any monies owed to the Council are addressed, and the insertion of a new contractual provision which allows sums owed to the Council to be offset.

The minor amendments include:

- The inclusion of the Welfare Support & Debt Write off policy links;
- The removal of the reference to Section 21.5 (under the heading 'Writing off of Debt') and replaced with 'in accordance with the Council's Financial Procedure Rules as contained in the Council's constitution.
- The inclusion of the Debt Write Off policy link under the heading of 'Writing Debts Off'.

**ORDERED:**

**That the Executive Member for Finance and Governance approves the amendments to the Corporate Debt Management policy to be implemented from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024.**

**That delegated authority to approve any future minor revisions/modifications is provided to the Director of Finance to reflect revisions to statutory guidance to the policy.**

**OPTIONS:**

**Do nothing – however if the policy was not updated it would not be reflective of the updated Financial Procedure Rules as contained in the Council's Constitution.**

**REASONS:**

- 1. The policy was a key decision that impacts on two or more wards and as such requires Executive approval.**
- 2. To include the Council's updated Financial Procedure Rules following the approval of the refreshed Council Constitution as outlined in the Executive Summary.**
- 3. The report contains only minor amendments to reflect the updated Financial Procedure Rules and does not have a larger impact on the overall budget or policy framework and therefore meets the criteria for Single Executive approval.**
- 4. The minor amendments ensure that the inconsistencies and presentation issues are addressed and result in no changes to the threshold to services and support provided.**
- 5. 3-yearly reviews uphold good practice within democratic processes and enables the refreshed policy to maintain visibility with the Executive.**
- 6. Delegated authority to the Director of Finance to approve future minor modifications to the policy will maintain service operation levels. As a working policy, failure to keep pace with new legislation leaves the Council at risk and can result in inconsistent practices.**

23/14 **DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENT POLICY**

The report outlined the proposed changes to the existing Discretionary Housing Payment policy, to incorporate the 'Credit Their Service Motion' carried by Members at Full Council meeting on 25.10.23.

Central Government provided local authorities with funding each year through the Discretionary Housing Payment scheme to assist residents who received Housing Benefit or Universal Credit (Housing Element) and were considered to be suffering hardship.

The allocated funding for the scheme in 2023/24 was £398,209. The new allocation for 2024/2025 is still to be confirmed.

There was no cost to the Council in respect of the Discretionary Housing Payment scheme as any expenditure up to the Government allocation is fully funded by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

Discretionary Housing Payments could be used to support residents in a variety of ways, on condition that it related to housing expenditure e.g., support with storage fees, removal costs or rent in advance. The maximum length of an award was 26 weeks.

The majority of the fund was utilised to support residents who are subject to the welfare reforms introduced in April 2013, including the Spare Room Subsidy Restrictions (a reduction in benefit of 14% or 25% for those with one or more spare bedrooms), the Benefit Cap (which restricted a claimant's benefit income to a set level) and also restrictions to benefit for those who are single and aged under 35 years old.

Priority was given to those residents who were potentially at risk of homelessness unless they received assistance with shortfall in their rent. The Benefit Service worked closely with the Housing Options team in such circumstances to ensure residents could remain in their tenancy wherever possible, to prevent unnecessary distress and avoid additional costs associated with any such evictions.

**ORDERED:**

1. That Executive Member for Finance and Governance approve the amendments to the Discretionary Housing Payment scheme policy to be implemented from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024.
- 2.
3. That delegated authority to approve any future minor revisions/modifications was provided to the Director of Finance to reflect revisions to statutory guidance in the policy.

**OPTIONS:**

**Do nothing – however if the policy was not updated it would not be reflective of the motion that had been passed by members**

**REASONS:**

**Following the 'Credit Their Service Motion' carried by Members at the Council**

meeting on 25.10.23: The Executive Member for Finance and Governance was required to ensure that relevant local policies were updated to reflect this position.

To formalise the disregard of any military compensation payments where they relate to the assessment of Discretionary Housing Payment and/or the Disabled Facilities Grant.

To ensure that the disregard of any military compensation payments was consistently applied (see para 3).

The policy was a key decision that impacts on two or more wards and as such requires Executive approval.

The report only contains minor variations and updates and does not have a larger impact on the overall budget or policy framework and therefore meets the criteria for Single Executive approval.

Delegated authority to the Director of Finance to approve future minor modifications to the policy maintains service operation levels. As a working policy, failure to keep pace with new legislation leaves the Council at risk and can result in inconsistent practices.

**All decisions will come into force after five working days following the day the decision(s) was published unless the decision becomes subject to the call in procedures.**