

Flintshire County Council – Decisions taken by the Flintshire County Council on Tuesday, 30 January 2018

Agenda Item No	Topic	Decision
A1	Minutes	That the minutes be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.
A2	Declarations of Interest	Following advice from the Chief Officer (Governance), Councillors Allport and Woolley declared personal and prejudicial interests in agenda item number 8, Notice of Motion. Councillors Carver, Gay, Paul Johnson, Tudor Jones, McGuill and Carolyn Thomas declared personal interests in the same item.
A3	Chairman's Communications	A copy of the Chairman's Communications had been circulated to all Members prior to the meeting.
A4	Petitions	Councillor McGuill submitted an online petition which had been signed by 10,532 people seeking that the 20% top up for Non Domestic Rates be reintroduced for Scout Groups. A further 358 signatures had been received via a paper petition and a letter of support for the petition had been received from Bear Grylls, the Chief Scout for the United Kingdom.
A5	Public Question Time	None were received.
A6	Questions	<p>The Chief Officer (Governance) explained that two questions had been received and had been copied, along with the response, and handed out.</p> <p><u>Councillor Clive Carver:</u></p> <p>“In relation to the removal of Discretionary Business Rate Relief by Flintshire County Council for Registered Charities and voluntary groups, can the Cabinet Member please advise (a) how many Registered Charities and voluntary groups have since applied for hardship rate relief? And (b) how many such applications have been granted”.</p> <p><u>Answer:</u></p> <p>“Since April 2017 a total of 6 Hardship applications have been received from Registered Charities or Voluntary Groups and 1 organisation has been awarded Hardship Relief – which equated to their full liability for 2017-18.</p>

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		<p>We always promote the Hardship Rate Relief scheme where there are financial risks to any Charitable or Voluntary organisation, or indeed to any commercial business, by making payment of business rates.</p> <p>It's important to say that each application for Hardship Rate Relief must be looked at on its own merits and where organisations have insufficient funds to pay the 20% liability, we will act in the wider public interest by awarding Hardship Relief. To date, based on the written evidence submitted from various organisations, there have been very few proven cases that would meet the test of hardship.</p> <p>The Hardship scheme remains open, and we encourage all organisations to speak to the Business Rates service if they want make an application for the first time (or re-apply again, even if a previous application has been unsuccessful)."</p> <p>Councillor Carver took the opportunity to ask a supplementary question:</p> <p>"Can you please provide a breakdown of figures of the six hardship applications, including the one that was awarded hardship relief?" Councillor Aaron Shotton said that information could be obtained and would be sent to Councillor Carver.</p> <p><u>Councillor Arnold Woolley:</u></p> <p>"Is the authority reliably aware of the number of houses within the County which have been continuously empty/unused for at least six months and how many of such has the authority dealt with by use of existing available powers so as to bring them into purposeful occupation".</p> <p><u>Answer:</u></p>

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		<p>There are currently just under 800 long term empty homes in the County.</p> <p>The Council has a number of strategies in place to bring long term empty (LTE) homes back into full use. One of the most effective ways of bringing these properties back into use has been use of the Local Taxation system to incentivise owners to focus on getting their properties occupied again.</p> <p>Full Council endorsed the recommendation of cabinet to introduce a Council Tax Premium scheme in April 2017, which effectively now imposes an additional 50% charge on owners of LTE properties, as well as on second homes.</p> <p>Around the time of introducing the Council Tax Premium scheme, officers were asked to write to owners of all LTE'S to promote access to other Council services which could assist with bringing LTE property back into use.</p> <p>Since the introduction of this scheme, our records show that 212 LTE properties 45 second homes have been brought back into full use and this scheme is designed to encourage owners to bring these properties back into full use to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • address local housing need • support the increase of affordable housing for purchase or let • enhance the appearance of local communities. <p>This Council is one of a handful of councils in Wales that has introduced the Council Tax Premium scheme from April 2017 with the primary objective of bringing empty property back into full use. Although we do what we can to bring property back into use, owners, landlords of empty properties should also share in the responsibility of bringing their properties</p>

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		<p>back into use and making the most of their assets.</p> <p>The Council is the first local authority in Wales to set up its own housing company, North East Wales (NEW) Homes which can offer a very competitive management service to support landlords.</p> <p>The Council has, for a number of years, used a small capital allocation to support owners to bring empty homes into use as shown below. This allocation has reduced over time in part due to capital constraints and in part due to the availability of alternative Welsh Government funding (below).</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Year</th> <th>FCC grants</th> <th>FCC loans</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>2013/14</td> <td>£164,000</td> <td>£30,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2014/15</td> <td>£105,000</td> <td>£39,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2015/16</td> <td>£79,000</td> <td>£4,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2016/17</td> <td>£62,000</td> <td>£0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2017/18</td> <td>£7,000</td> <td>£10,000</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>The Council has, until this year, also employed an Empty Homes Development Officer. This role is a mixture of Environmental Health Officer duties as well as work to promote and administer the grant and loan funding. The future intention is to a) pass the EHO work to the Environmental Health team to pick up as their resources allow and b) use the remaining Housing Regeneration team to manage the loans programmes.</p> <p>The Council currently manages the Houses 2 Homes programme on behalf of Welsh Government which provides repayable finance to bring empty properties back into use. The majority of this funding is currently committed as loans, with £595,815 currently allocated to 25 loans. As loans are repaid, this funding will be recycled into new loans.</p>	Year	FCC grants	FCC loans	2013/14	£164,000	£30,000	2014/15	£105,000	£39,000	2015/16	£79,000	£4,000	2016/17	£62,000	£0	2017/18	£7,000	£10,000
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		<p>It is expected that Welsh Government will shortly increase the flexibility of their repayable finance programmes which will allow the Council to increase the number of Houses 2 Homes loans. It is also expected that Welsh Government will fund officer time to support the loans programme which will enable it to reach more applicants.</p> <p>The Council intends, during 2018/19, to work with the RSLs to acquire empty homes for social rent. The RSLs will part-fund purchase and renovation and the Council will allocate Social Housing Grant to match fund this. Targeting is underway currently to match identified housing needs with the empty homes stock.</p> <p>Councillor Woolley thanked the Cabinet Member for the detailed response and did not ask a supplementary question.</p>
A7	Notice of Motion	<p>(a) That the amended Notice of Motion be supported as follows: “We call upon Flintshire County Council to reconsider reinstating 100% business rate relief to all local community organisations with properties under the rateable value of £6,000. This is the threshold which is set by Welsh Government for small businesses to qualify for full business rate relief”; and</p> <p>(b) That a report be submitted to County Council on 20th February with details of the options to reinstate Discretionary Rate Relief. WG would also be contacted on the lack of equity within the scheme.</p>
A8	Stages One and Two of the Council Fund Budget 2018/19 and Planning for the Closing Stage Three	<p>(a) That completion of Stages One and Two of the budget be noted with the exception of the Stage Two options for schools funding, car parking charges and Council Tax levels, and the three requests made to Welsh Government which are under negotiation;</p> <p>(b) That the final forecast for 2018/19 be noted and approved taking into account the</p>

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		<p>review of in-year cost pressures and their predicted impact on the following year;</p> <p>(c) That the arrangements for the third and closing stage of the budget setting process be noted; and</p> <p>(d) That the concerns be brought to the attention of the Cabinet Minister to immediately respond and assist a Council that was standing up against austerity in support of local services, and in particular schools. There must be further assistance from Welsh Government for this Council.</p>
A9	Treasury Management Mid-Year Report 2017/18	<p>(a) That the Treasury Management Mid-Year Report 2017/18 be approved; and</p> <p>(b) That the decision to ‘opt up’ to professional client status by regulated financial services firms as a result of the second Markets in Financial Instruments Directive (MiFID II) be approved. This will enable the Council to continue to manage its treasury management activities as at present.</p>