

Overview Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 31 March 2022

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Jordan Meade (Chair)

Councillors: Gurjit Kaur Bains
John Caller
Sarah Gow
Leslie Hills
Diane Morton
Brian Sangha
Peter Scollard
Gurbax Singh

Also in attendance: Cllr John Burden, Leader of the Executive and Cllr Narinderjit Singh Thandi, Cabinet Member for Performance & Administration

Daniel Killian	Director (Housing)
Sarah Parfitt	Director (Corporate Services)
Nicole Arthur	Service Manager (Housing Operations)
Chris Wakeford	Committee Services Officer - Scrutiny (Minutes)

32. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Gurdip Ram Bungar and Cllr Baljit Hayre; Cllr Brian Sangha and Cllr John Caller appeared as their respective substitutes.

33. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Overview Scrutiny Committee held on 10 February 2022 were signed by the Chair.

34. Declarations of interest

Cllr Gow declared an Other Significant Interest in Item 9. Call in - Cabinet Item 15. Establishment of Rosherville Repairs & Maintenance Local Authority Trading Company (Part B) due to the fact she is an appointed Director of Rosherville Limited, the Council's Local Authority Trading Company. Cllr Gow advised that she would leave the Council Chamber when this item was being considered.

35. Call in - Cabinet Item 10. Support for energy bills - the Council Tax Rebate 2022/2023

The Director (Corporate Services) informed Members that on 3 February 2022, the Government announced a package of support known as the Energy Bills Rebate to help households with rising energy bills, worth £9.1 billion in 2022-2023. This included:-

- £200 discount on their energy bill this autumn for domestic electricity customers in Great Britain. This will be paid back automatically over the next 5 years;
- £150 non-repayable rebate for households in England in council tax bands A – D, known as the Council Tax Rebate; and
- £144 million of discretionary funding for billing authorities to support households who are in need but are not eligible for the Council Tax Rebate, known as the Discretionary Fund.

The Director (Corporate Services) informed Members of the following:

Council Tax Rebate 2022-23

- The Council had been allocated £5,297,100 for the core scheme of Council Tax Rebate 2022-2023. This was equivalent of paying £150 to 35,314 households, which was required to be distributed to eligible households by 30 September 2022
- Where the Council holds live direct debit instructions for a liable council taxpayer of an eligible household (currently 27,000 for GBC), the guidance states that an automatic payment should be made as early as possible in the 2022-23 financial year, provided that there was assurance that the household was eligible and the bank details had been verified.
- The Council has an estimated 16,000 households to contact and take through a process to obtain and verify bank details before payment of the Council Tax Rebate.
- The Council anticipates that around 900 of these households will not be eligible for the scheme (e.g. empty households or households that fall into the exempt category)
- The title of the scheme is misleading and can cause confusion to recipients; it's not a rebate and operates outside of Council Tax.

Discretionary Fund

- The Council has been allocated £249,150 for the Discretionary Fund. This was equivalent of paying £150 to 1,661 households, which was required to be distributed by 30 November 2022.
- The guidance advised that the Council could determine locally how best to make use of this funding to provide payments to other households who were energy bill payers but not covered by the Council Tax Rebate. This could include households living in properties valued in bands E – H (currently 6,463 properties) that were on income related benefits such as Council Tax Reduction (currently 233 claimants in bands E-H) or those where the energy bills payers were not liable for council tax. The Director (Corporate Services) advised that the intention would be to work closely with colleagues across Kent to ensure commonality with the discretionary scheme.
- Cabinet granted delegated authority to the Director (Corporate Services), in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Performance & Administration, to develop a discretionary Council Tax Rebate scheme and associated policy, and to make the necessary arrangements to assess eligibility and determine award of funding to eligible households. Delegated authority was also granted to the Director (Corporate

Services) to make any further technical amendments to the scheme where further government advice is issued and ensure that the Portfolio Holder for Performance & Administration is kept informed of any such amendments required.

Following questions from the Committee, the Director (Corporate Services) highlighted the following:

- The Council are getting a number of enquiries about the Council Tax Rebate and there is some confusion for members of the public on this matter. The Council is putting as much information as possible on its website and the Local Government Association are also doing a media campaign. This area is challenging when the misleading message that this is a 'rebate' is portrayed in the press. Members can play an important role and help get the message across and this would be helpful to the Council
- A task and finish group will be formed next week to develop processes, ensure the support is distributed correctly and that communications are put out through all available channels.
- The Council Tax Rebate is a flat £150 payment for each household.
- Bank details will be checked using a tool called Spotlight. The Council will then run through the process to make sure the bank details match the person the Council is trying to get the money to.
- There is wide guidance on the Discretionary Fund but this will have to be carefully consider to make sure it is targeted in the right way. The Council is expecting further guidance from government on how the money is directed.
- There is a typo at the end of paragraph 4.2 of the report that should refer to 'householders' not 'businesses'.
- The Council will communicate directly with those who haven't taken up the support and every effort will be made to get the money to them.
- The Council Tax Rebate will be paid to the principal Council Tax payer. This will be the landlord in some cases and it will be down to them to pass on the payment to the residents of the property.
- The Director (Corporate Services) agreed to circulate the figures, outside of the meeting, for the amount of people who use PayPoint and those that use cash to pay their Council Tax.
- The Council is trying to find the most secure way to get the money out to eligible households. Cash will be avoided where possible and alternative methods such as prepaid cards, an arrangement with the Post Office or applying the Council Tax rebate to the individuals Council Tax account (as a last resort) will be looked into.
- Lobbying has been undertaken by the Local Government Association (LGA) and others to The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and it has been made clear that this is not a scheme that the Council are best placed to deal with.
- The Council is expecting an announcement from central government on 'new burdens' funding; once this is known the Council can make a full assessment on whether these matters will have to be dealt with using existing resources or, if additional resources are required, whether these will be fully met by central government. Conversations have already begun with Kent colleagues to consider resources.

- The Council will do its best to distribute as much of the Council Tax rebate as possible but it is reliant on people giving the Council the information we need and this will take time; payments are unlikely to get through until the end of April due to the intention to use the April Direct Debit process to provide assurance of the accuracy of bank details held.
- Based on the government guidance, the Discretionary Fund will look to support those in Band E-H and will target those who can't benefit from Council Tax rebate.
- The Council does have a register of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) so these can be identified and attempts made to communicate.
- The Homes for Ukraine Scheme is a separate scheme and will involve £10,500 per placement going to KCC, payment of £200 per refugee, £350 to the sponsor per month. There is a meeting tomorrow to finalise the detail.
- Measures will be put in place to prevent and detect fraud as far as is possible (e.g. Spotlight - bank account authentication tool, internal audit checks, pre-payment checks).
- The potential for confusion and cancellation of Direct Debits after payment is made is a concern but requests to set up Direct Debits are coming in thick and fast at the moment.
- The Council will give some thought to getting the message out that this is not a refund on Council Tax.
- The Council will look to engage with community groups to make sure we are giving them the right message. Members have a big role to play here.
- The Council will look to publicise the support for energy bills at community events such as Vaisakhi, Eid, Riverside Festival etc.
- The issues with the My Account system have been logged with the provider Northgate. The problems were due to volume of traffic and the advice was to come back and try later. Northgate are looking to rectify the problem.
- The Director (Corporate Services) will look into the possibility of a post payment check / flag being placed on the My Account system.
- The Council will utilise the Landlords Network to push out the message on the support for energy bills.

The Cabinet Member for Performance & Administration advised Members that a further report back on the support for energy bills will go to the Performance & Administration Committee and could also come to the Overview Scrutiny Committee if desired.

Resolved that the Committee noted the report on the Support for energy bills - the Council Tax Rebate 2022/2023

Note: Cllr Narinderjit Singh Thandi, Cabinet Member for Performance & Administration, spoke with the leave of the Chair on this item.

36. Oral Update from the Sub-Group Chair on the progress of the Scrutiny Topic Review.

In the absence of Cllr Baljit Hayre, Cllr Sarah Gow provided the following update on the Scrutiny Review of Street Cleanliness, littering, and Fly-tipping throughout the Borough:

- The Sub-Group met in-person on 3 March 2022 where the group met 'Street Champions' who highlighted the following:
 - The Street Champions should be publicised better to recruit more people
 - The Street Champions are keen to extend their role further. They would like school students to get involved and would like to see more recycling points in the Borough.
 - The Street Champions advised that it was a challenge for them to report fly-tipping.
 - The Street Champions were awarded a certificate of excellence.
 - The Street Champions were very complimentary about GBC staff, especially Joel Simons - Waste Projects & Compliance Officer.
- Apologies for absence were received from the two Conservative Members on the sub-group.
- KCC have stopped funding for joint enforcement, but officers will speak to the Kent Police and Crime Commissioner to look at other sources of funding.
- Members of the sub-group will visit a school to see the Council's talk on refuse and recycling and will also visit the Brookvale Depot to look at the setup / operations.

The Committee noted the progress of the Scrutiny Review of Street Cleanliness, littering, and Fly-tipping throughout the Borough.

37. Exclusion

Resolved that pursuant to Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 that the public be excluded from any item included in Part B of the agenda because it is likely in view of the nature of business to be transacted that if members of the public were present during this item, there would be disclosure to them of exempt information as defined in Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

38. Call in - Cabinet Item 15. Establishment of Rosherville Repairs Maintenance Local Authority Trading Company (Part B)

The Overview Scrutiny Committee considered, and discussed in detail, the Part B information pertaining to the establishment of Rosherville Repairs & Maintenance Local Authority Trading Company.

The Committee considered the robustness of the proposals and evaluated the impact that the establishment of the company may have on staffing resource and existing service provision.

Resolved that the Committee noted the Part B report on the establishment of Rosherville Repairs & Maintenance Local Authority Trading Company

Note: Cllr John Burden, Leader of the Executive, spoke with the leave of the Chair on this item.

Note: Cllr Sarah Gow left the room when this item was being considered.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 9.41 pm