

REPORT OF EXECUTIVE CABINET

GENERAL REPORT

1. The Executive Cabinet has met once on 11 January 2007 since the last Ordinary Council meeting and this report summarises briefly the principal matters considered at the meeting. None of the agenda items considered at the meeting require a specific Council decision.

Overview and Scrutiny Improvement Plan – Update

2. The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Councillor D Edgerley) presented an updated edition of the Overview and Scrutiny Improvement Plan, which had been approved by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Executive Cabinet in March 2006.
3. The Improvement Plan had emerged from a Members' self-evaluation workshop and identifies 13 actions aimed at improving the delivery of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny function. The updated Plan presented illustrates the progress that has been achieved on each of these planned actions.
4. In particular, Councillor Edgerley drew attention to the following measures that had been instigated in response to a number of the action points:
 - Proposals are being developed with the Improvement and Development Agency for the implementation of three training workshops in June/July 2007 to cover (i) general overview and scrutiny issues, including the implications of the Local Government White Paper; (ii) chairing overview and scrutiny bodies; and (iii) financial scrutiny.
 - The Council's Overview and Scrutiny Structure and Toolkit will be reviewed to ensure that they remain 'fit for purpose' and in line with best practice.
 - Greater public involvement in overview and scrutiny will be encouraged through articles in the Chorley Borough News and publicity at the Community Forum meetings.
5. The Executive Cabinet welcomed the planned initiatives to strengthen the overview and scrutiny role.

Forward Plan

6. We received and noted the Council's Forward Plan which sets out the key decisions which the Executive Cabinet, individual Executive Members and Officers are expected to take during the four months period between 1 January and 30 April 2007.
7. The Forward Plan has been made more inclusive and transparent and identifies more precisely the dates of anticipated decisions.

Revised Sanction and Prosecution Policy – Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit

8. The Executive Cabinet considered a report of the Director of Finance and authorised a few changes to the Housing/Council Tax Benefit Sanction and Prosecution Policy. This policy, introduced in March 2001, outlines the general principles to be applied when considering sanctions and prosecution action in cases where Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Benefit have been fraudulently overpaid.

9. Currently, all cases where either a sanction or prosecution is recommended is referred to the Director of Finance for a decision. However, a review of this policy is necessary in order to streamline the process and reflect a more appropriate delegation of decision making powers.
10. In essence, the policy has been revised to take account of the following changes:

Cases where Chorley Council takes the 'lead' in the investigation:

In instances where the recommendation of the Compliance Manager is to offer a sanction as an alternative to prosecution, the decision will be delegated to the Revenues and Benefits Manager.

In instances where the recommendation by the Compliance Manager is to commence criminal proceedings, the decision will remain with the Director of Finance.

Cases where the Department for Work and Pensions takes the 'lead' in the investigation:

In instances where a recommendation is made by the DWP's Fraud Sector Manager, the decision as to whether Chorley Council should participate in a joint sanction or joint prosecution will be delegated to the Compliance Manager.

11. The changes to the Sanction and Prosecution Policy will generate process efficiencies and will reflect the custom and practice that has been developed in respect of joint investigations with the Department for Work and Pensions.

Housing Rents and Charges for 2007/08

12. We considered a report of the Director of Finance seeking approval to the level of Council housing rents and other associated charges to be applied for 2007/08 with effect from 2 April 2007, after taking account of all relevant factors.
13. The Executive Cabinet accepted and approved the recommendations, the most significant elements of which are:
 - an average rent increase for the Council's 2,923 Council houses (including Cotswold House) of 4.99%;
 - a 4.1% increase in the existing sheltered accommodation and general needs environmental charges;
 - increases in the Warden support service and Tunstall or Lifeline alarm charges to be consistent with changes to the level of the 'Supporting People Grant';
 - establishing the charges for the use of cookers and fridges in sheltered accommodation;
 - an increase of 50% in the heating charges levied on 85 sheltered properties;
 - a 5% increase in garage rents.
14. The rent and service charge increases comply with the Government's guidelines and rents restructuring formula.
15. The increase in the heating charges for sheltered accommodation has been necessary in order to reflect substantial rises in energy costs in 2006. The 50% increase is, in fact, below the percentage fuel cost increases.

16. The Executive Cabinet appreciates the plans to transfer the Council's housing stock to Chorley Community Housing (CCH) on 26 March 2007. However, if the agreed increases are to be introduced from April 2007, we have had to take these decisions within the statutory deadlines for the issue of notices to tenants. The planned increases have, in fact, been considered by CCH's Finance Committee and the tenants were consulted on the proposals in December 2006.

COUNCILLOR P GOLDSWORTHY
Executive Leader

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There are no background papers to this report.