

RECORD OF OFFICER DECISION

APPROVAL FOR DEFERRAL OF COUNCIL TAX AND BUSINESS RATES COLLECTION

Decision made

To approve the rescheduling of council tax and business rate instalments for those most adversely affected by COVID 19.

Made by: Andy Brown, Director of Finance and Procurement

Background

1. Pursuant to paragraph 4 of Part 3 Section D, the Directors of Wiltshire Council are empowered to take all necessary decisions in cases of emergency. This decision is being taken by Andy Brown using these powers in circumstances where the Director concerned believes that there is a risk of damage to property, a threat to the health or wellbeing of an individual and/or that the interests of the Council may be compromised if this decision is not otherwise taken.

Reason for decision

2. This decision would in other circumstances be taken by Cabinet. However, in circumstances where Cabinet is unable to meet to expedite its functions in a timely manner during the COVID-19 pandemic, this decision is being taken in accordance with the power referred to in paragraph 1 above in consultation with the Council's Chief Executives and the Leader. This decision will be reported to the next meeting of Cabinet.
3. The decision was made to enable those most adversely affected by COVID 19 to contact the Council and defer payment of both council tax and business rates for April and May and recalculate any instalments from June 2020 to March 2021. The decision was taken because of the lockdown being declared while bills for both council tax and business rates were arriving on doorsteps. The decision was widely publicised and implemented by several councils. It generated over two thousand phones calls and a similar number of e-mails. Within a fortnight it is estimated that around 4,000 households took up the offer. Each household or business was sent a recalculated bill, giving breathing space and taking away the burden of payment from those who had suddenly lost their income. The breathing space would also give time for households and businesses to either claim benefits from the council, await grants or take offers of support from central government.
4. I confirm that in making this decision I have considered the following in line with Wiltshire Council's Constitution:

Key decision requirements	yes
Views of relevant cabinet member(s), committee chairman, area board(s)	yes

Consideration of the area boards and delegated decision checklist for officers on the issue of when and how to involve local councillors and area boards in decisions about local services	N/a
Implication of any council policy, initiative, strategy or procedure	yes
Consultation in accordance with requirements and expectations of consultation with the public	yes
Range of options available	yes
Staffing, financial and legal implications	yes
Risk assessment	yes
Involvement of statutory officers and/or directors	yes
Regional or national guidance from other bodies	yes
The council's constitution	yes
This contract is suitable for execution under the e-signature process.	N/a

Conflict of Interest

5. Not applicable.

Other options considered

6. Consideration was given to resetting everyone's instalment plan. Conversations with Software suppliers confirmed this was not a facility they were willing to provide, especially when they were being asked to deliver several other emergency measures. Their only suggestion was to undertake a complete re-run of the annual billing process. This would have meant rebilling over 200,000 households and 15,000 businesses at considerable cost in both materials and in officer time. The advantages of offering the deferral scheme rather than enforcing mass recalculations was to engage with customers and where possible, reassure, collect contact details and sign-post them to other methods of support.
7. The offer was announced just in time for those who wanted to avoid a direct debit payment on 1st April 2020, and because of prompt action less than 650 payments were returned for both council tax and business rates in comparison to the 62,000

collected. On 15th April almost 60,000 payments were collected with less than 400 rejected. The number of rejections were lower than at the same time the year before.

8. There will be impact a significant impact on cash flow and the ability to model income based on established monthly monitoring and historical patterns. The number of deferrals is not an indication of non-payment. Typically, those with the largest debts tend not to engage with the council at all. There is however encouraging signs that many want to support the council through prompt payment. This discretionary deferral scheme offers the most cost effective and direct help to a relatively small number of households and businesses who are most affected.



Made by:

Andy Brown, Director of Finance and Procurement

Date:

24th April 2020