

Present: Councillor Sue Burke (*in the Chair*), Councillor Biff Bean, Councillor Bill Bilton, Councillor Yvonne Bodger, Councillor Alan Briggs, Councillor Kathleen Brothwell, Councillor Chris Burke, Councillor Bob Bushell, Councillor Thomas Dyer, Councillor Geoff Ellis, Councillor Gary Hewson, Councillor Jackie Kirk, Councillor Rosanne Kirk, Councillor Jane Loffhagen, Councillor Rebecca Longbottom, Councillor Adrianna McNulty, Councillor Laura McWilliams, Councillor Ric Metcalfe, Councillor Neil Murray, Councillor Bill Mara, Councillor Donald Nannestad, Councillor Lucinda Preston, Councillor Christopher Reid, Councillor Edmund Strengiel, Councillor Ralph Toofany, Councillor Naomi Tweddle, Councillor Pat Vaughan and Councillor Loraine Woolley

Apologies for Absence: Councillor Liz Bushell, Councillor Andy Kerry, Councillor Helena Mair and Councillor Hilton Spratt

71. Mayoral Announcements

The Mayor reported that former City and County Councillor John Plant had recently passed away. Members took this opportunity to pay tribute to his memory.

72. Confirmation of Minutes - 30 November 2020

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 30 November 2020 be confirmed.

73. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Ralph Toofany declared a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest with regard to the agenda item entitled 'Allotment Fees and Charges'. Councillor Toofany was a user of the allotment service and left the meeting during the consideration of this item.

74. Receive Any Questions under Council Procedure Rule 11 from Members of the Public and Provide Answers thereon

No questions were received.

75. Receive Any Questions under Council Procedure Rule 12 from Members and Provide Answers thereon

No questions were received.

76. Motion Under Council Procedure Rule 14 - Covid-19

Councillor Gary Hewson proposed the following motion:

“This Council notes that Britain is experiencing the worst recession for over 300 years and has the fifth highest number of deaths in the world due to Covid-19. The failure of this Conservative government to contain the virus has caused too many deaths and worsened the economic impact.

The alarm bells on the devastating impacts on people’s lives of this unfolding economic disaster are growing louder.

The effects are being felt in the city of Lincoln, especially among households already in low paid employment, with one in four children in the city in households below 60% of the national average household income, and having increasingly to resort to Food Banks in the city to survive.

The Council, along with its partners has been working hard to protect our residents from the worst effects of the pandemic, playing an active role in public health measures, together with action to support our communities, and to help our businesses survive.

The Council believes that further levels of unemployment and hardship are not inevitable if urgent action is taken now to avert the worst effects of the pandemic. This must include further action from government, to include the following measures:

- An increase in Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) to £320 a week, the level of the current living wage, and make it available to all workers so people can afford to self-isolate. The current £96 a week is a fifth of average weekly earnings and 2 million who earn less than £120 a week are not even entitled to that. Even while the vaccine is being rolled out people will still need to self-isolate to prevent the virus spreading.
- An improvement to furlough arrangements so that no one is paid less than the minimum wage, it is unacceptable there are many of our lowest paid residents in Lincoln receiving only 80% of the minimum wage.
- No cutting Universal Credit in April - cutting UC back £20 a week amounts to taking away £1,000 a year from many of our low-income households in Lincoln.
- An increase to public service wages and raising the minimum wage to £10 an hour. A pay cut in real terms – after a decade of real cuts – is a grave insult to millions of public service workers who cared for our loved ones during this crisis. Raising their wages and the minimum wage to £10 per hour would greatly assist in the fight against in-work poverty in our city.
- Protect and create jobs; the TUC has shown investing £85 billion in green infrastructures would create 1.2 million jobs in 2 years and investing the resources public services need would create 600,000 jobs. This investment, alongside giving the packages of support sectors and businesses need will assist our residents in Lincoln with improved opportunities for employment

- These basic measures are the foundation to making sure we can build a better recovery from the impacts of this pandemic and begin to address the long term structural problems we have in Lincoln of low wages, and deep inequalities in income and wealth.

The Leader of the Council be requested to relay the content of this Motion onto the Government.”

Councillor Pat Vaughan seconded the proposal. He reflected that everyone had complained about the hardships faced as a result of lockdown and Covid-19, but that people had not been in the same circumstances. The hardship felt by those people in households of the lowest income were feeling the effects far worse than anyone. Councillor Vaughan said that, despite the furlough scheme, thousands of workers found themselves with little or no support, particularly those who were self-employed, with many families resorting to the humiliation of using food banks. He therefore called for further action by the Government, stating that 25% of families did not have enough to live on. People were still being expected to self-isolate which had an impact on their ability to work and it was those families of low income where further help should be provided.

Councillor Thomas Dyer, Leader of the Opposition, did not believe the Motion would achieve anything and was nothing more than a politically motivated attack during a global pandemic, designed to cause division at a time when everyone should be supporting each other. He claimed that the Motion included untrue information and inaccurate predictions which could not be substantiated and reminded Council that since the outbreak of Covid-19 the Government had provided unprecedented financial support. This included:

- the furlough scheme, which 9.9 million people had benefitted from which was worth £46.4 billion and had supported 1.2 million businesses;
- business grants, which 350,000 businesses had benefitted from and was worth approximately £10 billion;
- support to local authorities, including the City of Lincoln Council, which would equate to approximately £10 billion. This consisted of £4.6 billion to protect services, £1.1 billion to protect social care, £500 million to provide hardship Council Tax support, £100 million to maintain leisure provision, £32 million to support clinically extremely vulnerable people and £30 million to support implementation of Covid-19 regulations;
- a £280 billion investment to support jobs through business rate relief, CBILS, CLBILW, BBLs and future fund, VAT referrals temporary increase in Universal Credit, hardship funds, self-isolation payments, the kick-start scheme, mortgage holidays, the eat out to help out scheme, a temporary VAT cut, the culture recovery fund, the stamp duty cut and the restart scheme.

Councillor Dyer also reported that a total of 62 million Covid-19 tests had been delivered and, to date, over four million people had been vaccinated. He was of the opinion that, in times of such immense difficulty, people had come together as a country and as a society. He added that local communities had come together and offered support, food, company and companionship during the challenges of last year and took this opportunity to praise key workers and frontline staff for their outstanding contributions and support.

Councillor Dyer was of the view that the focus of the Government must be on economic recovery, with the route to prosperity being via successful businesses which in turn increased more jobs and more tax receipts. With these additional tax receipts more investment could be made in public services. He said that the unprecedented Government borrowing had been essential but that Government spending was not an unlimited resource. In order to restore confidence in the country's economy, Councillor Dyer was of the opinion that a plan to pay off the debt would be essential in the coming months and years ahead.

Councillor Dyer highlighted that the Motion did not include any mention as to how these proposals would be financed. In addition, within the draft Medium Term Financial Strategy he said that without Government support the City of Lincoln Council would not have had a balanced budget. He said that it was imperative for the City Council to concentrate on its own affairs.

Councillor Chris Burke was delighted that the Council had the courage to speak out against the Government. He praised the work of key and essential workers throughout the crisis who he said should be undertaking their important work with financial confidence. He was therefore opposed to the Government's freeze of public sector pay increases, stating that such complacency was outrageous. Councillor Burke was of the view that it was the City Council's duty to highlight concerns such as this and take appropriate action where necessary. He called for a cross-party approach in holding the Government to account.

Councillor Bob Bushell said that this was a time where people should be supporting each other, particularly those most in need. In respect of Councillor Dyer's comments, Councillor Bushell reflected that it came across as though there were no problems in society and that everything was positive. He emphasised that this was not the case and the city's low paid and unemployed were really suffering and desperate for support, with the Motion addressing the real issues that people were facing.

Councillor Donald Nannestad said that the Motion sought to ensure people had the bare necessities, which made a significant difference to those who currently did not and were struggling. He added that the Universal Credit system was completely inadequate and the wider number of people claiming the benefit had magnified how poor it was, challenging anyone to survive solely on Universal Credit or statutory sick pay.

Councillor Jane Loffhagen acknowledged that this pandemic would have been a challenge for any Government and although recognising the support it had put in place for people and businesses, was of the view that lots of people had fallen through the cracks. In respect of testing centres, she was of the view that certain people would not undertake a test through fear of having to self-isolate if testing positive as they could not afford the loss of income. Councillor Loffhagen was concerned that this was a significant risk to the continued spread of the virus, but was the reality of the situation. In respect of a pay freeze for key workers, she was opposed to this being put in place for the very people who had worked so tirelessly during the pandemic and called this an insult.

Councillor Laura McWilliams shared her experience in working on the front line in a care home and said that unless someone had worked in a role on the front line, on minimum wage, they could not claim that everyone was in this together. She had witnessed her own colleagues struggle with their mental health and physical exhaustion whilst watching the people they cared for die as a result of the virus.

Councillor McWilliams and her colleagues had themselves held whip rounds for people who were struggling to feed their families and pay rent and said that people in that industry on the frontline were not being treated properly or fairly. These people, on relatively low wages, were working extremely long hours under significant stress and pressure and did not have savings or nest eggs to fall back on. She explained that the reality in care homes and hospitals was that it was pandemonium.

Councillor Lucinda Preston claimed that the Government had prioritised certain groups of people over others and that it should give much more careful consideration as to how it spent public money, citing the procurement of large contracts or payments to consultants together with a cut in Universal Credit. Thousands of key workers were going above and beyond, doing their very best, across the country and they were not getting the support they should receive.

Councillor Edmund Strengiel was disappointed that the Motion highlighted a lot of negative aspects and did not properly acknowledge the support that the Government had put in place. He highlighted that the disease had not been instigated by the Government and that the country's economy had been flourishing prior to the pandemic, adding that it was due to the Government's financial management over the last ten years that had enabled it to invest so much in terms of support for people and businesses. Councillor Strengiel reminded Council that no decisions had been taken in respect of the assumptions made as part of the Motion and that they would be the basis of budgetary decisions in March 2021.

Councillor Ronald Hills reflected on previous epidemics that had occurred in his lifetime which were devastating enough for the people and communities effected, specifically flu epidemics which caused multiple deaths on the hospital ward he used to work in. The Covid-19 pandemic saw the spreading of a virus on an international scale with catastrophic effects which he felt no Government in the world had managed to control. Councillor Hills agreed with Councillor Strengiel's point that no decisions on the assumptions made in the Motion had been made. He added that the Motion consisted of nothing more than a wish list and was representative of where the country had been over the last year. It contained no recognition of the benefits of Universal Credit or national living wage, as well as no reference to work that had been undertaken to protect jobs and the range of opportunities that had arisen in the public sector. In terms of the City Council's finances, Councillor Hills agreed that the authority would have been virtually bankrupt without Government intervention through its financial support.

Councillor Christopher Reid highlighted that the Motion referred to the work the City Council had done to support people throughout the pandemic but stated that this would not have been possible without support from the Government. He acknowledged that something needed to be done to reflate the economy, however, it was his view that the Motion did nothing to achieve this. Councillor Reid was also confused in relation to the claim in the Motion that raising minimum wage to £10 per hour would greatly assist in the fight against in-work poverty in Lincoln, in the knowledge that the City Council currently employed staff on £9.30 per hour. He said that the Council had within its own power the ability to increase its own wage structure in line with what had been set out in the Motion, but had not done so. In relation to self-isolation, Councillor Reid highlighted that provision was available for low income assistance for those people who had to self-isolate and was keen that more people were made aware of their entitlement in respect of such schemes.

Councillor Alan Briggs was disappointed that no context had been included in the Motion to the support that had been provided to people by the Government in such difficult times. The proposal set out in the Motion had not been financed so it was unclear how this could be delivered. The Government had a £160 billion plan in place to protect jobs and people's incomes, whilst at the same time review public spending and rebuild the economy.

Councillor Gary Hewson agreed that people on the frontline knew how it really was during this pandemic. He had listened to what members of the opposition had said during the debate but highlighted that Members of Parliament were provided with an opportunity on 19 January 2021 to make a stance on the £20 reduction in Universal Credit and only six Conservative Members of Parliament were opposed to it. In respect of Universal Credit applications, as reported at the City Council's Performance Scrutiny Committee, the numbers in respect of Lincoln's tenants had doubled for the first two quarters of the year. He recognised that the Government had provided support but reminded members of the significant cuts in Government grant funding to local government over the years which had left local authorities across the country having to be more entrepreneurial.

Having been proposed and seconded and being put to the vote it was RESOLVED that the Motion be carried.

77. To Consider the Following Recommendations of the Executive and Committees of the Council

(a) Localised Council Tax Support Scheme 2021/22

It was proposed, seconded and RESOLVED that Council:

- (1) Notes the consultation responses relating to the Localised Council Tax Support Scheme for 2021/22.
- (2) Notes the proposed options to the core element of the Council Tax Support Scheme for 2020/21, as set out in section 6 and paragraph 6.5 of the report, and agrees setting a capital reduction rate of £6,000.
- (3) Agrees the proposed change to the Council Tax technical premium as set out in section 6 paragraph 6.6 of the report, that from 1 April 2021 any property empty over ten years will receive a premium of 300%, incurring a 400% charge.
- (4) Approves the continuation of the £20,000 Exceptional Hardship Fund for 2021/22 to top up Council Tax Support awards in appropriate cases.
- (5) Does not support, at this time, the request from the Police and Crime Commissioner to implement a Council Tax exemption for Special Constables.

(b) Council Tax Base 2021/22

It was proposed, seconded and RESOLVED:

That Council:

- (1) Notes that there are no special items as defined in Section 35 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 (as amended) applicable to any part or parts of the City of Lincoln local authority area.
- (2) Approves the Chief Finance Officers' calculation of the Council Tax Base for the financial year commencing 1 April 2021 and ending 31 March 2022, as set out in Appendix B of this report.
- (3) Approves, in accordance with the Chief Finance Officers' calculation, and pursuant to the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) Regulations 1992 (as amended), that the Council Tax Base for the 2021/22 financial year is 24,372.38.

(c) Council House and Garage Rents 2021/22

It was proposed, seconded and RESOLVED that Council:

- (1) Approves the basis of rent calculation for changes to individual Council house rents as set out in the report, which represents an increase in the average calculated 52-week Council house net rent in 2021/22 of 1.5% for social housing rents (£1.05 per week) and affordable rents (£1.61 per week) increase per property.
- (2) Approves a 3% increase in Council garage rents for 2021/22 in accordance with the proposal set out in the report.

78. Allotment Fees and Charges

Councillor Ralph Toofany left the meeting during consideration of this item further to his declaration of a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest.

Councillor Ric Metcalfe, Leader of the Council, proposed the recommendations set out in the report, which was seconded by Councillor Donald Nannestad.

Councillor Thomas Dyer, Leader of the Opposition, reflecting on the current circumstances, said that vulnerable people in particular had been dependant on their own entertainment, with allotments being a key aspect of that for many people in the city. He therefore questioned the timing of a proposed increase, but welcomed the fact that a years' notice would be provided to allotment holders. He asked whether the Council could look into the possibility of introducing a concession for old age pensioners.

Councillor Bob Bushell reminded Council that the allotment service was very heavily subsidised even taking into account the proposed increase in fees and charges. He recognised the importance of allotments which was why the Council had recently invested approximately £1 million to improve security, access to water and the introduction of a new site. Councillor Bushell was content with a

concession being offered on a means tested benefit system as opposed to age and made the point that income generated by allotment fees and charges would be reinvested into the allotment service. He was also confident, even taking into account an increase in fees and charges, that users of the service would continue to consider it as good value.

Councillor Christopher Reid was concerned that elderly users of the service who would not qualify for a concession rate under the means tested benefit system would see their current concession removed as well as having to pay an increased fee. He would therefore wish to see a concession for old aged pensioners.

Councillor Metcalfe reiterated that the Council understood the value of allotments, particularly at times such as those the country was facing in the current circumstances, which was why such a significant capital investment was made in the service. He reported, however, that the Council's finances were in a very serious state and contributions from the majority of the authority's budgets was required in order to address this. In reviewing this against the allotment service, given the recent investment and importance of the service, it did not seem appropriate to cut the service. A better approach was therefore proposed whereby service users paid a bit more for the service in order that full provision in the city could be maintained. Councillor Metcalfe reported that, even with the increase in fees and charges, the cost of the service was still £67,000 per year. He added that low income groups would be protected but was of the opinion that age alone should not act as a proxy for low income.

Having been proposed and seconded and being put to the vote it was RESOLVED that changes to the fees and charges for allotments be approved, with effect from the annual billing in 2022 and new leases thereafter, and that these be based on:

- removal of the 50% discount based on age;
- protection of discounts for those on means tested benefits at 50%;
- an increase in based charges by 50%;
- any income achieved above £30,000, linked with inflation, be ringfenced for allotment projects.