

Ashford Borough Council

Minutes of a Meeting of the Ashford Borough Council held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **11th December 2014**

Present:

His Worshipful the Mayor, Cllr. J Link (Chairman);

Cllrs. Adley, Apps, Mrs Bell, Bennett, Mrs Blanford, Britcher, Buchanan, Burgess, Chilton, Clark, Clarkson, Claughton, Davey, Davison, Feacey, French, Galpin, Heyes, Mrs Heyes, Hicks, Howard, Mrs Hutchinson, Miss Martin, Mrs Martin, Michael, Mortimer, Ovenden, Robey, Shorter, Sims, Smith, Taylor, Wedgbury, Yeo.

Also Present:

Chief Executive, Head of Legal and Democratic Services, Head of Culture and Environment, Head of Communities and Housing, Head of Finance, Member Services and Scrutiny Manager.

Prior to the commencement of the meeting the Reverend Eileen Harrop said prayers.

Apologies

Cllrs. Aaby, Bartlett, Bell, Clokie, Davidson, Mrs Dyer, Hodgkinson, Marriott.

290 Exempt or Confidential Information

The Mayor asked whether any items should be dealt with in private because of the likely disclosure of exempt or confidential information. There were none.

291 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on the 16th October 2014 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

292 Announcements

(a) Leader of the Council

The Leader said that first of all he considered that all within the Council Chamber would like to send their very best wishes to Paul Clokie for a full and speedy recovery. He said that he had spoken to Caroline that morning and she had said that whilst Paul remained seriously ill, there had been some improvement. He said he would continue to keep Members informed.

The Leader said that as the year drew to a close, he would like to reflect on the significant number of achievements which had been seen over the past twelve months and in doing so, he wished to acknowledge the hard work of the Council's Officers and all Members in serving the Borough, its residents and businesses. Firstly the Leader said that the Council had successfully provided a high degree of quality service to its residents whilst at the same time keeping Council Tax to the lowest in Kent and one of the lowest in the Country.

He also said just how pleased all should be about Ashford now being one of the very best Authorities for recycling in the Country. This had been a joint exercise with the residents and a new system had been delivered which had been embraced by residents and by their efforts it had lifted Ashford from the bottom to the top as the most improved recycling Authority in the Country. It had taken some time and a great deal of thanks needed to go to the residents. Ashford was now in the top 10% for recycling in the UK.

Over the last year the Leader said that there had been some significant historical milestones starting with the 100th Anniversary of the commencement of World War I. The DCLG were commemorating this by providing an engraved paving stone to all those who had been awarded the Victoria Cross during the 1914-18 conflict. The Leader said he was pleased to say that one of those to be so honoured came from Ashford and indeed he was personally pleased to note that Mr Frederick George Coppins who had been awarded the VC on the 9th August 1918 had been born in Charing.

He also said that Ashford Borough Council's governance had reached its 40th anniversary during the current year, it was also the 50th anniversary of Ashford's formal twinning with Bad Münstereifel. The following day would see the fifth anniversary of High Speed services running from Ashford and five years on the High Speed rail had made a significant contribution to the Borough's economic fortunes. It had attracted businesses and created jobs, improved the quality of life for commuters, drawn more people to live in the Garden of England and had put Ashford in pole position as an excellent place to access London and European markets. Ashford had accordingly been named Kent's number one business location.

The Leader explained that the results of a recent residents' survey conducted by independent consultants Lake Market Research had made interesting reading. A high degree of satisfaction had been recorded in that 9 out of 10 residents in the Borough had said that they were satisfied with the local area as a place to live whilst 8 out of 10 had indicated that they were satisfied with how the Council ran things. High levels of satisfaction were also reported across services such as street cleanliness, public safety/low crime levels, playgrounds and play areas, parks and open spaces and leisure and sports facilities. The Leader believed this was down to the Council's concerted efforts and prudent financial management. The survey did, however, say that the residents still did not realise that Ashford was the lowest Council Tax in Kent and one of the lowest in the Country. Whilst the results overall were positive, the Council was certainly not complacent and would continue to strive to provide the very best value for money services for the community.

This year had also seen the Council purchase International House together with surrounding land and buildings which would form a key part of the Commercial Quarter. Indeed the new public realm works had received planning permission and work was due to start early in the New Year. The area would form a dynamic main business sector in the town and indeed an important business hub for the south east, and the area would stimulate major investment opportunities and create many jobs.

Major planning applications for quality homes at Chilmington Green and TENT1 had been approved, whilst developments at Finberry, Panorama and Bluebells continued to offer choice of new quality homes for those wishing to move either within or to the Borough. Some of these developments would be assisted by the Government's decision to approve the funding for a new Junction 10A off the M20 and the partial dualling of the A28.

The Leader said that in the Town Centre a number of new initiatives had been launched to help breathe new life into the High Street including the new Farmers Market and Love Ashford website and the Council continued to attract interest from companies looking to invest in Ashford. T-CAT continued to make a significant contribution and the Council was looking at Park Mall and other retail outlets in the Town Centre to see just how it might further stimulate and promote a more vibrant experience.

The Leader explained that in the countryside the Council continued to highly value the rural town of Tenterden and the Borough's beautiful villages and their retail offer and other businesses all contributed to the Ashford economy. The Council would continue to give small business relief to assist them whenever it could.

The Leader said that turning to even more green issues, the Borough had seen the long awaited Willesborough Dykes cycle path open in the Autumn offering an easy, traffic-free route to and from the Town Centre and McArthur Glen Designer Outlet and International Station which also served as a picturesque leisure path for families who wanted to access other cycle paths and explore the wider countryside. Meanwhile the creation of a new Country Park at Conningbrook Lakes had moved a step closer following the signing of Agreements between the Kent based Brett Group and Ashford Borough Council. The Agreements included the Country Park Licence, which effectively handed the land over to the Council to begin the preliminary works with a view to opening the park in Spring 2015. The Leader said that he had seen a couple of pictures recently and said that work was commencing to create a footpath from the Julie Rose Stadium to the Country Park. With a beautiful lakeside setting, views to the North Downs and access to a network of country trails, Conningbrook Lakes would be a family friendly facility for visitors to explore and enjoy. The park would be another stunning attraction for Ashford and would reinforce the Borough's reputation as a great place to live, work and relax. Looking to the future, the Council had seen the outstanding Ofsted rated Hadlow College take over the educational provision in the Borough who would be bringing forward a new FE and HE College.

Turning to the year ahead, the Leader said that recent proposals such as the Designer Outlet expansion, a planning application had now been submitted and plans for a Town Centre cinema at Elwick Place had been revealed. The International Model Railway Museum and other exciting developments were likely to

come forward in 2015 he said we could all look forward to an exciting year ahead for the Borough.

Finally, he said he would like to wish all colleagues, residents and businesses a Merry Christmas and a Happy, Healthy and Prosperous New Year.

(b) His Worshipful the Mayor

His Worshipful the Mayor advised that as this was the Christmas meeting of the Council there would be refreshments in Committee Rooms 1 and 2 after the meeting and he said that both Members of the Council and the public present at the meeting were very welcome to join him afterwards.

(c) Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Community, Wellbeing and Education

The Deputy Leader said he would like to update Members on the proposed merger of the two respective CCG's (Clinical Commissioning Groups) in Ashford and Canterbury. With the setting up of CCG's in place of Primary Care Trusts plans had been put forward earlier in the year for Ashford to merge with Canterbury. He said that the history of and reasons for this proposed merger were now well documented and in Ashford all but one of the GP practices had agreed to such a merger although he said that in certain practices only a majority of GP's were in favour. Nevertheless a response from NHS England to these proposals had been expected in October. However, this was then deferred to allow further discussions to take place and to wait for some key policy announcements contained in the NHS Five Year Forward Plan. The Deputy Leader said that whilst, for the moment at least, NHS England had not given the green light, they were offering to support exploration of other ways of collaborating more closely. Their view was that existing and new legislation, announced at the beginning of October would allow some of the proposed benefits to be gained without a formal merger and give increased ability to collaborate by allowing the formation of joint Committees. With such staff sharing, function sharing and governance sharing structures in place organisations were being asked to see just how many benefits could be gained without the need for a formal merger before taking proposals any further. If these arrangements proved insufficient, then NHS England was prepared to discuss whether a new merger application would be appropriate.

The Deputy Leader further explained that over the next few weeks there would be consideration given as to how best to work within the new framework before bringing updated proposals back to the governing bodies and membership. Reassurance needed to be given that this news should not impact on the work around developing community networks and other priority projects. Service to patients should and must be made uppermost and the drive to push ahead with integration and the structural changes that the local NHS needed to make would continue, whilst ensuring that the expected national performance targets were met. He said that in a nutshell the message would seem to be to do things differently by working in a different way rather than through formal restructuring. In conclusion the Deputy Leader said he hoped to be able to give a further update on this matter at the next Ashford Health and Wellbeing Board which was due to meet towards the end of January 2015.

293 Cabinet 13th November and 4th December 2014

(a) 13th November 2014

Resolved:

- That (i) the Minutes of the Meeting held on the 13th November 2014 be received and noted with the exception of Minute No. 233.
- (ii) Minute No. 233 be approved and adopted.

(b) 4th December 2014

Resolved:

That subject to the expiry of the period by which decisions arising from the meeting of the Cabinet held on the 4th December 2014 may be called in ie 17th December 2014:-

- (i) the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 4th December 2014 be received and noted with the exception of Minute Nos. 257, 258, 259 and 262.
- (ii) Minute Nos. 257, 258, 259 and 262 be approved and adopted.

294 Selection and Constitutional Review Committee – 9th December 2014

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Selection and Constitutional Review Committee held on the 9th December 2014 be approved and adopted.

295 Audit Committee – 2nd December 2014

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Audit Committee held on the 2nd December 2014 be received and noted.

296 Notice of Motion

His Worshipful the Mayor advised that Councillor Chilton had withdrawn his Motion.

297 Questions by Members

(a) Question from Councillor Michael to Councillor Clarkson, Leader of the Council

“Thank you Mr Mayor my first question to the Leader is the Local Plan Review places significant weighting on homes for inward migration. Can the Leader tell Members why this is necessary and give an insight into what is driving this?”

Reply by Councillor Clarkson, Leader of the Council

“Thank you Mr Mayor. I am always happy to have questions from Councillor Michael, they give me an opportunity to expand a little. I am delighted to give the insight sought by Councillor Michael. People move home for a variety of reasons. Typically, work related but often for a range of reasons including house prices, quality of childrens’ schooling which is very, very good in this Borough, access to wonderful countryside, good public transport links. Ashford is attractive for many reasons, so like other growing towns a significant proportion of its growth comes from people moving into the area. To assess the housing need, we must plan for this and the Council commissioned an independent team of consultants and experts who have followed the Government’s guidance on how to estimate the number of people moving into the area and that is why we can welcome the people coming into the area and I think we do so with open arms to share the enjoyment we have in this Borough. Thank you Mr Mayor”.

Supplementary Question by Councillor Michael

“I ask the Leader to think again on the consequences of what I ask given the differences in two consultant reports. I do not see how this large provision helps existing residents struggling to get a home and believe it can only go against them due to house prices being drawn upward as the more affluent commuters to places such as London, relocate to Ashford something which evidence suggests will be the catalyst for inward migration and not large scale local economic demand for workers so I please urge the Leader to think again on the matter”.

Reply by Councillor Clarkson, Leader of the Council

“Mr Mayor, I know I am highly skilled but answering a question as long as that sounded more like a statement to me but nevertheless Councillor Michael surprises me. He sits on the Planning Policy Task Group, he has ventilated this repeatedly at that meeting and the whole meeting has voted and although they did not vote with him, he was unanimously over-ruled by that meeting. He is aware that we didn’t engage two, we engaged one set of consultants who as I said earlier have given us evidence that we are satisfied with and we will continue on that basis. Thank you Mr Mayor”.

(b) Question from Councillor Michael to Councillor Clarkson, Leader of the Council

“Thank you again Mr Mayor. Question 2 to the Leader, regarding Councils found with unsound Local Plans at the last Council meeting the answer given is economical in its explanation because my conversation with some of these Councils gave an informed insight and in particular indicated exploratory meetings with the Inspector queried housing numbers being below their abolished regional target but that further evidence was provided to support the lower number, ie plans were not thrown out and timetable not materially affected. I therefore ask can the Leader give an assurance that contact is made with these Councils to forestall similar problems arising with our Local Plan?”

Reply by Councillor Clarkson, Leader of the Council

“Thank you Mr Mayor. Well the first thing is, these Councils that you mention and not this Council I hasten to add have had problems with their Plans and they have had the advantage of seeking to lobby the Inspector, we don't envisage that happening because we are rather more thorough here and I am sure that we take account of all these other experiences abroad and we will of course continue to keep abreast of experience elsewhere bringing forward a sound Local Plan. We must make sure that we avoid the problems of so many other Councils especially those that have tried to sidestep meeting what is called their objective assessed need. Government's made it clear that this is likely to lead to plans being found unsound and hence taxpayers money being wasted. We will work hard to make sure this situation does not arise in Ashford. Thank you Mr Mayor”.

(c) Question from Councillor Michael to Councillor Clarkson, Leader of the Council

“Thank you Mr Mayor. Question to the Leader, the average price for a terraced house in Ashford is £170K and for many residents young and old, purchase is impossible due to the sizeable deposit needed and mortgage their salaries cannot support. There is a chronic shortage of housing that is affordable for rent by those wishing to have a home of their own. Does the Leader not think that fuelling houses for commuters and incidentally the buy to rent market will exacerbate matters further and can the Leader provide details of what mitigating action will be taken to give assurance to these young and older residents that their need for good quality and affordable rented housing is made available with security of tenure?”

Reply by Councillor Clarkson, Leader of the Council

“Thank you Mr Mayor. I have to say I find this a very odd analysis if I may be so bold. What would drive up prices is a shortage of housing. Councillor Michael seems to want it both ways, on one hand arguing the Council should plan for less homes but also complaining that house prices are too high. You cannot have it both ways. Meanwhile the Council's record of delivering affordable homes as part of new developments, local needs housing in rural areas is a programme of building new affordable Council accommodation and providing special care homes for an ageing

population is one of the very best in the South East if not one of the best in the country. I hope that all Councillors, whatever their party allegiance would recognise these significant achievements, of course we must continue to do all we can to make sure Ashford residents have good quality, reasonably priced homes to live in and we will continue to look at ways in which we can further assist people securing those affordable homes. Thank you Mr Mayor”.

Supplementary Question by Councillor Michael

“I think the Leader might have misunderstood what I was saying but I leave that to him to respond, but I will say that I hope the switch away from what I believe to be the traditional Council housing model fulfils the dreams and aspirations of residents desperate for a home that is within their means”.

Reply by Councillor Clarkson, Leader of the Council

“Well I think Councillor Michael may think I have misunderstood, I didn’t understand at all and although he didn’t ask the question I can quite understand the question he intended to make, but that’s another issue. I can say to you that far from doing what you suggested and that is relying only on Council housing, we have a record of doing the opposite with our affordable housing, with stairway up to home ownership and I think we have been very successful and I think as we move into the next year, we will be looking to other ways that we can assist, we know the Government have issued a housing scheme to assist first time buyers with mortgages and so forth and deposits and we will continue to look at that, so Councillor Michael can rest assured that we are as anxious and I with eight young grandchildren ranging from about 25 down to about 12 am very keen to make sure that we have plenty of houses for young people to get on the property ladder either to buy or to rent and we need to make sure they are affordable. Thank you Mr Mayor”.

Supplementary Question by Councillor Chilton

“Thank you Mr Mayor. Does the Leader agree with me that given rents in the private sector are quite extortionate with insecure tenancies and that we have got a considerable waiting list, what Ashford really needs is an expansion of social housing for rent for families and young people as opposed to an exclusive housing policy for a small social elite?”

Reply by Councillor Clarkson, Leader of the Council

“It will come as no surprise to everyone that I don’t agree with one word that my colleague over there said, I think when you look at it, you look at perhaps a neighbouring district like Shepway with about 3,000 Council houses, we have virtually 8,000, we have 5,000 we actually own and we have 3,000 that are owned by Housing Associations. We have quite a large sector and I think that you cannot start differentiating, it would be quite wrong to sort of imply that we are looking to those who are going to buy because there are many people in this Borough who can’t afford to buy and therefore it is important that we as much as we are able provide housing that is affordable for both renting and buying and we will continue to face all those markets and try and help them and the other thing is this, I have to say this

Borough is actually leading the field in my view on the housing for the elderly and ageing population, we are absolutely in the van with that especially with Farrow Court, and not only Farrow Court a whole range of others that we have and I think that's very very important so thank you Mr Mayor".

(d) Question from Councillor Michael to Councillor Clarkson, Leader of the Council

"Thank you Mr Mayor. At the last Council meeting I raised a question regarding the Designer Outlet reported 3.2 million footfall and in the recent Leader's briefing read that County Square was on track for a footfall of over 5 million in 2014 which equates to 13,698 each day throughout the year. Can the Leader give an explanation as to how the Town Centre has managed to overtake the Designer Outlet?"

Reply by Councillor Clarkson, Leader of the Council

"Mr Mayor, with your indulgence I have seen the Tom and Jerry show but I have never seen the Winston and Gerry Show and I seem to be on my feet a lot more than I would have liked this evening because I am conscious that we are in the festive season but let me just say I am advised that there has been no overtaking at all and indeed Councillor Michael is just plain wrong. County Square has always had a higher reported footfall than the Designer Outlet but has not published their figures whereas the Designer Outlet has. With a change of ownership of County Square about a year ago and the new management of County Square they decided themselves to promote their own figures. So to be clear, I am actually delighted that the Designer Outlet have got such high figures that they are putting in a planning application to double the size. I am also delighted that County Square are very pleased that they are going to be meeting their target of 5 million. They seem very happy with it, I am delighted about it and if Councillor Michael wishes to question these figures then fine or indeed he might want to question the Government's figures or for that matter anyone else's figures, he is free to do so but I haven't got the time, inclination or will to do so because we are busy getting on with managing Ashford, trying to promote Ashford, trying to grow Ashford and looking after the wellbeing of those in Ashford. Thank you Mr Mayor".

Supplementary Question by Councillor Michael

"I thank the Leader for his direction which I shall take up. Might I suggest to the Leader that different terminology be considered because the dictionary definition of footfall is the number of people that go into a shop or business in a particular time period which in this instance interprets that each day of the week 13,698 people visited County Square and 8,767 visited the Designer Outlet so I do think that we should get the terminology correct otherwise we might be seen to be misleading the public. Thank you Mr Mayor".

Reply by Councillor Clarkson, Leader of the Council

“Mr Mayor, I am happy to listen to Councillor Michael’s suggestion he makes a suggestion that I use other terminology. Unfortunately you see when Government figures come out and when the various offices of whatever stats it is come out or the County Square figures come out or the Designer Outlet figures come out, that is their responsibility they use the terminology, they choose to and that is the long and short of it”.

Supplementary Question by Councillor Galpin

“Thank you Mr Mayor. Can I just ask the Leader if he agrees with me that it behoves Members no matter what party to support the Town rather than to find fallacious points of argument that portray our towns both Ashford and Tenterden in a negative manner”.

Reply by Councillor Clarkson, Leader of the Council

“Well I can do no more than say encore to that because I think it behoves all Members of this Authority, whatever Party they are in to look at the positive, if there is something really meaningful that is negative that needs looking at, then by all means let’s do it but I believe that the place to do that is in the Committees, the Working Groups and so forth, not in a Full Council meeting like this where per force you cannot have the debate and discussion you might have wanted and there will be shortish answers because of the very nature of the organisation. There is ample opportunity to do so in other quarters. Thank you Mr Mayor”.

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(KRF/AEH)

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