

Ashford Borough Council

Minutes of a Meeting of the Ashford Borough Council held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **15th October 2015**.

Present:

Her Worshipful the Mayor, Cllr. Mrs G A Dyer (Chairman);

Cllrs. Adby, Apps, Bartlett, Mrs Bell, Bell, Bennett, Mrs Blanford, Bradford, Britcher, Buchanan, Burgess, Chilton, Clokie, Farrell, Feacey, Galpin, Heyes, Mrs Heyes, Howard, Knowles, Koowaree, Link, Miss Martin, Mrs Martin, Michael, Murphy, Ovenden, Pickering, Shorter, Sims, Smith, Waters, Mrs Webb, Wedgbury, White.

Also Present:

Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Head of Legal and Democratic Services, Head of Community and Housing, Head of Finance, Senior Member Services and Scrutiny Support Officer.

Prior to the commencement of the meeting: -

- (i) Her Worshipful the Mayor asked Members to remain standing in silence in respect of the late Reginald Richard Harrington who was the representative for the Ashford Kingsnorth (including Shadoxhurst) Ward between 1979 and 2003 and the Ashford Park Farm North Ward between 2003 and 2007 and was Mayor in 1991/92 and for the late Peter William Stutchbury who was Member for the Hamstreet Ward between 1983 and 1991.
- (ii) The Reverend Catherine Wilson said prayers.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Barrett, Dehnel, Hicks, Krause, Powell.

171 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.

172 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Council held on the 16th July 2015 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

173 Announcements

(a) Twinning

The Mayor advised that Ashford had recently hosted the twinning delegation including Mayors and other representatives from Fougères and Bad Münstereifel, Ashford's Twin Towns in France and Germany. She thought it was a very successful visit and she wanted to thank those Councillors who had supported it in any way and particularly Councillor Galpin who had managed the business seminar so well and this had been a most interesting experience and a great success.

(b) Rotary Ramble

The Mayor also said that to support the Mayor's Charity there had recently been a Rotary Ramble and she again wanted to thank those Councillors who had taken part or had kindly supported that event. She would be able to write to Councillors in due course and advise exactly how much money had been raised but as both Tesco Stores (Crooksfoot and Park Farm) and Find a Voice themselves had taken part, the totals were still being added up.

(c) Leader of the Council

The Leader said that since the last Full Council meeting there had been a number of positive developments which he would like to share with colleagues.

He said that at the end of last month the Council approved plans to expand the Ashford Designer Outlet Centre, with nearly 40 new stores and six restaurants and cafes planned as well as the creation of up to an additional 700 new jobs. This would transform it into one of the UK's premier outlet centres including the best names in designer fashion, enhancing the whole shopping experience and providing stronger links with the town centre and the station. In addition, plans for a new town centre cinema, hotel and restaurants at Elwick Place had been formally submitted and would be considered shortly. The Council welcomed the fact that another major investor was showing so much confidence in Ashford.

He advised that construction of Ashford College was now underway, and with the proposals for Elwick Place and the Council's purchase of Park Mall shopping centre and the Dover Place developments, these were all good indications of the progress the Council was making as part of the renaissance of the town centre, which would benefit the entire Borough. The Council had recently agreed to work with local developers, Quinn Estates Ltd and George Wilson Holdings Ltd, to bring forward the plans for CQ38 - the Ashford Commercial Quarter – 38 minutes to London. These were developers with a strong track record for delivering quality buildings on schedule and under budget. They had worked on a number of projects across Kent, delivering over 3 million sq ft of commercial space and creating thousands of jobs. The Council had purchased International House last year, and work on a new public realm around International House and Dover Place was progressing well with completion due soon. This would create a sense of place, forming an attractive first impression of the town and a delightful approach from Ashford International Station. Last month they had warmly welcomed Locate in Kent, to International House. Their move followed Handlesbanken's relocation in April. It would appear that Locate in Kent had acted on its own 2014 survey, which named Ashford as Kent's No 1 business location.

The Leader said that message from this Council to the business community was very clear – the Council was determined to work hard to make Ashford a success and now was the time to get involved. This was exactly the message they would be taking to MIPIM UK, the large-scale property trade show, which would be taking place during the following week in London. Last year’s MIPIM UK had been an excellent platform for promoting the Borough to a wider audience. Ashford had really punched above its weight, holding its own among locations such as Manchester, Leeds, Cardiff and the City of London, with an impressive and engaging stand that attracted a constant stream of interest. This year the Ashford stand would be double the size and even more dynamic, with a meeting area and iPad docks loaded with development presentations so that potential investors and developers could see what opportunities were available to them here in Ashford. They were looking forward to showcasing Ashford and offering an insight into how the town’s exciting future was unfolding.

He said that following last year’s celebrations of 50 years of twinning with Bad Münstereifel and 30 years with Fougères, this year it had been Ashford’s turn to host its friends from Germany and France. Each year the official twinning event had a core theme and this year the topic had been business. Ashford was keen to develop business, trade, and tourism relations. There had been a presentation by the Chamber of Commerce and then a meeting with Ashford’s MP Damian Green and local industry leaders. The civic leaders were present from Germany and France and they had been keen to engage with Ashford to increase business potential.

The Leader said that colleagues will have seen and read about the humanitarian crisis in Syria which had shocked the world and he was proud to say that the Cabinet had last week voted unanimously to welcome up to 50 Syrian Refugees a year for a five year programme as part of the government’s Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme. Tonight Council had an opportunity to endorse that Cabinet decision by confirming its support in welcoming those refugees into the Borough. As Angela Merkel and David Cameron had said “We are in the middle of a Refugee Emergency”. Those refugees were from a war-torn area and supporting them was the right thing to do. Since the crisis was highlighted by the worldwide media, he had personally received a number of approaches from residents asking what Ashford was doing. These people were very vulnerable and Ashford should set an example by its action to assist. Ashford had been promoted as an international town and, through a proactive response to a humanitarian situation they had an opportunity to reinforce that commitment. Everybody wanted the refugees to be proud to be here and he felt that they should be proud to have them.

Finally, he advised that last week Cabinet had also approved a suite of documents related to the Council’s five year planning. One of those was the summary of a new Five Year Corporate Plan, setting out the Council’s direction and priorities, and the finalised version would be presented before the end of the year. Members and Senior Officers had worked hard together to produce this new plan which reflected a diverse but growing Borough and focused on exciting opportunities to encourage and invest in economic growth, providing business and leisure facilities and quality homes to live in across the Borough. A proactive commercial approach, shown by some of the Council’s recent acquisitions, was the best way for Local Authorities to operate and secure additional revenue streams which would all be for the benefit of the people of Ashford. The Council’s Five Year Corporate Plan, headed, “Aspiration, Action & Achievement”, set out the positive direction they were taking to help the Borough to grow, thrive and prosper in the coming years

174 Cabinet – 10th September and 8th October 2015

The report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services, which had been tabled, clarified the procedure for consideration of the Cabinet minutes.

(a) Cabinet – 10th September 2015

Resolved:

- That (i) **the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 10th September 2015 be received and noted with the exception of Minute Nos. 118, 119, 122, 123 and 127.**
- (ii) **Minute Nos. 118, 119, 122, 123 and 127 be approved and adopted.**

(b) Cabinet 8th October 2015

Councillor Chilton said that with regard to Minute No. 159 “Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme”, he wanted to advise Council that the Labour Group fully supported the moves to bring these refugees to Ashford and considered it was absolutely vital that Ashford played its part. The image of the poor boy lying dead on the sands of Greece was an image that nobody would forget and he hoped all Groups would support this scheme and not seek to politicise this matter for political gain.

Councillor Ovenden said that he would like to re-iterate those comments and advise that the Ashford Independent Group also gave its full support to this scheme.

Resolved:

That subject to the expiry of the period by which decisions arising from the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 8th October 2015 may be called in, i.e. 21st October 2015: -

- (i) **the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 8th October 2015 be received and noted with the exception of Minute Nos. 159, 161, 163, 164 and 165.**
- (ii) **Minute Nos. 159, 161, 163, 164 and 165 be approved and adopted.**

175 Audit Committee – 29th September 2015

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Audit Committee held on the 29th September 2015 be received and noted.

176 Selection & Constitutional Review Committee – 8th October 2015

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Selection & Constitutional Review Committee held on the 8th October 2015 be approved and adopted.

177 Questions by Members

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

Councillor Michael advised that the Leader had already responded to his question by e-mail, for which he thanked him, but he would still ask the question for the benefit of other Members.

“I do not disagree with the humanitarian response by ABC but I have a concern that when Government funding expires we do not let these people down and ask the question – What provision will be made in the budget to continue with ongoing support?”

Reply by Councillor Clarkson

“Madam Mayor, it is a fact that the Government had only agreed to fully fund the first year from the Overseas Aid budget, but on the 2nd October 2015 I received a letter from Richard Harrington MP, the Minister responsible for Syrian refugees, in which he clearly indicated, and I quote “The first twelve months of a refugees resettlement costs are fully funded by Central Government using the Overseas Aid budget. To ensure that Local Authorities can plan ahead and continue to respond to the overwhelmingly generous response of the British people, we will also provide additional funding to assist with the costs incurred in future years. These arrangements will be applied to all cases since the 20,000 expansion was announced. We understand that Councils need certainty about financing of the scheme in order to enter in to contracts or commitments and we will be working closely with Local Government to develop the process for drawing down the funds in order that this certainty can be given, including those Councils offering help under the existing scheme”. Given that the scheme we are embarking upon will run for five years until 2020 and will be fully funded by Government as previously stated, I can see little real significant impact on our budget during the life of this Administration which concludes in 2019. I would like to think that many of the adult family members will soon be in work and contributing to our economy. This Administration has also agreed to review our participation in the scheme annually and adjust if necessary. At the end of the five year programme all refugees will be reassessed by the Home Office to see if they wish to stay and seek to secure UK Citizenship or return to Syria if it is safe to do so. I hope that helps in answering the question. Thank you Madam Mayor.”

Supplementary Question by Councillor Michael

“I thank the Leader very much for that and I support all that he says. My follow up question is to ask the Leader to inform Members how the integration and

management of the refugees will be serviced given that current Council resource is set to be stretched. For example does it require a separate dedicated team and if so how is this to be funded?"

Reply by Councillor Clarkson

"It does not require a new dedicated team. To put it into perspective we are probably dealing with about eight to ten extra families here. Given that we have an excellent Housing team at the moment that deals with the Housing Revenue Account with our Council Tenants, we have 5000 homes with 5000 families that we already look after, and that is more than just maintaining our property on their behalf. We actually advise them on all sorts of things because we believe in keeping the cohesive nature of our community together. So in settling at this figure I consulted with the Officers to see how much we could handle without adding a burden to our resources. The other thing is this - we are not alone in this scheme. We have offers of help from all kinds of people including the Churches, Jasmin Vardimon, the Scouts and the second hand furniture store who have said they can help with furnishing the accommodation, so there is a real willingness out there to make this work and I think to that extent it will really be a walk in the park. That does not mean it will not need careful handling because there are issues here. We are going to get a lot of information from Government from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees about the people – their medical state, whether they can speak English or not, the sizes and ages of the families and all of that, so there will be a job to be smart and intelligent and fit them in to our community. They will represent 0.04% of our population which is infinitesimal really. KCC are gearing up too and Tracey Kerly has been appointed as our liaison with KCC to ensure there are school placements for the young children. We do have many schools that are full, but we also have many others that are not, Charing Primary School for example has got spare places and the Surgery at Charing has space for another 1200 people on their books, so there are plenty of opportunities. I think this is easily absorbed in what we do now and we certainly have a mass of the requisite skills to handle this well and show that we are an example to everybody else and I think that is what Ashford is all about."

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

"I would like to thank the Leader for his explanation on the last question which was very helpful. My second question is can the Leader inform Members on plans to address the needs for our young citizens by way of leisure and recreation facilities?"

Reply by Councillor Clarkson

"Madam Mayor, we work hard to provide a range of leisure facilities for young people in the Borough and are currently supporting, managing and developing a number of sports and recreational offers, including: - Ashford Skate Park - a popular leisure destination for young people of all ages. In addition Sk8side work with these young people to deliver out of school activity schemes and events; Spearpoint Pavilion - A new sports pavilion in Kennington which will enable local football clubs to grow and develop their youth sides for both sexes, including the Ashford Angels girls' FC team; Conningbrook Lakes - Working with the Sea Cadets, Kent Scouts and sailing and canoe clubs to develop a leisure offer targeted at young people; Pitchside and Courtside - Venues which provide multi sports facilities to the community and are used by over 1000 people per week, many of whom are young people; Waterside

Youth Space - Working in partnership with the Salvation Army to provide a range of educational and recreational facilities from the youth space to young people through a regular youth club and holiday activity schemes; Cuckoo Park Play Space - In partnership with Kingsnorth Parish Council, we are working to develop an open play space which will include a range of play equipment for both formal and informal play for all ages. Construction is expected to begin in April 2016; House and Hang 10 - Commissioning and working with a voluntary sector youth provider to develop and deliver activities for young people from a dedicated space in the Stour Centre and within local communities; Revelation St Mary's - The arts programme has offered opportunities for young people to both participate and learn about the arts and music. I was there recently as they have a lovely mini youth orchestra which performed during the twinning visit and they were absolutely fantastic. Jasmin Vardimon Company - Regularly works with nine Ashford based schools and they are doing certificates for them and so forth. I have always been impressed since I came on to the Council in 2005 just how much sport and leisure was being developed. We also support a number of projects delivered by local organisations through the community grants fund. These grants often act as the catalyst by which groups can bring in the match funding they need to deliver the project. Projects regularly funded include the refurbishment of play areas, Scout and Guide groups, youth sports teams, and youth theatre groups and youth clubs. Guidance and support is provided to community youth organisations to grow and develop their youth offer, for example we have recently worked with Tenterden Town Council to develop a youth policy and have supported the Tenterden Youth Club with advice and funding to refurbish a village hall from which to operate. As you see we are working on developing both indoor and outdoor leisure and recreation facilities where young people can engage in various different activities. We do most of this in partnership with others. For example, our local Leisure Trust is amongst those key in supporting activities for young people. We are currently working with them to support how the Stour Centre and Tenterden Leisure Centre can upgrade their facilities to attract more users. These are clearly large indoor facilities and as previously stated we are working to support new community facilities that will underpin young people's leisure activities. I am pleased to announce that the Repton Community Centre planning application has just been received by the Council and will deliver an outdoor multi use games area and indoor spaces for young people to meet and enjoy. I have actually had a leaflet given to me this evening on that facility and we received the planning application last Wednesday. So I think we can be quite proud. I am not complacent, there is always a lot to do, we have got a lot of young people, but I am also looking, with an aging population, what we are going to do to keep all of us older people fit and well as well so I think we can be proud of it."

Supplementary Question by Councillor Michael

"I thank the Leader for that. I am involved with a lot of youth activities and I do know that we do a lot but I just wanted to draw his attention to Goat Lees Primary School's Project Team which recently undertook a survey of town facilities, and it identified its top six priorities which included: - an Ice Rink; a Children's Driving School; a Bounce House; an arcade; and a maze. I therefore ask will the Leader consider a 'Big 8' for the Borough's young citizens and could I propose that these are identified through the participation of all schools in Ashford which I believe would bode well for this Council?"

Reply by Councillor Clarkson

“I’d like to thank Councillor Michael for his question as he always gives me an opportunity to air and ventilate all of the things we are doing. A Big 8 for youth is a very interesting concept but it does rather cut across what we’re doing at the moment, although that isn’t to say we wouldn’t consider it. The issue is that I would have preferred Councillor Michael to come and see me or Cabinet colleagues to come and discuss such a proposal rather than ventilating it at a Full Council meeting when we’ve not had an opportunity to discuss it with him. That’s a matter for him but fortunately we live in a democracy and I am very pleased we do. As far as an ice rink is concerned it is rather like a theatre. We know that they would be very well received by people in the Borough but there is a huge cost to running them. I know Ashford Borough Council do most things but believe it or not we are not Ice Rink or Theatre operators, but if somebody wanted to come along and put an Ice Rink or a Theatre here then, as we’ve done with other things like the model railway, we would gladly participate, help with site acquisition, grants for capital funding etc, but thereafter I am afraid they would have to run that themselves, because we simply don’t have the experience or the funding. Cabinet colleagues and I are always open to discuss any of these matters with you. I can assure you that any good, viable and bright ideas will be embraced with both arms. You are pushing at an open door.”

Supplementary Question by Councillor Wedgbury

“I thank Councillor Michael for allowing me to ask this question. Is the Leader also aware of all the Voluntary Groups we have as well as the Scouts, Park Farm Rangers, Ashford United Football Club and the Air, Sea and Army Cadets? For example the Air Cadets take their Cadets shooting, flying and to the Nijmegen Marches – a fantastic event in its 100th year next year and they also take them on fantastic holidays at very low prices so is the Leader aware of all those and what a brilliant Borough we are in for young people?”

Reply by Councillor Clarkson

“I thought that was addressed to Councillor Michael but as it was addressed to me, yes you are quite right Councillor Wedgbury. I myself have got involved with the Scouts and all sorts of voluntary groups in Charing and I know Member colleagues do the same in every Ward throughout the Borough and I think it’s great. I recently had communication from the Scouts Group whose Leader is actually one of our Elected Members so we are actually very fortunate in this Borough to have an awful lot of activity going on and I think that’s great. It doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have any more, we certainly need to look after the youth, but I thank Councillor Wedgbury for his enlightening comments.”

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

“UKIP welcomes the fact that Ashford will be playing its part in welcoming Syrian refugees to safety and notes that if we are able to control our own borders we will be able to arrange to take even more. The Prime Minister has said that the UK will take 20,000 refugees over five years – that equates to just under 31 people over five years per UK Constituency. Could the Leader explain why he is taking 250, which is over 800% of our ‘fair share’?”

Reply by Councillor Clarkson

“Thank you for your question Councillor Murphy. As you know the Prime Minister has agreed, as you have said, to take 20,000 Syrian refugees over the life of this Parliament. Although the Home Office has indicated that it will seek to ensure an equitable distribution of refugees across the country so that no individual Local Authority bears a disproportionate share of the burden, I am sure that Councillor Murphy will recognise that some parts of our country are remote and placing refugees in areas that have poor access to services, particularly the various health services that may be required for some of the very traumatised or vulnerable people, is not the best way to provide help to support them. We know the Home Office and Department for Community and Local Government are working with Local Authorities and the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales to agree details of the arrangements to house and support refugees, but some of the more remote parts of Scotland and Wales are unlikely to be suitable or ideal areas. It is not therefore the simple numbers issue that Councillor Murphy assumes. As well as access to health and education, families need to be given the chance to integrate with local communities and Ashford is well placed to offer such opportunities. 50 people per year is 0.04% of our population in Ashford and even the 250 over the five year period amounts to 0.2% of our population. I am sure Councillor Murphy has also read of the call for the UK to take 50,000 refugees over the next five years as a fairer proportion. Campaigners including Citizens UK have said that a pledge to take 20,000 refugees is not enough and 50,000 over five years is more appropriate. On Monday of this week 343 signatories including retired judges, Queens Council barristers, law professionals and a range of others made a statement calling for a humanitarian and effective Government response to the refugee crisis. Whilst you mention our borders, I think everyone in this room is clearly concerned about un-fettered migrants coming to seek a better life in this country, but that is not what we are talking about here. We are limiting our intake to the camps around Syria where you can see the devastation and I think there is something like 3 million people in those camps alone and I think a third of the Syrian population has been decamped from the country so this is a vast issue and I think for us to take 50 individuals, or six to eight families, a year is fine and I have no worries about our ability to handle it. We can and we will be seen to be doing our part and I haven't got a lot of time to worry about what other Districts are doing as I want to focus my time and energy with Tracey Kerly and other colleagues on what we are doing. I hope Councillor Murphy is re-assured and in her role as an Ashford Borough Councillor will welcome and support the integration of up to 50 Syrian refugees, in their family units, as and when they arrive.”

Supplementary Question by Councillor Murphy

“The Leader may feel that it is his moral duty to take these refugees, who I agree need our support, and I also applaud his ability to find the necessary housing acknowledging that the Government is paying for this, and not using Council stock, but shouldn't the properties that may be bought by the Council Housing Company or taken from private supply, be used for those on our housing waiting list first rather than for housing refugees over and above our fair share?”

Reply by Councillor Clarkson

“In response to that supplementary question may I just say that it isn't my moral duty as you've pointed out, but I think it's our collective moral duty to take these refugees into our Borough. These are 50 people – men, women and small children and as I

have said we already cater for 5000 families on our housing stock which we are very proud of. We do have a housing waiting list with over 1000 people on it and we are very concerned about that, but any of them, if they want to go in to private rented accommodation as the Syrians coming over are going to go into, we would certainly help them and they could probably do that in the next few months. However they won't have the right to buy and they won't be able to pay 60% of the normal rent so it is a totally different thing. The Syrians are coming in with Visas, the right to stay here for five years, and immediate right to work and the Government have said they will be eligible for benefits because they are refugees in fear of their lives, and that is why we are able to have them in private rented accommodation. So it is not a problem if others want to come off the waiting and list and go in to that but they won't have all the benefits and they won't be able to get the Government's financial support to do so. We are not talking about the same thing here. I am concerned about our housing waiting list as we all are and we will move heaven and earth to try and reduce it, but when you look at other Authorities I think we have a significant number of people on our stock and we are also always thinking of ways to increase the number of people coming off our housing waiting list. We are doing a lot more right to buy, shared ownership, stairway to ownership, 20-30% affordable housing on new developments, and working with Government on deposit schemes and things of that nature. I have even suggested to Tracey Kerly and others about looking at doing some sort of mortgage scheme ourselves for people so I am keen to resolve that but it is a very different thing to what we are talking about here."

Supplementary Question by Councillor Chilton

"The original question suggested that we could take more if we controlled our own borders but then went on to complain that we are taking more than our fair share. I know UKIP Councillors tend not to attend meetings but had they turned up perhaps they would have found out the required information instead of coming to Full Council ill informed, so would the Leader agree with me that all Members should turn up to meetings so they are better informed?"

Reply by Councillor Clarkson

"I thank Councillor Chilton, the Leader of the Labour Group, for his comments. I am well aware that all Members of this Authority have a life outside this Authority and have families and their own domestic issues and often employment to attend to, so it would be ill-advised of me to comment on individual Members or individual Groups. I obviously agree that when Members sign up to be Councillors they should attend to their duties and the Committees they are put on to and if they can't do so they should perhaps ask to come off of those Committees. So I agree with the general thrust of what he says but I don't want to be critical of any Group or any individual because I respect their individual positions."

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

"Would the Leader please clarify when he says that Ashford is taking 250 Syrian refugees if he means 250 individuals or 250 families because the immigration authority only counts the head of the household therefore if he is using the immigration authority's rationale Ashford could in fact be taking 1750 individuals, as each family allowed to settle will be between four and seven people, and not 250 as they have been led to believe?"

Reply by Councillor Clarkson

“Madam Mayor please forgive me but I am really beginning to lose the will to live. I understand the question but I do not understand the motive behind it. I think our Cabinet report which I’m sure all Members will have read, and the statements I have made earlier this evening make this abundantly clear. I’m not really concerned what the Home Office does and the way their stats work, but we are taking up to 50 people a year – ‘people’ meaning men, women and children – and I don’t think I’ve missed anyone out there, so up to 250 people over a five year period. Now I didn’t do advanced maths, but it seems pretty clear to me. I am sorry to seem a bit short but I suppose it wears a bit thin after a while when you keep getting the same question in different forms. That is the situation and I don’t think I can make it any more crystal clear than that – up to 50 people per year for a five year period, so up to 250 men, women and children.”

Supplementary Question by Councillor Galpin

“It was an interesting question and I think the Leader answered it with alacrity but I would just like to ask the Leader whether he feels that the Borough could continue to economically grow without any new people coming to live here, whether they be from Syria or Scunthorpe? We have 5000 new jobs coming in the very near future and less than 1000 people unemployed so somebody would have to do those jobs and there are houses waiting for them, so I see no disparity and no reason for guilt, so would the Leader like to comment on that?”

Reply by Councillor Clarkson

“Clearly we are a growing community. Over the last 10 years we have created a net increase year on year of approximately 700 jobs per year and we are set to continue to do so. So we will need more labour in our workforce and skilled labour at that. That is why this Authority has spent a great deal of time, effort and money in trying to ensure that we have a Further Education and Higher Education college campus here that can take on the skilling of young people so that they can get a higher salary than our current fairly low ones which I want to lift and grow. We have probably the lowest unemployment rate going. The National Employment Growth rate is at 1.8%, Kent’s is 1.5%, but Ashford’s is twice the national average at 3.6%, so we certainly will need more labour and whether they are coming from Scunthorpe, Syria or anywhere else I know not and I will contemplate that later when I get home this evening. However, the main thing for me is that we need to understand that the last statistical information on ethnicity and population in the Borough that we have is the 2011 Census which shows that 20 of the 35 Wards had 90% plus White British and Irish and the other 15 all had between 82% and 90% White British and Irish populations. These figures do not include the gypsy and traveller communities and other white categories. There are 14 other categories of ethnicity making up the remainder of the population so I hope that puts this matter in some perspective. I understand this can be an emotional issue but it shouldn’t be as these are desperate people with desperate young families in these camps and how wonderful would it be to have two or three of those families here in time for Christmas?”

(DS)

MINS:

