

Ashford Borough Council

Minutes of a Virtual Meeting of the Ashford Borough Council held on Microsoft Teams on the **15th October 2020**.

Present:

His Worshipful the Mayor, Councillor J S Link (Chairman);

Cllrs. Anckorn, Barrett, Bartlett, Mrs Bell, Bell, Blanford, Buchanan, Burgess, Campkin, Chilton, Clarkson, Clokie, Cornish, Dehnel, Farrell, Feacey, Forest, Harman, Hayward, B Heyes, T Heyes, Howard, Howard-Smith, Iliffe, Knowles, Krause, Ledger, Link, Mulholland, Pickering, Rogers, Shorter, Spain, Sparks, C Suddards, L Suddards, Walder, Webb, Wedgbury, White, Wright.

Prior to the commencement of the meeting the Reverend John Emmott said prayers and asked Members to respect a period of silence for Alexander Ward who was the Borough Council Member for the Beaver Ward and who had passed away recently.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Michael, Ovenden, Pauley, Smith.

In Attendance:

Chief Executive, Director of Law and Governance, Director of Finance and Economy, Head of HR and Customer Services, Head of Planning and Development, Strategic Development and Delivery Manager, Principal Solicitor (Strategic Development), Civic Engagement Officer, Member Services Manager (Operational).

106 Exempt or Confidential Items

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.

107 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Bartlett	Made a Voluntary Announcement as he was a Member of Kent County Council and he lived near to the site in question.	114
Mrs Bell	Made a Voluntary Announcement as she was a Member of Kent County Council.	114
Farrell	Made a Voluntary Announcement as he was a Member of Kent County Council.	114
Feacey	Made a Voluntary Announcement as he was Chairman of the Ashford Volunteer Centre.	116

Webb	Made a Voluntary Announcement as she was a Director of the Ashford Volunteer Centre.	116
Wedgbury	Made a Voluntary Announcement as he was a Member of Kingsnorth Parish Council and a paid official of the USDAW Trade Union.	114

108 Minutes

Councillor Farrell referred to a discussion from the previous Meeting where the Leader had informed the Council that the Administration would defend the Borough from lorry parks. With the announcement earlier that week of a second lorry park in the offing, he asked how the Leader would assess that defence and asked why he thought the Government was unwilling to publish the Environmental Impact Assessment for both or either sites? The Leader responded that whilst he would be happy to discuss this further with Councillor Farrell off line, what he could say at this meeting was that Councillor Farrell would know more about the news reports he had read, but the Leader had been assured by the Government that the site at Sevington was categorically not a 'lorry park'. It was going to be used by HMRC as a customs clearance facility and an Inland Port Health Authority. Apart from Waterbrook, he did not know anything about any other large scale lorry parking facilities in the Ashford Borough.

Councillor Anckorn said that at the last Council Meeting he had asked the Leader about Eurostar services in Ashford. It had since been announced in the Kentish Express that services would not return to Ashford until 2022 at the earliest and he asked the Leader for an update on what the Administration was doing to safeguard Eurostar services at Ashford International Station. The Leader said that everyone present would be aware of the dire effects of Covid-19 and a commercial decision had been taken by Eurostar to suspend some services. Given passenger numbers this was not unexpected or unusual, with some airlines also continuing to follow suit and suggesting it might take up to four years for them to get back to normal. He was as saddened as everyone by Eurostar's decision, but he was assured that they would return. He had held meetings with the Chief Executive of Eurostar and he had also written to them, along with the Leader of KCC and the MP for Ashford, to express their eagerness that Eurostar returned to Ashford as swiftly as possible. In turn Eurostar had committed to keeping them updated on passenger numbers and their return to Ashford. There was not a great deal more that could be done at this stage, but he shared the desire of everyone in the Borough that services would return at the earliest possible opportunity.

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Council held on the 16th July 2020 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

109 Announcements

(a) The Mayor

The Mayor advised that since his inauguration on the 16th July, he had thoroughly enjoyed his first few months in office and despite the Government restrictions he and his dear wife, the Mayoress Jill, had had the great opportunity to safely get out and about across the Borough. It had been a great honour to meet so many upbeat members of their community who were working so hard to overcome the challenges set by the ongoing pandemic. He had also embarked on a programme of Civic Visits taking them through towns and villages and visiting places like Ashford Museum and Tenterden's Kent and East Sussex Railway; the Bandstand in the town with the super Revelation artists; the Little Teapot Café and The Old Dairy Brewery; accommodation providers such as Egerton's Frasers Hotel for tea; and a special tour of the wonderful Green Farm complex at Shadoxhurst that provided not just accommodation but spa facilities too with incredible charity outreach to the local community and inner city families in London. They had also presented Mr Ash Miah of Cinnamon Spice restaurant with a well-deserved Ashford Applause award for his community support offering free meals during the Covid lockdown. There they had been joined by the High Sheriff of Kent and her husband for lunch to celebrate. It had also been a delight to experience the talents of the current World Number One Under 12 Tennis player and the Lawn Tennis Association's Boy Player of the Year, Ben Gusic-Wan, as he played an exhibition match at Wye Tennis Club against one of his coaching team, Ben Roger. Ben's highlight of the year had come when he won the Florida Orange Bowl in the United States and had become the first British Boy to win this since Andy Murray in 1999. This was a great achievement and as a Borough they should be most proud.

Such visits and invitations had given him the chance to chat with owners, managers, staff and volunteers and see how they were working with the Covid-19 regulations. They had informed him of their grateful thanks to Ashford Borough Council for all the help and support they had been given during this dreadful time. He had to commend them all on their enthusiasm and positivity. On their visits he and the Mayoress had been pleased to see that so many of the Borough's local attractions and accommodation providers had registered and achieved Visit Britain's 'We're Good to Go' status. This was the official UK mark to show that the tourism or hospitality business had worked hard to follow the Government and industry Covid-19 guidelines and had a process in place to maintain cleanliness and aid social distancing. He wanted to say well done to all of the businesses that had received this mark of safety for everyone.

The Mayor said that he had also met with two of his charities. The first was Ashford Street Pastors where they had coffee on the terrace at the Willesborough Baptist Church with an opportunity to discuss their plans going forward, and then joining in with a socially distanced gathering with the Dementia Memory Café in Tenterden Recreation Ground on a very hot afternoon! It had been such a delight to meet safely, out in the open air and it was clear just how vital funding was for these worthy charities.

Finally, during these past few months they had seen a number of historic commemorations. He had taken part in the VJ commemorations with a video message for the community and wreath laying at the Memorial; the Merchant Navy

Day 'Raising of the Red Ensign' ceremony outside the Civic Centre; and for the Battle of Britain 80th Anniversary he and the Mayoress had represented the Council at small wreath laying ceremonies in both Great Chart and Egerton. Each of the gatherings were intimate but had been performed and arranged with just as much formality, dignity and respect as any large event. It had been most rewarding to represent the Borough at so many occasions and in particular during these most unusual times. His Deputy, Councillor Callum Knowles, had also supported him by attending a couple of virtual events such as the Lord Lieutenant's Awards Ceremony and the Chairman of KCC's Reception and he wanted to thank him for doing so. Looking forward to the next few months, he and the Mayoress would still enjoy participating in further virtual fundraising events, meetings and concerts, (still a challenge he was pursuing!), and a number of engagements and Civic Visits as they led up to Christmas. In the meantime, he wanted to thank Members for their support and encouraged everyone to stay safe and take care.

(b) Leader of the Council

The Leader said that he wanted to take a few minutes to update colleagues on some recent news and developments.

Firstly, on behalf of Ashford Borough Council he wanted to congratulate all of those who had been rightly recognised for their contribution towards public life in the recent Queen's Birthday Honours List. There were a number of people in Kent on that list, but he particularly wanted to offer congratulations to the former Leader of Kent County Council, Paul Carter who had been knighted. He had offered his personal congratulations when the news had been released that past Saturday morning, and would be following that up with a formal letter from Ashford Borough Council. At a more local level he wanted to take the opportunity to congratulate Councillor Heather Hayward who had been shortlisted for the 2020 LGIU & CCLA Councillor Awards for the Community Champion Award for her work on The Limes Community Garden. He was sure that colleagues would join him in wishing Councillor Hayward the very best of luck when the awards took place at the end of November.

On a more sober note, the Leader recognised that many people had suffered considerable hardship during the pandemic including illness, loss of loved ones, loneliness and isolation as well as financial hardship. Therefore the Council would prioritise services and projects that would build a stronger community and help the Borough's local economy recover from Covid-19. The Council's Recovery Plan therefore set out how it would help residents through these tough times, either directly, or by signposting to where support was available via other organisations. It covered the next 18 months and included four key themes: - Supporting Economic Recovery; Supporting Community Recovery; Place Making, Regeneration and Infrastructure; and Organisational Change and Workforce Development. Shortly after the lockdown the Council had launched its Voluntary Emergency Response Appeal (VERA), setting itself the ambitious target of raising £10,000 to help with the Borough's response to, and recovery from, the pandemic. 70 donations were made, with contributions from residents, Members, Officers and local companies such as Givaudan and Countryside Properties. They knew that there were many local voluntary organisations that helped supply food and essentials to those most in need during the height of the crisis. Three key organisations that were continuing to deliver support across the Borough had received funding from VERA - Ashford Vineyard Foodbank, Bright City Church Foodbank and Repton People's Pantry. As the

Council's Corporate Recovery Plan highlighted, they would continue to look at ways to strengthen the voluntary sector, such as networking valuable groups, so they could help each other and share resources in the future. Officers would also continue to look out for, and secure, further funding for those three strategic community organisations, as well as other Borough wide groups or projects who were helping those that were struggling with the most basic of necessities.

The Leader advised that Ashford Borough Council had also supported almost 2,500 of the Borough's businesses through the Government's grants scheme. They had paid out 97% of the funding they received from the Government for these schemes - a total of around £29m. The grants were given to small businesses who were affected by the nationwide lockdown, and the feedback they had received showed how vital they had been to keeping businesses afloat in these unprecedented times. Each Local Authority had been given funding from the Government, depending on the Government's assessments. He wanted to point out that the Council's Finance Department were geared up to deal with this, even before the Government had given the official go ahead and they were able to be ahead of the game in giving out these grants and pro-actively contacting businesses and advising them they may be eligible and assisting them with their applications. This was a great credit to the Council Officers involved and had made a great difference. He said that businesses in the Borough needed everyone's support more than ever. He wanted to encourage everyone to shop locally wherever possible to help the local economy and keep the Borough's many small businesses going.

With uncertainty over future Government funding, a considerable budget impact from the Covid-19 pandemic and a refocusing of future priorities, the Leader advised that work was now being accelerated on the Council's Commercialisation Strategy. He believed they had a great opportunity to fundamentally change how the Council did business and delivered services in the future, which not only supported their community and economy to recover locally, but would also bring in income to protect front line services. By being more commercially minded, the Council would be putting the people of Ashford at the heart of everything they did when thinking about how they provided services, and any income generated would be reinvested into those services and meaningful projects. All acknowledged the challenges that they faced, but he viewed the funding picture as an opportunity to affect fundamental changes to how the Council did business, with improvements to the services they delivered as a result. They had always been pro-active in the management of the Council's finances. They had always explored the Council's commercial investment and development opportunities to enable it to be a dynamic and entrepreneurial Council. The strategy would form a part of the Council's response to the budget deficits identified in the Medium Term Financial Plan and would support the Council in its continued delivery of the quality services that Ashford's residents needed and deserved.

In conclusion, the Leader said that everyone would be aware of the worrying rise in Covid-19 cases, and additional restrictions being put in place elsewhere in the country to stem the flow of the pandemic. While Ashford, and indeed the wider South East region, had not seen cases rise as high as in other locations in the UK, they must not be complacent and he would ask everyone - fellow Councillors, Council Officers, residents and businesses - to all do everything they could to follow the Government guidance to protect themselves and others, and let Ashford be an example.

Councillor Campkin referred to recent reports that the Ashford Conservative Association had received £10,000 from the aforementioned Covid Grants and asked if the Leader could justify this. The Leader said that in his view it was not up to him to justify and if any Business or Association was eligible to apply for a grant then in his view it should. The Portfolio Holder for Finance and IT advised the Council had successfully administered a number of grant schemes and he would be answering a question on that later in the meeting, but he considered it would be wholly wrong to pick out any individual organisations or businesses. His own understanding informally was that the Association had received that grant, which it was eligible for, and it was right that it had, in the same way as other businesses, charities and organisations. The important thing to remember when such grants went out was that they were not just about that individual organisation, but they were about keeping the economy going and enabling organisations to keep paying their bills, salaries etc. That was why the Government had devised such schemes – to do whatever was needed to protect people and keep the economy going and this was something all across Ashford should be proud of.

Councillor Farrell said that he wholeheartedly agreed with the Leader's sentiment about supporting businesses now more than ever, and to that end as the Leader of the Council, which was also the Licensing Authority, would he join Councillor Farrell in calling for the baseless, unscientific 10pm curfew to be scrapped, so as to support pubs and restaurants across the Borough? As Leader, would he also resist further restrictions on businesses and employees that came without the necessary support? 80% furlough had been good enough for workers in March, and in his view it should still be now. The Leader thanked Councillor Farrell for his question and thought he had paid him a great accolade by inferring that he had any influence over national Government! In many ways he agreed with the points being made. He also personally found the 10pm curfew difficult to understand as in his view the pre-existing restrictions such as table service and social distancing at premises were already in place, regardless of closure times. On the point about the furlough scheme, the Leader said that in his view, regardless of Political affiliation, this Government should be praised for the remarkable job it had done in putting forward funding in terms of furloughing, grants and the whole gambit of support through this pandemic. Personally, he would love for the furlough scheme to be able to continue for as long as it took, but he considered there had to be some realism. There was not a bottomless pit, with great pressure on the economy, and with further waves and lockdowns already happening, there was a need to be prudent and cautious. He would though continue to do everything he could to encourage support for the Borough's businesses and residents and further financial support if there were to be further localised restrictions.

Councillor Harman said she just wanted to say on behalf of the Ashford Independent Group how proud they were of their colleague Councillor Heather Hayward for her nomination and they were all rooting for her to win the Community Champion Award. Councillor Hayward was the epitome of a Councillor who was rooted in 'the real world' and for helping people on the ground in ways that made a massive difference to communities.

Councillor Spain asked about the commercialisation of the Council and said that in the current economic climate this did come with increased risk and he asked the Leader for reassurances over how risks would be constrained and controlled to

ensure the best outcomes for residents. The Leader said he agreed that there was a need for caution, but there were two strands to consider. Firstly, the commercialisation strategy so far, which had seen investment in assets such as International House, had proved extremely beneficial for the residents because they ultimately owned them and they were making a good return. The Council had prudently avoided opportunities to buy further office blocks and focussed attention on housing which there would always be a demand/need for. The second strand of the commercialisation strategy was not about being entrepreneurial outside the Council's area of knowledge and expertise, but using existing skills and services and bringing those to others in a way that could generate an income and get best value from them. Possible examples included management of private rented property and using the skills of Aspire more widely.

Councillor Rogers asked what the Council's policy was on social housing and purchasing three plus bedroom properties for larger families as this was an increasing issue in his ward. The Leader said he would take this off-line and discuss with the Member and the Head of Housing outside of the meeting. What he would say is that the Council was extending its housing stock in terms of accommodation for larger families, as well as affordable homes for key workers which should also hopefully release larger properties at the other end of the scale.

(c) Councillor Lyn Suddards

Councillor Lyn Suddards thanked the Council for giving her the opportunity to say a few words on behalf of the Labour Group in tribute to the late Councillor Alex Ward. It seemed like such a short time ago that her and Alex were both standing together at the Election Count, so happy and full of ideas about what they were going to do, so this did all seem so unfair. Alex had such a strong sense of public service. Although he had only been a Borough Councillor for just over a year, he had originally stood in 2015 and had been campaigning for improved services and the wellbeing of people in Ashford, and further afield, for a number of years before that. He also had a strong belief in social justice and felt it an enormous privilege to represent the Beaver Ward and people who may not be in a position to have their voices heard without the active support of their elected representatives. Alex was tireless, and Councillor Suddards said he sometimes drove her mad with his relentless eye for detail and his energy for walking around the Ward which he knew every patch of!

She wanted to mention Alex's young wife Elizabeth and his parents Emma and David who had also worked tirelessly as lifelong members of the Labour Party. They had asked her to pass on their thanks for the kind messages received from Members and staff of the Council, including the Leader and the Chief Executive. Alex had died of Motor Neurone Disease which was a terrible and cruel illness which took a third of all sufferers within a year. Alex's death had been quick and shocking but, right to the end, he had kept abreast of what was going on locally and nationally and even when he had first been diagnosed they had gone out on a walk together with Alex using a walking frame, and he had been thinking about possible improvements for pavements and accessibility for disabled people. She felt that turning attention to some of those needs would be a fitting tribute to Alex. Their slogan in Beaver Ward had been "if you elect us, we will be visible" and she endeavoured to continue with that to represent the ward. She said that it was a travesty that his life had been cut short and she missed him terribly, but he would want everyone to carry on with their

work for the betterment of Ashford. The Mayor, Leader and other Members echoed this sentiment and praised Councillor Suddards for her words.

110 Cabinet – 30th July and 24th September 2020

(a) Cabinet – 30th July 2020

Councillor Chilton said that with regard to Minute No. 23, the Budget Scrutiny process begun on the 7th December, and with no Cabinet meeting in October, he asked if the Portfolio Holder could assure that the MTFP document would be available prior to Budget Scrutiny commencing. Councillor Bell advised that whilst he did not want to commit to a particular date, there was a huge amount of work going on regarding the MTFP and the Officers were doing a phenomenal job.

Councillor Spain asked about the Recovery Plan, Minute No. 24. He had previously expressed his disappointment about community facilities not being a part of the plan and he wanted to make the Council aware that the previous day the Kennington Community Council had formed a new Bybrook and Bockhanger Facilities Committee, focused on the development of a new community facility at Bockhanger. He asked if the Leader would give an assurance that the Council would work with the Community Council to give that project the best chance of success. The Leader responded that the Council would give as much support as it possibly could and they were on the side of the people in providing them with the best facilities possible across the Borough, but a lot of projects had been paused due to the current budgetary shortfalls. There were a number of projects that needed attention and he did not want to be held up with any of them, but there had to be some realism and the first target was balancing the budget for 2021/22.

Resolved:

- That (i) the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 30th July 2020 be received and noted with the exception of Minute Nos. 23, 24, 28 and 31.**
- (ii) Minute Nos. 23, 24, 28 and 31 be approved and adopted.**

(b) Cabinet – 24th September 2020

Councillor Chilton asked with regard to Minute No. 72, if there had yet been a response from the Secretary of State as to whether they would be compensating Ashford and other Local Authorities for losses due to Covid-19, or had further representations been made to Government? The Leader said they were continuing to make strong representations but they had not yet had a definitive response from Government. The Director of Finance and Economy explained that the Government was reviewing the package incrementally but confirmed that there had not yet been a definitive response.

Resolved:

That (i) the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 24th September 2020 be received and noted with the exception of Minute Nos. 74, 75, 76 and 78.

(ii) Minute Nos. 74, 75, 76 and 78 be approved and adopted.

111 Audit Committee – 29th September 2020

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Audit Committee held on the 29th September 2020 be received and noted.

112 Selection and Constitutional Review Committee – 1st October 2020

Councillor Bernard Heyes said he had some concerns about the planning delegation report and the extent of the delegations proposed in terms of major applications and for those up to 50 units. He was concerned about a potential erosion of democracy and public involvement in planning issues. He considered that the procedure whereby a minimum of six Committee Members was needed to request the determination come to Committee was not enough to stop that erosion. He would also be interested to hear from the Ashford Independent Councillors who purported to stand for residents' concerns about development. Councillor Wedgbury agreed with these comments and said that he also had a number of concerns, particularly that Parish Councils did not have the ability to call planning applications to Committee. The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Development said he understood the points being made, but considered it was important to emphasise that there was a need to determine sufficient number of applications otherwise there was a danger that determination could be passed to local inspectors and the Council would lose that control. He gave some examples of issues from the previous evening's Planning Committee which showed why the proposals were being put forward, and stressed the safeguards in the proposals which maintained the ability to call in any application via the Ward Member, the Portfolio Holder, or any six Members of the Planning Committee. In terms of Parish Councils, his view was that Ward Members should be attending Parish Council Meetings and be aware of any planning issues that they had and make their own judgments.

Councillor Harman said that in response to comments about Ashford Independent Councillors, she wanted to make it clear that it was Ashford Independent Councillors present at the Selection and Constitutional Review Committee who had raised these issues as concerns and spoken on them at the Meeting. They had expressed concerns about the proposed hectarage of sites to be delegated and the number of units as well and she maintained those concerns, but they were also aware of the problems caused by the backlog of applications and were reassured by the number of safeguards in the proposals for calling applications in. However, she said it was vitally important for Councillors to be 'on their toes' and fully across any planning issues in their wards in order to deal with them in a robust way and represent their constituents.

The Leader said he had a lot of sympathy with many of the points made. When this had initially been proposed, there had been discussion of delegating up to 100 units and there had not been as many safeguards on call ins either, so this report had already been significantly strengthened from what was originally proposed. There was a delicate balance though between the needs of the Local Planning Authority and the demands being placed on them. He agreed that it was up to Ward Members to play an active part and he also said that this would be kept under constant review and if the new proposals did not work well he would have no hesitation in seeking to revert to the original situation.

Councillor Chilton said he was also totally against these proposals. They diminished Members' democratic rights and powers and at a time when Ashford was growing, and with a number of changes to the planning system in the pipeline. He therefore considered there was need for more democratic oversight and less items being delegated to Officers, rather than more. He said he also thought it was surprising that a Political Party who had stood on a manifesto of restricting development were seemingly willing to stand by and allow this to happen.

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Selection and Constitutional Review Committee held on the 1st October 2020 be approved and adopted.

113 Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Annual Report 2019/20

Councillor Farrell asked the Vice-Chairman of the Committee firstly how he would assess the introduction of the topic assessment matrix for review items, and secondly if there had been any improvement in attendance of Cabinet Members at Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings, as this had been an issue of concern for the Committee in previous years. Councillor Charles Suddards said that the Committee had looked at the ABC Property Company and transparency this year but he considered that the report was quite light on detail and he asked what recommendations the Committee made.

Councillor Chilton responded that in his view the matrix did have an impact on the Committee's ability to perform its function. Members would note that this year's Annual Report was extremely slim compared to other years and he thought this demonstrated that the introduction of the matrix had diminished the Committee's powers and abilities. On the second topic, there had been a problem with Portfolio Holder attendance although he did want to say that Councillor Shorter was exemplary during the Budget Scrutiny sessions, coming to every single one. Whilst others had attended from time to time, attendance had been pretty poor. With regard to the Property Company, the Committee had received an update report in recent months, so this would have fallen in the 2020/21 year outside of this report. It was a pure update report so the Committee had not made any specific recommendations, but Members of the Committee had asked for the issue of the Property Company to come back for proper scrutiny, particularly in light of the Commercialisation Strategy and he hoped this would happen in the new year.

The Leader of the Council said it was worth again clarifying that the Commercialisation Strategy related to better use of existing Council services, not property acquisition or the activities of the ABC Property Company.

Resolved:

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Annual Report 2019/20 be received and noted.

114 Consideration of a Petition by the Council

The Mayor directed Members' attention to the report of the Director of Law and Governance which set out the procedure for considering the Petition and also the advice of the Strategic Development and Delivery Manager on the subject of the Petition itself.

In accordance with the Council's Petition Scheme, Mrs Arthur of the Village Alliance, spoke to the Petition she had submitted.

Mrs Arthur said that she was presenting this petition on behalf of the Village Alliance and the residents of Sevington and Mersham to protect their villages. As residents in the Ashford Borough, they wished to see the land to the East of Highfield Lane, Mersham remain as a green buffer zone - a "Strategic Gap in Perpetuity" as referred to in Policy SP7 of the Local Plan 2030, to protect an ancient settlement and countryside from encroachment, as defined in the National Planning Policy Framework. This land was the last green field between Mersham and the Sevington Inland Border facility. It deserved designation as a green space, in perpetuity.

She thanked the Council for allowing her to speak and to present their petition. Mersham and Sevington residents, the Village Alliance and the Parish Council had worked together for many years to save the last field protecting their village. This petition was launched on the 8th of August, in the face of the encroaching contingency lorry park and the HMRC customs clearance site, now known, as the Sevington Inland Border Facility. They had been overwhelmed by the support from their villages, their neighbouring villages and the residents of the Ashford Borough, with many signatures in just six weeks. In fact, 1666 valid signatures had been received and a total of over 2500, including those outside the Borough, and it was still growing. They had the opportunity to preserve the identity of Mersham and other villages for future generations. Like many of the villages around Ashford, Mersham was one of Ashford's assets. An historic Kentish village, that was easily accessible. The Borough's beautiful villages were one of the reasons why people visited the area and wanted to live there. Indeed, in Ashford's own promotional video, a new resident mentioned the easy access to the leisure facilities offered by rural villages. The MP Damian Green had said that, "Although Ashford is known as an expanding urban area, much of Ashford is made up of beautiful villages and protected countryside. We need to manage the growth of Ashford, so that we do not lose the green fields we value so much". Damian had also said that Mersham should be "preserved as a village rather than a suburb". Mersham had a strong, vibrant, village community and was fast becoming a rural leisure and sports facility for Ashford. The school had an ever-growing reputation and the Farriers Arms pub, saved 10 years ago by a team of over 100 villagers, was now a successful, nationally recognised, community pub.

Mrs Arthur said that the Department of Transport website for the Sevington Inland Border Facility had now gone live. They were asking for feedback, to help shape the future of the site and the land to the East of Highfield Lane. They had stated that they had “no intention to build” on this eastern parcel of land, but they were considering the future of this land once it was no longer needed for the storage of topsoil. Without a clearly defined green buffer, the identity and integrity of Mersham was under threat and they faced an uncertain future. In order for Policy SP7 to be effective, there should be a firmer commitment to a clearly defined expansion of the green corridor, to provide green buffers to protect settlements. In the Planning Inspector’s examination of Policy SP7 in the Ashford Local Plan in May 2018, he asked the question - “will it be effective in ensuring the separation of settlements?” and “should there be a firmer commitment to define green corridors around Ashford and some settlements?” The Strategic Policy Map of the Local Plan showed no commitment to the protection of Mersham. In her view, this was unsatisfactory. They believed a Green Corridor should be a firm commitment by the Council to create green buffer zones to protect the unique character of rural settlements. The topography of the land to the east of Highfield Lane was obvious in its name - “The High Field”. It was overlooked by an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and near to a Site of Special Scientific Interest. They were not alone in their desire to protect it. They were buoyed to have the support of Parish Councils around the Borough, of the Campaign to Protect Rural England, of Borough Councillors, their County Councillor and Councillor Clarkson. They wished to work together with the Council, the County Council and the Department for Transport, to provide a green buffer. A green space providing a community benefit creating a biodiversity gain, to offset the biodiversity loss. A flagship for Policy SP7, Separation of Settlements, to provide a green buffer to protect the identity and integrity of an ancient village, for residents in the Borough and future generations to enjoy in perpetuity. The previous day, across the Borough, residents had seen KCC drone images of the Border Facility Site. This showed true devastation of Ashford’s countryside. Borough residents had been shocked and dismayed by these images. They needed to compensate for the destruction of their natural environment. This was the opportunity to do so.

Councillor Wedgbury said that Kingsnorth had its own green buffer zone which had been of particular benefit to the community during the recent pandemic – being used for exercise, dog walking and useable open space as well as cattle grazing. His concern on this particular matter was that the piece of land in question was not in Council ownership, it was owned by the Government. He had also investigated whether there had been a crowdfunding page set up to enable the community to buy this piece of land, but had been surprised to find there was not. He moved that the petition should be referred to Mersham Parish Council to give them the opportunity to raise funds to buy the land and protect it in perpetuity for the community.

Councillor Ledger said he agreed with the many good points made by Mrs Arthur. He said that Policy SP7 was a key policy in the Local Plan and there was talk in the report of safeguarding this piece of land in the next Local Plan. However, he was concerned that this would be too late. He also considered there needed to be further guidance from Officers about Policy SP7 as this was not just an important issue for Mersham, it would be important for a number of villages who needed green corridors and open spaces maintained and protected for community use. He therefore moved that “Ashford Borough Council ask if this land could be gifted by the Government in good faith in compensation for the disruption and destruction caused, or at least

obtained for a nominal amount, to give the Council control over that land and be able to keep it as a green buffer to create a community space or woodland there.”

This was seconded by Councillor Hayward.

Councillor Bartlett said he wanted to pay credit to Mrs Arthur and her team at the Village Alliance as it was recognised how important this issue was for the future of Mersham. He considered a buffer between the Sevington Border Facility and the village of Mersham was vital and everyone across the Council was like minded in supporting that. He did not consider it appropriate to pass this issue to the Parish Council as it was a Borough wide issue, so he did not support Councillor Wedgbury’s proposal. He moved the following motion – “That the site to the east of the Customs Clearance Border Facility be considered for designation as a green buffer area as part of the next review of the Local Plan. Work should also be started by Council Members and Officers, with the Department for Transport (DfT), to identify ownership and management options for the site, in conjunction with the Parish Council”.

Councillor Bartlett said that this motion was designed to demonstrate the importance of all parties working together on this issue and it had two “barrels” in that it sought to both obtain the land, and protect it. It was noteworthy that the DfT had set up a series of stakeholder engagement groups, including the involvement of the Village Alliance, and he was grateful for their involvement and looked forward to working together to secure this. In response to points made during the debate, Councillor Bartlett said that he thought the Council had a unique opportunity to do something in one area of the Borough, which could then be rolled out to other villages and communities. This would be the first time the Council would take this kind of step in giving the designation of a ‘green buffer area’ and whilst he understood the concerns of other Councillors about other villages, he thought it was important to devote the time to getting this site right, developing a framework for engaging with the Parish Council and local communities, and then roll that out to other areas in the Local Plan in the normal way. As Chairman of the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group he gave that assurance.

This was seconded by Councillor Mrs Bell.

Councillor Wedgbury’s motion was seconded by Councillor Bernard Heyes.

With three motions now proposed and seconded, the Director of Law and Governance advised that the Council should really have voted on the first motion to secure a seconder, before moving and seconding others.

A vote was then taken on Councillor Ledger’s motion which was lost.

A vote was then taken on Councillor Bartlett’s motion. This Motion was carried.

Resolved:

That the site to the east of the Customs Clearance Border Facility be considered for designation as a green buffer area as part of the next review of the Local Plan. Work should also be started by Council Members and Officers, with the Department for Transport (DfT) to identify ownership and management options for the site, in conjunction with the Parish Council.

115 Notices of Motion

Councillor Walder introduced a Notice of Motion that she had given pursuant to Procedure Rule 11 and was detailed in full in the Supplementary Agenda.

She asked that this Council note that October marked Black History Month, the annual recognition and celebration of the history, achievements and contribution of African/Caribbean people to this country. She asked the Council to welcome the links forged with the Ashford BAME community, evidenced by the recent and upcoming Mayoral engagements celebrating Black History Month. She also asked that this Council also note that there was no room for complacency in the face of inequality and social injustice. The Government's pioneering Ethnicity Facts and Figures website set out in clear detail enduring ethnic and racial inequalities in housing, employment and the justice system. She asked the Council to recognise that it was not enough to be 'not racist' - that was too low a bar to set. Ashford was a caring, innovative Borough and they should aim high, striving to be actively anti-racist and anti-discriminatory and do all they could to champion and celebrate diversity and inclusiveness in their Borough.

Councillor Walder asked for the Council to acknowledge and recognise the amazing contribution that the BAME community had made to the NHS and the disproportionately high impact of Covid-19, both in the community and among healthcare staff in the community, as evidenced in the Public Health England review of June 2020. The stated aims of the Council's Recovery Plan were to improve their understanding of Ashford's diverse communities in all that they did and to reach out to further develop ways of engaging individuals and communities to ensure their voices were heard and to develop a community action plan. She sincerely thanked Council Officers for their contribution and urged the Council to: -

- Appoint a designated Officer to actively and regularly engage with representatives of the BAME community, providing regular progress reports.
- To build on the excellent equalities and diversity training already delivered to Officers and Councillors and to consider the inclusion of unconscious bias training.
- To support the work of community groups including the Ashford BME group and to actively support BAME businesses.
- To work towards the establishment of a cultural centre or centres to celebrate the contribution of the Borough's diverse Ashford communities.
- To consider BAME history and culture as a source for street names on future developments.

The content of the motion was seconded by Councillor Wright. She said she was particularly happy to second this motion at the time of Black History Month and to celebrate the achievements of Ashford's local BAME communities. The work done by the Ashford BAME Association was making a huge contribution to life in the Borough and she wanted to congratulate both the Ashford BME Group and the Kent Ethnic Cohesion Council on the excellent on-line event that was streamed the

previous week to mark Black History Month. She also wanted to say how much she was looking forward to the next event, this coming Saturday in the presence of the Mayor, and she hoped that the streaming of this presentation may be able to be made available to all Members. She knew Ashford strived to do its best for all of its citizens and this meant that school children from ethnic minorities needed role models from their communities in order to develop and thrive. That was why it was so important to adopt the recommendations in this motion and those related to equality and diversity in the Recovery Plan. Councillor Wright said she had heard of skilled young professionals from a BAME background not wishing to move out of London and the big cities in case their children suffered discrimination at school, and it was important for Ashford to encourage those skilled workers to come here. Ashford was proud to call itself an international town, so she hoped it would become a destination for these professional people to come and help their area. In order to provide positive role-models, the Ashford BME Group had developed a series of training events which could be rolled out to schools to promote diversity and Black History. She urged all Councillors to support this, particularly those who were School Governors, in order to bring this to the attention of local schools and actively promote this work to the community.

The Director of Law and Governance confirmed that the custom and practice with such a motion would be for it to stand referred to the appropriate Committee (in this case the Cabinet), without detailed debate or discussion. The Cabinet would then have the benefit of a detailed report on how some of the proposals in the motion could potentially be taken forward, and then the discussion/debate could take place and any decisions or recommendations could come back to Full Council if necessary. Ultimately, it was a matter for the Council Members to decide how to consider such a Motion, but he thought it was important to provide that clarification.

The Leader of the Council said that the Borough of Ashford had become more diverse in the last five years and that was reflected in the diversity of the Council's staff with the number of BAME staff doubling in that period. However, he did not think it was enough to rely on the diversity of the Council's own workforce as an indicator that Ashford was an inclusive Borough. Before the lockdown period earlier this year, both staff and Members received excellent diversity and inclusion training and it was planned to regularly provide such learning opportunities and challenge ways of thinking and behaving to provide an understanding of the issues the BAME community faced. This training, along with more effective ways of engaging, consulting and involving Ashford's diverse community would help the Council ensure the BAME voice was heard. With that in mind they had already begun to review, refresh and develop the Council's Equalities Policy and that was planned to come forward in the coming months. In this refresh the Council would be considering more effective ways to engage with BAME residents, community groups and businesses and more effective ways of reporting progress and celebrating successes. Whilst they may not appoint a brand new designated Officer to oversee this work, he said he would be asking the Chief Executive to appoint a named Senior Officer to co-ordinate and champion the policy and to ensure it continued to have prominence across all the activities of the Council. Having said all of that, it was important not to forget all of the work they were already doing with BAME groups, for example the Council working with the Ashford BME Group since its inception – providing advice on business planning, funding and support through the community grant process on a number of occasions. This grant funding had provided training, health, social and cultural inclusion projects. They had similarly worked with the former Ashford

International Chinese Association, the Ashford Asian Society and the Ashford Muslim Society. Ashford was also well known for its pro-active response to the Syrian Refugee crisis and the Resettlement Programme with currently 145 individuals resettled in the Borough. This not only provided a safe place to live but also encouraged the families to take a full part in the community in terms of finding work, learning English etc. as well as preserving their own culture and traditions, making the Borough a more culturally rich and diverse place. He further advised that: - the Ashford Volunteer Centre were doing a particularly good job working with the Ashford BME Group to undertake a 'BAME Healthcheck' to look at their needs; Kent and Medway Public Health had launched a county wide 'Covid BME Champion Network'; and 'Engaging Kent' had also recently launched a BAME Forum to raise awareness in health and wellbeing into the network and the Clinical Commissioning Groups, with the Ashford BME Group part of this.

The Leader of the Council therefore moved that: -

"Councillor Walder's motion be referred to the Cabinet for it to be considered in the light of what was already being done in this sphere of work."

This was seconded by Councillor Bell.

Councillor Campkin said he would prefer this issue to be debated at this meeting. Given that it was Black History Month he considered Members should make history by discussing this matter at this meeting and giving the Cabinet a flavour of the feeling of Council Members. He understood that constitutionally, any decisions would have to go through the Cabinet, but he thought it was worthy of further discussion at this meeting.

A vote was then taken on the Leader's motion. This Motion was carried.

Resolved:

That the Motion be referred to the Cabinet for it to be considered in the light of what was already being done in this sphere for work.

116 Questions by Members of which Notice Had Been Given

Question from Councillor Chilton to Councillor Bell, Portfolio Holder for Finance and IT

"Could the Portfolio Holder inform the Council as to how much money has been paid to firms in the Borough of Ashford under the Government's Small Business Relief scheme?"

Reply by Councillor Bell

"I thank Councillor Chilton for his question. Supporting business has been, and remains, a strategic priority for the Council. During early April nearly 3000 letters were sent to local businesses inviting them to apply for rate relief business grants, as announced and funded centrally by Government. All eligible businesses who have applied for the Government's Covid-19 revenue support grants have now been paid.

In a short time, necessary systems were designed, implemented and administered by the Council's Revenues and Benefits Support Team with support from colleagues across the Council. To put that in to context, by the 28th May the Council had paid out almost £26m to 2169 businesses (over 90% of known eligible businesses), providing support at a time they needed our help the most. I am extremely proud that we have been able to make these payments so quickly and grateful to the Officers whose hard work has made this possible. The Business Support Team then contacted any business who applied but were either ineligible or had not supplied enough information, in order to understand if support could be provided, showing our commitment to supporting our local business community. By the time the scheme closed we had paid out a total of 2317 grants with a total value of £27.775m. Businesses who had been ineligible for previous grant schemes or other reliefs were invited to apply for a discretionary grants scheme. The Council had around £1.4m available for distribution and awards were between £1000 and £10,000. These were provided to qualifying businesses who had been adversely affected by the Covid-19 outbreak but were ineligible for the Government's other grant schemes or rate relief. The scheme initially prioritised charities, bed and breakfasts, businesses in shared spaces and market traders, and digital sectors were then considered as funds remained after the initial need had been met. In total 175 discretionary grants were made and a total of £1.351m was paid out to local businesses. I think at this point it is well worth paying tribute to the Revenues and Benefits Team who worked under incredibly challenging circumstances and still delivered this scheme whilst managing their own increasing workload. I am incredibly proud of their achievement and I think we should have a vote of thanks from the Council to the team. The schemes ran from the end of March to the end of September. The Government's expectation from the outset had been to get the money out of the door urgently, to businesses, traders, organisations, charities, clubs and so on, i.e. to pay them quickly. There was no mandatory application process in the guidance, however like most other Local Authorities we had an intentionally simple process to obtain bank details etc. This presented the risk of fraud which of course needed to be managed as part of the process, and I want to spend a few moments highlighting the measures that were put in place to ensure that these grants were paid properly and public funds were protected to our normal phenomenally high standard. Applications received were checked to ensure that they met all relevant criteria and they had to quote their unique business rates account number which meant that only rate payers in our system could apply for the grant on a property. As part of the payment process property reference checks were conducted to ensure that only one grant per eligible property was paid to avoid duplicate or bogus applications, and a bank account checker was also carried out to ensure validity. During the initial phase of the work there had been a huge number of applications, but there was still time for extra checks to take place as needed to ensure eligibility before the grants were paid out. It has also been the case, as with all Local Authorities, that a large number of businesses have applied for the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Relief that were not receiving it last year so consideration had to be given to these and, if eligible, the grant was then paid. Whilst we feel that most fraud would have been prevented, there is a realisation with any scheme like this, with a need to pay out quickly and with no lead in time to implement the scheme, that some fraud will be in the system. With this in mind, post-payment checks of the grants have been passed to the Council's Investigations Team to carry out. Checks such as Company's House registration, bank account checks and small business rate relief reviews are all being carried out. The results of these reviews is so far positive with only a handful of cases being passed for additional checks and no major cases of fraud identified. The

last point I just wanted to make was to update Members on the current and future demands on the Council with regard to the Government Grants system as it relates to the pandemic. The Test and Trace Grants Scheme went live last Monday and the Council will receive applications and issue one-off grants of £500 for individuals encouraged to isolate if asked to do so through the Test and Trace system. The scheme targets low income individuals that would struggle to self-isolate due to loss of income and inability to work from home during this period. There is also a future Business Rate Grant Scheme that will be implemented if businesses are asked to close due to a local lockdown within the Borough.”

Supplementary Question by Councillor Chilton

“I thank Councillor Bell for his answer. At the start of this meeting the Portfolio Holder confirmed in a question from Councillor Campkin that the Ashford Conservative Association has received £10,000 of public funds. When families are struggling to make ends meet, when unemployment is rising and will continue to rise and when businesses are going bust, do the Tories think it is right they have taken public funds or will they do the decent, moral and honourable thing and pay the money back so it can go to those who actually need it, not a Political Party?”

Reply by Councillor Bell

“Thank you Councillor Chilton for both the question and the finger wagging which I think underlines the Political nature of the question. I think I would refer you back to the answer I gave earlier on which is that when the grants were put out to organisations a large element of that was not purely for the organisation themselves, but to keep the local economy going. The Association, as with all good Conservatives, have always been big supporters of the local economy and businesses and those funds will undoubtedly be spent in exactly that way – to support the local economy. As such I think we should be celebrating the fact that Central Government money, not from Ashford tax-payers, has been directed into our local economy, which is an excellent thing. With regard to Political Parties, Ashford Borough Council treated all equally and equitably. I have already outlined all the schemes and checks and balances and everything has worked how it should do. I have to say that money being pumped in to the local economy is a great thing.”

Supplementary Question by Councillor Farrell

“Mr Mayor, I have to say that I am astounded by that absolutely tone deaf answer from the Cabinet Member on this ludicrous payment of £10,000 and he draws reference to the Political nature of the question, but that is because a Political Association has received Government funds at a time when businesses across our Borough are in danger of going to the wall and thousands worry for their livelihoods. The question I wanted to ask was that the Cabinet Member went to great lengths to explain the criteria to us, but could he talk us through the elements where it states that Political organisations are not able to apply for this funding and with that explain whether the Ashford Conservatives have decided to stop being a Political organisation and if that has allowed them to apply for this funding? I echo Councillor Chilton’s call for that money to be handed to a viable business in our Borough that is struggling. I also ask him to confirm that the Ashford Conservative Association has not applied for a grant under the Cultural Recovery Fund?”

Reply by Councillor Bell

“With regard to the criteria I can confirm that all of the criteria laid down by Central Government were adhered to and there were no exceptions to that. I believe that Councillor Farrell may have made the mistake of following a story published by a website which was full of factual inaccuracies, littered with half-truths and had quotes from people that were completely mis-quoted and injurious to those people. The idea that the guidelines have not been adhered to, fully and 100% by our Officers who worked incredibly hard on this, is a complete nonsense, and I am happy to confirm that. With regard to whatever other grants or applications have been made by other Political Associations or organisations, I haven’t got a crystal ball or know what other people are doing every minute of the day, and nor do I want to know. So I am unable to confirm that, but I have no reason to believe its true in the slightest.”

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