

Cabinet

Minutes of a Meeting of the Cabinet held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **29th July 2021**.

Present:

Cllr. Clarkson (Chairman);
Cllr. Bartlett (Vice-Chairman);

Cllrs. Barrett, Bell, Buchanan, Feacey, Forest, Iliffe, Pickering, Shorter.

Apologies:

Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Blanford, Clokie, Harman, Sparks, C Suddards.

In attendance:

Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer, Head of Corporate Policy, Economic Development and Communications, Head of Finance and IT, Head of Planning and Development, Member Services Manager.

83 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 24th June 2021 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

84 Leader's Announcements

The Leader said that he did want to make mention of three matters.

Firstly he said that he thought colleagues would be pleased to note that the Government had announced its intention to scrap its Action Fraud Unit. He considered this was good news as, in his view, it had been particularly ineffective. It would be replaced with a National Fraud and Cyber Crime reporting system and the Police were also keen to start taking more action in this sphere.

Secondly, the Government had also announced that they intended to ban developers from building on land at risk from flooding. This was of particular interest to this Borough with its large area in the flood plain and he knew the Council's Planning

team would be looking at this very closely. Fortunately, during the last serious spell of flooding in the Borough, not a single one of the newer developments that had benefitted from Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems had flooded. This was a great credit to the systems put in place and a sign that they needed to continue to follow this course of action.

Finally, following the devastating flooding in Ashford's twin town of Bad Münstereifel in Germany, the Leader advised that a Just Giving page had been set up and he was pleased to note that donations had now reached nearly £13,000. They had all been shocked at the tragic effect the flooding had had on their friends in Bad Münstereifel and they had indeed flown the Borough flag at half-mast in respect of those who had lost their lives and thoughts remained with them.

85 Financial Outturn 2020/21

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which presented the outturn revenue position for the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account for the 2020/21 financial year. It also presented the outturn for capital works and how these works had been financed, the Collection Fund position, reserves outturn and a treasury management update.

The Portfolio Holder said that as he had just take over the Portfolio, credit for the report should go to previous Portfolio Holder and his staff. The process of logging the financial situation of the last year had been key in trying to properly understand exactly what had happened over the last 12 months, which had clearly been particularly testing. The resulting surpluses were thanks to the Organisation as a whole, with particularly good management from the Finance department. Over the last reporting year some 8000 grants had been processed by Revenues and Benefits totalling £41.5m and 2400 grants had been processed by the Economic Development team totalling £4.9m. This was a significant amount of additional work and deserved particular recognition. Savings across all Services had been delivered and had covered the massive forecasted budget deficits following the COVID pandemic. Projects had been deferred or delayed, vacancy filling had also been deferred, homelessness had become a key priority with a significant additional pressure applied to the budget, and parking revenue had dipped by 62%, therefore it was important to highlight the sheer amount of work and effort that had gone in to producing such a relatively healthy budget outcome on behalf of the residents of the Borough.

The Leader drew attention to the Kent Business Rates Pool update which had resulted in an estimated net benefit of approximately £1.68m to Ashford. This would go in to reserves as the Authority re-embarked on its investment plans and project delivery in the coming years.

Resolved:

- That (i) the financial outturn for 2020/21 be received and noted.**
- (ii) the Capital Outturn, Collection Fund position and Treasury Management update be received noted.**

- (iii) the reserve transfers and position (as per Tabled 5 of the report) be approved.

86 Annual Performance Report 2021 and Corporate Plan 2022-2024

The Leader introduced the report which presented the Annual Performance Report for the last year, set against the objectives of the Recovery Plan and the draft Corporate Plan 2022-2024. Building on the three themes of the Ashford Ambition report: - Green Pioneer; Caring Ashford; and Targeted Growth; the draft Corporate Plan's objectives and actions would enable the Council to continue the journey to achieving the Ashford Ambition developed with a wide range of local stakeholders. The report asked the Cabinet to note the 2021 Annual Performance Report and approve the draft Corporate Plan 2022-2024 for consultation.

The Leader thanked Officers for a sterling piece of work and producing a draft plan that linked across all departments and embraced the three themes of the Recovery Plan. The Head of Corporate Policy, Economic Development and Communications advised that there was a slight change to the report in that the consultation would now run until September, with a report back to the Cabinet in October.

The Deputy Leader said he endorsed the document and particularly the sections on expanding the Ashford economy. On that note, he was pleased to advise that the Kent Resilience Forum had earlier that day agreed to lift Operation Brock on the M20. He thought all colleagues would appreciate this news as, in his view, it had been unnecessary to re-instate it in the first place.

The Leader advised that, on a related note, he was in the process of creating the Greater Ashford Land Mapping Commission. This would be chaired by Councillor Paul Clokie, with the Leader of the largest Opposition Group Councillor Noel Ovenden as Vice-Chairman. The Commission would be about examining the entire land mass of the Borough with a view to protecting the best of Ashford's countryside against inappropriate development, which he considered a moral duty. The Commission would have the task of identifying areas for protection and they would need to establish a sound rationale for such designation in each case, but the Council would have no hesitation in pushing back against and challenging Government where necessary. It would be a non-political group and include representation from the CRPE, WKPS, local AONB Units and KALC, as well as relevant Council Officers. The Commission also had the support of the local MP Damian Green and KCC. He had set a target of December 2022 for production of a final report. Councillor Clokie advised that one of the most important aspects would be working with the Parish Councils and ensuring that they agreed the land suggested in their own areas.

Resolved:

That (i) the Annual Performance Report 2021 be received and noted.

- (ii) the draft Corporate Plan 2022-2024 be approved for consultation.**

87 Pay Policy Statement – Annual Review

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which advised that the Localism Act 2011 required the Council to publish an Annual Pay Policy Statement. This report was an opportunity to review the current Statement to ensure it was up to date and reflected the Council's approach to pay. The Council also took this annual review as an opportunity to review the rates of the Ashford Living Wage Allowance (ALWA) and the Ashford Apprentice Wage Allowance (AAWA) and the report provided recommendations on rates for the 2021/22 allowances. He reiterated that the ALWA and AAWA were still significantly above the statutory national rates.

Both the Leader and Portfolio Holder said they wanted to take the opportunity to praise the staff in Human Resources for dealing so well with the pressures brought about over the last year, particularly including the recruitment for a whole new Service in Port Health, along with the general pressures of the pandemic.

Recommended:

- That**
- (i) the updated Pay Policy Statement be approved.**
 - (ii) the Ashford Living Wage Allowance be increased to £9.27 for 2021 and this be backdated to 1st April 2021.**
 - (iii) the Ashford Apprentice Wage Allowance continues to be maintained at 15 pence per hour over the National Minimum Wage rate applicable to the age of the apprentice.**

88 A Nutrient Mitigation Strategy for the Stour Catchment in Ashford Borough

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which outlined the background of advice issued by Natural England in July 2020 with the result that the Council had been unable to grant planning permission for new housing within the Stour Catchment since then, unless the proposal could show it could achieve nutrient neutrality. In response to the gravity of the situation, Officers had been asked to pursue a mitigation strategy as a means to finding a strategic solution within the Borough's boundary. Accordingly, Officers had been working with expert consultants to prepare a Stodmarsh Mitigation Strategy for the Council. The report introduced that draft strategy and explained that the only realistic land based solution involved the creation of new strategic wetlands in the Borough. The Portfolio Holder said he could not overstate the importance and urgency of this issue. The report therefore sought Cabinet agreement to actively pursue a mitigation strategy based on the delivery of new strategic wetlands.

The report was opened up to Members and the following comments were made: -

- In terms of exploring land acquisition options and lobbying Government for financial assistance, it was also worth noting that the Government already owned land in the Borough, particularly adjacent to the International Border Facility, which could contribute to the overall solution.
- This was not a unique situation to Ashford and indeed all of the Districts in Kent, along with Kent County Council, had written to the relevant Government Ministers outlining the situation and seeking funding.
- The situation did present a great opportunity to create impressive wetlands, not only for the benefit of wildlife, but also the Borough's residents.
- The Council would continue to fight 'tooth and nail' against any inappropriate development in areas not affected by the Stodmarsh issue.
- Communications on the issue would be vitally important as would close liaison with Parish Councils and KALC (the Kent Association of Local Councils). The Leader asked if Briefing Notes and press releases could be sent out to keep everyone informed and give them a clear picture of what was happening.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) the principle of acquiring land within the Borough as a means of creating new strategic wetlands for the purposes of nutrient mitigation be agreed.**
 - (ii) Central Government should be approached for grant and/or loan funding to deliver the mitigation package.**
 - (iii) in the event that (ii) above is unsuccessful, it be agreed that a financial package be set aside by the Council for the purposes of delivering the mitigation package.**
 - (iv) Officers be authorised to prepare a credits-based formula to be considered for adoption as a Supplementary Planning Document as a means of seeking proportionate developer contributions towards the delivery and maintenance of the mitigation package.**
 - (v) the Head of Planning and Development, the Head of Corporate Property and Projects and the Solicitor to the Council be authorised, in consultation with their Portfolio Holders, to negotiate, enter into agreements and complete acquisitions of land and any related documentation, to implement the nutrient mitigation strategy and to make necessary arrangements (subject to all planning and other consents) for works to be undertaken on land to create strategic wetlands, with a view to generating nitrogen and phosphorous credits.**

89 Revenues and Benefits Recommended Write-Offs Schedule

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which proposed the formal write-off of £86,225.20. The proposals were in line with the Council's Revenues and Benefits Service Write-Off Policy. The Deputy Chief Executive had been consulted along with Heads of Service for relevant areas.

Resolved:

- That (i) the action that accounts totalling £21,726.15 had been written-off under delegated powers (Financial Regulations 11.1 refers) be noted.
- (ii) the write-offs listed in the Exempt Appendix to the report totalling £64,499.05 be approved.

90 Civic and Ceremonial Programme Board – Notes of 23rd June 2021

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Civic and Ceremonial Programme Board held on the 23rd June 2021 be received and noted.

91 Economic Regeneration and Investment Board – Notes of 21st May and 29th June 2021

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meetings of the Economic Regeneration and Investment Board held on the 21st May and 29th June 2021 be received and noted.

92 Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group – Notes of 24th June 2021

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group held on the 24th June 2021 be received and noted.

93 Schedule of Key Decisions to be Taken

Resolved:

That the latest Schedule of Key Decisions as set out within the report be received and noted.

Queries concerning these minutes? Please contact Member Services
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