



To the Members of the Borough Council

Dear Sir/Madam

You are hereby summoned to attend a Meeting of the Ashford Borough Council, to be held in the Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford, Kent, TN23 1PL on **Thursday, 20th October, 2022 at 7.00 pm.**

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T W Mortimer'.

T W Mortimer
Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer

Agenda

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1. **Apologies**
2. **To consider whether any items should be dealt with in private because of the likely disclosure of Exempt or Confidential Information**
3. **Declarations of Interest** 1 - 2

To declare any interests which fall under the following categories, as ex the attached document:

 - a) Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (DPI)
 - b) Other Significant Interests (OSI)
 - c) Voluntary Announcements of Other Interests

See agenda item 3 for further details
4. **To confirm the Minutes of the Council Meeting held on the 21st July 2022** 3 - 18
5. **Appointment of Mayor's Cadet**
6. **To receive any announcements from the Mayor, Leader or other Members of the Cabinet**
7. **To receive any petitions**

8. **To receive any questions from, and provide answers to, the public (being resident of the Borough) which in the opinion of the Mayor are relevant to the business of the Meeting**
9. **To receive, consider and adopt the recommendations set out in the Minutes of the Meetings of the Cabinet held on the 28th July and 29th September 2022** 19 - 28
10. **To receive, consider and adopt the Minutes of the Meetings of the Selection and Constitutional Review Committee held on 29th September 2022** 29 - 32
11. **To receive the Minutes of the Meetings of the Audit Committee held on the 19th July and 4th October 2022** 33 - 42
12. **Annual Report of the Audit Committee 2021/22** 43 - 56
13. **To consider Motions of which Notice has been given pursuant to Procedure Rule 11**
14. **Questions by Members of which Notice has been given pursuant to Procedure Rule 10**

NOTE: - If debate on any item included within this Agenda gives rise to the need to exclude the press and public due to the likelihood of Exempt or Confidential information being disclosed the following resolution may be proposed and seconded and if carried, the press and public will be requested to leave the meeting for the duration of the debate.

That pursuant to Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, the public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of this item as it is likely that in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings that if members of the public were present there would be disclosure of exempt information hereinafter specified by reference to the appropriate paragraphs of Schedule 12A to the Act, where in the circumstances the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

12th October 2022

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Agenda Item 3

Declarations of Interest (see also “Advice to Members” below)

- (a) **Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (DPI)** under the Localism Act 2011, relating to items on this agenda. The nature as well as the existence of any such interest must be declared, and the agenda item(s) to which it relates must be stated.

A Member who declares a DPI in relation to any item will need to leave the meeting for that item (unless a relevant Dispensation has been granted).

- (b) **Other Significant Interests (OSI)** under the Kent Code of Conduct relating to items on this agenda. The nature as well as the existence of any such interest must be declared, and the agenda item(s) to which it relates must be stated.

A Member who declares an OSI in relation to any item will need to leave the meeting before the debate and vote on that item (unless a relevant Dispensation has been granted).

However, prior to leaving, the Member may address the Committee in the same way that a member of the public may do so.

- (c) **Voluntary Announcements of Other Interests** not required to be disclosed under (a) and (b), i.e. announcements made for transparency alone, such as:

- Membership of amenity societies, Town/Community/Parish Councils, residents' groups or other outside bodies that have expressed views or made representations, but the Member was not involved in compiling or making those views/representations, or
- Where a Member knows a person involved, but does not have a close association with that person, or
- Where an item would affect the well-being of a Member, relative, close associate, employer, etc. but not his/her financial position.

[Note: Where an item would be likely to affect the financial position of a Member, relative, close associate, employer, etc.; OR where an item is an application made by a Member, relative, close associate, employer, etc., there is likely to be an OSI or in some cases a DPI. ALSO, holding a committee position/office within an amenity society or other outside body, or having any involvement in compiling/making views/representations by such a body, may give rise to a perception of bias and require the Member to take no part in any motion or vote.]

Advice to Members on Declarations of Interest:

- (a) Government Guidance on DPI is available in DCLG's Guide for Councillors, at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/5962/2193362.pdf
- (b) The Kent Code of Conduct was adopted by the Full Council on 19 July 2012, and a copy can be found in the Constitution alongside the Council's Good Practice Protocol for Councillors dealing with Planning Matters. See <https://www.ashford.gov.uk/media/2098/z-word5-democratic-services-constitution-2019-constitution-of-abc-may-2019-part-5.pdf>
- (c) Where a Member declares a committee position or office within, or membership of, an outside body that has expressed views or made representations, this will be taken as a statement that the Member was not involved in compiling or making them and has retained an open mind on the item(s) in question. If this is not the case, the situation must be explained.

If any Member has any doubt about any interest which he/she may have in any item on this agenda, he/she should seek advice from the Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer, or from other Solicitors in Legal and Democracy as early as possible, and in advance of the Meeting.

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Ashford Borough Council

Minutes of a Meeting of the Ashford Borough Council held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **21st July 2022**.

Present:

Her Worshipful the Mayor, Cllr. J A Webb (Chairman);

Cllrs. Anckorn, Barrett, Bartlett, Mrs Bell, Blanford, Buchanan, Burgess, Campkin, Chilton, Clokie, Cornish, Feacey, Forest, Hayward, B Heyes, Howard, Howard-Smith, Iliffe, Knowles, Krause, Ledger, Meaden, Michael, Mulholland, Ovenden, Pickering, Shorter, Smith, Spain, Sparks, C Suddards, L Suddards, Turner, Wedgbury, Wright.

Also Present:

Deputy Chief Executive, Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer, Director of Health and Wellbeing, Civic Officer, Member Services Manager.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Bell, Clarkson, Farrell, Harman, Link, Nilsson, Pauley, Rogers.

Prior to the commencement of the meeting Members remained standing in respect of the late Dr Robert Thomas Taylor CBE, Mr Simon Rigby Foster, and Mr Serge Joseph "George" Koowaree, all former Members of this Council who had passed away recently. The Reverend Starkings then said prayers.

102 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. The Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer advised that there were none.

103 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Feacey	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as he was Chairman of the Ashford Volunteer Centre	
Webb	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as a Director of the Ashford Volunteer Centre.	
	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as her husband had previously been in receipt of a Disabled Facilities Grant.	113 (d)
Wedgbury	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as a paid Shop	

Steward for the USDAW Trade Union.

104 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Council held on the 19th May 2022 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

105 Announcements

(a) Deputy Leader of the Council

The Deputy Leader said he would like to start his announcement by referring to agenda item 14 – the Motion that had been submitted. He accepted he could have chosen his words better in response to allegations from a leading opposition Council colleague who had lost faith in the Leadership of the Council, who accused the Leadership of having to rely on senior Officers to guide them on key decisions and there had also been accusations of infighting and sniping at meetings. He was happy to apologise for his words. It had now been two months, and he was now confident that the majority of colleagues were now fully behind the Leader and any infighting and sniping had disappeared like snowflakes in a heatwave.

He said he was delighted that opposition parties and the leading group had now come together to secure control of the Newtown Works site by a mortgage so that they could move on with deploying the £14.7m of Government Levelling Up funding. Their appointed Councillor, who was Chair of the Board of their majority owned company, Ashford International Development Company Limited, Councillor Feacey, would work hard to deliver the project. It would create a sought-after film studio space, provide thousands of jobs and make the town a hub for the creative arts industry, which was set to grow significantly in the future. Other important developments in the last two months included work that had begun on accessing further Levelling Up funds from the Youth Opportunities Fund for those Wards that qualified, including Stanhope and Bockhanger.

The Deputy Leader said that if two months was a long time in Ashford politics, two weeks seems even longer. He could not let events in Westminster pass without comment. It's was a fortnight since Boris Johnson had resigned and they were now down to a contest between two superb candidates to be the next Prime Minister. The decision would be made by a highly engaged electorate and he had attended the first hustings earlier that day at the Local Government Association to hear the candidates' proposals for Local Government. He considered that whoever ended up with whatever job in Government in the next few weeks needed to look urgently at the funding for Local Government, devolution, house building targets and how to carry the community with them. What he had heard was a laser like focus on the cost-of-living crisis from the Government and there was news on that with regard to Ashford.

He advised that KCC had received Household Support Funding from the Government and had now confirmed an allocation of £374,179 for Ashford. This was split into £290,700 to support pensioners with energy bills and £83,479 to support vulnerable adults. The details of the Ashford scheme were as follows – To provide all pensioners

who were in receipt of the £150 Council Tax Energy Rebate for properties in bands A to D with a payment of £100 towards their energy costs. It was important for colleagues to be aware that the Council was not able to use the data obtained via the Council Tax Energy Rebate Scheme to make direct payments from this funding. Therefore a letter would be sent to all 2,840 eligible pensioners in the Borough to advise them of the opportunity to claim this £100 and to provide their details to enable payment. This meant that this new £100 must be claimed and it was partly down to colleague Councillors to make sure their residents were aware and claimed what they were entitled to. This had been announced in the month when those in receipt of means-tested benefits also started to receive one off cash payments. The earlier £150 Council Tax Energy Rebate must be claimed by those who have not received a direct payment by 31 July 2022, and he urged colleagues to spread the word as that deadline was fast approaching. Support for other vulnerable households of up to £100 per household, for assistance for energy or food, could be applied at the website address <https://www.ashford.gov.uk/benefits/claiming-benefits/household-support-fund-1-april-30-september-2022/>

Again it was important to note that this must be claimed by 30 September 2022. He urged all Members to get behind this so they could ensure they deployed all the funds made available to them. Around 850,000 people in the UK were missing out on Pension Credit and £1.7bn was going unclaimed. This was an opportunity to remind residents through Councillors of the need to register for Pension Credit by 18th August 2022 if they were not already claiming and they wished to claim the £650 payment from the Government to support them in the cost of living crisis. They needed to ensure that all residents who were eligible and had not already claimed to do so by calling 0800 99 1234. If they applied for Pension Credit by 18th August 2022, they would receive £326 straight away, £324 in October and may be eligible for the £300 warm homes discount in December, plus of course the Pension Credit itself which could include a free TV licence and significant reductions in broadband charges.

The Deputy Leader said there was further issue he wanted to address which was recent reports of delays in answering the Police 101 number - particularly distressing during this week, Anti-Social Behaviour Awareness Week. It had been suggested that these were BT issues and outside Police control, but in these circumstances the Police highly recommended their live chat facility which offered all the benefits of speaking to someone, but with the speed of response residents were seeking from the 101 system. The chat was not an automated system unlike other systems, and operators could respond immediately to multiple calls via this method. It was receiving a lot of positive feedback. The website could be accessed at

<https://www.kent.police.uk/ro/report/ocr/af/how-to-report-a-crime/>

He urged colleagues to spread the message and he knew the Police could not over emphasise the importance of "report it, report it and report it again". That way they would get the resources they needed in Ashford. Chief Inspector Nick Sparkes had agreed to attend the next Kennington Community Council meeting on 10th August at St Mary's Community Hall, Rylands Road, Kennington to provide an update and would also provide an opportunity for questions. As he had already said, this week was Anti-Social Behaviour Awareness Week. The Community Safety Unit had continued to work in partnership with the Police to raise awareness of Anti-Social Behaviour. There had been a "Safer Summer" event in the Town Centre the previous day where the Police and ABC staff had engaged with the public and provided advice.

Finally, he advised he had agreed with the Mayor that he would take questions on anything he had said but that he would wait to address the current issue with South East Water in the formal question session later.

Councillor Campkin asked with regard to Newtown Works, would the Council or the new Directors commit to putting a two-way communication system in place involving local residents, representatives and businesses? He also wanted to take the opportunity to remind everyone that both South Willesborough and Newtown Community Council and Kennington Community Council were legally and statutorily equivalent to Parish Councils.

The Deputy Leader said he full agreed with what had been said. He had already discussed this with the Clerk, Chairman and Members at South Willesborough and Newtown and they had tentatively agreed to have a meeting every six months or so to discuss progress on the project with key stakeholders. He hoped this would satisfy any concern about information flows on this very important project for the town.

(b) Councillor Steve Campkin

Councillor Campkin said he wanted to say a few words about George Koowaree. He firstly wanted to contest the implication of George's death being sad. Anyone who had seen the recent video on Facebook would agree that there was nothing sad about it. George had served this Council and the Willesborough area for a very long time, some 30 years. George was HIS Councillor - they knew he loved them and he knew they loved him. He said he got out "while the going was good" - stepping down in 2019 at a time of his own choosing and on his own terms. At KCC level he stepped down in 2021, again at a time of his own choosing and on his own terms. He had been awarded Honorary Alderman at KCC and Councillor Campkin had appreciated the opportunity to pay tribute to him but, most importantly, to look him in the eyes and say, on behalf of everyone in Ashford, "thank you, sir" - There were tears!

He had heard that George spent the past year travelling around saying goodbye to his extensive family, and just that past weekend he had attended his granddaughters wedding. The video he mentioned showed him dancing at the event, in his wheelchair. The following morning he checked out, at a time of his own choosing, and on his own terms.

Councillor Campkin said George would be missed but to try not be sad that he was no longer among us - just be glad that he had been.

(c) The Mayor

The Mayor said that Councillor Campkin had paid a fitting tribute to George Koowaree which she though he would have appreciated. He was a man with a great sense of humour, who enjoyed life, enjoyed being a Councillor and enjoyed being with his residents. He had lived a very happy life and positively impacted many people.

As part of her announcements this evening she firstly wanted to note that she was tonight wearing the new robes with the synthetic fur. As she had stated at the last meeting they were being adjusted to fit her properly so she didn't trip. The original robes would stay in the Mayor's Parlour as they were part of Ashford Borough Council's

heritage, but she would be wearing the new robes at all occasions she attended going forward.

What a start it had been to her Mayoral year! It had begun with a full programme of events and celebrations to mark the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. Not just in Ashford but Tenterden and across the Borough too. The Queen's Platinum Jubilee – 'Ashford Celebrates' had been an incredible programme for Ashford to be so proud of. It has begun with the Beacon Lighting event with the Vision Signing Choir performing with local songwriters and performers Chris Symons and Jenny Bailey. It had been wonderful to see so many people attending this event and enjoying the festivities with jubilation. Second was the fabulous Thanksgiving Service to celebrate the life and achievements of our sovereign – Queen Elizabeth - with St Mary's Primary School Choir and a performance from the special Ashford Community Choir. There were readings and music from each decade of the Queen's reign and it had been a truly majestic occasion. The final event of the weekend had been the dedication of the new HMS Albacore Memorial to mark the 80th Anniversary of both Ashford's Warship and the Ashford Sea Cadets. There had been some incredible work from the Council's Aspire team to design the memorial, with generous sponsorship from local citizens and companies to donate the anchor, stones and plaque as well as the work to prepare the anchor. The dedication ceremony had been attended by the Captain of the Sea Cadets, Captain Neil Downing RN, who was also representing the Royal Navy. The Band of the Sea Cadets played and presented the Mayor and Ashford Borough Council with a specially designed HMS Albacore flag. She encouraged anyone who was yet to see this spectacular memorial to go and have a look at it in the Memorial Gardens.

The Mayor said that past Sunday had seen her Civic Service at St Mary's Church. It had been a socially and culturally diverse celebration with Choirs from St Mary's Church and the recently established Fountain Church's Restore Ministry performing along with the Musical Director of the Church on the organ. The procession had also been led by a Nepalese bagpiper. At her Civic Service she had pledged to focus on uniting communities and regenerating businesses, to encourage the rekindling of the community spirit that had been a focus during the pandemic and to encourage everyone to hold out hands of friendship to each other to break down barriers and to work together looking forwards not backwards. She believed that by working together with the Borough's incredible youth, youth organisations and Cadet Forces they would build a wonderful future for Ashford and its diverse Borough, because they were the future. It was everyone's responsibility to make Ashford a stable, and environmentally safe place to live and raise families.

With those principles in her heart she felt most humbled and honoured to take on the role of Mayor for a second term and had already embarked on an exciting voyage of engagements. She also wanted to thank Councillor Krause and his wife Sue, her Deputies for stepping in too where necessary and they had been excellent. She had been working with her charity Singleton Spaces to create a programme of fundraising events including a Bat Tour and Buffet in September, a Murder Mystery evening in the autumn, a Concert and Supper around Christmas, and a New Year Quiz – all at the centre. There would also be her opening dinner at the Everest Inn and Donna would circulate the dates and times shortly.

In conclusion, the Mayor said she wanted to give a fleeting glimpse of just some of the engagements she had attended since May. These included: - Home-Start Ashford's

presentation of a special Queen's Platinum Jubilee handmade wall hanging – created by the children and families at the Centre; a Biodiversity Day and Butterfly Count events at Singleton Environment Centre; the Fabric of Ashford – a Community Arts project in the town centre and at the Environment Centre; joining the Morning Worship at St Mary's Primary School following their wonderful performance at the Thanksgiving Service at St Mary's Church in June where the children sang for her again; the opening of Miles and Barr in Ashford Town Centre; visiting Ark Drama's "young people in action"; and a concert at Godinton House to celebrate and raise funds for the Ashford and Tenterden Samaritans on their great achievement of 50 years of listening to those in crisis - they did incredible work. She had also had the privilege of attending Kent and East Sussex Railway's 150th Anniversary. It had been fabulous to see the new engine and to have a ride on it too. She looked forward to colleagues' support in the days and months ahead and exciting times ahead for Ashford for all to enjoy.

106 Regulatory Committee – 19th July 2022

The Chairman of the Committee said he wanted to thank Officers for their hard work in bringing the exceptional review of fares forward and the two representatives of the industry who had attended the meeting and gathered useful evidence which had helped the Committee with their deliberations.

Resolved:

- That (i) the Minutes of the Meeting of the Regulatory Committee held on the 19th July 2022 be received and noted with the exception of Minute No. 96.**
- (ii) Minute No. 96 be approved and adopted.**

107 Cabinet – 26th May and 30th June 2022

(a) Cabinet – 26th May 2022

Resolved:

- That (i) the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 26th May 2022 be received and noted with the exception of Minute No. 20**
- (ii) Minute No. 20 be approved and adopted.**

(b) Cabinet – 30th June 2022

With reference to Minute Nos. 75 (Climate Change Action Plan) and 85 (Notes of the Climate Change Advisory Committee), Councillor Campkin said he acknowledged the acceptance of the recommendations however, since both the meeting of the Committee and the Cabinet, they had experienced unprecedented temperatures here in Britain and indeed across the world, including forest fires across Europe and floods in Australia where it was currently winter. He said he spent every single day worrying about climate change, which was probably not healthy, and he was actually outside working in the extreme temperatures all day that past Tuesday, but even he had been shocked and

terrified at the scenes on the news when he got home of more than four extreme fires in London. He wanted to pay tribute to the citizens and firefighters who, he believed, were still working as they spoke to control the destruction. Despite this, they had still seen comments from senior politicians and of course self-appointed climatologists on social media, indulging in what he viewed as delusional climate change denial - claiming that actual climate scientists were wrong and "it was just summer". They had also seen all of the Prime Ministerial candidates presenting the false dichotomy during a climate crisis and a cost of living crisis that they must choose between environment and economy. He thought these commentators were correct that climate scientists were wrong in their predictions - they were far too conservative. The temperatures experienced that past Tuesday were higher than in 1976 by several degrees, and were not expected until 2050. The Cabinet minutes, along with the aforementioned candidates, had set 2050 as a target date for Carbon neutrality, in line with the Paris agreement. He said 2050 was far too late. In fact, judging by this week's weather, 2022 may be too late. To compound this, neither Britain nor any other country except Bhutan, was on track to meet even those inadequate targets. Climate change was there, now. It was indeed an "emergency" and he said he took no pleasure in saying "I told you so". The Cabinet reports had been completed and submitted before these events made mainstream news, so he apportioned no blame, but he did want to ask that Members of this Council were mindful that it was later than they thought. He said he was however genuinely pleased to see the Deputy Leader call for an increase in Council funding on his own social media earlier that day and thought this was the kind of leadership that was needed. If Local Authorities were to take action to reduce carbon emissions to zero by 2030 by the absolute latest, and address the cost of living crisis, he considered they must implement a Green New Deal, and this would require, at the very least, an end to austerity and a restoration of Council funding to pre-2011 levels including adjustment for inflation. In addition, as Local Authorities, they must be making those demands crystal clear to both the Government and opposition members in Parliament. He said the sun shone down on rich and poor alike, and it was getting hotter.

Resolved:

- That (i) the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 30th June 2022 be received and noted with the exception of Minute Nos. 80 and 84.**
- (ii) Minute Nos. 80 and 84 be approved and adopted.**

108 Selection and Constitutional Review Committee – 30th June 2022

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Selection and Constitutional Review Committee held on the 30th June 2022 be approved and adopted.

109 Audit Committee – 21st June 2022

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Audit Committee held on the 21st June 2022 be received and noted.

110 Appointments Committee – 27th May and 21st June 2022

(a) Appointments Committee – 27th May 2022

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Appointments Committee held on the 27th May 2022 be received and noted.

(b) Appointments Committee – 21st June 2022

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Appointments Committee held on the 21st June 2022 be received and noted.

111 Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Annual Report 2021/22

The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Ovenden, said he would like to thank all Officers and Members involved with Overview and Scrutiny this year. It had been a very busy year and everyone had worked hard and achieved good results.

Resolved:

That the report be received and accepted.

112 Notices of Motion

Councillor Wright had submitted a Notice of Motion pursuant to Procedure Rule 11. This was detailed in full in the Supplementary Agenda.

The Mayor asked if, following the Deputy Leader's apology earlier in the Meeting, Councillor Wright was prepared to accept this as a response to the original Motion.

Councillor Wright said that a lot had been said at the start of the meeting and she had not quite picked everything up. She asked if the Deputy Leader could repeat that part of his statement.

The Deputy Leader said he was pleased to provide some clarity and was sorry if he had not been clear. First of all, he had dealt with the unacceptable attack on leading

Councillors by the opposition for being rudderless and dependant on others and then there was the accusation of in-fighting and sniping which he considered was beyond the normal cut and thrust of politics. He apologised for any conduct from Conservative Members that had offended and now welcomed the opportunity that other Group Leaders had to make a similar statement on behalf of their own Members who said the things he referred to.

Councillor Wright said that this did not really address the specific point of her Motion which was that there had been a public insult in the press and online calling the opposition Members “odds and sods”. That was the point she wanted addressed. She was unaware of any previous exchanges and she felt the Deputy Leader’s comments stood on their own. It was not a matter of causing offence but she considered it was a breach of the Code of Conduct and brought the Council and the whole democratic process in to disrepute at a time when it really needed defending. She said it had come from one the last people she would have expected it from.

The Deputy Leader said there had been an exchange in the press where leading opposition Councillors had made certain statements about the way that the leadership operated in this Council. He considered that those comments were unacceptable but wanted to draw a line under what was said by both sides. He agreed that exchanging such comments via the Kentish Express was not acceptable. He confirmed that he did regret using the words “odds and sods”.

Councillor Wright confirmed that she accepted the apology.

113 Questions by Members

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

“Can the Deputy Leader inform Council what action will be taken to ensure the recent loss of water supply to residents does not happen again? Residents were without water for days. What due diligence does the Planning Department exercise to verify that water capacity and supply is in step with future ABC housing numbers? Here we are in the 21st century and it appears the water company is still operating as in Victorian times with unsatisfactory pipework, pumping stations and water storage facilities; and completely absent of future housing and commercial growth. The last few years has witnessed incredible population growth, and the coming years will see even more, so are stand-pipes and water shortages going to become a normal occurrence for residents not only during hot weather but other times too?”

Reply by Councillor Bartlett

“Madam Mayor, I would like to thank Councillor Michael for his question which gives me the opportunity to update Council on the current situation in affected areas. But first we need to remember that the heatwave earlier this week was unprecedented and whilst we need to factor this experience into our future planning, we can’t let this distract us from supporting the communities that are currently affected.

The water supply issues are being caused by the increased demand for water due to the unrepresented hot weather we have experienced over the last week. As an example Monday's demand was over 25% higher than normal within Kent. Although the ground source collection reservoirs are not depleted, South East Water struggled to pump and treat enough water for the current demand. Challock and Molash are on higher ground so to start with had intermittent loss of supply. This loss was managed by South East Water, with the supply being turned on in the morning and turned off during the day to allow for the pumped and treated water to be replenished. Unfortunately, on Wednesday, South East Water did not have sufficient supplies to turn the water on until 5pm. However the water is now back on and although there may be some small disruptions we are expecting a full recovery of water supplies over the next day or so. To add to the pressure on demand, South East Water have had a number of burst pipes that they have been responding to. This is due to weather drying out the ground causing pipes to shift and burst. The situation is moving back towards being stabilised but this has taken six days.

The Council has given mutual aid to South East Water at the Challock water station, where residents have collected water, and we have identified vulnerable people to enable South East Water to drop supplies to those residents. From this morning Freedom Leisure offered residents affected by the water issues the opportunity to use the shower facilities at the Stour Centre. While this is a completely unsatisfactory situation, I wanted to confirm that we have been assisting where we can. Our Emergency Planning team has been in liaison with South East Water and other partners to offer support and ascertain what the issues are. The bottled water station will be manned until 9pm tonight and will operate as long as it is needed. The pumps refilling the local underground reservoir have run for a much longer period today so storage will recover and the situation will improve. Media outlets across Kent, including our own communications channels, are sending out consistent messages to households across social media and other platforms, supporting the South East Water messaging and we should use this forum to encourage our residents to use water responsibly during the heatwave to ensure that there are adequate supplies.

Turning towards how we engage with statutory providers in the planning process, water companies (along with the other utility companies) are statutory consultees when the Council prepares a new Local Plan and they would advise at that stage on whether they foresee any constraints to development arising from a predicted lack of water supply over the Plan period. The Companies themselves are then under their own obligation to show how they intend to plan for and deliver supply in their Water Resource Management Plans (which cover five year periods) and are then assessed by OFWAT. These Plans take account of planned housing numbers across different Districts within their water supply areas and are increasingly factoring in climate change variables.

Turning to how the water companies are operated, it has been interesting today to hear how the two Tory Leadership contenders are fond of quoting the late, great Prime Minister but I wonder what Mrs Thatcher would make of the legacy of her privatisation programme. 'Public to private' was supposed to expose the utilities to free market disciplines and competition, shake out bloated workforces and encourage innovation. What I suspect she could never have envisaged is within just a few decades many would end up being sold from the London Stock Exchange into overseas hands. South East Water is now jointly owned by overseas private venture and an Australian infrastructure fund. Many overseas owned water supply companies are now facing

enforcement action from the Environment Agency. Other than a rush of cash for shareholders and executives, nothing positive can ever come from the loss of local ownership. If Levelling Up is ever to happen the next Prime Minister needs to get a grip, and fast.”

Supplementary Question by Councillor Michael

“I’d like to thank Councillor Bartlett very much for that. There are a couple of points I would like make. First of all some time ago there great concern about water supply going forward and a new reservoir was proposed at Broad Oak, Canterbury as it had been identified that without that we would not have the supply. So whether we have hot weather or not, we already knew there was a problem with supply but we still haven’t got Broad Oak and we’re still dealing with the same supply we had many years ago. So I would ask Councillor Bartlett if he would consider looking at the business continuity plan of South East Water? A lot of us are involved in areas, myself with three schools, where business continuity plans are important, so I would like to know what South East Water’s says. They should have a number of “what if” scenarios. What if it gets too hot? What if pipes or pumping stations fail? So I would ask Councillor Bartlett if he could make an enquiry of South East Water and whether we can see their business continuity plan and what it includes? I cannot accept that because we’ve had extreme heat that is the cause of the problem. It seems to me that lack of proper management, business continuity planning and consideration of the “what ifs” is the cause of the problem.”

Reply by Councillor Bartlett

“Madam Mayor, the new reservoir at Broad Oak, Canterbury is still in the long-term plans I believe but it was put on the backburner somewhat when the new channel was dug from Bewl reservoir to the underground reservoir in Kingsnorth some three or four years ago. But the point is well made. I think that matter is probably best taken up by Overview and Scrutiny and the Chairman of that Committee is here this evening.”

Supplementary Question by Councillor Mrs Bell

“My question does somewhat follow on from Councillor Michael’s on the point of communication between the Council and the water companies. Does the Deputy Leader welcome the fact that the Leader intends to invite the water companies to the Ashford Strategic Delivery Board to discuss how liaison with Ashford Borough Council could be improved in terms of planning and delivering infrastructure to support growth?”

Reply by Councillor Bartlett

“Yes, I completely endorse that and I think with the work that we’ve outlined this evening we should all be assured that the matter is under control.”

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

“Please will the Deputy Leader clarify the regulations regarding parking of electric vehicles in charging bays? I ask as I was alerted to a parking ticket issued to a hybrid vehicle in another town because it was said the bays were for electric only cars. Should

charging bays be used to only charge electric only vehicles, but thereafter vacated?
Publication of regulations would be prudent if this could be done as soon as possible."

Reply by Councillor Bartlett

"Thank you for the question. The wording of Ashford's contravention is "Parked in an electric vehicles' charging place during restricted hours without charging". Therefore, we do not need to worry about what kind of vehicle. As part of any Electric Vehicle Charging Point installation, we have to ensure that the Parking Order/TRO reflects the contravention. In Ashford's case, the TRO explains an electric vehicle as any vehicle powered by electricity so hybrids are fine, we don't need to be more specific.

Supplementary Question by Councillor Feacey

"I was just going to ask the Deputy Leader if he could give us an update on where we are with the EV charging points and also let us know about the ANPR systems in Ashford."

Reply by Councillor Bartlett

"Thank you, yes this is an important matter and it is useful to remind colleagues that work is being done to expand the offer of EV charging points in other car parks along with work to support the rollout of Automatic Number Plate Reading equipment and the review of the layout of parking in our car parks to improve their use and amenity impact, including that on residents. The first car parks will be at Waitrose/Recreation Ground in Tenterden and Vicarage Lane car park in Ashford."

(c) Question from Councillor Lyn Suddards to Councillor Bartlett, Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Safety and Wellbeing

"Given the social issues facing us as a Council, post pandemic, the recorded deterioration in mental health and wellbeing of the local population, particularly children and young people, the unprecedented demand on food banks, families now facing fuel poverty and the continued attack on women when walking on our streets, does the Portfolio Holder for Safety, Health and Wellbeing agree that it is time for the Health and Wellbeing Reference Group to involve other elected Members - a cross party group to best serve the needs of our residents because currently it just seems that it is the Portfolio Holder who is involved? The context for this is that I keep meeting other Members concerned about the same or similar issues and I think there needs to be more co-ordination on these issues."

Reply by Councillor Bartlett

"Thank you again for the question. The Health and Wellbeing Reference Group has not met for two years. This is because other Groups meet to cover the work of the Reference Group. First, the Ashford Community Safety Partnership is addressing the subject of tackling violence, as well as Domestic Abuse. The Partnership brings together a range of statutory and voluntary sector services to jointly determine how they can work together to reduce crime, fear of crime and Anti-Social Behaviour. The aim of the Partnership is to make Ashford a safer place to live, work and visit. The membership of the Partnership board includes: - the Local Authority including the Portfolio Holder; the

local Police; the Fire and Rescue Service; the Kent, Surrey and Sussex local community Rehabilitation Company; the Clinical Commissioning Group (now ICP); Kent County Council's Community Safety Partnership; the Head Teachers' Forum chair; and the Chairs of the Partnership subgroups. The Partnership is not a politically balanced Committee on which places are offered according to how well the parties do in the elections, however, there is politically balanced representation on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee which has looked at a number of related themes including, in April and July 2021 support to the Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector, in June 2021 - Youth Unemployment and in September 2021 - Young Peoples Mental Health. The Council is also a member of the East Kent Food Poverty Group who are running the following events: -Stanhope Community Pantry (Fare Share) on 5th August; Repton Community Trust next monthly meeting of the University of the third age on 24th August; and a third event is also planned at the One You Shop with the date to be confirmed. The One You shop also provides a large number of health checks and interventions together with food parcels for those in need. Again, the East Kent Food Poverty Group is not a politically balanced Committee of this Council but I would have no objection if Overview and Scrutiny was to investigate the work of the Partnership and the reports to it (or Cabinet if it preferred) and it could be updated to reflect current local priorities."

Supplementary Question by Councillor Lyn Suddards

"Thank you, but I don't think what you have said actually addressed what I was asking. You said that the Health and Wellbeing Reference Group hasn't met for two years, so I suppose my question is are you saying that there isn't a place for it? If not I am wondering why. All of the things you've said that the Council is doing or are involved in are obviously excellent and needed, but there is reason why we're all Elected Members and I believe in order to serve our residents in our own Wards we should be involved in steering these committees and representing our constituents. So why did this Group stop meeting? Was there a discussion about it and maybe could we have a report back on if/when it will be re-started?"

Reply by Councillor Bartlett

"Thank you for the opportunity to be able to clarify. The Group referred to has indeed not met for the last two years as the work has been undertaken by other Groups. That work has been reported to Overview and Scrutiny and they have been able to pass views on what has been good and bad. What Councillor Suddards is suggesting is to re-create the Reference Group that existed up until about two and a half years ago. I don't have any objection to that but it would obviously have to be dealt with properly, possibly through Selection and Constitutional Review and we will need to decide if it is to be politically balanced or not. That will be a discussion for elsewhere rather than here tonight. It is important to note though that if we did set up a separate committee, the reports that are currently going to Overview and Scrutiny, and I mentioned four tonight that went through in the last year, may no longer go there so it is important to take views from everyone so we don't duplicate work. But I'd have no objection to the principle suggested."

Supplementary Question by Councillor Bernard Heyes

"On the question of fuel poverty, does the Deputy Leader agree that with the £650 the Government having started to pay people on benefits, the £250 to pensioners in bands

A to D and the £160 in warm home discounts, this is over £1,000 which is starting to mitigate the effects of fuel poverty? And would he welcome any further interventions from the new Prime Minister whoever that is?”

Reply by Councillor Bartlett

“Yes, I think this is a really important point that I made earlier that there are a number of very important inflection points coming up. If a potential claimant of pension credit does not make their claim by the 18th August, then they lose the opportunity of claiming the £650 from the Government. I think it is incumbent on us to make sure we get the message out there that there is £1.7bn of benefits which are not being claimed. I am not sure how much of that is in Ashford, a small percentage of course, but the point is that we have an opportunity here to get the message out that there is money that people just sometimes have to make a claim for before they get it. It’s down to us to get the word out.”

(d) Question from Councillor Spain to Councillor Bartlett, Deputy Leader of the Council.

“A number of issues relating to Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) and Ashford Borough Council (ABC) and its disabled tenants have been brought to my attention. Given the seriousness and complexity of these issues, and the statutory duties of ABC towards disabled tenants under legislation including the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996, human rights legislation, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), I am asking the Deputy Leader of the Council, the following questions: - I ask that the Deputy Leader commit to a thorough, open, and constructive investigation of all of these issues engaging an independent domain expert to advise; I ask the Leader to engage an acknowledged domain expert of the calibre of someone such as Michael Mandelstam so that the Council is certain that it is getting the best possible independent advice on these critically important and complex issues; and I also ask the Leader that the investigation produces a full report into all of these issues to be brought back to the next Full Council meeting.”

Further information on this question was tabled for Members.

Reply by Councillor Bartlett

“Thank you to Councillor Spain for the question. It might be helpful to remind colleagues that leading Members and Officers welcome discussions related to service issues and will consider any ways of improving the service if issues are highlighted to us. There are already processes in place for individual cases to be highlighted to the Council via the Council’s complaints process so individual concerns should rightly be raised via that process. We are keeping track of the pattern of complaints made to identify if there are wider issues to be kept under review. The question of course does not provide the number or detail of the cases which have resulted in the issues raised and having only given quite general points it may be better for these individual issues to be raised directly with the Assistant Director for Housing so that responses can be supplied in the context of the specific issues raised. There has, despite the pandemic impacts, been a marked improvement in wait times for disabled adaptations both in terms of DFG’s and adaptations in the Council housing stock, and a review of these issues quite a few years ago found that the processes the Council was following were fit for purpose.”

Supplementary Question by Councillor Spain

"I have to say I am somewhat disappointed by the answer. The issues that I have identified are systemic issues. They are very clear and I have laid out a number of points of law against each issue so they do not require the support of individual cases to justify them. They are very clear and I believe that all of us as Councillors signed up to the Nolan Principles when we became Councillors. These include very important aspects of our behaviour in public life and corporately, as the Borough Council we should also uphold these principles. Our residents expect us to do the best we possibly can and provide the best services and our Council Officers also sign up to these principles. Whilst I have no doubt that everyone is doing their absolute best against these vital principles of our democracy, sometimes despite our best efforts we don't end up in quite the right place and I would urge the Deputy Leader to consider taking these issues with the seriousness they deserve. The Council will be side-swiped with legal issues, possibly by the Ombudsman and eventually the Courts, if we do not address these issues. To be a stronger Council that serves our community better I would again ask the Deputy Leader if he would please consider engaging an independent expert to look in to this and review these issues?"

Reply by Councillor Bartlett

"Well, I would just re-iterate what I said a few moments ago. These issues have been raised before and a review has found that the processes the Council is following are fit for purpose. I think at this stage we would be better advised to allow these issues to be considered in depth by the Assistant Director for Housing so that responses can be provided in the context of the specific issues raised, before looking for a report from an independent consultant."

Supplementary Question by Councillor Michael

"I just wanted to add something here. I too was contacted by an individual, perhaps the same one who contacted Councillor Spain, but when I did some investigation I found we had a certain amount of funding for such adaptations – it's not a bottomless pit – and my understanding was that we were spending right up to the limit on that money and we were giving a good service. So is that the case? Are we using all of our funding to do that and if we have more adaptations that funding, then where do we go with that?"

Reply by Councillor Bartlett

"This is a good point well-made and I think we should take that point on board and ask the Assistant Director for Housing to undertake a review with the Portfolio Holder and include Councillor Spain as well."

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Decisions effective from the 10th August 2022 unless they are called in or are recommended to the Council for approval

Cabinet

Minutes of a Meeting of the Cabinet held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **28th July 2022**.

Present:

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

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

Apologies:

Cllr. Iliffe, Chief Executive.

Also Present:

Cllr. Sparks.

In attendance:

Deputy Chief Executive, Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer, Assistant Director of Planning and Development, Web and Communications Assistant, Member Services Manager.

114 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 30th June 2022 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

115 Revenues and Benefits Recommended Write-Offs Schedule

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which proposed the formal write off of £149,067.49. The proposals were in line with the Council's Revenues and Benefits Service Write-Off Policy. The Deputy Chief Executive (Section 151 Officer) had been consulted, along with Head of Service for relevant areas. He advised anyone who had concerns or questions about the report to speak to the Council's Recovery Manager who could explain the process regarding the efforts to retrieve these debts before they were written off.

Resolved:

- That (i) the action that accounts totalling £43,762.79 have been written off under delegated powers be noted (Financial Regulations 11.1 refers).
- (ii) the write-offs listed in the Exempt Appendices to the report totalling £105, 304.70 be approved.

116 Street Naming and Numbering 22/0027/SNN – Land between A2070 and Railway, north of Warehorne Road, Hamstreet

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which advised that the Street Naming and Numbering policy required any request for naming a new road after a person, deceased or living, to be agreed by the Cabinet. The name proposed for the development was considered to be relevant to the location.

Resolved:

That use of the name 'Waylett Crescent', as set out in paragraph 3 of the report, be approved.

117 South of Ashford Garden Community Vision and Strategy Update

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which shared some of the highlights of the first year of delivery, including details of Homes England's continued investment in the project. The report also set out some of the priority projects for the years ahead. In addition, one of the key actions from year one was to produce a Sustainable Transport Strategy recognising the changing landscape of public mobility and proposing realistic actions in the near term. Members were also asked to endorse that Strategy as part of the wider Vision and Strategy.

Resolved:

- That (i) the challenges and successes of Year 1 delivery of the South of Ashford Garden Community Vision and Strategy be noted and the projects underway as part of Year 2 be endorsed, taking into consideration the current risks to delivering key infrastructure.
- (ii) the South of Ashford Garden Community Sustainable Transport Strategy as attached to the report be endorsed and the wider Strategy continue to be championed as part of the delivery of new homes in the South of Ashford.

118 Greater Ashford Environment and Land Mapping Commission – Notes of 14th June 2022

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Greater Ashford Environment and Land Mapping Commission held on the 14th June 2022 be received and noted.

119 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.

120 Economic Regeneration and Investment Board – Notes of 22nd June 2022

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Economic Regeneration and Investment Board held on the 22nd June 2022 be received and noted.

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Cabinet

Minutes of a Meeting of the Cabinet held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **29th September 2022**.

Present:

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

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

Apologies:

Cllr. Pickering.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Burgess, Harman, Sparks, Wright.

In attendance:

Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer, Director of Customer, Technology and Finance, Assistant Director of Planning and Development, Head of Economic Development, Service Lead – Finance, Economic Development Manager, Senior Governance and Data Protection Officer, Senior Communications Officer, Member Services Manager.

152 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 28th July 2022 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

153 Leader's Announcements

The Leader advised that a meeting of the ACER (Ashford Critical Emergency Resilience) group had taken place on 9th September. This had been chiefly to address various issues around the current economic situation. The meeting had agreed to form a Welfare Advisory Group, to be chaired by the Director of Customer, Technology and Finance, which would examine how the Council could assist residents and businesses in the current cost of living crisis. This work would be invaluable as the Council built its budget for 2023/24 and onwards.

154 Financial Monitoring – Quarter 1 Report

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report and drew attention to the tabled papers which included a management response to the in-year deficit position. The report presented the Quarter 1 budget monitoring position which had been extended to the 31st July 2022. The current economic outlook and conditions had significantly changes since the budget was set and this was reflected within the report and the projections it contained. The forecast position to 31st March 2022 indicated an overall pressure on the General Fund of £1.7m, with a pressure in services of £1.2m. The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was reporting a saving of £351,000. A full break down of movements was shown in the report. The report also provided an update on the Collection Fund, Treasury Management, Reserves and progress on savings identified in the 2022/23 budget. There were also a number of items in the ‘Other Items’ section of the report for the Cabinet to consider.

The Portfolio Holder drew particular attention to paragraph 49 of the report and the explanation around borrowing not coming forward from the Council’s Subsidiary Company – A Better Choice for Property Ltd. He said the reasons for this were clearly explained, but it was important to draw attention to them so they were not misconstrued.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) the Quarter 1 forecast position for the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account be noted**
 - (ii) the Collection Fund position be noted.**
 - (iii) the Treasury Management position be noted.**
 - (iv) the provisional reserve allocations, as highlighted at Table 5 of the report, be noted.**
 - (v) the use of delegations under the ‘Other Items’ section of the report be noted.**

155 Performance Report – Quarter 1 2022/23

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which summarised performance against the Council’s updated suite of Key Performance Indicators reflecting the Corporate Plan 2022-24. He thanked the Officers involved for pulling together such a clear and detailed report.

Resolved:

That the performance data for Quarter 1 2022/23 be received and noted.

156 Update on Broadband and Digital Infrastructure Improvements in the Ashford Borough

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which advised that the Council had been very pro-active in the approach to improving broadband and digital connectivity across the Borough for a number of years. Whilst KCC obviously led on this work, ABC had built a reputation as an organisation that providers and developers could work with. The report outlined the specific projects that Officers had been working on over the past 12 months and he thanked the report author and others for their hard work in this area.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) the content of the report and the broadband work undertaken in the past year be noted.**
 - (ii) it be noted that the delivery of broadband is a key priority in the Council's draft Corporate Plan.**

157 Graduate Planner Programme

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which advised that in recent years the Planning and Development Service had run a graduate planner programme which recruited graduates to work within the service on a fixed term, two-three year contract. The report set out the details of the programme and some of its recent successes.

Members welcomed the report and the programme. In an environment of resourcing and employment challenges across the sector, it was seen as a responsibility for all large organisations to help develop graduates and apprentices.

Resolved:

That the contents of the report and the success of the Graduate Planner Programme be noted.

158 Joint Transportation Board – Minutes of 6th September 2022

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Joint Transportation Board held on the 6th September 2022 be received and noted.

159 Trading and Enterprise Board – Minutes of 6th September 2022

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Trading and Enterprise Board held on the 6th September 2022 be approved and adopted.

160 Civic and Ceremonial Programme Board – Notes of 27th July 2022

The Leader said he wanted to draw attention to the Platinum Jubilee Civic Awards that had taken place on Friday 23rd September. Staff had worked tirelessly to put on a very special evening which had provided an opportunity to recognise individuals who gave their time to do so much for the people of Ashford. The awards themselves had taken the form of a handmade crystal tree on a plinth of English oak, which had been a fitting tribute to Her Majesty the Queen in the year of her Green Canopy. Both the Leader and Chief Executive said it had been a joy to be present and a very humbling experience to meet the award recipients and their families and hear their stories.

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Civic and Ceremonial Programme Board held on the 27th July 2022 be approved and adopted.

161 Compliance and Enforcement Board – Notes of 26th July 2022

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Compliance and Enforcement Board held on the 26th July 2022 be received and noted.

162 Climate Change Advisory Committee – Notes of 2nd August 2022

The Portfolio Holder for Environment, Property and Recreation said he wanted to mention the 'Great Big Green Week 2022' which had launched the previous week and wanted to thank the Chairman of the Climate Change Advisory Committee, other Members and Officers who had been involved in the successful launch event in the Town Centre. It was vital area in which to engage residents and this had provided a good starting point.

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Climate Change Advisory Committee held on the 2nd August 2022 be received and noted.

163 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.

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Selection and Constitutional Review Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Selection and Constitutional Review Committee held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **29th September 2022**.

Present:

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

Cllrs. Chilton, Feacey, Forest, Harman, Hayward, Meaden, Ovenden, Shorter.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 1.2 (c) Councillor Shorter attended as Substitute Member for Councillor Howard-Smith.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Farrell, Howard-Smith.

Also Present:

Electoral Services Manager, Member Services Manager.

147 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Bartlett	Made a Voluntary Announcement as a Member of Sevington with Finberry Parish Council and Kennington Community Council, who had both expressed an interest in these items	149, 150
Chilton	Made a Voluntary Announcement as a Member a Director of the Academies Trust, which had a number of schools that were used as Polling Stations.	150
Feacey	Made a Voluntary Announcement as Chairman of the Ashford International Development Company.	151
Hayward	Made a Voluntary Announcement as a Trustee of building which was a potential Polling Station.	150
Ovenden	Made a Voluntary Announcement as a Member of Wye with Hinxhill Parish Council who had expressed an interest in these items	149, 150

148 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 30th June 2022 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

149 Community Governance Review – Final Recommendations

The report of the Electoral Services Manager set out the final recommendations resulting from a Community Governance Review as approved by the Local Government and Polling Districts Task Group. The report requested that this Committee now approve the final recommendations to be presented to Full Council

The Chairman said that had discussed this matter and understood there was general unanimity with the proposals amongst the Local Councils.

Recommended:

That the final recommendations as set out in the report, be agreed for submission to Full Council.

150 Interim Review of Parliamentary Polling Districts and Places 2022

The report of the Electoral Services Manager presented a review of the proposals arising from an interim review of Parliamentary Polling Districts and Places. A public consultation on the proposed Polling Districts and Places had been held in the period beginning 9th May 2022 and concluding on 27th June 2022.

Members made a couple of suggestions of potential new locations for Polling Stations in Furley and Bybrook Wards. The Electoral Services Manager advised that there was flexibility to change venues within a Polling 'Place' (area) so he would be more than happy to examine any opportunities for alternative venues that presented themselves.

Recommended:

That the proposed Polling Districts and Polling Places scheme as set out in Appendix 1 to the report be approved.

151 Update on Appointments to Cabinet Boards and Outside Bodies

The report asked the Committee to ratify a small number of updates to appointments reported to this Committee on 3rd May and 30th June 2022 and subsequently ratified by the Full Council. The Chairman clarified that Councillor Ovenden was being added as an Observer on the Ashford Strategic Delivery Board in his role as Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Resolved:

That the following appointments be noted and approved: -

- **Ashford Strategic Delivery Board – Cllr Ovenden added as an Observer.**
- **KCC Superannuation Fund Committee – Cllr Clokie no longer the Conservative Rep for Kent Districts.**
- **NHS Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board – Cllr Bartlett – Rep for East Kent Districts.**

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Ashford Borough Council: Audit Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Audit Committee held in Committee Room 2, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **19th July 2022**.

Present:

Cllr. Buchanan (Vice-Chair in the Chair);

Cllrs. Campkin, Shorter, Spain, Wright.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Hayward, Krause, Smith.

Also in Attendance (virtually):

Cllr. Ledger.

Accountancy Manager, Director of Customer, Technology and Finance, Interim Head of Internal Audit.

Audit Manager – Grant Thornton UK

In attendance:

Deputy Chief Executive, Senior Accountant, Senior Member Services Officer.

98 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 21st June 2022 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

99 Draft Statement of Accounts 2021/22

The Senior Accountant introduced the item. The Draft Statement of Accounts for 2021/22 would be presented to the 'Independent Auditor' Grant Thornton and form the basis of the Audit. Once the audit was completed the Independent Auditor's report to the Members of Ashford Borough Council would be inserted into the Statement of Accounts for final approval and signing by this Committee. The final set of accounts would be accompanied by the Audit Report that would cover any material adjustments between the Draft and Final position. The draft set of accounts would also be used to start the statutory public inspection period which would commence before the last day of July in accordance with revised guidelines.

The Deputy Chief Executive advised that training on the Statement of Accounts had been undertaken via Teams the previous week. The Senior Member Services Officer confirmed that this session had been opened to all Councillors and

additionally had been made available to all Councillors to view after the training session.

Members wished to express their thanks to the Senior Accountant for such an informative and useful training session.

Resolved:

That the Audit Committee;

- a) Note the draft statement of accounts 2021/22 and support their presentation to External Audit and for Public Inspection.**
- b) Approve delegation to the Deputy Chief Executive to make changes to the Draft set of Accounts for 2021/22 before final publication (any material changes will be reported back to this committee).**

100 2021 Auditors Annual Report

The Audit Manager – Grant Thornton UK advised that the report before them was a new style format and he highlighted the main changes to the Committee. In the past an unqualified or qualified decision would have been given, instead of ratings a balanced commentary was given over three themes; financial sustainability, governance and the three ‘E’s’ – improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness. The balanced commentary teased out the positive areas of the Council’s overall arrangements and where necessary areas for improvement. Any weaknesses were graded and he confirmed that no significant weaknesses had been identified during this process. Over the three themes, eight recommendations for improvement had been suggested. Management had accepted seven of these, it had been noted the response was that the cost benefit of undertaking the work may not justify the work involved.

Members noted the change to the reporting template and further that it was no longer a clear cut case of an unqualified or qualified opinion. Drawing attention to the recommendations in the report, it was questioned what weaknesses were identified to make such recommendations and how far the Council would be expected to go in meeting those.

The Audit Manager – Grant Thornton UK advised that they had not identified any significant weaknesses which was positive. Moving to the improvement recommendations, he added that there were two types; recommendations to do more within the existing arrangements or to undertake benchmarking into good practice elsewhere.

The Deputy Chief Executive concurred with the view of the Committee that any work undertaken from the recommendations should be of benefit to the Council and not just a case of reports for the sake of reports. He drew attention to the recommendation that the Management Team had not agreed with, which was the differentiation in financial planning between statutory and discretionary services. Whilst work could be done to assess what those services were, there was a greater point on how statutory services were provided. For example, the waste collection service was a

statutory service however what form did that need to take to be a statutory service? Effectively there could be different levels of a statutory service. The Audit Manager – Grant Thornton UK was aware of one Council that had undertaken work to establish what their defined ‘core offer’ was and had differentiated between their statutory and discretionary services.

There was some discussion on what benefit such work would be to the Council and as part of that it was suggested that work could be undertaken to assess the minimum level of service that could be provided in each area. This would be more self-defined and provide greater benefits to the Council should there be a return to austerity measures. Members supported this proposal and felt it appropriate to make such recommendation to the new Administration whom would be in place following the May 2023 elections.

Resolved:

That the Audit Committee:

- a) **Notes the Auditor’s Annual Report**
- b) **Recommends to the incoming Administration (from May 2023) that a review of service levels be carried out to assess what the minimum acceptable and current service levels to inform savings proposals in the event of budgetary pressures.**

101 Report Tracker & Future Meetings

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

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Ashford Borough Council: Audit Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Audit Committee held in Committee Room 2, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **4th October 2022**.

Present:

Cllr. Buchanan (Vice-Chair in the Chair);

Cllrs. Spain, Wright.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Krause, Shorter, Smith.

Also in Attendance (virtually):

Cllr. Hayward.

Senior Accountant, Head of Policy & Performance, Interim Head of Internal Audit.

Audit Manager – Grant Thornton UK

In attendance:

Deputy Chief Executive, Finance Service Lead, Policy & Democratic Services Assistant, Senior Member Services Officer.

164 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 19th July 2022 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

165 Corporate Risk Register

The Head of Policy & Performance introduced the report which was presented to the Committee every six months and covered all the risks on the Corporate Register that fell outside the Council's risk appetite threshold. At its last meeting the Committee had requested that the risks be reviewed following Russia's war in Ukraine and the global repercussions that had ensued. The Council's Management Team had held a dedicated session to review the risk register in light of the war and other factors including the post EU transition and recovery from the pandemic. There had been a change to the risk profiles following this and the changes were highlighted to the Committee, including the pressures surrounding homelessness, inflation and the supply and demand of goods and services.

Members questioned whether the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and the associated risks, such as rising fuel bills, should be given more prominence. The Head of Policy & Performance advised that there was a risk to the MTFP and work

was underway to mitigate against that. The Finance Service Lead advised that the Quarter 1 Budget Monitoring Report had touched on these risks and they were being monitored.

In response to a question, the Head of Policy & Performance drew attention to the risks relating to Chilmington and housing development not being built out. The housing market had been buoyant throughout the summer however due to emerging pressures these risks may need to be revisited and monitored. It was noted by the Committee and Officers that there had been a number of changes nationally and globally in the past two weeks that had caused turbulence and instability.

The Finance Service Lead advised that any risk pertaining to the Council's arm's length companies related to historical debt. Provided the projects undertaken by the companies were viable the loans that were drawn down were not a risk to the Council.

Resolved:

That the Audit Committee agree the assessments and the adequacy of key controls to manage the risks.

166 Annual Governance Statement – Progress on Remediating Exceptions

The Head of Policy and Performance introduced the mid-year update on the 2021-2022 Annual Governance Statement (AGS). The AGS had identified eight areas for continued work and review and she gave the Committee an update on a number of these areas as follows:

- Appraisal Training – good progress had been made with a number of training sessions held and step by step guides produced to assist Officers.
- Review of the Constitution – the review of the Executive arrangements had concluded with a wider health check due to be undertaken.
- Hybrid Meetings Equipment – the equipment had been installed in the Committee Rooms and had been used successfully, there were some final tasks needed to complete this work but all feedback had been positive and the outcome had been a significant improvement.
- Section 106 Action Plan – Officers had worked hard to respond to the audit actions and an update to Overview & Scrutiny had been given in September 2022.
- Member Induction Programme – This was being formulated and would be discussed with Members later in the month at the Member Training Panel.
- Terms of Reference of the TEB – this work had been completed with the Terms of Reference including oversight of the Ashford International

Development Company being included in the Chief Executive's delegated decision regarding the purchase of the Company in January 2022.

Resolved:

That the Audit Committee notes the progress made towards the areas of review highlighted by the 2021-2022 Annual Governance Statement.

167 Corporate Enforcement Support & Investigations Team Annual Report 2021/22

The Finance Service Lead advised that the Investigations and Enforcement Team were currently at the Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuations Excellence Awards, where they had been shortlisted for two awards; Excellence in Counter Fraud and Excellence in Staff Development and/or Education. Drawing attention to the report he highlighted that the team had saved the Council £460,000 through their work. There was a real benefit to the work they undertook.

The Committee wished to put on record their thanks for the hard work of the Investigations and Enforcement Team and felt that being nominated for two awards highlighted how hard they worked. Members were complementary about the infographic that had been submitted highlighting the achievements over the past municipal year, they felt this was a clever and informative way to highlight their work streams and achievements.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

168 Annual Report of the Audit Committee

The Interim Head of Internal Audit introduced the report, which outlined the work of the Audit Committee and how it had discharged its duties during 2021/22. The report provided assurance to the Council that important internal control, governance and risk management issues were being monitored and addressed by the Committee. The Committee's views had been sought and their comments incorporated into the report.

The Deputy Chief Executive confirmed that the Committee had been invited to a workshop in September to review the contents of the report and their views had contributed to the report before them. The attendance statistics were pleasing and it was useful that it also highlighted those that had been able to attend virtually, giving weight to the successful hybrid working of the Committee.

Resolved:

That

- (i) the Annual Report of the Audit Committee Activity for 2021/22 be agreed.**

- (ii) **the Chair of the Audit Committee presents the report to a future meeting of the Full Council to demonstrate how the Committee has discharged its duties.**

169 Audit Fee Letter

The Senior Accountant introduced the report and advised that the report detailed the proposed auditor and scale fee as set by Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) who the Council had appointed to procure External Auditors and confirm they were proficient in relation to legislative requirements. The PSAA also acted as a regulator to confirm that any fee variations raised by external auditors were fair and appropriate and in line with regulation. The PSAA had confirmed the appointment of Grant Thornton for the 2022/23 Audit and set a standard fee for core work of £53,939. The audit fee for core work has increased by £4,700 compared to the prior year due to recurring approved fee variations. Since these fees were set in 2018/19, additional work had become necessary to satisfy Financial Conduct Authority requirements. In line with previous years these additional requirements were anticipated to be in the region of £24,000. Therefore the fees for the 2022/23 External Audit would amount to £77,939. The current procurement through PSAA was for the period 2018/19 to 2022/23 with a new five year contract being procured currently.

The Finance Service Lead advised that PSAA were currently retendering and it should be noted that there had been a 150% increase in costs going forward, therefore the 2023/24 budget would need to be increased to £195,000 per annum (forecast of £78,000 for 2022/23). The external auditor would be properly resourced and able to undertake the work allocated to them, however this would be an additional budget pressure.

In response to a question, the Deputy Chief Executive advised that there was no alternative route for this work to be undertaken. There would be more of a balance between those companies allocated work as part of the PSAA tendering process. The Council was not aware, at the current time, who the external auditor would be for 2023/24 onwards.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

170 Audit Progress Report

The Audit Manager – Grant Thornton UK drew attention to the report and progress to date. He noted that the 2020.21 accounts process had been prolonged but reassured the Committee that the end was in sight. A previous error had been highlighted however this had not been material, following this another had been found and the two together had resulted in a material consideration. Work was being undertaken and these should be signed off shortly. Once these accounts had been signed off work would move to the 2021/22 accounts. He assured the Committee that time and resource had been set aside to complete these accounts. The Audit Plan would be brought to the November 2022 meeting.

There was considerable discussion regarding the proposal announced in the local audit consultation response from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in particular the requirement for Audit Committee's to include an independent member. The Audit Manager – Grant Thornton UK felt that this would be imposed but no definitive response had been received to date. It was noted that there were other Local Authorities that had an independent member on their audit committee already. The practicalities of identifying the relevantly qualified individuals would need to be investigated. The Finance Service Lead undertook to do some benchmarking work on this and would report back to the Committee in due course,

Resolved:

That

- (i) the report be received and noted**
- (ii) the Finance Service Lead undertake a benchmarking exercise into independent persons on local authority audit committees.**

171 Report Tracker & Future Meetings

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

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Audit Committee

Audit Committee Annual Report 2021/22

Ashford Borough Council

Introduction from the Chair - Cllr Larry Krause

As the Chair of the Audit Committee, it is my pleasure to introduce the annual report of the Committee's activity during April 2021 to March 2022. This report looks back and gives us the opportunity to reflect on the activity of the Committee during the year. I am pleased to confirm that the Committee has been able to discharge its responsibility to provide independent assurance on the adequacy of the Council's risk management framework and the associated control environment.

The Committee has met five times in the last year. As Hybrid meetings are now becoming the norm, it is pleasing to note that while some Members, and Officers, joined the meeting remotely, these meetings were successful in being inclusive. As per the Council's Constitution, all the meetings were quorate, with at least a quarter of the committee Members' attending. In addition, as per legislation, there was enough in person attendance to allow formal decision making to be made and recorded.

During the year we have received, reviewed and, where necessary, challenged reports relating to the Council's internal and external audit, risk and governance arrangements, and financial activity. We have routinely reviewed the updated Corporate Risk Register, including risks associated with the Ashford Port Health Service and Cyber Security. We also have robust processes in place to review weak assurance internal audit reports and ensure services are taking appropriate action to address the findings from these.

Among the highlights for the year, we noted the positive assurance opinion provided by the interim Head of Internal Audit on the Council's risk and control environment. In addition, in March 2022, Grant Thornton had substantially completed the audit, and were looking to give an unqualified opinion. While this is good news in providing assurance over the quality of our financial arrangements, the ongoing delays around delivery of the final report remain frustrating.

We have provided robust scrutiny and challenge of the Authority's financial performance. Including writing a letter to Grant Thornton expressing our disappointment in the delays to the audit for 2021/22. A copy of this letter was provided to the PSAA for their information, and it is our hope that these issues are addressed during the procurement of external audit for the five years following the 2022/23 audit.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Members and Officers that have supported the Committee over the last year.



Cllr Larry Krause,
Chair of the Audit Committee

What is the purpose of the Audit Committee?

The Audit Committee operates in accordance with the [Audit Committees, Practical Guidance for Local Authorities 2018](#),. Published by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance (CIPFA). The guidance recommends that audit committees should report annually on how they have discharged their duties, and sets out the purpose of an Audit Committee.

As per CIPFA's Position statement: Audit Committees in Local Authorities and Police:

“Audit Committees are a key component of an authority’s governance framework. Their function is to provide an independent and high-level resource to support good governance and strong public financial management.

The purpose of an Audit Committee is to provide those charged with governance, independent assurance on the adequacy of the risk management framework, the internal control environment and the integrity of the financial reporting and annual governance processes. By overseeing internal and external audit it makes an important contribution to ensuring that effective assurance arrangements are in place.”

The Audit Committee is independent from executive management and the Cabinet and has clear reporting lines and rights of access to discharge its responsibilities in accordance with its Terms of Reference (Appendix I). This includes direct access to the Council’s Appointed Auditors (Grant Thornton) and Chief Audit Executive, without the presence of other Officers, where appropriate.

Ashford Borough Council – Audit Committee Purpose as per the Terms of Reference

The purpose of an Audit Committee is to provide independent assurance of the adequacy of the risk management framework and the associated control environment, independent scrutiny of the Authority’s financial and non-financial performance to the extent that it affects the Authority’s exposure to risk and weakens the control environment, and to oversee the financial reporting process.

The Committee monitors internal and external audit activity, reviews, and comments on the effectiveness of the Council’s regulatory framework, and reviews and approves the Council’s annual statements of accounts.

The Committee is not a substitute for the management function in relation to internal or external audit, risk management, governance, or any other review or assurance function. It is the Committee’s role to examine these functions, and to offer views and recommendations on the way the management of these functions is conducted.

Key challenges

The Council is still feeling the effects of the pandemic, and as we approached March 2022 other effects from geopolitical unrest and a weakening economy were becoming clearer. As a committee there have been some key challenges in the last year. Some of these are noted below:



Hybrid Working

The Council has adapted well to remote working, but more is needed to understand how to work effectively in a hybrid environment. Including how to maintain connections and informal discussions, and considerations around the amount of physical office space that is required.



Administration of business grants and community grants

The Council is involved in a number of significant projects, e.g. New Towns Work, and Audit Committee needs to understand the governance arrangements in place to manage these and have assurance they are suitably robust.



Cyber Security

Cyber Security continues to be a key threat to Council operations and requires ongoing management and monitoring to ensure that the Council remains as protected as it can be.



Internal Audit

While Mid Kent Audit has remained operational and been able to deliver the bulk of the Council's 2021-22 audit plan it has experienced significant difficulties retaining and recruiting staff. This includes delays in recruiting to the Head of Audit post which has been vacant since January 2022.



Carbon Neutral Targets

The Council, as with other authorities, has ambitious targets for being carbon neutral by 2030. As such a key challenge is ensuring delivery of these targets and maintaining momentum as other pressures on the Council increase.



Delivering the Port Health Service

The Council continues to work with Government to set-up the Port Health Service. However there continues to be changes and delays to timescales and the scope of service provision.

Membership & attendance during the year

The Committee met five times over the course of the year. These meetings were hybrid meetings. While some Members and Officers attended the meeting at the Council offices, Microsoft Teams was used for those attending virtually.

When there is not a lockdown in place, as per Government guidance, Members can only vote in a committee if they are actually in attendance, (i.e., they cannot vote if they attend virtually). All five meetings were quorate (as per the Terms of Reference), including those that attended in person to be able to vote if required.

Attendance for each meeting is set out below.

Members	15 Jun 21	20 Jul 21	05 Oct 21	01 Feb 22	15 Mar 22
Cllr Krause (Chair)	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present
Cllr Buchanan (Vice Chair)	Present	Present	Apologies	Present	Present
Cllr Camp kin	-	-	-	-	Present
Cllr Hayward	*Sent Substitute	Present	Present	Present from item 262	Virtually
Cllr Mulholland	Present	Present	Virtually	-	-
Cllr Ovenden	-	-	Virtually	-	-
Cllr Shorter	Apologies	Present	Present	Present	Present
Cllr Smith	Apologies	-	-	Present	Present
Cllr Spain	-	-	-	-	Virtually
Cllr C Suddards	Virtually	Present	Present	Present from item 262	-
Cllr Walder	Present	Present	Apologies	Present	-
Cllr Wright	-	-	-	-	Apologies
Cllr Harman	*Substitute	-	-	-	-
Cllr Burgess	Visiting Member	Visiting Member	Virtually	-	-
Cllr Forest	Visiting Member	-	-	-	-
Cllr Sparks	Visiting Member	Visiting Member	-	-	-

Officers	15 Jun 21	20 Jul 21	05 Oct 21	01 Feb 22	15 Mar 22
Deputy Chief Executive	Attended	Attended	Attended	Virtually	Attended
Head of Finance and IT	-	Attended	Attended	--	
Accountancy Manager	Attended	Attended	Attended	Virtually	Virtually
Senior Accountant	-	-	-	-	Virtually
Accounts Officer	-	-	-	Virtually	
Head of Planning & Development	-	-	-	-	Apologies
Investigations & Enforcement Support Manager	-	Apologies	-	-	-
Head of Service Port Health	-	-	Attended	-	-
Port Health Manager	-	-	Attended	-	-
Ombudsman Complaints Officer	-	Attended	Attended		Attended
IT Manager	-	-	-	-	Virtually
Compliance and Data Protection Manager	-	-	Attended	-	Virtually
Head of Audit	-	-	Attended	Attended	-
Interim Head of Audit	-	-	-	-	Attended
Deputy Head of Audit	Attended	Attended	-	-	-
Interim Deputy Head of Audit	-	-	-	-	Virtually
Audit Manager	Attended	-	Attended	-	Virtually
External Audit Engagement Manager	Attended	Attended	-	-	Virtually
Member Services	Attended	Attended	Attended	Attended	Attended

There were a few changes to the political balance at the start of 2022. To ensure that the Committee's political balance remained intact, some changes of membership were required during this time.

Of the current Members for 2022/23, six were Members of the committee during 2021/22. This provided some stability, while providing challenge from new Members.

Key decisions & insights

The reports presented to Members by Officers and External Audit throughout 2021/22 are noted in the table below. They detail what the content of the reports, and Members' action taken where applicable.

Internal Audit Activity

15 June 2021 – Internal Audit Annual Report and Opinion 2020/21

The Deputy Head of Audit gave a presentation and introduced the report. This included the progress of the internal audit plan, implementation of management actions, which all contributed to the annual assurance opinion. The Deputy Head of Audit opinion stated that the Council had an effective framework of governance, risk management and internal control for 2020/21, which is a positive opinion.

The Audit Committee noted the internal audit report and annual opinion.

1 February 2022 – Internal Audit Report: Instruction and administrative processes of Legal Services.

The Interim Deputy Head of Audit presented the report. In September 21, a final internal audit report of the Legal Services Instructions and Administrative Process, was issued with a Weak assurance opinion. The report detailed the findings, recommendations made. Legal Services attended the meeting to provide an overview of action taken so far and to detail further planned actions to address the findings.

The Audit Committee noted the report.

1 February 2022 - Internal Audit Interim and Assurance Report

The Interim Head of Audit presented the report. It detailed the Head of Audit interim Opinion for 2021/22, closing of the 2020/21 plan, progress against the 2021/22 audit plan, other work, and implementation of agreed actions.

The Audit Committee noted the report.

15 March 2022 – Internal Audit Plan for 2022/23

The Interim Head of Audit presented the report. It detailed how the audit plan came about, the audits with their indicative scopes, other work to be conducted such as consultancy, planning and how the audit plan will be resourced.

The Audit Committee approved the Internal Audit Assurance Plan, noted that the partnership has sufficient resources to deliver the plan and the annual assurance opinion, and the plan had been compiled independently and without inappropriate influence from Management.

External Audit Activity

15 June 2021 – Audit Progress Report and Sector Update

The Audit Manager from Grant Thornton presented the report. They detailed the progress on the audit plan, the timeline for the deliverables for 2020/21 audit, and an update on the planning enquiries including a revision to the ISA (UK) 540 Accounting Estimates.

They also provided a sector update, which included insight into account for grants in the pandemic, finance in the pandemic, and good practice in annual reporting.

The Audit Committee noted the report.

External Audit Activity (continued)

5 October 2021 – Audit Fee Letter

The Accountancy Manager presented the report. It detailed the scale of fees as set by the Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) and confirm the fee should be £74,440 for 2021/22.

The Audit Committee noted the proposed fee for 2021/22 for the final accounts audit.

Risk and Governance

5 October 2021 – Strategic Risk Management

The Compliance and Data Protection Manager presented the report. The report detailed the risk registers for strategic, delivery, financial and compliance risks. It also reported on the emerging risks.

The Audit Committee agreed the assessment of the key controls to manage the risks, and considered the risks associated with the Ashford Port Health Service. In addition, they requested a more detailed report on cyber security to a future meeting in order for the controls to be assessed.

5 October 2021- Annual Governance Statement (AGS) – Progress on Remedying Exceptions

The Compliance and Data Protection Manager presented the report. The report detailed the progress to date on the areas previously identified where continued work was required.

The Audit Committee noted the report.

5 October 2021 – Annual Report of the Audit Committee

The Audit Manager introduced this item. They explained that the contributions Members had made at a recent workshop had been captured in the report. The report confirmed that the Audit Committee had successfully undertaken its duties during 2020/21.

Members agreed the report, and the Chair of the Audit Committee will present the report to a future meeting of Full Council.

5 October 2021 – Corporate Enforcement Support and Investigations Team Annual Report 2020/21

The Head of Finance and IT presented the report. It detailed the work of the Investigation and Enforcement Support Team up to March 2021. It reported that there were 268 investigations and a number of specific campaigns to identify irregularity and fraud, and identified £616k of public funds (£220k relating to the Council).

The Audit Committee noted the report.

15 March 2022 – Corporate Risk Register

The Compliance and Data Protection Manager presented the report. The report detailed the risk registers for strategic, delivery, financial and compliance risks. It also reported on the emerging risks, and those where the risk profile was reduced. At the request of the Audit Committee, risks associated with Cyber Security and their mitigating controls was presented to the committee.

The Audit Committee agreed the assessments of key controls to manage the risks. They also considered the risks associated with Cyber Security.

Risk and Governance (continued)

15 March 2022 – Annual Governance Statement (AGS)

The Compliance and Data Protection Manager introduced the report. The report detailed the progress on recommendations from the previous AGS. It also detailed the governance arrangements for 2021/22, with input from the Interim Head of Audit. The conclusion of the report is that governance arrangements remain appropriate, effective, and adaptive to change as circumstances dictated.

The Chair raised at the pre-meeting the adequacy of the Trading and Enterprise Board arrangements and need for them to be incorporated into the New Towns Work and Project Green Projects.

The Audit Committee approved the 2021/22 annual governance statement, subject to the inclusion of the additional work regarding the Trading and Enterprise Board.

Financial Activity

20 July 2021 – Draft Statement of Accounts 2020/21

The Accountancy Manager presented the report. They explained training sessions to Members had taken place to assist them in reviewing and commenting on the accounts. The report presented the draft statement of accounts, which will be used to commence the Public Inspection Period which will begin before the end of July 2021. They will also be passed to Grant Thornton (external audit) to form the basis of the 2020/21 audit.

The report included the Statement of Accounts, Financial Results and Activity for 2019/20, Core Financial Statements, Housing Revenue Account, and Collection fund.

Members noted the draft statement of accounts 2020/21 and support the presentation to External Audit, and for Public Inspection.

1 February 2022 – Invitation to become an Opt-In Authority: Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA)

The Accounts Officer presented the item. They advised that the Council previously appointed the PSAA in 2016 for five years, and now needs to decide whether to opt in for the next five years, (2023/4 to 2027/28), which was the preferred option. The other option was to appoint the auditors either by themselves or jointly with another council.

Prior to the presentation, the Chair expressed their disappointment in the delay of report from Grant Thornton who was due to present at the now postponed November meeting, and then subsequently this meeting. The Audit Committee were advised the delay is due to resources and a high turnover of staff, which is a problem within the sector not just Grant Thornton. The Audit Manager Grant Thornton extended their apologies for the current position.

The Chair thanked the Audit Manager (Grant Thornton), and proposed that a letter would be sent to Grant Thornton, with the PSAA to be copied in so they are aware of the Council's disappointment

The Audit Committee recommended that the Council become an opted in member of the PSAA. They also resolve to write to Grant Thornton to express their dissatisfaction at the delays to the audits over 2021/22, and to send a copy of the letter to the PSAA for their information.

Financial Activity (continued)

15 March 2022 – Statement of Accounts 2020-21, Findings and Letter of Representation

The Accountancy Manager introduced the report. They advised that the Auditors have substantially completed the audit remotely, were looking to give an unqualified opinion. The report noted an amendment to the financial statements due to an error in classification of low risk / best practice recommendations. The outstanding work on the valuation of the Council's housing stock was due to be completed by the 31/03/22.

The Audit Committee:

- Considered the auditors findings,
- Agreed the bases upon how the accounts had been prepared,
- Approved the substantial audited 2020/21 Statement of Accounts.
- Delegated the authority to the Chair and Chief Financial Officer to agree any further amendments required, but any significant changes to be reported back to the Audit Committee, and
- Approved the Chief Financial Officer's letter of representation to the appointed Auditors.

15 March 2022 – Presentation of Financial Statements

The Senior Accountant introduced the report. The report detailed the time scale for sign off of the 2021/22 accounts, was moved to the 30 November. This will relieve some of the pressure on the external audit team. It also stated that an emergency consultation took place, and as such there may be changes to the code that may affect the 2021/22 and 2022/23 accounts. It also stated that the Council can demonstrate that it is still a 'going concern'.

The Audit Committee noted the report, approved the accounting policies for the 2021/22 accounts, and delegated authority to the Head of Finance and IT to make changes to the accounting policies following the emergency consultation.

Other Work

1 February 2022 – Homes England – Compliance Audit Annual Report 2021/22 For Ashford Borough Council

The Development Partnership Manager presented the report. The report details that Homes England selected Ashford schemes for a compliance audit this year. The scheme selected was East Stour Court. The audit took place between the 11th and 20th August 2021, and awarded the Green Grade with no breach of funding conditions or recommendations for improvement.

The Audit Committee noted the report and wished to put on record their thanks and gratitude to Officers for a successful audit.

Development of Audit Committee

During the year the Committee has received formal training from Officers on understanding the Council's Statement of Accounts. In addition, Members have received further information on the Council's Port Health operations and Cyber Security processes to support the Committees understanding of how these key risks are managed.

As a Committee Members are keen to ensure they continue to develop, and ideas to support this were explored during a workshop held with Committee Members in September 2022. The following ideas for future development were agreed:

- Undertake a **peer review** of the functioning of the Audit Committee to be facilitated by Mid Kent Audit across the partnership authorities. It was considered that this would be useful to support potential changes in Membership following the May 2023 elections.
- Introduce an **induction programme** for all new Committee Members which covers the key aspects and functions of the Audit Committee. Additionally, have a **buddy** system so new Members of the Committee can be supported by Members with experience on the Audit Committee.
- Have a programme of **briefings** delivered to Committee Members during the year which includes topics like: internal audit, external audit, risk, and the annual governance statement.

Audit Committee will also continue to request further details on, and understanding of, the Council's key risks, with risk owners invited to attend a Committee meeting and present on their risk area.

Conclusion

The Audit Committee, in partnership with the Council's Internal and External Auditors, and with the support from Officers has provided robust and effective independent assurance to the Council on a wide range of risk, governance and internal control issues.

It is our conclusion that we can demonstrate that we have appropriately and effectively fulfilled our duties during 2021/22.

Appendix 1 - Terms of Reference & Responsibilities

The purpose of an Audit Committee is to provide independent assurance of the adequacy of the risk management framework and the associated control environment, independent scrutiny of the Authority's financial and non-financial performance to the extent that it affects the Authority's exposure to risk and weakens the control environment, and to oversee the financial reporting process (Minute No. 408/12/06 refers).

To consider/monitor or advise the council as appropriate upon:

Audit Activity

1. The Head of Internal Audit's Annual Report and Opinion, and a summary of internal audit activity (actual and proposed) and the level of assurance it can give over the council's Corporate Governance arrangements.
2. The summary of internal audit reports issued in the previous period.
3. Reports on the management and performance of the Audit Partnership Agreement.
4. Reports from the Head of Internal Audit on agreed recommendations not implemented within a reasonable timescale.
5. The External Auditor's Annual Management Letter and relevant reports.
6. Any detailed responses to the External Auditor's Annual Letter.
7. Specific reports as agreed with the External Auditor.
8. The scope and depth of external audit work and to ensure it gives value for money.
9. Liaison with the Audit Commission on the appointment of the Council's External Auditor.
10. The commissioning of work from internal and external audit.

Regulatory Framework / Risk Management

11. An overview of the council's Constitution in respect of Contract Procedure Rules and Financial Regulations.
12. The effective development and operation of financial management, risk management and those elements of corporate governance within the remit of the Audit Committee.
13. Council policies on "raising concerns at work" i.e., whistle-blowing in the context of the Anti-Fraud and Anti-Corruption Strategy and the council's complaints process.
14. To recommend the Authority's Annual Governance Statement for approval to the Executive. (Minute No. 531/5/10).
15. The council's compliance with its own and other published financial standards and controls.
16. The External Auditor's report on issues arising from the Audit of the Accounts.
17. The ability to refer matters to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for their consideration (Minute No. 62/6/09).

Note: The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has a similar provision to refer matters to the Audit Committee.

Delegations

To exercise the powers and duties of the council relative to: -

18. The approval of the Annual Statement of Accounts in line with the statutory requirements including those relating to the publishing deadlines. Specifically, to consider whether appropriate accounting policies have been followed and whether there are concerns arising from the financial statements or from the Audit that need to be brought to the attention of the council.

Quorum:

One quarter of the total membership.

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