

Cabinet

Minutes of a Meeting of the Cabinet held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **27th July 2023**.

Present:

Cllr. Ovenden (Chairman);
Cllr. Campkin (Vice-Chairman);

Cllrs. Betty, Harman, Hayward, Nilsson, Walder, Wright.

Present:

Cllr. Barrett.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Bartlett, Bell, Chilton, Dean, Feacey, Gathern, Gauder, Giles, Hallett, Heyes, Meaden, Michael, Pickering, Roden, Spain.

In attendance:

Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Director of Customer, Technology and Finance, Director of Health and Wellbeing, Director of Place, Space and Leisure, Assistant Director of Environment, Property and Leisure, Assistant Director of Planning and Development, Assistant of Director of Housing, Head of Policy and Performance, Head of Economic Development, Service Lead – Finance, Safety and Wellbeing Manager, Grounds Maintenance Operations Manager, Economic Development Manager, Town Centre Regeneration Manager, Project Manager (National Lottery Heritage Fund), Principal Solicitor (Strategic Development), Senior Recovery Officer, Economic Development and Regeneration Officer, Communications Officer, Member Services Manager.

96 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Feacey	Made a Voluntary Announcement as a Chairman of the Ashford Volunteer Centre.	106
	Made a Voluntary Announcement as a Chairman of the Ashford International Development Company	99
Gathern	Made a Voluntary Announcement as a friend of one of the report authors.	101

97 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 29th June 2023 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

98 Leader's Announcements

The Leader said that after the Full Council meeting the previous week there had been several observations on the poor state of the Council Chamber microphone system. Some Members may know that this would be the last Cabinet Meeting using the existing Audio Visual equipment. During August there would be extensive renovations carried out which would see new modern meeting equipment installed, including new microphone units, screens, projectors, cameras and, importantly, facilities to livestream and hold hybrid meetings. This would replace the current obsolete and unreliable equipment which was at its "end of life". This would also allow the Council to be able to professionally film and livestream their meetings itself, and be able to hold meetings in a hybrid fashion, with participants genuinely able to join remotely (although voting Members on Committees would still have to attend in person as per current legislation). They would also be able to undertake electronic voting and a number of other upgrades. It was hoped that the equipment would be fully installed and operational for meetings from September and ahead of the first few meetings, there would be training from the installers themselves for Members in how to use the new equipment. He was sure colleagues would agree this was a huge step forwards and reflected their ambitions as a modern and forward thinking Council.

He said that within tonight's agenda they were making proposals for setting up several Working Groups on : - Parking Strategy; Medium Term Financial Plan; Parks Foundation; and Housing Repairs. The make-up for these Groups would be the relevant Officers, Cabinet Portfolio Holder and one Member from each Political Group – which he would expect to be the Shadow Portfolio Holder. This was to ensure a focused conversation and allow continuity with joint portfolio meetings. They also had the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group, which was open to all Members, and obviously Overview and Scrutiny as well. He considered this was cross-party working and Member involvement on a new and unprecedented scale.

The Leader also advised that he had recently come across one of the schemes supported using money from the Household Prosperity Fund. The Council had approached 10 Primary Schools in the Borough offering £1000 each to help families with things like school uniform for the next school year. He thought this was a really nice scheme, where they were using some Government money to help some of those in most need in the Borough.

99 Financial Monitoring Report

The Service Lead - Finance introduced the report which presented the Quarter 1 budget monitoring position up to 30th June 2023. The changing economic picture continued to put stress on the original budget assumptions and this was reflected within the report. The Quarter 1 forecast showed an overall pressure to the General Fund of £429,000. A full break down of the key movements since Quarter 2 was shown in the report. The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was reporting a pressure of £542,000. The report also provided an update on the collection fund, treasury management, reserves and progress on corporate savings identified in the 2023/24 budget.

Members asked a number of questions on the report and the following responses were given: -

- The Medium Term Financial Plan Working Group would consider the proposed elimination of the capital budget for the Hubert Fountain in Victoria Park, against the merits of proposed capital expenditure on other projects. It was noted that there may also be opportunities to raise funding and gain grants via the proposed Ashford Parks Foundation.
- There was no specific delay on the modular housing solution at Henwood and this would still be delivered to the agreed timescale. The Council had attempted to bring this date forward, but this had not been possible due to the manufacturer's construction timescales.
- The current support for Tenterden Leisure Centre would be in place for 18-24 months. They would be going out to a full procurement for a permanent operator with capital investment and a payback/profit share arrangement so it was hoped this would generate an income in the future. The Portfolio Holder advised that there would be a targeted messaging campaign to ensure that local residents, users and potential users all knew that the Tenterden Leisure Centre was again open for business.

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 Capital Monitoring position be noted.**
 - (iv) the Treasury Management position be noted.**
 - (v) the provisional reserve allocations, at Table 8 of the report, be noted.**

- (vi) **the amendments to fees and charges, as outlined in Appendices C and D to the report, be approved.**
- (vii) **the proposal to create a Working Group to develop the Medium Term Financial Plan, including Shadow Portfolio Holders, be supported.**
- (viii) **the update on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund, at Appendix E to the report, be noted.**

100 Revenues and Benefits Recommended Write-Offs Schedule

The Senior Recovery Officer introduced the report which proposed the formal write off of £344,479.14. The proposals were in line with the Council's Revenues and Benefits Service Write-Off Policy and the Deputy Chief Executive (Section 151 Officer) had been consulted along with Heads of Service for relevant areas. She advised that the Council had robust processes in place for reviewing such debts and a suite of methods for tracing individuals and businesses. She would be happy to meet with any interested Members to explain the process in more detail.

In response to a question, the Leader said it was certainly his intention to continue the previous practice of going through a couple of cases at random with the Officers to provide assurance.

Resolved:

- That
- (i) **the action that accounts totalling £39,032.58 have been written off under the delegated powers (Financial Regulations 11.1 refers) be noted.**
 - (ii) **the write offs listed in the Exempt Appendices totalling £305,446.56 be approved.**

101 Ashford Parks Foundation

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which updated on the position of the £5.1m Heritage Lottery Funded (HLF) project in Victoria Park (this figure was inclusive of uplift, contingencies, and separate British Cycling Pump Track works). The report also sought to set up an Officer and Member Task and Finish Group to further explore, investigate and understand the feasibility, practicality and financial implications of delivering an Ashford Parks Foundation. In order to achieve this the report also sought to extend the employment of the HLF Project Manager to lead on this work.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) the delivery of the National Lottery Heritage Funded (NLHF) capital project at Victoria Park be noted.**
 - (ii) it be agreed to extend the employment of the HLF Project Manager from December 2023 to 30 April 2024, in order to lead and report on a feasibility study for the potential of an Ashford Parks Foundation and to provide continuity with volunteer groups to continue required the legacy works.**
 - (iii) an Officer and cross-party Member Task and Finish group be set up to explore the viability of an Ashford Parks Foundation.**

102 Parking Tariff Review

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which advised that over the last few years, the Council had experienced a significant increase in its costs relating to car parking, mainly driven by increased utility costs. The Council had a policy to review parking charges on a triennial cycle, however the last review had been postponed and so it had been four years since the charges were reviewed. This meant that the charges had now got out of sync with the cost of the service. The specific proposal was to increase all tariffs by an agreed percentage, approximately 10% (rounded to the nearest 10p) whereas CPI has increased by 20.18% since the last increase in charges. The report advised that the proposed charges would still be lower than those of their competitors, but there did need to be a review of the Council's wider parking policy to make sure that, whilst fitting within the budget envelope, the Council's parking provision and charging policies delivered its corporate objectives. The outcome of this review would be the production of a new parking strategy that would come forward to a future meeting of the Cabinet. The Portfolio Holder advised that he established a Working Group to have an oversight of this review and to bring forward proposals later in the year.

Members asked a number of questions on the report and the following responses were given: -

- Price increases were always regrettable, particularly in a cost of living crisis, however charges had not been increased for four years and the proposals were still significantly lower than the CPI increases during that time and were needed in order to cover operating costs. The new charges would be comparable with neighbouring areas.
- The 'free after 3(pm)' parking would still be in place for the timebeing, but would form part of the wider review.
- There could be no guarantees given about future pricing charges at this time. These would be looked at as part of the wider review. The Working Group would have an important role to play in that, considering all of the issues such as climate change, cycling/walking, bus usage and accessibility. It was

important to take the time to look at the wider picture and consider the matter properly.

- The review would certainly involve extensive consultation with local businesses and well as a wide range of other stakeholders.

Resolved:

That an increase in on-street and off-street parking tariffs, from 1 October 2023, across the borough be agreed, by approximately 10% on current tariffs (e.g. £1.20 to £1.30, £2.40 to £2.60 etc.) and in accordance with the specific rates detailed within the report.

103 Ashford Town Centre Business Grants

The Portfolio Holder said that following from the last item she was hoping that this report would keep Ashford's car parks in place and busy. Ashford Town Centre should be the beating heart of the Borough and the previous administration had recognised this with the introduction of the Ashford Town Centre Support Grant scheme 2021/22. This had showed some success with £88,000 leading to nearly £250,000 in investment, 75 jobs created or supported, additional Business Rates receipts (£23,000) and six newly-filled premises. Despite current economic challenges, it was recognised that they needed to do more to further revitalise Ashford's Town Centre and create a place of prosperity and opportunity. The report detailed how the Council could continue to support a Town Centre Grant Funding Scheme by utilising Section 106 developer monies - therefore at no additional cost to the Council.

The Head of Economic Development introduced the report which reviewed the trial grant scheme and set out a proposed new Ashford Town Centre Grants policy for the period up to March 2025.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) the content of the report and the work to deliver grants in Ashford Town Centre be noted.**
 - (ii) the Ashford Town Centre Business Grants Policy, to run between 2023-2025, be approved.**
 - (iii) the use of Officer delegation to approve the £140,000 of Section 106 funding to deliver this grants scheme be supported.**
 - (iv) delegated authority be granted to the Deputy Chief Executive to approve grants and administer the scheme.**

104 Corporate Enforcement Statement

The Director of Health and Wellbeing introduced the report which presented an updated Corporate Enforcement Statement - setting out the Council's overarching approach to enforcement and implementing best practice as set out in the Regulators Code. Adopting a refreshed Statement would reiterate the Council's approach to taking fair, proportionate and transparent action when there were breaches of legislation or regulation that it was responsible for upholding.

Resolved:

That the Corporate Enforcement Statement be approved for publication on the Council's website.

105 Statement of Community Involvement - Update

The Portfolio Holder advised that she was pleased this update had come forward and it would be a key part of the upcoming Local Plan review. It would also be valid for all other plan-making and planning application processes and they would continue to look to expand to more platforms in the future. An update to the Statement of Community Involvement was required every five years, or prior to the formal examination stages of Development Plan Documents. Updates had been made to the document in accordance with revised legislation and the changing function of the planning service with regard to community planning issues and cooperation with other public bodies. She was also pleased to report that the Arcus system had restored the option to allow residents to sign to weekly email alerts for new planning applications on a ward basis. She hoped in future this could be expanded to a Parish level.

The Assistant Director of Planning and Development introduced the report and stressed that the statement outlined the minimum that the Council will do in different planning consultation situations and they would always look to go beyond that. In addition, for the first time, the statement set out who would be directly consulted on planning applications and that all planning applications would be available on the Council's website.

With regard to consultation on the Local Plan review a Member said he had appreciated the previous 'roadshows' out in the Parishes and hoped these would be repeated this time round.

Resolved:

That the content of the updated Statement of Community Involvement be agreed and the Assistant Director - Planning and Development, or the Spatial Planning Manager, be authorised to make any grammatical or other changes that are necessary in their opinion, for accuracy and consistency with legislation; and,

Recommended:

That the updated Statement of Community Involvement, incorporating such changes, be adopted as a local development document.

106 Policy for Funding the Voluntary and Community Sector and Shared Prosperity Fund Criteria

The Portfolio Holder said that as a Borough they were blessed to have an amazing variety of organisations within the voluntary sector, all supporting residents and this policy provided structure to how those organisations could be financially supported by the Council. The policy had returned to Cabinet having been presented to the previous Administration and then gone out for consultation. They had taken on board the comments from the consultation and also included how they intended to distribute the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund funding they had recently been awarded.

The Head of Policy and Performance introduced the report which updated on outcome of the consultation and presented a final draft of the policy.

In response to a question, the Head of Policy and Performance advised that the consultation had targeted the Voluntary Sector and Parish, Town and Community Councils.

The Leader advised that the final policy would include the two matters discussed by Group Leaders – namely inclusion of being able fund adjacent Wards through Ward Member grants and ensuring that faith based organisations are only funded for projects or services that are available to the wider community.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) the outcome of the consultation for the Policy for Funding the Voluntary and Community Sector be noted.**
 - (ii) the inclusion of UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund grants be noted.**
 - (iii) subject to the addition of Members being permitted to fund adjacent Wards through Ward Member grants, and ensuring that faith based organisations are only funded for projects or services that are available to the wider community, the final draft policy be approved and adopted.**

107 Housing Repairs Contract

The Assistant Director of Housing introduced the report which advised that the provision of a day to day responsive repairs service was currently outsourced by the Council to a main contractor – Equans (formerly Engie). Equans had given six

months' notice to terminate the contract which would end on the 30th November 2023. The report set out the options available to the Council to ensure that the Housing Service's 5,000 tenants continued to receive a service after the end of the contract and explored the most favourable option for delivering an improved and more efficient repairs service, including highlighting the potential for savings in the proposed delivery model to the Housing Revenue Account.

In response to questions it was confirmed that the proposals would give the Council the option to offer more traineeships and apprenticeships as well as potential revenue streams in the future. It would also allow the service to be more flexible and responsive.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) the Responsive Repairs service become an in house operation.**
 - (ii) a cross-party Member Task and Finish Group be set up to include the Housing Portfolio Holder and Shadow Portfolio Holders.**
 - (iii) authority be delegated to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader and relevant Portfolio Holders, to make a final decision on proceeding with bringing the repairs service in house - full business case will be developed to support the transfer.**
 - (iv) the Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer be authorised to negotiate, finalise and complete all necessary legal agreements and other documents to give effect to the above.**
 - (v) it be noted that the TUPE implications for bringing the service in house will be identified and discussed with Human Resources.**

108 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.

109 Joint Transportation Board – Nomination of Membership

Resolved:

That the following Members be appointed to the Joint Transportation Board: Councillors Feacey, Forest, Gathern, Heyes (Ch), Joseph, Michael and Meaden.

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110 Trading and Enterprise Board – Nomination of Membership

Resolved:

That the following Members be appointed to the Trading and Enterprise Board: Councillors Betty (Ch), Harman, Ovenden, Walder. Councillor Bell to be appointed as Observer as the Leader of the largest Opposition Group.

Queries concerning these minutes? Please contact Member Services
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