

Cabinet

Minutes of a Virtual Meeting of the Cabinet held on Microsoft Teams on the **24th September 2020**.

Present:

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

Cllrs. Barrett, Bell, Buchanan, Clokie, Pickering.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Feacey, Forest, Hayward, Shorter.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Anckorn, Mrs Bell, Burgess, Chilton, Harman, Knowles, Krause, Mulholland, Ovenden, Spain, Sparks, C Suddards, L Suddards, Walder, Wright.

In attendance:

Chief Executive, Director of Law and Governance, Director of Finance and Economy, Head of Corporate Policy, Economic Development and Communications, Head of Personnel and Development, Head of Community Safety and Wellbeing, Head of Environment and Land Management, Head of Culture, Head of Housing, Head of Corporate Property and Projects, Community Safety and Wellbeing Manager, Accountancy Manager, Community Safety and Resilience Team Leader, Parking, Highways and Transportation Team Leader, Community Safety Officer, Web and Communications Assistant, Member Services Manager (Operational).

68 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Bartlett	Made a Voluntary Announcement as he lived adjacent to the Mojo Site, Sevington.	70

69 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 30th July 2020 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

70 Petitions

In accordance with Procedure Rule 9.1 Mrs Arthur, representing the Village Alliance, presented a petition to the Cabinet calling for the protection of Mersham and Sevington.

Mrs Arthur advised that as residents in the Ashford Borough, they wished to see the land to the East of Highfield Lane, Mersham, remain as a green buffer zone - a "Strategic Gap in Perpetuity" as referred to in Policy SP7 of the Local Plan 2030, protecting an ancient settlement and countryside from encroachment, as defined in the National Planning Policy Framework. This land was the last green field between Mersham and the customs clearance and lorry holding area. It deserved designation as a green space in perpetuity. She thanked Councillors for allowing her to speak and to present their Petition. Mersham and Sevington residents and the Village Alliance had worked for many years to save the last field protecting their villages. This petition was launched in the face of the encroaching contingency lorry park and the HMRC customs clearance site, now known as the Sevington Inland Border Centre. They had been both humbled and buoyed by the support from their villages, their neighbouring villages, and the residents of the Ashford Borough, with many signatures in just six weeks. In fact 1666 valid signatures had been received, and a total of over 2500 when including those from outside the Borough. They were heartened to have the support of Parish Councils around the Borough, of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), of Borough Councillors, and Councillor Clarkson, Leader of the Council. They wished to work together with the Council, the Kent County Council and the Department for Transport, to provide a community benefit on this land. A flagship for Policy SP7, Separation of Settlements, to provide a green buffer, a green space and to protect the integrity of an ancient village for residents in the Borough to enjoy in perpetuity.

The Leader said that he readily accepted the petition and it would now be dealt with appropriately in accordance with the provisions set out in the Council's Constitution. He said that he, along with Ashford's MP Damian Green and his Deputy Leader Cllr Bartlett, has made it very clear to Government that whilst they would work with them on this Inland Border Facility, it was absolutely vital that there was a buffer zone to protect the Borough's beautiful rural areas. He considered that the petition was therefore "pushing at an open door", but the issue would be properly debated at the Council meeting on the 15th October.

71 Leader's Announcements

The Leader said that he wanted to voice his appreciation for all of the hard work Officers had put in to making a bid to the Forestry Commission for a significant allocation of trees to create a new woodland for Ashford. In fact he was delighted to report that 10 days ago it had been confirmed that Ashford had been successful and would be awarded some 6666 trees to be planted over the coming months at Discovery Park. This was a great accolade for Ashford and would be of great benefit to the ecology of the Borough and the Garden of England as a whole.

72 Financial Monitoring

The Portfolio Holder presented a shortened (bi-monthly) budget monitoring report covering the two month period to 31st July 2020 (as agreed by the Cabinet on 25th June 2020 in response to financial uncertainty as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic). The report examined movements in the General Fund, Housing Revenue Account, Collection Fund and provided an update on the Government Fees and Charges Support Scheme.

The Portfolio Holder said that the report presented a slightly improved position in the forecast deficit, but there would clearly be a lot more detail presented to the next meeting of the Cabinet in October in the Medium Term Financial Plan report.

In response to questions from a Member, the Leader advised that there had not yet been a composite reply from Government on requests for extra support for Kent Authorities to deal with the effects of Covid-19. The Council, along with others, had lobbied for that and a response was awaited. With regard to the fee for pavement licensing and the potential for a waiver to assist businesses, the Head of Community Safety and Wellbeing advised that there had been minimal take-up on this and as the Winter approached it was unlikely that there would be any more. She said she would supply the Member with an update on actual figures. The Leader said that they would keep an open mind in dealing with this issue.

Resolved:

- That (i) **the forecast outturn position for the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account be noted.**
- (ii) **the forecasts for Council Tax and Business Rates (the Collection Fund) be noted.**

73 Corporate Property Performance – Annual Report 2019/20

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which provided a summary of how the Council's main commercial assets were performing and the work the Council was undertaking to improve or maintain such performance. He advised that the report reflected on the effects of Covid-19 and that these would need to continue to be managed going forward.

A Member asked about the Sustainable Energy Project, which had a fantastic return on investment of 49.3%, and wondered if the Council should be making more of this and looking to roll it out into other areas. He also pointed to the return on assets in areas like Bockhanger and Stanhope which were much higher than those in Elwick Place and asked if thought should be given to dispersing investments more widely.

The Head of Corporate Property and Projects advised that the Sustainable Energy Project related to solar energy and the Council's decision to take advantage of a generous feed-in tariff at the time, to install PV panels on a number of Council owned

properties including the Civic Centre. This had provided a significant return and future opportunities would continue to be pursued. The Deputy Leader advised that KCC were currently undertaking some PV work, offering assistance to people who may want to install PV panels on their homes but could not easily afford the up-front capital costs, through bulk purchasing to obtain discounts and taking the administrative burden away from individuals. He encouraged Members to publicise that scheme in their Wards. It was agreed to also publicise this in the Ashford For You magazine.

With regard to location of investments, the Leader said there was somewhat of a dichotomy as some of the investments in the Town Centre had been more about supporting and revitalising, rather than making significant profits. He advised that even in these tough times, there were new tenants interested in coming on board for Elwick Place and whilst that was commercially sensitive at the moment, details would emerge in the near future. The Head of Corporate Property and Projects conformed that all but one of the units in Elwick Place were currently 'under offer'.

There was discussion on Council owned office space and whether there was a danger that post Covid-19, with working dynamics inevitably changing, this would leave a surplus of such space, placing a pressure on the Council's financial position. The Leader said that he was pleased to report that, even before the current pandemic, the Council had been very circumspect and had turned down offers to purchase further office space in and around the town, because they had been aware of the already changing nature of workplaces. The Council was very cognisant of this issue and how it could potentially relate to the Civic Centre and International House in the future.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) the revenue performance of the Council's Corporate Property portfolio during the financial year 2019/20, as provided for in the Corporate Property Income Schedule at Appendix 1 to the report, be noted.**
 - (ii) the risk assessment in relation to the Council's future income from its commercial assets, particularly in light of the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic, be noted.**
 - (iii) the clarification added to the Property Acquisition, Investment and Disposal Strategy, as provided in Appendix 2 to the report, be approved.**

74 Introduction of a Tree Policy for Ashford Borough Council

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which advised that the Council did not currently have a policy relating to how tree stock was inspected and managed for the purposes of public safety. Currently, there was no formal policy that influenced how

Council owned trees were managed in respect of enquiries and complaints from members of the public, and the report proposed a policy for this area.

Recommended:

That the Tree Policy as set out in Appendix 1 to the report be adopted.

75 Introduction of Tree Planting Schemes

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which proposed the implementation of a tree planting scheme and associated policy. This would enhance the amenity value of areas that had capacity for additional trees and generate environmental benefits such as removal of carbon, reduction of flooding, enhanced air quality and provision of shade.

In response to a question it was confirmed that anyone, including Parish Councils and businesses, as well as individuals, could apply to this scheme.

The Deputy Leader advised that KCC's Five Year Plan included a scheme to plant one tree for every person in Kent (1.6 million), so there was funding available and he considered all Authorities were like minded and would work together to deliver this for the county.

Recommended:

That the Tree Planting Scheme and Policy as laid out in Appendix 1 to the report be adopted.

76 Memorial Benches and Seating

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which advised that the Council occasionally received requests from members of the public who wished to have a bench dedicated to a loved one in various open spaces and cemeteries owned by the Council. He advised that arrangements for managing benches and dedications were currently ad hoc and this policy would introduce a formal management process and policy for installation and removal.

Recommended:

That the Memorial Benches Policy as set out in Appendix 1 to the report be adopted.

77 Removal of Cash Transactions

The report proposed the phased removal of cash from Council business in response to the wider changes being seen in society as a result of digitalisation of services and the Covid-19 pandemic. It was reiterated that the majority of the public had adapted to the behavioural changes and had already embraced technology and cashless payment options. With regard to parking machines in particular, it was

noted that the removal of cash would be a phased and sensitive process with cash usage being monitored and reviewed for demand. If cash demand continued to be high, cash would be retained in relevant car parks.

A Member stressed the benefits of the Ring Go parking payment facility, and whilst it may take some a few attempts to get used to, it made paying for parking so much easier, quicker and more efficient. It also meant that there was no need to 'keep an eye on the clock' for your allotted times as they could be topped up.

The Leader stressed that Ashford was a caring Authority and would not leave anyone behind. Cash and card payments for parking would continue whilst needed, alongside the Ring Go App and there would be clear information and marketing distributed across the Borough in all formats to help users. There was also a discussion about communicating this message to the Nepalese community, many of whom did not have English as their first language. The Council's good links with this community were emphasised and whilst additional signage was not favoured, there would be opportunities to support those groups. It was also agreed to publicise the changes in the Ashford For You magazine.

Resolved:

- That (i) the immediate removal of cash payment machines from the Civic Centre reception be agreed.**
- (ii) a phased removal of coin payment from the Council's on-street and off-street parking machines be agreed.**
- (iii) a phased removal of built in credit card and contactless readers from the Council's on-street and off-street parking machines be agreed.**

78 Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Statement

The report presented a Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Statement for approval by the Council. The statement set out steps that Ashford Borough Council must undertake to ensure a collaborative approach on these issues across organisations. The requirement for a statement was not a statutory requirement, but it was seen as best practice and certainly something this Council wanted to do to protect the public from the negative impacts of modern slavery and human trafficking.

Members welcomed the statement and the work the Council had been doing on this issue. It was recognised that the key responsibility for this was with other agencies, but by working closely with other strategic partners this demonstrated the Council's commitment to being part of the ongoing solution. There were some questions around empowering workers and making them aware of their rights if they were being exploited and identifying how to support the hidden victims. The Leader encouraged any Members with more detailed and specific questions on these important issues to raise them off-line with the relevant Officers as they could make sure they were responded to properly. The Community Safety and Resilience Team

Leader confirmed that the Council did have a dedicated Lead Officer for Modern Slavery and they were part of the Council's Safeguarding Leads Officer Group.

A Member thanked Officers for the annual training conference that have been put on about this issue in March. She had attended and it had been excellent and a real eye-opener. This was a problem that was "hiding in plain sight" so she agreed that anything that could be done to raise public awareness on this issue should be pursued. She also hoped that some similar training could be put on again in the future to raise awareness amongst more Councillors. This was agreed.

It was agreed to publicise the reporting mechanisms in the Ashford For You magazine and via a Leader's Briefing Note for Councillors and all Community, Town and Parish Councils and to make the policy easily accessible on the Council's website.

Recommended:

That the Ashford Borough Council Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Statement be approved.

79 Ashford Strategic Delivery Board – Notes of 24th July 2020

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Ashford Strategic Delivery Board held on the 24th July 2020 be received and noted.

80 Economic Regeneration and Investment Board - Notes of 11th August 2020

A Member asked about the Jasmin Vardimon Dance Company, whose new facility was referred to in these notes. Whilst it was great to have such a cultural offer in the town, could any reassurance be given that the Company would put on community events that would benefit the residents of the Borough at large? The Leader said that he had also had those concerns and had asked the exact same question and had been reassured that there would be a Service Level Agreement which would provide for two or three publically available events every year.

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Economic Regeneration and Investment Board held on the 11th August 2020 be received and noted.

81 Member Training Panel – Annual Report and Notes of 5th August 2020

Resolved:

That the Annual Report and the Notes of the Meeting of the Member Training Panel held on the 5th August 2020 be received and noted.

82 IT and Digital Transformation Advisory Committee – Notes of 11th August 2020

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the IT and Digital Transformation Advisory Committee held on the 11th August 2020 be received and noted.

83 Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group – Notes of 29th July 2020

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group held on the 29th July 2020 be received and noted.

84 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.

85 Joint Transportation Board – Nomination of Membership

Resolved:

That the following Members be appointed to the Joint Transportation Board: Councillors Burgess, Cornish, Feacey, B Heyes (VCh), T Heyes, Krause and Spain.