

Ashford Borough Council

Minutes of a Virtual Meeting of the Ashford Borough Council held on Microsoft Teams on the **10th December 2020**.

Present:

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

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

Prior to the commencement of the meeting the Reverend John Emmott said prayers and asked Members to respect a period of silence for Vicky Louise MacDonald who was the Borough Council Member for the Ashford Stanhope Ward from 1995 to 2003 and who had passed away recently.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Campkin, Cornish, T Heyes, White.

In Attendance:

Chief Executive, Director of Law and Governance, Director of Finance and Economy, Head of HR and Customer Services, Head of Corporate Policy, Economic Development and Communications, Head of Corporate Property and Projects, Civic Engagement Officer, Member Services Manager (Operational).

177 Exempt or Confidential Items

The Mayor asked whether any items should be dealt with in private because of the likely disclosure of Exempt or Confidential information. There were none.

178 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Feacey	Made a Voluntary Announcement as he was Chairman of the Ashford Volunteer Centre.	181
Forest	Made a Voluntary Announcement as his Company provided IT Services to the Ashford Volunteer Centre.	181

Webb Made a Voluntary Announcement as she was 181
a Director of the Ashford Volunteer Centre.

179 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Council held on the 15th October 2020 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

180 Announcements

(a) The Mayor

The Mayor said that at the beginning of 2020, they had all entered a new decade with hope and excitement. Everyone had their own dreams and aspirations for the year ahead but little did they know that within a matter of weeks they would enter a new dimension and be forced to expand their thinking, strength and patience. The pandemic had truly been a challenge and continued to stretch everyone as they awaited the delivery of the vital vaccine and the chance to hug loved ones and share time with those everyone had missed so much.

He and his dear wife Jill may not have had a conventional term of office, but what they had seen was so many incredible acts of kindness and achievements across their great Borough – all realised through compassion and love. He was immensely proud of the Council – both its Members and Officers, the Borough’s businesses and organisations, its volunteers and its citizens, for coming together and reaching out to one another. The demonstration of love and strength of spirit had been most humbling and reminded him of wartime – yes, he was old enough!

Over the last month, he had taken part in Ashford’s Remembrance Sunday and Armistice Day ceremonies. Despite the necessity for closed gatherings, the dignity and honour shown was most poignant. They had remembered all those who fought and died for our freedom during the World Wars as well as all those who continued to protect us at this present time. “We will Remember them.”

Before the second Lockdown they had been fortunate enough to view, participate in and experience several occasions either virtually or in person. Throughout October, they had marked Black History Month 2020. This had been a true showcase of discovery, exploration and celebration of the heritage and culture of Black history across the Borough’s communities, and for him this festival was only the start of a greater celebration for the future. He had been honoured to speak at the pre-recording of the finale event and to see for himself the magnificent talent and skills on show – well done to all those involved in the programme. He and the Mayoress had also witnessed the Licensing of the new Team Rector for Ashford in late October. Led by the wonderful Bishop Rose, Revd Dr Jeremy Worthen had been inaugurated at St Mary’s Church in the town centre and they had much pleasure in welcoming him to this great Borough. The Mayor advised that he also met up with his third charity – Parkinson’s Ashford – to discuss the support they needed and where monies were required to provide the

necessary provision for this most worthwhile cause. In fact, fundraising was difficult, if not impossible at present. He was however planning to organise a series of events before his term ended and he looked forward to colleagues' support.

During his Civic Visits to businesses, attractions, accommodation providers and charities over the past few months, it had been most rewarding to hear their words of thanks to the Council for the support they had been given. Council staff had excelled themselves by relocating to a virtual world overnight way back in March. Within hours they had continued providing all of the services necessary to keep the Borough 'Open for Business' and ensuring its residents and businesses were kept well informed and safe during the pandemic. So he wanted to extend a sincere thank you to each of the Council's Members and Officers for all of the hard work and dedication shown throughout these challenging times.

As they moved towards Christmas and the end of 2020, the Mayor said that they would, no doubt, reflect on what the New Year might bring. He encouraged everyone to step into 2021 with courage - knowing that all they had learnt and achieved through these months had made everyone more aware of their priorities and their passions. He therefore wanted to take this opportunity to wish everyone a peaceful holiday time and a healthy and happier New Year.

In conclusion the Mayor said that whilst this Christmas would be slightly different, there were a few other dates he wanted to make colleagues aware of. On Sunday 13th December there would be a Christmas Service at St Mary's, Great Chart, on Wednesday 16th December the Mayor and Mayoress would be undertaking a Civic Tour of the Town Centre, on Saturday 19th December there would be carols around the Christmas tree at St Francis Church, Cryol Road and on Tuesday 22nd December they would be delivering Christmas parcels around Ashford.

(b) Leader of the Council

The Leader said that he wanted to take a few minutes to provide colleagues with some recent news and announcements of interest.

He was sure that colleagues would have shared the disappointment that Ashford, along with the rest of Kent, was recently placed into Tier 3 and was now facing the highest coronavirus restrictions as a consequence. He assured everyone present that while sharing this disappointment, he had seen the empirical evidence put before Leaders and Chief Executives across the county by Public Health England and KCC Public Health experts, and it was the collective view of the Leaders that this was absolutely the right thing to do. This move should ensure the safety of local communities and lessen the strain on local health facilities. Sadly in Ashford cases were rising and this was true across most of the County, with some parts of Kent seeing the highest rates in the Country. There was thankfully some light at the end of the tunnel, with the first vaccines in the Country taking place this week, including at the William Harvey Hospital. While this news should be welcomed, now was not the time to relax and so he wanted to ask everyone - Elected Members, Council Officers, residents and businesses - to all do everything they could to follow the Government guidance to protect themselves and others to reduce the number of cases.

With the clock ticking down to the end of the Transition period on the 31st December,

preparations were in full swing for minimising potential disruption caused to Kent's road network by expected delays in processing freight and other traffic through the Port of Dover and Eurotunnel. As all would know, Ashford was likely to be centre stage during this challenging time, which was why a pre-Cabinet Transition update had been presented to the Council by Senior KCC Officers. They had taken Members through the latest position and the planning for the end of EU Transition and examined potential impacts on Kent in general and Ashford in particular. They also outlined: - Government progress in enabling businesses, traders and hauliers to be "border-ready" by 31st December; how the Kent Access Permit had been designed to provide hauliers who had all the correct documentation with smooth access to the port and Eurotunnel; and how partners in Kent had worked tirelessly this year to prepare for Transition. There were five sites in Kent which had been chosen to help mitigate against the impact of HGVs being held up while they waited to cross the Channel, either via Dover or Eurotunnel. These were Sevington and Waterbrook (both in Ashford), Ebbsfleet, the former airfield at Manston and a site in Dover. Detailed planning should ease the flow of HGV traffic with worst-case scenario modelling suggesting that as many as 7,000 HGVs could be held in queues for up to two days in Kent while waiting to cross the Channel if things did not run as smoothly as intended. To counter this, a traffic management system had been devised to control and manage the flow of HGVs along the M20 and M2/A2 corridors towards the coast. These included Dover TAP, M20 Operation Brock between Junctions 8 and 9, the new Sevington site alongside M20 Junction 10A, Manston airport and also TAP256. These would be used in turn, but only if the need for more lorry parking escalated.

Referring to the development of the Sevington Border Control Post, the presentation had informed that acoustic fencing being installed on top of earth mounds bordering the site was already doing an effective job in shielding local residents from excessive levels of noise and disturbance. At the last Full Council meeting they had received a petition from the local community on designating this area as a buffer zone, which had been fully endorsed on the night and they continued to discuss this, and a large number of other matters, with regards to the site with Central Government. They had been assured that great efforts were being made to ensure that Covid-secure steps were being taken to provide maximum safety for staff operating the site and also HGV drivers. KCC Officers had also confirmed that Waterbrook would only be used if Sevington was not ready for the 1st January, and if it was not ready it would only be used for a short period whilst it was made ready. The presentation had also indicated that KCC was lobbying Government to be given greater powers to be able to clamp illegally-parked HGVs across the County and to issue on-the-spot fines. Members had made it clear that it was important to take a firm approach from Day 1 to ensure that a clear message was sent out to all hauliers and HGV drivers that illegal parking would not be tolerated. Communities, Ward Members and Parish Councils all had a key role to play by being the eyes and ears on the ground and by providing local intelligence on any issues that emerged so that swift action could be taken. The Operation Fennel plan, which set out preparations to mitigate against any impact of Brexit, had been produced by the Kent Resilience Forum in conjunction with KCC, Districts, Emergency Services and several other partners and could be found on the 'Kent Prepared' website. As a consequence of EU Transition, Ashford would become responsible for checks on imports of products of animal origin, high-risk food not of animal origin and animal by-products imported from the EU. The Border Control Post would operate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year and it was currently estimated that it would involve over 124,000 checks per year. Over 120 staff were likely to be directly employed/engaged by the Council. The service would be introduced on a phased approach with documentary checks starting on the 1st April 2021 and physical checks three months later. Clearly this was a huge undertaking and the Council had asked

Government for financial and practical support in setting this up. The creation of new inland border facilities was of national importance and the site at Sevington was a key part of the national plan. When fully operational it would be one of the largest in the UK. This Council would therefore play a vital role in making a success of the country's new trading arrangements with the EU, in whatever format this took. The new service being developed for the Sevington Border Control Post was definitely a challenge but equally it was an exciting prospect and the Council was rising to the occasion. Clearly this was a big undertaking and the Council had asked the Government for finance and practical support in setting it up. The Leader said he was therefore pleased to announce tonight that they had today received confirmation that their funding bid for the Sevington Border Control Post had been endorsed by Defra and fully approved by the Treasury for the full amount that the Council had asked for. This was extremely pleasing to note.

The Leader advised that figures released earlier that week by Visit Kent showed that the tourism industry in Ashford was worth £311m to the Borough in 2019, before the devastating impact of the coronavirus. The latest Tourism Economic Impact Study recorded that the Borough welcomed 4.7m visitors in 2019, with £20m spent on average in the local economy each month, as a direct result of the region's tourism and hospitality industry. Using the industry-respected Cambridge Economic Impact Model, the study measured the volume and value of tourism across the County in 2019, and the impact of visits and visitor expenditure on the local economy. There had been an increase in tourism jobs across the district of 5.8%. This represented 11% of the Borough's total employment last year. The findings provided a detailed picture of the significant effect that tourism and hospitality had on the Borough's wider economy, and also established a benchmark from which to measure the impact of COVID-19. The research showed how more visitors were coming to try the wealth of experiences they had within the Borough of Ashford before the pandemic took hold. These included their world-class vineyards and heritage steam trains, inspirational gardens and endangered Big Cats - all set among some of the most beautiful countryside the Garden of England had to offer. The Council would be working with the Borough's tourism businesses to help them get back on their feet in 2021 and be able to welcome these visitors once again and more details would follow on this, including a detailed breakdown of the report's findings.

Finally, as this was the final Full Council meeting of the year, the Leader said he would like to wish the Mayor, colleague Members, Officers, and indeed all residents a Merry Christmas and he too hoped a more engaging and wholesome New Year in 2021 as they came out of the hold of the COVID-19 virus.

181 Cabinet – 26th November 2020

Resolved:

- That (i) the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 26th November 2020 be received and noted with the exception of Minute Nos. 149, 151 and 152.**
- (ii) Minute Nos. 149, 151 and 152 be approved and adopted.**

In accordance with Procedure Rule 15.5 Councillors Anckorn, Chilton, Farrell, Spain, C Suddards and L Suddards asked for it to be recorded that they had voted against the Minutes as they had particular concerns about the Town Centre Reset, Medium Term

Financial Plan and Council Tax Base items, although these were items previously resolved by the Cabinet.

182 Audit Committee – 24th November 2020

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Audit Committee held on the 24th November 2020 be received and noted.

183 Appointments Committee – 3rd November 2020

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Appointments Committee held on the 3rd November 2020 be received and noted.

184 Selection and Constitutional Review Committee – 19th November 2020

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Selection and Constitutional Review Committee held on the 19th November 2020 be approved and adopted.

185 Audit Committee – Annual Report 2019/20

Resolved:

That the Annual Report of the Audit Committee 2019/20 be received and noted.

186 Notices of Motion

The Member Services Manager (Operational) advised that the Motion previously submitted with the Summons for the Meeting had been withdrawn.

187 Questions by Members of which Notice Had Been Given

Question from Councillor Charles Suddards to Councillor Clarkson, Leader of the Council

“In respect of the ‘Town Centre Reset report’ it should be noted that neither of the two Ward Members representing the Town Centre (Victoria Ward) have been consulted or involved in any way. How does the Leader propose to rectify this?”

Reply by Councillor Clarkson

“Firstly may I thank Councillor Suddards for his question, which actually surprises me somewhat, quite simply because there is nothing to rectify whatsoever. Our Officers quite properly drafted a paper termed the Ashford Town Centre Reset which put forward a possible overview of how we would need to think about changing the approach to the Town Centre, much as all Local Authorities have been doing in the light of changing social transformation that was occurring long before the Covid-19 Pandemic emerged. Online shopping was having a marked effect on the retail trade and thus the dynamics of Town Centres. All Members of this Authority are invited to attend all Cabinet Meetings and Committee Meetings. The draft principles of the Reset were presented to a meeting of the Ashford Town Centre Redevelopment Advisory Committee on the 25th September 2020. There was also a presentation from Milligan's regarding the Vicarage Lane Project made at the same meeting. It should be noted that both the two Ward Members for Victoria Ward were invited to attend, one as a member of that Committee and the other as an open invitation for all Members. The Minutes record that Councillor Charles Suddards was actually in attendance and that Councillor Farrell, as a Member of the Committee, gave his apologies. A report to Cabinet followed on the 26th November 2020 where all Members of the Authority are notified and able to attend. At that meeting of the Cabinet, I very clearly indicated that this report was the starting point and I went on to stress, as is clearly recorded in the Minutes, that the Town Centre Reset was a blueprint and should be seen as a springboard to improve, grow and rejuvenate the Town Centre. It was also pointed out by one of our Officers at that Meeting that the Ashford Town Centre Reset document was itself shaped by the findings from extensive research and consultation undertaken about the future of the Town Centre during 2018 and findings from the 2020 Residents' Survey. The outline plan was also informed through the visioning exercise undertaken by Experian during 2019/20 to inform and shape our longer term Corporate Planning. This exercise involved a number of workshops that all Members of the Authority were invited to and had the opportunity to attend. You may also know that these workshops included a broad range of stakeholders, including businesses, partners and community groups. May I also say to Councillor Suddards that there are more than just two Councillors with an immediate interest in the Ashford Town Centre. I think that Councillors Anckorn, Buchanan, Feacey, Forest, Heyes, Webb, Rogers, Smith, Lyn Suddards and Barrett will all have a close interest. However notwithstanding that, this is such a major development that all Members of the Authority will have a keen interest in the redevelopment of the Town Centre. I can assure Councillor Suddards that as we move forward with specific work streams and projects to help deliver the blueprint for the town, there will be further engagement with local residents, businesses, partners and of course all Members to ensure our plans meet the future needs of our community and economy as a whole.”

Point of Information by Councillor Farrell

“Thank you for allowing me to make a point of information. We have had an extensive list of meetings there from the Leader and as a point of information I have had to give my apologies to one Town Centre Meeting, I have been at all of the others, including the Town Centre Visioning. I think it's important to state on that point of information that the Ward Members are requesting to meet with the Development Managers of the Town Centre scheme. We were previously invited to two meetings with Arch Industries to discuss the project moving forward, but have not received a similar invite this time. It

was simply a polite request from Councillor Suddards and myself. Not a political point scoring one or one which was intended to rile to Leader as it seemingly has. I am apologetic if Councillor Suddards asking a question on our behalf has caused that, but this is seeking to represent our residents. I completely understand that the Town Centre is important to all Members of this Authority and indeed that is right, but I believe we are uniquely placed to represent the views of those living within the confines of the Town Centre, not least because they actually voted for us and we have a democratic mandate to do so. We are offering to work collegiately with the Leader of the Council on this. Not to fire pot-shots, but to meet privately with the new Development Managers to put forward the experiences and wishes of our residents on such a vital and important development to their lives.”

Reply by Councillor Clarkson

“All I would say is that if you think I am riled you are mistaken. I am simply answering the question that was put, and am pleased to do so in order to say that there has never been more consultation than we have in this Authority at this present time. I think we are on the first steps of this and we will be continuing to consult widely with Members and others as we move forward. The Town Centre Reset is not something that will just emerge, it is going to develop over time.”

Supplementary Question by Councillor Bartlett

“Will the Leader agree with me that the debate on the 26th November at Cabinet included a clear commitment to work collegiately with the Ashford community and the Central Ashford Community Forum?”

Reply by Councillor Clarkson

“Yes I am absolutely delighted to confirm that and that we will be consulting very very closely. That is the whole ‘*raison d’etre*’ of this and we did indicate that at the Cabinet and indeed I know our Head of Corporate Policy, Economic Development and Communications is very committed to ensuring that we deal with the surveys we give to our residents and holding workshops to show that we are going down the road that they want to go down. It is their Borough, their town, and we are merely their agents, elected to represent them. ”