

Ashford Borough Council: Cabinet

Minutes of a Virtual Meeting of the Cabinet held on Microsoft Teams on the **17th December 2020**.

Present:

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

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

Also Present:

Cllrs. Anckorn, Mrs Bell, Blanford, Burgess, Chilton, Farrell, Harman, Krause, Ledger, 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 Community Safety and Wellbeing, Head of Culture, Leisure and Tourism, Head of Corporate Property and Projects, Head of Finance and IT, Head of Planning and Development, Head of Environment and Land Management, Head of Housing, Community Safety and Wellbeing Manager, Accountancy Manager, Communications and Marketing Manager, Development Partnership Manager, Chilmington CMO Project Manager, Parking, Highways and Transportation Team Leader, Masterplanning and Delivery Coordinator, Member Services Manager (Operational).

188 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Bartlett	Made a Voluntary Announcement as he lived adjacent to the Sevington Inland Border Facility site.	192
Feacey	Made a Voluntary Announcement as Chairman of the Ashford Volunteer Centre.	192
Shorter	Declared an 'Other Significant Interest' (OSI) as he owned a property and worked adjacent to the Court Lodge site which was one of the sites mentioned in the report. He would introduce the item as Portfolio Holder and then withdraw from the debate and vote on the item.	193

189 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 26th November 2020 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

190 Leader's Announcements

The Leader said he no particular announcements other than, as this was the last Cabinet Meeting of the calendar year, to wish everyone a happy and safe Christmas.

191 Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2020–2050 – Affordable Housing Delivery and Aspirations

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which set out the priorities within the HRA. The Council had to have a 30 year Business Plan for its HRA and the viability of that plan was the foundation of every decision taken in the HRA. This ensured a holistic approach to balancing the need to increase the Council's stock (given demand), while providing quality, energy efficient homes and sustaining tenancies. He drew attention to the fact that the HRA had built or acquired 219 new homes in the financial year, enabled 154 homes through registered providers and had three construction sites up and running to deliver another 77 homes in the next 1/2 years. In addition, the rent arrears that had been forecast at the start of the pandemic had not been realised and the position had actually improved and there were 33% less people in temporary accommodation than before the pandemic. He said he was therefore very proud of the achievements of the Housing Service this year.

In the course of the discussion on this item the following responses were given to questions/comments: -

- With regard to shared spaces and facilities as mentioned in the Social Housing White Paper, whilst this was not a requirement it was only right to state that Ashford already had some good examples of how shared space had been used within independent living schemes and involvement of nearby communities. There was perhaps a need to better emphasise what was already there and encouraging communities to access those facilities through better community engagement.
- Existing five-year fixed term tenancies would be transitioned to secure lifetime tenancies when they expired. This would allow people to put down roots and become more engaged with their communities.
- On decarbonisation and the Green Homes Grant, the Council would continue to make best use of any funding streams available to them, but it was fair to

point out that not all of those funding streams were available for Council/social housing stock.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) the progress in delivering affordable housing in the HRA and temporary accommodation within the General Fund be noted.**
 - (ii) the updated HRA Business Plan and financial projections be agreed.**
 - (iii) Overview and Scrutiny will review the HRA Business Plan financial projections as part of the budget scrutiny process.**
 - (iv) the HRA priorities set out in Paragraph 10 of the report be agreed.**
 - (v) it be agreed that the Council will no longer issue five-year fixed-term tenancies, offering only secure tenancies following the successful completion of an introductory tenancy.**
 - (vi) it be agreed that the Council will, after careful consideration, cease the Ashford Promise.**
 - (vii) it be agreed that the Council will continue with the on-street purchase programme in quantities outlined in the report, recognising that 20 units will be cross-subsidised in later financial years, and set affordable rents.**
 - (viii) the Council's plans for future housing delivery as set out in Appendix B to the report which presents projects under way or in the consideration phase be noted, and authority be delegated to the Head of Housing, in consultation with the Head of Finance and IT and the Portfolio Holders for Housing and Finance and IT, to vary the programme as necessary.**

192 Draft Budget 2021/22

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which presented the draft budget for 2021/22 for the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account. He also directed Members' attention to the tabled papers which included some changes to the original report. The draft budget was in line with the Medium Term Financial Plan presented to the Cabinet in November, and which formed the basis for this draft budget. It would now be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for review as well as the formal budget consultation processes. Despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the report presented a balanced budget for 2021/22, although there were a number of risks to the delivery of the budget that were explored within the report. The report also included the HRA draft budget which incorporated the assumptions in the 30 year business plan presented to the Cabinet earlier in the meeting.

The Portfolio Holder drew particular attention to: - the modest proposed Council Tax increase which left Ashford as the lowest charging in Kent; the level of savings that had been identified in the face of the pandemic and generally reduced income; some areas of increased income; and reduced New Homes Bonus. The £2.3m of savings that had been identified were equivalent to a notional Council Tax increase of £55 rather than the £5 proposed. He therefore thanked Officers for their hard work in pulling the draft budget together. He further emphasised that this was indeed a draft document and if Members had any queries or questions on particular points of detail, they should take the opportunity to attend the Budget Scrutiny meetings which would be the opportunity to delve in to the detail and get full and comprehensive responses from Officers. The draft would also go out to consultation with residents, businesses and staff before coming back for adoption by Full Council on the 4th March 2021.

In the course of the discussion on this item the following responses were given to questions/comments: -

- With regard to Government support, both the Leader and Portfolio Holder said they had no complaints about the amount Ashford had received so far during the pandemic. Clearly, this year had been difficult for everyone across the country, but the Government did not have a 'bottomless pit' and, along with more general support, this Council had received significant funding for both the Stour Centre and the Port Health Authority. The Council had received £3m in support grants, and although this did not cover all of the loss of the income, it was their view that the Government should not be expected to make up every penny that Local Authorities had lost. It was not true that the Council had not been given money by the Government that it was in some way 'owed' and it was important to not mix-up one-off Government grants with the Council's ongoing financial planning and budgeting. This Council was not the sort of authority who simply looked to Central Government for cash, they were innovative and took their destiny in to their own hands. The provisional settlement for next year had been announced by Government earlier that day and there was now a lot of data and detail for Officers to examine and digest ahead of the final budget report.
- With regard to the deletion of roughly 30 full time equivalent posts and a pay freeze for existing staff, it was confirmed that there would be full consultation with Unison. It should be emphasised that a number of the posts were already long-term vacant, so it would not be a case of 30 people losing their jobs. There were also likely to be opportunities for redeployment for the small number of individuals who may be affected. It was about looking at outputs and smarter ways of working, rather than the number of posts. Again more detail could be provided on this during the Budget Scrutiny process.
- In response to suggestions that having the lowest Council Tax in Kent may not necessarily be something to be proud of if that did not translate in to Council provided community buildings and facilities and more engagement of the community, the Portfolio Holder said that it was the view of this Administration that the Council Tax was quite a pernicious tax, particularly for those on fixed or lower incomes. It had therefore always been the intention to benefit those people by keeping the Council Tax low. The whole ethos of the

Council's Medium Term Financial Plan was to get back to a point where the budget was more stable, to enable money to be put aside again for those types of capital projects mentioned. The Portfolio Holder for Culture, Leisure and Tourism advised that whilst he agreed it was right to recognise the importance of community buildings, he also encouraged all involved to move away from thinking about these in terms of Wards and boundaries and encourage facilities and organisations to work for the Borough as a whole.

- The intention was to be as open and transparent as possible and include as much detail as they could in the final public budget report to Cabinet/Full Council, which would enable full questioning. If any Members felt this was not the case when the final reports were published, they were encouraged to contact the Portfolio Holder for further information.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) the draft budget for 2021/22 be approved.**
 - (ii) the draft Housing Revenue Account budget for 2021/22, at Section 2 of the report, be approved.**
 - (iii) it be agreed that the report will be used as the basis for the budget consultation with the public, the business community, Parish Councils and staff.**
 - (iv) the draft budget as set out in the report be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Budget Task Group for formal scrutiny.**

193 Five Year Vision and Strategy for the South of Ashford Garden Community

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which presented for adoption a Five Year Vision and Strategy for the South of Ashford Garden Community, following 18 months of stakeholder and wider public engagement. The document set out clear and achievable actions to be delivered by different partners, helping to join-up high quality placemaking with community-led governance and long-term sustainable development. He also directed Members attention to the Update Report which included minor amendments to the report including the recommendations and also proposed the inclusion of the Portfolio Holder in recommendation (ii) to allow for the proper Member oversight.

Before withdrawing from the discussion and vote, the Portfolio Holder responded to a question about the provision of local employment within the strategy and whether this could be formally built in. He said that using the previous Chilmington scheme as an example, there were a number of live/work units, small scale industrial units, shops, schools, medical facilities and other community assets which would usually be taken over by the Community Management Organisation and these were the principles that would also be adopted here.

Resolved:

- That (i) **the draft Vision and Strategy and the steps to implement the proposed action plan (along with strategic partners who have endorsed it) be approved in principle.**
- (ii) **the Head of Planning and Development be delegated authority, in consultation with the Director of Finance and Economy and the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Development, to approve the final document for publication.**

194 Kent and Medway Energy and Low Emissions Strategy

The Leader introduced the report which advised that the Council had been asked by Kent County Council to endorse the Kent and Medway Energy and Low Emissions Strategy. The Strategy set out a course of action to deliver clean growth, supporting the Kent Environment Strategy.

Resolved:

That the Kent and Medway Energy and Low Emissions Strategy be endorsed.

195 Edinburgh Road Car Park Review

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which proposed changes to the operation of Edinburgh Road car park in terms of operating hours, a bespoke charging tariff and the introduction of reduced fees for customers using RingGo. He thanked Officers for producing the report which sought to make better use of an underused Council asset.

A Member asked about the charging regime and if prices could be made more comparable to other areas of the town for residents, and to the Designer Outlet for shoppers/visitors. The Highways and Transportation Team Leader advised that the focus of incentives had been more around RingGo users although all charges were being reduced and free parking would continue after 3pm. The Portfolio Holder advised that charges for residents equated to about £1.60 per day so were certainly not punitive. He also advised that parking charges across all car parks were being kept under constant review and would be altered if necessary.

Resolved:

- That (i) **the new operating hours of Edinburgh Road car park, as outlined in the report, be agreed.**
- (ii) **the bespoke charging tariff for Edinburgh Road car park, as outlined in the report, be agreed.**

- (iii) the introduction of reduced fees for customers using RingGo be agreed.

196 Economic Regeneration and Investment Board – Notes of 22nd October 2020

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Economic Regeneration and Investment Board held on the 22nd October 2020 be received and noted.

197 IT and Digital Transformation Advisory Committee – Notes of 17th November 2020

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the IT and Digital Transformation Advisory Committee held on the 17th November 2020 be received and noted.

198 Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group – Notes of 21st October and 26th November 2020

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meetings of the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group held on the 21st October and 26th November 2020 be received and noted.

199 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.

200 Exclusion of the Public

Resolved:

That pursuant to Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, the public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item, as it is likely 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 Paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of the Act, where in the circumstances the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

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201 Use of the Chief Executive's Urgency Powers

The Leader advised that he had accepted the late inclusion of this exempt item on to the Agenda.

The exempt information report advised of the use of the Chief Executive's Urgency Powers to complete a strategic acquisition.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

Queries concerning these minutes? Please contact Member Services
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