

Ashford Borough Council: Cabinet

Minutes of a Virtual Meeting of the Cabinet held on Microsoft Teams on the 25th February 2021.

Present:

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

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

Also Present:

Cllrs. Anckorn, Burgess, Campkin, Chilton, Farrell, Harman, Hayward, Howard-Smith, Krause, Mulholland, Ovenden, Spain, Sparks, C Suddards, White, 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 Culture, Leisure and Tourism, Head of Finance and IT, Head of Personnel and Development, Community Safety and Wellbeing Manager, Accountancy Manager, Communications and Marketing Manager, Senior Recovery Officer, Senior Accountant, Governance and Data Protection Officer, Member Services Manager (Operational).

232 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Bartlett	Made a Voluntary Announcement as a Member of Sevington Parish Council	236

233 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 17th December 2020 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

234 Leader's Announcements

The Leader said that whilst he did not normally make long announcements at the Cabinet meetings, he did just want to take a few moments to address a few important matters.

Firstly he wished to offer the Council's condolences to all who had so sadly lost family, loved ones and close friends during the tragic Covid-19 pandemic. This dreadful disease had adversely impacted on so many lives and he knew that all would be extremely pleased to see the number of cases falling, not just in Ashford but also across the entire Country. It was heartening to know that the new vaccines, that had been developed at pace, were now being rolled out in a programme that had been a great credit to this Nation. The pandemic had put a particular strain on the marvellous NHS, but many other bodies had pulled together and the Elected Members fully recognised the huge contribution made by their own hard working and dedicated Council Officer colleagues and indeed the many Ashford volunteers. All had worked tirelessly to support and protect the most vulnerable in society and the Borough's important business communities.

It was well known, even before the Pandemic, that many of the larger retail outlets were benefiting from growing online shopping. A number of those retail chains had now taken this opportunity to accelerate the changing high street dynamic and were permanently closing a significant number of their large stores. It was not however just the retail trade that had been affected. The pandemic had hit many differing sectors of the economy thus impacting directly and indirectly on jobs and livelihoods. That is why the Council had adopted the Ashford Recovery Plan and they continued to deliver their services to the public, whilst still observing the Covid-19 advice and guidance. Life must go on and the Council must also continue to pursue its Climate Change Agenda and address the new major planning changes that were on the horizon, and that meant they needed, more than ever, to protect their beautiful countryside here in the Garden of England. On top of all that, Ashford had now also become an important part of the arrangements resulting from the UK's departure from the EU, with the Government creating the Ashford Inland Port facility at Sevington. This would be one of the most significant import and export control facilities in the United Kingdom. He had therefore appointed his Deputy, Councillor Paul Bartlett, to be the Portfolio Holder Elect for this facility and he would work closely with the soon to be appointed Head of Service on the Council's role in this newly created border facility at Sevington.

The Leader said it would also be remiss of him not to thank the Council's Chief Executive Officer - Tracey Kerly, and all their Officer colleagues for their additional hard work and professionalism in embracing this the new Port Health facility. This major facility was being built out at pace and there had been many challenges not least with HR having to recruit, employ, train and settle in about 130 additional staff, at extremely short notice, in addition to other departments of the Council, such as Environmental Health, Finance and IT who had all pulled out all of the stops and he wanted to formally record Members' thanks for this particular ongoing piece of work. He also wanted to thank the Kent Police Service for a first class job of dealing with clearance of the thousands of HGVs and their drivers stranded around Ashford before Christmas, when the French closed the border. KCC, with Barbara Cooper,

Toby Howe and their staff, worked with the Police and were still doing an excellent job of continuing to manage the HGV traffic movements around the Sevington Area, especially given all the many other challenges including the Covid Testing of HGV Drivers. He thanked all involved.

The Leader said that now, with the roadmap from Government, there did appear to be brighter times on the horizon and all would look forward to that.

235 Report of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group

The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee introduced the report and advised that the Overview and Scrutiny Budget Task Group had scrutinised the Council's draft 2021/22 budget over four meetings, covering topics such as the Planning Service, savings proposals, risks to commercial income in light of Covid-19, Legal Services, funding for Council projects and Parish Council grants savings proposals. There were obviously economic uncertainties brought about by the pandemic, but the Task Group had regarded the draft budget to be as sound and deliverable as it could be at this time. He advised that the Task Group had made a number of recommendations which they believed would assist in managing any budgetary risks in the coming year. He thanked Officers for the quality of the information they had been provided with and the Portfolio Holders and Lead Members who had attended the meetings and made the process a success.

The Leader and Portfolio Holder both thanked the Task Group for a good pragmatic piece of work and confirmed that the Cabinet fully accepted the five recommendations, noting that there would need to be some further analysis in to recommendation (iv) which was already underway and that recommendation (v) had already been taken forward and would be reflected in the next Agenda item.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i)** **it be noted that the Task Group considers that the Council's draft budget is sound and deliverable as can be at this time, recognising that the economic impact of Covid-19 is yet to be fully determined.**
 - (ii)** **it be noted that the Task Group recognise that there is sufficient reserves to manage the economic risks to the 2021/22 budget, but they recommend that these reserves are maintained, particularly given the current uncertainties in the economy.**
 - (iii)** **the performance of the Council's commercial income units continue to be monitored whilst businesses recover from the impacts of Covid-19, through regular budget monitoring reports.**
 - (iv)** **the Task Group's recommendation that additional funding should be allocated towards the emerging Carbon Neutrality Action Plan to ensure that the Council is able to deliver its pledge to become carbon neutral, be noted and further investigated.**

- (v) **that the Cabinet should consider a one-off grant to the disproportionately affected Parishes from the removal of Council Tax Support Grant, to help smooth the transition to full removal of the grant.**

236 Budget 2021/22

The report presented the final Draft 2021/22 Budget which would be recommended to the Full Council for approval. The Budget had been built against a backdrop of economic uncertainty due to the Covid-19 pandemic and continued uncertainty over long term Government Funding as the Government's fair funding and spending review had been deferred to 2022/23, resulting in another one year settlement only. There were also economic risks of the UK leaving the European Union. The budget had also been built to support the Council's Recovery Plan which had been developed to support the Borough through these uncertain times and grow back stronger. The report incorporated the requirements arising from the need to deliver a Port Health Service, which was reported at Appendix N to the report which provided detail over the development of the budget, applicable fees and charges and associated risks. The report also covered the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) which included an increase in rents of CPI + 1% in line with Government guidance and reflected the business plan presented to the Cabinet in December, as well as a number of strategies and framework documents for consideration.

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report and directed Members' attention to the tabled paper which included a point of clarification over the staff cost of living increase and proposed a new Council Tax Support Transitional Grant for disproportionately affected Parish Councils, which was for one year only. He also drew particular attention to the fact that the budget proposed a £5.00 rise in the Borough's annual Council Tax requirement which would still leave Ashford as the lowest of any Kent District, whilst also maintaining some of the best services in the County.

Resolved:

- That
- (i) **the budget context be noted.**
 - (ii) **the Chief Finance Officer be delegated powers to establish local discounts in Business Rates in accordance with Government policy.**
 - (iii) **the summary of reserves at Table 6 and Appendix C of the report be noted.**
 - (iv) **the Equality Impact Assessment in Appendix E to the report be noted.**
 - (v) **the Port Health Services Report at Appendix N to the report be noted.**
 - (vi) **the Housing Revenue Account budget for 2021/22 be approved.**

- (vii) the estimated average rent increase of CPI + 1% (1.5%) be agreed, in accordance with Government guidelines, and that rent setting for the future continues to follow Government guidelines.
- (viii) the Capital Plan 2020/21 to 2023/24 in Appendix G to the report be approved.
- (ix) the ABC Exceptional Circumstances Policy as outlined in Appendix L to the report be approved.
- (x) the advice from the Chief Financial Officer concerning the robustness of the estimates and the adequacy of reserves be noted.
- (xi) the allocation of £20,140 be approved from the 2021/22 Service Contingency Reserve (once the 2021/22 budget has been approved) to fund the new Parish Council Transitional Grant as detailed at Appendix B to the Tabled Paper.

Recommended:

- That
- (i) the Revenue Budget 2021/22 including the net budget requirement of £14,740,440 (excluding parish precepts), be agreed.
 - (ii) the level of Discretionary Fees to be levied from 1st April 2021 (as set out in Appendix D to the report), and the Discretionary and Statutory Fees for the Port Health Service which are set out separately in Appendix A of Appendix N to the report, be agreed.
 - (iii) the Band D council tax at £172.50 be agreed.
 - (iv) the 2021/22 Capital Strategy at Appendix H to the report be approved.
 - (v) the MRP Policy as set out in Appendix I to the report, the Treasury Management Strategy Statement at Appendix J to the report, and the Investment Strategy at Appendix K to the report be approved.

237 Financial Monitoring – Quarter 3 Report

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which presented the Quarter 3 budget monitoring position up to 31st December 2020. The Quarter 3 forecast showed that additional income from the one off Government's Sales Fees and Charges Compensation Scheme had reduced the previous deficit by £566,000, resulting in a revised General Fund forecast of £75,000 surplus. A full break down of movements since Quarter 2 was shown in the report. The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was forecasting an annual deficit of £392,000 compared to a budgeted deficit of £630,000, an overall positive position of £238,000.

Resolved:

- That (i) the forecast outturn position for the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account be noted.
- (ii) the Collection Fund Position be noted.
- (iii) the contribution from reserves be noted.
- (iv) the Treasury Management position be noted.

238 Corporate Performance Report – Quarter 3

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which summarised performance against the performance indicators included in the Recovery Plan for Quarter 3 (1st October to 31st December 2020).

Resolved:

That the performance date for Quarter 3 2020/21 be received and noted.

239 Revenues and Benefits Recommended Write-Offs Schedule

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which proposed the formal write off of £349,519.28. The proposals were in line with the Council's Revenues and Benefits Service Write Off Policy. The Director of Finance and Economy had been consulted, along with Heads of Service for relevant areas.

Resolved:

- That (i) the action that accounts totalling £92,077.98 have been written off under delegated powers (Financial Regulations 11.1 refer) be noted.
- (ii) the write offs listed in the Exempt Appendix to the report, totalling £257,441.30, be approved.

240 Joint Transportation Board – Minutes of 8th December 2020

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Joint Transportation Board held on the 8th December 2020 be received and noted.

241 Civic and Ceremonial Programme Board – Notes of 3rd February 2021

The Leader drew attention to the fascinating presentation received by the Board from the Commanding Officer of the Ashford Sea Cadets on HMS Albacore – Ashford's Warship. This had arisen from an initiative during the Second World War where the residents of Ashford had bought War Bonds and adopted this minesweeper ship to help support the war effort. 2022 would see the 80th Anniversary of the fundraising event which was being branded as Warship Week and it had been agreed to appropriately commemorate this in Ashford, along with the 80th Anniversary of the establishment of the Ashford Sea Cadet Unit and the Platinum Jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen, with a series of events/initiatives in Ashford in 2022.

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Civic and Ceremonial Programme Board held on the 3rd February 2021 be received and noted.

242 Compliance and Enforcement Board – Notes of 26th January 2021

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Compliance and Enforcement Board held on the 26th January 2021 be received and noted.

243 Climate Change Advisory Committee – Notes of 8th December 2020

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Climate Change Advisory Committee held on the 8th December 2020 be received and noted.

244 Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group – Notes of 16th December 2020 and 22nd January 2021.

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meetings of the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group held on the 16th December 2020 and the 22nd January 2021 be received and noted.

245 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.

Queries concerning these minutes? Please contact Member Services
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