

Cabinet

Minutes of a Meeting of the Cabinet held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **23rd February 2023**.

Present:

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

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

Apologies:

Cllr. Burgess.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Campkin, Harman, Ovenden, Sparks, Wright.

In attendance:

Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer, Director of Customer, Technology and Finance, Director of Health and Wellbeing, Assistant Director - Housing, Assistant Director – Planning and Development, Head of Policy and Performance, Service Lead – Finance, Principal Solicitor – Strategic Development, Senior Accountant, Web and Communications Assistant, Member Services Manager.

307 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Feacey	Made a Voluntary Announcement as Chairman of the Ashford International Development Company.	310, 311

308 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 15th December 2022 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

309 Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Planning IT Delivery Task Group

The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee introduced the report which advised that the Committee had formed a Task Group to review the lessons learnt during the project to deliver the new Planning IT System with Arcus Global. The Task Group also wanted to ensure that where issues had been experienced, they were not repeated for future transformation projects. He thanked everyone involved for contributing to a worthwhile and eye opening project.

The Leader said he welcomed the report and thanked the Members and Officers involved in a good piece of work. He proposed an addition to recommendation (vii) whereby the Leader and the Cabinet as a whole be kept informed of project updates for key projects on a regular basis, rather than just the specific Portfolio Holder. This was agreed.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) projects of a certain size or importance require a professional project manager and this role should not be in addition to normal duties.**
 - (ii) unnecessary and historic data should not be transferred to new systems and any data migration should be considered during the early stages of a project. A data retention policy should be agreed and adopted for implementation in the project.**
 - (iii) internal and external user testing should be thoroughly scoped, agreed through Project Management Group (PMG) and carried out for any future system implementation or upgrade.**
 - (iv) detailed scoping of Officers' time should take place when considering project resources.**
 - (v) consultation with external customers should take place at the outset of a project to inform its delivery.**
 - (vi) PMG should determine the governance arrangements of future project, including frequency of highlight reports setting out key risks and challenges.**
 - (vii) Portfolio Holders, the Leader and the Cabinet as a whole, should be kept informed of project updates for key projects on a regular basis, which is defined from the outset of a project.**
 - (viii) system rollouts should foremost be designed to improve the customer experience and processes need to be mapped with this in mind.**

310 Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Budget Scrutiny Task Group

The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee introduced the report and advised that their Budget Task Group had scrutinised the Council's draft 2023/24 budget over four meetings. The Task Group had made six recommendations for the Cabinet to consider when making its final budget proposals to recommend to Council. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee had made a further four recommendations to Cabinet at their Meeting on 14th February 2023.

He advised that the Task Group had spent four meetings scrutinising the draft budget based on the information presented to it. Six worthy recommendations had been made and it was fully understood that the budget for this year was being supported by a reserve set up precisely for this purpose. He had therefore been extremely angry and disappointed to be presented with revised budget proposals at a late stage, immediately prior to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on the 14th February related to the Council Tax. With regard to the proposal to reduce the increase in Council Tax, he believed some Members were acting in their own interests rather than those of the wider Borough. The budget had been built on a £5 increase to Band D Council Tax, but the Administration had subsequently reduced the recommended increase to £3.75. This equated to less than 3 pence per household per week which he believed would make little or no difference to anyone, including those struggling, however the cumulative effect for the Council, year on year would be significant. There were already provisions in place for those who were struggling exceptionally, (Appendix L to the draft budget referred), and he believed the Council should take the full £5 increase and do something good with the extra money. It could perhaps be ring-fenced to further assist those struggling with the cost of living, or put to community use. Over the next five years such an increase could equate to around £375k which the Council would never get back, and much good could be done for the community with that money. In his view, the reward for good budget management should be extra things above and beyond the basic services the Council provided. He said the view that it was right to take the maximum possible increase had been taken on behalf of the people of Ashford and he urged the Cabinet to re-consider this position as per Recommendation (viii) of their report.

The Leader thanked the Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny for his comments and their report. He said budget setting was always a complicated process with a number of facets. He reminded Members of the strategy of this Council to become more entrepreneurial and self-sufficient in the face of reducing Government grants and to generate its own income. This strategy had been largely successful but had been hampered slightly by factors outside of their control (including Brexit, Stodmarsh, Covid-19 and the Sevington Border Facility). With regard to the late amendments to the draft budget, it was important to note that there was a compressed timetable to work within. Government announcements on issues such as grants and New Homes Bonus had come during this period and provided unexpected windfalls. As the Administrative party, the Group had undertaken an open vote on the Council Tax increase and the majority view had been to support a £3.75 increase bearing in mind the economic and cost of living circumstances that residents faced. Treasury Management under this Administration had always been sound. They had been

quick to set up an additional Economic Growth and Risk Fund, following the outcome of the Brexit vote in 2016 and this had served the Council well. They also had a good track history of delivering balanced budgets. The Leader said that this budget would not affect the level of services provided by this Council, which would continue to be better than most Councils in the country.

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Development advised that between the submission of the draft budget at the end of November and now, there had been significant movement including the receipt of additional New Homes Bonus, Government grant and additional income from the Ashford International Development Company. This had resulted in a windfall of some £1.2m. The Administrative Group had considered it was only right to pass on some of that windfall to relieve the pressure on the Council tax payer. For context the difference was approximately £61k or 5% of the overall windfall. He also contended the wording of Recommendation (viii) which referred to 'Government recommended levels' of Council Tax increase. The Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny accepted this should refer to the "maximum level allowed by Government before a referendum".

Resolved:

That the recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and its Budget Scrutiny Task Group be received and noted.

311 Budget 2023/24

The report presented the final Draft 2023/24 Budget which would be recommended to the Full Council for approval. The paper provided updates from the draft budget presented in November, including funding announcements. The draft budget had forecast a deficit of £2.87m which was to be funded from the Economic Growth and Risk Fund, however there had been a number of movements since then which had reduced the deficit by £1.36m to £1.51m.

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report and directed Members' attention to the tabled paper which included five responses that had been received during the public consultation along with the Council's own responses. He thanked those who had engaged with the process and had provided good quality responses/questions and hoped that more would take that opportunity in the future.

He said that whilst a lot of what he had wanted to say had been covered in the last item, it was right to focus on the primary movements since the draft budget had been presented. These had resulted from the change in Government funding with an additional £526k of New Homes Bonus received and an additional £188,060 for the 3% Funding Guarantee Grant that had been introduced. There had also been £200k of immediately deliverable savings identified and £500k increase in interest receipts from Ashford International Development Company as the Council looked to deliver significant savings to balance the budget going forward. As previously discussed, there was also a growth item of £61,140 relating to the proposal to cut the Council Tax increase of £5 to £3.75 per annum. This would maintain Ashford's position as having the lowest Band D Council Tax in Kent at £181.25 per annum. He said that funding the 2023/24 deficit from reserves was a short term strategy and the Council

and Management Team had developed a savings plan of £1.42m to close the year's budget gap and to reduce the draw on reserves. These savings would be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Budget Task Group for consideration. He concluded by again thanking the Officers involved for all their hard work in pulling this budget together. He had mentioned back in November that this year's budget would have to be built against a background of unprecedented uncertainty and that had been proven correct.

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Development said he wanted to draw further attention to the Council's clear Council Tax Strategy – ABC gave great value – great services with the lowest Council Tax in Kent. It was sound, disciplined and easy for the public to understand. This had not happened by accident and had been driven by this Administration.

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 proposed savings schedule attached at Appendix O to the report be supported and presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Budget Task Group for consideration.**
 - (vi) the Housing Revenue Account budget for 2023/24 be approved.**
 - (vii) the rent increase of 7%, in accordance with Government guidelines, be agreed, and that rent setting for the future continues to follow Government guidelines.**
 - (viii) the Capital Plan 2023/24 to 2025/26 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, at Appendix M to the report, be noted.**

Recommended:

- That
- (i) the Revenue Budget 2023/24, including the net budget requirement of £18,642,710 (excluding parish precepts), be agreed.
 - (ii) the level of Discretionary and Statutory Fees to be levied from 1st April 2023 (as set out in Appendix D to the report) be agreed.
 - (iii) the Band D council tax at £181.25 be agreed.
 - (iv) the 2023/24 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.

312 Financial Monitoring – Quarter 3 Report

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which presented the Quarter 3 budget monitoring position up to 31st December 2022. The Quarter 3 forecast showed an improved position with a calming of the economic outlook. There had been a reduction in the deficit since Quarter 2 of £642k, making a revised year end forecast deficit of £1.4m. A full break down of movements since Quarter 2 was shown in the report. The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was reporting a total underspend in operational activity in year of £373k (compared with £489k at Quarter 2). There was a further reduction of £1.5m within the HRA capital programme due to staff shortages.

Resolved:

- That
- (i) the Quarter 3 forecast position for the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account be noted.
 - (ii) the Collection Fund Position be noted.
 - (iii) the Treasury Management position be noted.
 - (iv) the provisional reserve allocations, as highlighted at Table 6 of the report, be noted.
 - (v) the update of the ANPR installation project, as highlighted at Appendix B to the report, be noted.
 - (vi) the Assistant Director and Portfolio Holder for Safety and Wellbeing be delegated authority to progress with ANPR installation into other suitable car parks, utilising the capital funding that was agreed in 2019.

313 Corporate Performance Report – Quarter 3

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which summarised performance against the Council's update suite of Key Performance Indicators, reflecting the Corporate Plan 2022-24, for the Quarter 3 period 2022/23.

Resolved:

That the performance data for Quarter 3 2022/23 be received and noted.

314 Local Development Scheme Update (2023)

The report advised that National Planning Policy stated that Local Plans should be reviewed at least once every five years to determine whether policy revisions were needed to keep them up-to-date and/or whether new policies were required. The appended Local Development Scheme (LDS) set out the pathway that the Council intended to follow in terms of carrying out its review of the Ashford Local Plan 2030 by the summer of 2023, and the subsequent drafting of a new Local Plan thereafter.

Recommended:

That the Local Development Scheme 2023 be adopted by Full Council, as required under Section 15 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended by the Localism Act 2011), to have effect from the day following the Full Council meeting.

315 Revenues and Benefits Recommended Write-Offs Schedule

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which proposed the formal write off of £163,998.82. The proposals were in line with the Council's Revenues and Benefits Service Write-Off Policy. The Deputy Chief Executive (Section 151 Officer) had been consulted, along with Head of Service for relevant areas. He thanked Officers for their continued diligence in pursuing such debts.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) the action that accounts totalling £19,639.89 have been written off under delegated powers be noted (Financial Regulations 11.1 refers).**
 - (ii) the write-offs listed in the Exempt Appendices to the report totalling £144,358.93 be approved.**

316 Joint Transportation Board – Minutes of 6th December 2022

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Joint Transportation Board held on the 6th December 2022 be received and noted.

317 Trading and Enterprise Board – Minutes of 31st January 2023

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Trading and Enterprise Board held on the 31st January 2023 be received and noted.

318 Civic and Ceremonial Programme Board – Notes of 25th January 2023

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Civic and Ceremonial Programme Board held on the 25th January 2023 be received and noted.

319 Compliance and Enforcement Board – Notes of 24th January 2023

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Compliance and Enforcement Board held on the 24^h January 2023 be received and noted.

320 Climate Change Advisory Committee – Notes of 25th January 2023

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Climate Change Advisory Committee held on the 25th January 2023 be received and noted.

321 Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group – Notes of 16th December 2022

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group held on the 16th December 2022 be received and noted.

322 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.

323 Economic Regeneration and Investment Board – Notes of 14th December 2022

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Economic Regeneration and Investment Board held on the 14th December 2022 be received and noted.

324 Regeneration, Infrastructure and Improvement Co-ordination Board – Notes of 20th January 2023

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Regeneration, Infrastructure and Improvement Co-ordination Board held on the 20th January 2023 be approved and adopted.

Queries concerning these minutes? Please contact Member Services
Telephone: (01233) 330349 Email: membersservices@ashford.gov.uk
Agendas, Reports and Minutes are available on: www.ashford.moderngov.co.uk