

Cabinet

Minutes of a Meeting of the Cabinet held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **30th March 2023**.

Present:

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

Cllrs. Buchanan, Feacey, Forest, Iliffe, Shorter.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Barrett, Bell, Pickering.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Burgess, Harman, Sparks.

In attendance:

Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer, Director of Customer, Technology and Finance, Director of Place, Space and Leisure, Head of Economic Development, Head of Strategic Projects, Spatial Planning Manager, Human Resources Manager, Senior Communications Officer, Principal Solicitor – Strategic Development, Member Services Manager.

360 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Feacey	Made a Voluntary Announcement as Chairman of the Ashford Volunteer Centre.	365
	Declared a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest as Chairman of the Ashford International Development Company. He left the Council Chamber during consideration of this item.	367
Head of Strategic Projects	Declared a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest as a Director of the Ashford International Development Company. He left the Council Chamber during consideration of this item.	367

361 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 23rd February 2023 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

362 Leader's Announcements

The Leader advised that on Sunday 23rd April, a new mobile alert system was to be tested that would sound an alarm on people's phones warning them of imminent danger. The UK-wide trial of a new Government system meant that everyone in the country would receive a test alert on their mobile phones.

He was pleased to inform Members that on 24th March, the Council had completed on the acquisition of a parcel of land at Repton. That parcel had been earmarked in the Section 106 agreement as being for a range of primary healthcare uses, but the developers had not taken this forward. The Council had stepped in and negotiated a good price for the land which had now bought from the development consortium. They were already working with colleagues in the healthcare sector to bring forward a scheme that would provide a range of health benefits to the local community and which would ease the pressure on ever-stretched GP surgeries. The land had been acquired in the Council's Housing Revenue Account and, subject to planning, would also include 15 apartments for applicants with an identified need on the waiting list. This took the fusion of health and housing agendas to a new level and they were excited to see how the scheme progressed from this point.

The Leader also advised that the Council had been successful in bidding for £5m of Government funding to help fund a major retro-fitting project for 727 of their Council homes and thus significantly improving energy efficiency. He knew Officers had worked extremely hard for many months on this application to the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund and he had been told that this was one of the largest awards made to a single bidding Authority this year. He wanted to give his thanks to all involved.

Members would also be aware that the Council had received £14.7m of Levelling Up Funding for the International Film Studios project at Newtown Works, which was on the agenda later that evening. With the scheme underway he had recently written to the Minister for Levelling Up, Dehenna Davison MP, to brief her on progress and invite her to Ashford to see for herself this transformational project. She had replied saying that "Ashford is a great example of Levelling Up in action" and had confirmed that she would be delighted to visit Ashford this summer. He was sure that all would be pleased to welcome the Minister to their town.

As this was the last Cabinet meeting under his leadership, the Leader said he wanted to thank colleagues and Officers who had made the Cabinet such a productive forum during his ten years as Leader. He said he would miss everyone.

363 Pay Policy Statement – Annual Review

The Human Resources Manager introduced the report which advised that the Localism Act 2011 required the Council to publish an Annual Pay Policy Statement. This report would review the current Pay Policy Statement, ensuring it was up to date and reflected the Council's approach to pay. The Council also took this annual review as an opportunity to review the Ashford Apprentice Wage Allowance and the report therefore updated the position in relation to Apprentice pay for 2023/24.

The Leader said he welcomed the report and thanked those involved in the pay negotiations for both Council staff and waste contractor staff this year, which had both reached a pleasing outcome, against a difficult national backdrop.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, IT and Digital drew attention to the focus on Apprenticeships and said he was pleased to see that the Council continued to set an example in this regard.

Recommended:

- That**
- (i) the updated Pay Policy Statement be approved**
 - (ii) the continuation of the Ashford Apprentice Wage Allowance at a rate of 20 pence per hour over the National Minimum Wage rate applicable to the age of the apprentice, be approved.**

364 Update on the Council's Strategic Nutrient Mitigation and Proposed Pathway for Nutrient Neutrality Supplementary Planning Document

The Spatial Planning Manager introduced the report which advised that since July 2020, certain planning applications located in the Stour catchment and/or which discharged foul water into the catchment, had been put 'on hold' until they could achieve nutrient neutrality. In response to this issue the Council had been working proactively to deliver strategic nutrient mitigation. This was in the form of identifying suitable land in the Borough for strategic wetlands, which could generate off-site nutrient mitigation that could then be secured by developments, allowing them to be granted planning permission. This work had progressed and was now subject of an update to Cabinet. The report also outlined what a future Nutrient Neutrality Supplementary Planning Document was likely to cover and sought delegated authority to publish and consult on a draft document when appropriate.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) the Cabinet continue to support the acquisition of sites for, and delivery of, strategic wetlands in the Borough as a means of providing off-site nutrient mitigation, subject to planning permission being sought and obtained for them in due course.**

- (ii) **the proposed contents and broad scope of a future Nutrient Neutrality Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) be agreed.**
- (iii) **authority be delegated to the Director of Place, Space and Leisure and the Assistant Director of Planning and Development, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Development, to determine the final contents and scope, and finalise the wording of the draft Nutrient Neutrality SPD, to determine the timing, length and methods of consultation, and the publish the draft SPD for consultation at the appropriate time.**

365 Policy for Funding the Voluntary and Community Sector

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which presented a draft policy for funding the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). The purpose of the policy was to provide a consistent and co-ordinated approach to funding the VCS and it set out how funding would be awarded to ensure it would contribute towards the Council's corporate priorities, improve efficiency and give greater clarity, certainty and stability to the VCS organisations. The report also included a proposal to bring together a revenue funding stream which would include Ward Member grants and Strategic/Service grants (formerly Community/Service grants) in two distinct funding streams.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) **the draft policy be noted and the proposed funding streams agreed.**
 - (ii) **the Head of Policy and Performance undertake a consultation on the draft policy with Ward Members and the Voluntary and Community Sector, reporting the outcome back to Cabinet.**

366 Digital Accessibility Policy

The Portfolio Holder for Environment, Property and Recreation introduced the report on behalf of the Portfolio Holder for HR and Customer Services. The report advised that the Council was committed to providing a digital experience that was accessible to as many people as possible. This included those with disabilities, older people, people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds and people with varying levels of digital literacy. To this end, the Digital Accessibility Policy had been developed to ensure that the digital services the Council provided were available to all members of the public. He said that he had also been involved in this work as Chairman of the IT and Digital Transformation Advisory Committee and knew that both he, and the Portfolio Holder for HR and Customer Services would like to thank the staff involved in this and the wider Digital Transformation work, in particular the Digital Transformation Manager.

Resolved:

That the proposed Digital Accessibility Policy be adopted.

367 International Film Studios/Newtown Works

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development introduced the report which sought to agree the funding for the Studios phase of the Newtown Works development and asked Members to note that Ashford International Development Company was in negotiations with a major studio operator. He said that this development was one of the most exciting economic projects for this Borough in decades and thanked all involved in getting the project to this stage. With the Council's support, together with the Levelling Up Funding from Central Government, this provided a once in a lifetime opportunity to redevelop a nationally significant railway heritage site into a thriving economic driver for the whole area.

Other Cabinet Members spoke in support of the proposals and expressed their excitement to what was seen as a "game-changer" for Ashford. Particular focus was given to the "de-risking" of the project through due diligence and forward selling of a majority of the residential units and early discussion with studio operators. This was along with the wider community benefits through the Section 106 agreement including a town centre play area, indoor and outdoor sports facilities, GP services, highway improvements and importantly, the engagement of Ashford College through its curriculum and training programmes.

Recommended:

- That**
- (i) a loan facility to the Ashford International Development Company be agreed in principle, for the construction of the International Film Studios and workshop space, to the value of £50m, subject to the terms set out in Paragraph 17 of the report and subject to the completion of the due diligence process set out in the report, and to the granting of planning permission satisfactory to the film studio operator.**
 - (ii) the loan facility for the International Film Studio and workshop will either be repaid on completion of the works from the sale proceeds, or through a lease to an operator on a long-term basis.**
 - (iii) the Ashford International Development Company be financially supported at risk, to proceed with the redesign of the studio facility (subject to the Chief Executive being sufficiently confident that the overall deal is secured), up to the value of £30,000, in order to submit a revised planning application. This cost would initially be met from a reallocation within the Business Rate Retention Reserve.**

- (iv) responsibility for finalising the deal and sign off be delegated to the Chief Executive, taking into account the recommendations of a Due Diligence Working Group, which would include the Leader of the Council, the Section 151 Officer, the Solicitor to the Council, the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and the Portfolio Holders for Finance, IT and Digital and Economic Development.
- (v) a budget of £100,000 be allocated to carry out the due diligence required to finalise the transaction.
- (vi) the Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer be authorised to negotiate, finalise and complete all necessary legal agreements and other documents to give effect to the above.

368 Joint Transportation Board – Minutes of 7th March 2023

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Joint Transportation Board held on the 7th March 2023 be received and noted.

369 Climate Change Advisory Committee – Notes of 2nd February 2023

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Climate Change Advisory Committee held on the 2nd February 2023 be received and noted.

370 IT and Digital Transformation Advisory Committee – Notes of 31st January 2023

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the IT and Digital Transformation Advisory Committee held on the 31st January 2023 be received and noted.

371 Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group – Notes of 3rd February 2023

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group held on the 3rd February 2023 be received and noted.

372 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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