

Cabinet

Minutes of a Meeting of the Cabinet held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **28th September 2023**.

Present:

Cllr. Ovenden (Chair);
Cllr. Campkin (Vice-Chair);

Cllrs. Barrett, Betty, Harman, Hayward, Nilsson, Wright.

Apologies:

Cllr. Walder.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Bartlett, Mrs Bell, Bell, Chilton, Dean, Feacey, Gathern, Hicks, Leavey, Ledger, Meaden, Michael, Pickering, Roden, Spain, C Suddards, L Suddards.

In attendance:

Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer, Director of Health and Wellbeing, Director of Place, Space and Leisure, Assistant Director of Environment, Property and Leisure, Assistant Director of HR, Customer Services, Communications and Digitalisation, Head of Economic Development, Service Lead – Finance, Safety and Wellbeing Manager, Human Resources Manager, Economic Development Manager, Communications and Marketing Manager, Commercial Projects and Recreation Manager, Commercial Portfolio Operations Manager, Estates Manager, Project Manager – Commercial, Community Safety and Resilience Team Leader, Senior Governance and Data Protection Officer, Member Services Manager.

In attendance (virtually):

Assistant of Director of Housing, Head of Policy and Performance,

141 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Bartlett	Made a Voluntary Announcement as a Trustee of the Central Ashford Community Forum.	146
Feacey	Made a Voluntary Announcement as a Chairman of the Ashford Volunteer Centre.	147

Made a Voluntary Announcement as a Chairman of the Ashford International Development Company.

Wright Made a Voluntary Announcement as a Trustee 147
of Repton Connect Community Trust.

142 Minutes

A Member asked if there had been any development on the formation of an Ashford Parks Foundation Task Group. The Assistant Director of Environment, Property and Leisure advised that an Officer and cross-party Member Task and Finish had been set up, including the Lead Member and the two Shadow Portfolio Holders, and the first meeting would be held the following day.

Another Member asked for an update on the delayed modular housing solution at Henwood. The Portfolio Holder advised that he believed the project was not delayed and still on course for a May/June 2024 'go live' date, but he said he would provide a fuller update by email.

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 27th July 2023 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

143 Corporate Performance Report

This report summarised performance against the Council's suite of KPIs reflecting the Corporate Plan 2022-24, for the Quarter 1 period 2023/24. The Portfolio Holder introduced the report and advised that this Quarter 1 report detailed the performance from around six weeks of the previous Administration and around six weeks of the current Administration. Therefore, in the spirit of teamwork, he was to introduce the report on behalf of both Administrations. The report had already been discussed at Overview and Scrutiny, a discussion she had missed due to a clash with a Parish Council meeting, but she had read the minutes of that meeting with interest. She wanted to draw attention to Page 18 of the report where the Ambition for Ashford is stated. This was a key statement and worthy of repeating as she believed this should be what guided all Councillors in their roles, regardless of political affiliation. She quoted - *"The Ashford Ambition: to be a thriving, productive and inclusive Borough in 2030 and beyond; a vital part of Kent and the South East where local businesses, social enterprises, communities and the public sector provide collective leadership to promote shared prosperity, happiness and wellbeing.* As Members would be aware, they were looking to achieve this ambition through the underlying principles and key performance indicators in the themes of Green Pioneer, Caring Ashford, and Targeted Growth. The report also highlighted specific activity in each of those theme areas.

The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee reiterated the Committee's request to consider raising the recycling target from 50% to 55%. In response the Portfolio Holder advised that the current 50% was a KPI rather than a target and in his view it was indicative of where they should be as an Authority (not too far under or over). There was upcoming legislation that aimed to reduce the amount of waste being produced in general, so this was likely to have an effect on recycling KPIs and targets anyway and he thought it was premature to adjust any targets before that was taken into account. The Director of Place, Space and Leisure advised that a full report and presentation on the new waste contract, changing legislation and the recycling rate was coming to Overview and Scrutiny in October and she thought that would be a good opportunity for them to consider the issue and make recommendations to the Cabinet. The Leader thanked Overview and Scrutiny for their comments on recycling and advised it had sparked discussion with the Cabinet and Officers. He agreed that it was not the time to adjust any KPIs, but over the coming months they would be taking a long hard look at how best to promote and educate on recycling – the next stage of a communications push that in his view was long overdue.

Resolved:

That the performance data for Quarter 1 2023/24 be received and noted.

144 Update on the Broadband and Digital Infrastructure Improvements in the Ashford Borough

The Head of Economic Development introduced the report which outlined the initiatives worked on, and progress made, by Ashford Borough Council over the past 12 months and set out the recommended actions moving forward.

A Member said he welcomed the report and the priority given to broadband by this Council. One area he hoped that would be pursued was emerging technologies such as Starlink, which would help boost, in particular, rural broadband. The Head of Economic Development advised that they were certainly examining emerging technologies. Project Gigabit and the Gigabit Voucher Schemes were the current focus but there was a need to better inform the public about the breadth of technologies that were available to them. There was some debate about Starlink and similar technologies and the difficulties of getting such schemes up and running, but it was agreed important to advise those with poor broadband of all of the options available to them.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) the content of the report and the Broadband work undertaken in the past year be noted.**
 - (ii) it be noted that the delivery of broadband is, and should remain, a key priority in the council's Corporate Plan.**
 - (iii) the actions set out in section 38 of this report be approved.**

145 Updated Senior Structure

The Chief Executive introduced the report which reviewed her senior management structure and presented a planned update in order to meet the required savings agreed in the Medium Term Financial Plan, and to continue to deliver the Council's Corporate Plan.

A Member said he was not too happy with the proposed structure which he felt was still too "top heavy". He also questioned the use of the title 'Corporate Director' when some of the individuals appeared to have a narrower area of focus than the entire organisation. He said he had an alternative structure in mind that he intended to present to Full Council. The Chief Executive said it would be useful to have an idea of any alternative proposals so that these could be properly priced up in advance. The Member said he would happily engage in that way.

The Leader clarified that Cabinet was being asked to endorse the updated structure. He said he was happy to accept the proposals as presented, but he would also be happy to continue to engage with Members from across the Council on this and, if an alternative structure could be arrived at that worked better, then of course they would consider it.

Resolved:

That the Chief Executive's recommendations regarding an update to the Senior Structure of the Council be endorsed.

Recommended:

That the costs associated with the early release of pension (set out in the exempt appendix of the report), in the event a redundancy results, be approved.

146 Civic Centre Relocation

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Growth and Investment and the Deputy Chief Executive introduced the report which advised of a savings to relocate the Civic Centre to International House. The proposal was a unique opportunity for the Council to make significant cuts in expenditure, without reducing the level of services to the Borough of Ashford and there were no redundancies resulting from this move. The proposal looked at rationalising the Council's office space, bringing forward significant savings in the region of £1.3m per annum. Whilst the configuration would be slightly different, the current square footage of office space would be replicated in the new building.

Members asked a number of questions on the report and the following responses were given: -

- Public access to the Council's offices and meetings would still be maintained within the proposals. The Customer Services function would be relocated to a bespoke area within the ground floor of International House which would be accessible to the public and a floor of the building had been set aside to accommodate a Council Chamber type space of a similar size to house public meetings. The newly installed AV equipment was also fully transportable so could be redeployed at International House.
- The Leader said he would ensure that the questions asked by Central Ashford Community Forum as part of the consultation had been responded to. It was his understanding that they had, but he would check that and re-send the answers if necessary.
- There were no firm plans for re-use of the existing Civic Centre, and a number of options were available, but social housing was certainly one of the options and always had been.
- The Leader considered that discussions around hybrid working, staff working patterns and how many days a week staff were expected in the office were not relevant to the issue at hand in the report and it was not the appropriate forum to have these discussions at this stage. It was acknowledged that Overview and Scrutiny had many questions about this and a report on hybrid working was coming back to the Committee in February. For now, it was important to note that there would be no net loss of office space in the new building and, at International House, the current level of staff could comfortably be accommodated. They also had the flexibility to take on additional space if needed. The Leader thought discussions around staff needed to be more nuanced and he was a bit sad about the route they were beginning to take. Staff worked in different ways and there was a lot of conflicting research and information out there about office/hybrid/home working. It was an issue he also wanted to explore in more detail, but he considered the most important thing was a happy and productive workforce and welfare and respect was vital. It would be important to speak to their own staff and understand what they valued in their employment.
- The desire for more understanding of the figures involved and further detail was acknowledged. The Leader said this was now something he wanted to see worked up further, but that had not happened yet as they had not wanted to use valuable resources working up a detailed plan until there was more of a firm commitment to proceed. Members said they would like to see the combined costs/savings for all three phases of the project, and potential variances, so a final decision could be taken in the round. At the moment, there appeared to be more questions than answers about the finances. The Leader said he accepted the points raised and he could not give the absolute assurances that had been asked for, but as Portfolio Holder for Finance, he said that he would not proceed with a project that started to spiral out of control, and if that happened he would be the first person to "pull the plug" and it would not go ahead. They would share all of the information available when they could and he was open to suggestions from any Member of this

Council about how things could be done better. That was the *modus operandi* of this Administration.

- The Leader said it was important to recognise that ultimately the Civic Centre was an office building to work and hold meetings in and it was dangerous to be too sentimental. Those who stood to suffer from its loss were actually the Council and the Councillors, but not the residents of Ashford. However, any other means of delivering those £1.3m worth of savings was very likely to have an impact on residents. It was a great building and to an extent it would be sad to see it go, but it would be a lot sadder to lose services, just because they had wanted to hang on to their building and their Council Chamber. That did not have the same amount of worth to him. It may have seemed that he had focussed chiefly on the financial savings aspect of this proposal, but it was in that context that he had focused on the finances, because ultimately, in his view, it was in the best interests of the residents of the Borough.

Recommended:

- That**
- (i) the relocation of the Civic Centre to International House, including Phase 1 and Phase 2, be approved.**
 - (ii) it be noted that Phase 3 will include a future report to the Cabinet detailing the future use of the Civic Centre.**
 - (iii) 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**

147 Anti-Social Behaviour Policy

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which presented for renewal the Ashford Borough Council Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Policy. The policy provided clarity on how the Council met its responsibilities under the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. She thanked Officers for their hard work in bringing forward this necessary update to the Policy

The item was opened up to Members and the following points were raised: -

- In response to a question about early intervention, the Safety and Wellbeing Manager advised that this was certainly undertaken by the wider Community Safety Partnership (CSP) which was a strategic group involving all of the relevant agencies. There were limits to ABC's own remit and the areas covered in this particular overarching strategic policy document, but there were a number of policies and procedures underneath that which Officers worked to. ABC did support KCC and the Police via the CSP and there were a number of examples of early intervention projects involving youth. She said she would be happy to share further details of the CSP Action Plan with the Councillor and indeed invite him to future CSP meetings. A Member said that whilst the onus was on other agencies to initiate early intervention he believed

as Councillors they had a moral and societal duty to try and get involved and engage with young people and communities in their areas.

- There were known issues with Kent Police's 101 service over the last six months or so where calls had been unanswered, so there was concern that the policy was predicated on those misleading figures and they may not be getting a true picture of ASB in Ashford.
- In response to a question, the Community Safety and Resilience Team Leader advised that there had been less than five Community Triggers to date, but she would confirm the exact figure to the Member by email.
- A lot of youth ASB was caused by boredom and it was considered important to provide more facilities for older youths, not just play parks for younger children.
- The Portfolio Holder for Homes and Homelessness stressed the housing aspects of the policy and how that related to Council Tenants.

Recommended:

That the renewed Ashford Borough Council Anti-Social Behaviour Policy be approved and adopted.

148 Joint Transportation Board – Minutes of 5th September 2023

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Joint Transportation Board held on the 5th September 2023 be received and noted.

149 Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group – Notes of 26th July 2023

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group held on the 26th July 2023 be received and noted.

150 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.

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