

Ashford Borough Council

Minutes of an Extraordinary Meeting of the Ashford Borough Council held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **23rd November 2023**.

Present:

His Worshipful the Mayor, Cllr. L W Krause (Chairman);

Cllrs. Anckorn, Arnold, Barrett, Bartlett, Betty, Blanford, Brunger-Randall, Buchanan, Campkin, Chilton, Dean, Feacey, Forest, Gathern, Gauder, Giles, Hallett, Harman, Hayward, Heyes, Hicks, Joseph, Leavey, Ledger, Link, McGeever, Meaden, Michael, Mulholland, Ovenden, Pauley, Pickering, Shilton, Smith, Spain, C Suddards, L Suddards, Townend, Walder, Wright.

Also Present:

Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer, Corporate Director of Place, Space and Leisure, Corporate Director of Housing, Customer, Technology and Finance, Assistant Director of Environment, Property and Recreation, Service Lead – Finance, Housing Development and Regeneration Manager, Commercial Portfolio Operations Manager, Project Manager – Commercial, Principal Solicitor – Strategic Development, Senior Communications Officer, Member Services Manager, Senior Member Services Officer.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Mrs Bell, Bell, Iliffe, Nilsson.

210 Minute No. 146/9/23 – Civic Centre Relocation

The Leader of the Council said that by now all Members would have seen the reports and information on this. This Minute had been adjourned to this Extraordinary Meeting to allow everybody to have the chance to ask questions and to go through the detail and he hoped those questions had all now been answered and Members were happy to proceed with the proposals.

The Leader of the Council therefore proposed: -

“That the recommendations in Minute No. 146/9/23 of the Cabinet be approved and adopted.”

This was seconded.

Councillor Heyes said that is his view this whole process had brought in to mind the old adage “*act in haste, repent at leisure*”. He understood that this had been deferred but he, and many other Members still had concerns about the whole thing. His major concern was about the future of the Council Chamber and the ability to be able to create anything like a Council Chamber at International House. During the Members’ site visit they had been unable to see the area earmarked for this, but he thought the provision of

any sort of 'statement' Council Chamber in International House would be problematic, if not impossible, and he considered that a Borough Council should have a proper auditorium type Council Chamber. He also considered Members needed more information on the level of working in the office as opposed to from home and guarantees that there would be sufficient desk space for a majority of staff being in the office at least three days a week. He also thought there needed to be more certainty over the future of the Civic Centre building. There had been talk about the possibility of social housing, but there were still a lot of unknowns. He also remained concerned about the move of the current Monitoring Centre and if the technology could be moved successfully. He asked if the Council had considered retaining the central core of the building (Monitoring Centre, reception and Civic Suite) as a preferable option? He had been told that this would be difficult because of utilities, but he thought this was worth exploring. As a result of the concerns he had expressed, Councillor Heyes said he would be voting against this proposal.

Councillor Chilton said the presentation Members had received following the deferral of the decision back in October had answered most of the questions his Group had had. He thought it was worth re-iterating one or two points. Firstly the budget and financial pressures the Council faced, which were the predominant factors behind the proposal to move. There was a need to make £1.5m of savings to ensure this Council did not go in to the red. He and other Members of the Medium Term Financial Plan Task Group had looked at those figures in great detail, along with the impacts of interest rates and inflation, and the position if they did not make this move – it was very perilous. If they did not make the move to International House, those savings still had to be made and this would mean reductions in services and in staff. He also wanted to touch upon the approximate £10m of costs for maintaining the existing Civic Centre building and keeping it habitable. During an informal briefing of a small group of interested Members, the heating had actually failed which did demonstrate the problems faced, however there were legitimate questions about how they had arrived at that position. Councillor Chilton said he had been involved in Budget Scrutiny through the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for at least ten years and such figures had never emerged and there had never been a warning that they would need to spend this vast amount of money to keep this building habitable, so they needed to ensure that they were never again in a position where they urgently needed to find millions of pounds for such purposes, whichever building they were in. He said he did not wish to be snide, but he thought they had arrived at this position because the previous administration had not undertaken the necessary building and site surveys to flag the investment that was needed to potentially stay in this building. That was all history, but a lesson to learn and he hoped that there would be a commitment to receive regular reports on all of the Council's assets to ensure they did not arrive in that position again. Going back through the chronology, Councillor Chilton said there had been a briefing immediately after the elections, a paper to Cabinet, private briefings, the Full Council meeting in October, the deferral and then the separate briefings to all Members. Throughout the process it had felt as if Members had had to fight hard to extract information out, particularly on the costs, and new figures had emerged throughout. He was grateful for the briefings that had taken place and these had been useful, but he thought that in a Council where there was 'No Overall Control', to make a success of the Borough, this could not continue and information had to be more forthcoming. There should not be endless meetings and deferrals to get information that they were entitled to as Members. In summary, he said that his Group would be supporting the proposal to move to International House but they did have some concerns about the future of the existing Civic Centre. At the last briefing the

suggestion of 'mothballing' the Civic Centre site had been mentioned and he did not consider this was an acceptable position. The building was an asset with a significant value and he did not think 'mothballing' it and allowing a depreciation in value could be supported. He would like to see the setting up of a cross-party Working Group to decide on the future of this building at the earliest possible opportunity and, given that the savings needed to start to be made in the coming financial year, he also thought they needed detailed financial plans for the various options for Phase 3, within this financial year. Having said all that, his Group would be supporting the proposal as they would never countenance a position where protecting a building came before protecting services and staff.

Councillor Bartlett said he wanted to explain why he still had some reservations over the proposed finances and financial gains from the proposed move. In his view there were still considerable uncertainties about how much the whole process would cost and it was therefore conceivable that it could end up costing more to move than staying. First of all there was the unknown matter of Business Rates for this building once vacated, whatever they decided to do with it. At present they simply did not know the outcome of the new Bill on Business Rates as it moved its way through the Houses of Parliament. There would inevitably be some changes and he suspected there could be a clampdown and there was a risk that the Council would still be liable for Business Rates even after they had vacated. His second "know/unknown" area was the Monitoring Centre which was an essential operation of the Council with regard to tackling Anti-Social Behaviour in the Town Centre amongst its many other features. So, some sort of plan needed to be put in place to ensure that this could continue to operate from International House and that the systems could be accommodated. There would also obviously be a cost to this, which was also unknown. Councillor Bartlett said that his last point of concern centred on this Council and how it had dealt with some of its big ticket projects and he was concerned about the Civic Centre site and how it could potentially be integrated with the Kent Woolgrowers site in the future. He worried that the bill for Consultants to advise on such designs could run out of control and consume any savings proposed by this move. As an example, the Council had spent £2m on Consultants to advise on the design of the development at Vicarage Lane/Mecca Bingo without moving forwards and he did not want to see that repeated.

Councillor Spain said he had two points to make. With regard to the Council Chamber, Officers had included information on the creation of new Council Chambers in the report and other Authorities had done this successfully in modern buildings. So, it was possible and the links in the report did show some suitable and attractive examples so he did not have the same concerns about this as some of his colleagues. Secondly, in terms of the redevelopment of the existing Civic Centre site, he would like to see all options kept open and not necessarily be tied to one particular direction at this stage. If the redevelopment of this site was completely dependent on the Kent Woolgrowers site for example, that could limit things. It may be that they arrived at a point where developing the two sites together was the best option, but at this stage he would prefer the Council to be presented with all options open to them.

The Mayor said he would like to raise a couple of points he had observed during the Site Visit to International House. In terms of staff safety he was worried about the lack of a designated safe walkway from International House back to the Stour Centre/Civic Centre car park. This was a potential issue that had not been identified in any of the reports so far and there may be a need for an additional solution such as a new pedestrian

footbridge. Secondly, he was concerned about access around International House and via the lifts. In the Civic Centre building, both lifts, and entrances to all floors were controlled by staff/Member access cards and there was no access to parts of the building for unauthorised members of public. He was not sure this was the case at International House and he was concerned that Council staff and their working environments should be protected, and any modifications needed for this could be another unbudgeted expense. There did not appear to be any contingencies for such issues in the figures.

The Leader said he would like to respond to some of the points raised during the debate. He said that throughout this process, the more that had been mentioned, the more the suspicion seemed to grow that things were being hidden. So, some topics had not been mentioned, but that did not mean they had not been, or were not being, considered. They might not just have been fully worked up at this stage. With regard to the Mayor's point, safety and security of staff would be a priority. There was a safe, lit walking route from International House to the Stour Centre/Civic Centre car park. It was accepted that this was not ideal, but it was safe – crossing to the front of the station and across the pedestrian bridge. They would continue to look at other options and improvements and the possibility of providing a new pedestrian bridge when they worked up the Kent Woolgrowers site. In the International House building, there would be a barrier in front of the lifts and card access to all floors – these would be crucial elements of any move like this, but again might not have been detailed in the high level papers submitted so far. With regard to the Monitoring Centre, the Leader said he had also asked the question about whether it could be moved and had been provided with assurances. They did not have cables anymore, it was all wireless, so the Centre could easily be accommodated at International House – the staff would even have windows to enjoy unlike now! Turning to the future of the Civic Centre building, the Leader said that he for one had never said it would be 'mothballed'. This was a very vague term without true meaning as any building had a cost associated with it. From his perspective there was no intention to do this. What they did need to do was get to a stage where they had a preliminary plan for the Civic Centre, ideally to deliver social housing on the site. It was true that they had not run the final numbers on that, but the key thing was that they had flexibility – they could change their plans and models to suit what was best for the Civic Centre site. With a clear preliminary plan, he considered any rateable value could be reduced to zero once they moved out, but they needed to move forward at pace. They were looking at nutrient neutrality solutions now, that could see something delivered relatively quickly. However, he considered the most important thing was to continue to work together, cross-party – also looking at plans for the Kent Woolgrowers site which were continuing to be worked up and all Members would be involved in that. Referring to the Mecca Bingo development, yes there had been aborted costs involved in bringing that project forward, which they were extremely keen to avoid this time and that was probably why they did not have a whole host of consultant's bills and involvement in front of them this time. In his view it was better to make the decision and move ahead. Decisions could be undone, Politicians did that all the time, but in his view they needed to do this. They were in a difficult budgetary position and they needed to ensure they continued to deliver quality services to their residents, rather than ensure they retained a panelled Council Chamber. In conclusion, the Leader said he hoped he had answered everyone's questions and that they were now all convinced that this was the right thing to do.

A vote was the motion was then taken.

Resolved:

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

(DS)