

# Ashford Borough Council

Minutes of a Meeting of the Ashford Borough Council held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **14<sup>th</sup> December 2023**.

## Present:

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

Cllrs. Anckorn, Barrett, Bartlett, Mrs Bell, Bell, Betty, Blanford, Brunger-Randall, Campkin, Chilton, Dean, Feacey, Forest, Gathern, Gauder, Giles, Hallett, Harman, Hayward, Heyes, Hicks, Iliffe, Joseph, Ledger, Link, McGeever, Meaden, Michael, Mulholland, Ovenden, Pickering, Roden, Shilton, 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 Health and Wellbeing, Corporate Director of Place, Space and Leisure, Assistant Director of Environment, Property and Recreation, Service Lead – Finance, Member Services Manager.

## Apologies:

Cllrs. Buchanan, Gambling, Leavey, Nilsson, Pauley, Smith.

Prior to the commencement of the meeting The Reverend Starkings said prayers.

## 254 Exempt or Confidential Information

The Mayor asked whether any items should be dealt with in private because of the likely disclosure of exempt or confidential information. The Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer advised that there were none.

## 255 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Brunger-Randall	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as a Member of Tenterden Town Council.	262 (a)
Feacey	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as he was Chairman of the Ashford Volunteer Centre.  Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as Chairman of the Ashford International Development Company.	

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Gauder	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as her partner was Chair of Ashford Town Swimming Club.	262 (b)
Mulholland	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as a Member of Tenterden Town Council.	262 (a)
Wright	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as a Trustee of Repton Connect Community Centre	

## 256 Minutes

### (a) Council – 19<sup>th</sup> October 2023

The Mayor directed Members' attention to the addendum paper which included details of proposed amendments following a review of the Minutes of this Meeting.

With regard to Minute No. 184, Councillor Gathern said she was pleased to hear that the Council was standing firm on the original agreement with the developer over their contribution for the dualling of the A28. Could the Council be assured that this robust approach would also be taken with other infrastructure in future developments and, in particular, she would like to reiterate her remarks from the recent Joint Transportation Board (JTB) meeting about possibly re-thinking the non-segregation of the cycle and footpath at the side of the dualled A28? Councillor Campkin advised that the Council was supporting the dualling of the A28. What he had attempted to explain at the JTB was that he would like to see the walking and cycling infrastructure possibly brought forward as a contingency, including the segregation of the cycleway, but he would be speaking to Planning colleagues about that and would hopefully have an answer in due course.

Councillor Charles Suddards asked about Minute No. 180, and the pledge that a high level options paper would be produced concerning the future of the Civic Centre and Council Offices. He did not think this had yet been produced and asked the Leader when that would come forward. He was worried that the Civic Centre would be 'mothballed' for an indefinite period and that did concern him. The Leader said that this had been dealt with by way of a video presentation made available to all Members and all high level information that was available had been given to Members ahead of the Extraordinary Council Meeting. Phase 3 of the project was a set of unknowns and no particular option had been taken forward at this stage. At this stage of the process, pursuing any option further would involve spending money and potentially abortive costs and he did not believe there was any point doing that at a time of financial difficulties.

### **Resolved:**

**That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Council held on the 19<sup>th</sup> October 2023 be approved and confirmed as a correct record, subject to the following amendments to Minute No. 180 (b): -**

**180 Cabinet – 27<sup>th</sup> July and 28<sup>th</sup> September 2023**

**(b) Cabinet – 28<sup>th</sup> September 2023**

The Leader of the Council proposed that these Minutes be approved and adopted or noted as appropriate.

This was seconded by Councillor Campkin.

Members requested that Minute Nos. 145 and 146 be considered separately.

With reference to Minute No. 145(b) (Updated Senior Structure), Councillor Bell said that whilst there was appreciation of the work undertaken by the Chief Executive to review her Senior Management Structure, there had been a number of concerns raised. Chiefly that the proposals had been presented as a *fait accompli* with limited opportunities to consider the wider objectives of any new structure. Additionally, that the structure appeared to be the result of purely internal review, with no external independent input and he thought this aspect was vitally important. He also thought the structure felt quite old fashioned and top heavy with too many layers and narrow spans of control. To address those concerns he suggested they delay any immediate implantation plans and take a short period of time to undertake a more comprehensive and independent review of the organisational structure and this should include the commissioning of expert external advice which reflected modern thinking on organisational design. It was accepted that any delay would impact on the need to make savings, but he considered a short pause to consider wider issues would ultimately give a better result, with potentially even more savings, but more importantly a resulting structure that would be more effective in delivering what residents needed. He assured that Members were committed to helping achieve a successful outcome to this project and would willingly participate and provide support where requested. He wished to propose a Motion accordingly.

~~Councillor Bell therefore proposed that "Minute No.145 be not agreed and that the Chief Executive undertake a further review of the structure more widely, taking into account independent external advice when making further recommendations."~~

~~This was seconded by Councillor Heyes.~~

Other Members supported this view and the use of external consultants and independent advice.

Councillor Harman said she was shocked by colleagues' suggestion the Council revert to a practice of appointing external consultants, at great expense, to put forward proposals which may or may not be accepted by their excellent Management Team or this Council. The Chief Executive had given considerable thought to this subject and approached it with great sensitivity. She believed appointing consultants would be a step backwards and a way of pushing the blame elsewhere and that this Council should not be wasting tax payers money on employing consultants.

Councillor Nilsson said that the overall structure had been agreed during the previous Administration and indeed agreed by the Full Council in 2022. This report only proposed a minor change so she was a little confused at references to 'top heaviness'. No issues had been raised at the Joint Consultative Committee, where there had been a full and frank discussion and she considered there was a need to resolve this and take the uncertainty away from staff.

*The Leader said that what they were looking at was a proposal from their appointed Chief Executive who had looked at her staff structure and made decisions with a knowledge of her staff that as Councillors they did not have. She had found a way that both made sense of the structure at the present time and made savings. These recommendations did not preclude a further review of the senior staffing structure going forward. The Administration had changed less than five months ago and he thought it would have been very heavy handed for them to come in and undertake a major review of the senior staffing structure whilst they were in a time of change and uncertainty. He asked Members to think carefully and seriously consider accepting the recommendations at this time, because this genuinely affected individuals' jobs and lives - individuals who had been through a consultation process and he did not want to interfere with that. He would be open to any suggestions going forward on the staff structure. Personally he would like to limit the use of external consultants and focus finances on delivering services for their residents, but if that was seen as preferable he would not rule it out. This Administration had already shown that they were willing to work in a cross-party fashion and he was happy for the group who had been working with the HR Portfolio Holder to continue to review the structure, perhaps with an external peer group. They employed staff to deliver services and with his involvement with the Senior Leadership Team on a day to day basis, he had seen no evidence of a deficiency within that team.*

*After further advice from the Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer, Councillor Bell then proposed an amendment to add to the Motion that the Chief Executive undertake a further review of the structure more widely, taking into account independent external advice when making further recommendations."*

*This was seconded by Councillor Heyes.*

*Following debate, a vote was taken on the proposal put forward by Councillor Bell. This was lost.*

*The Council then voted on the original Cabinet recommendations in Minute No. 145 (b). These were approved.*

#### **(b) Extraordinary Council – 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2023**

Councillor Chilton asked if the Cross-Party Working Group set up to consider future options for the Civic Centre building could consider if, during the period after the office move when the building was empty, it could be temporarily used by the community and voluntary and community sector. It was a significant space which could perhaps be put to good use. The Leader said he thought it would be appropriate for Officers to look at this and respond to Councillor Chilton outside of the meeting. There may be financial and practical implications, but he thought it should be considered alongside all of the other options the Working Group would be looking at.

#### **Resolved:**

**That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Extraordinary Council Meeting held on the 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2023 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.**

## 257 Announcements

### (a) The Mayor

The Mayor advised that during the previous week he had had the pleasure of visiting former Councillor Paul Clokie at his home to present him with his Honorary Alderman award. He had found him in remarkably good health and Paul had sent his best regards to colleagues old and new who were working hard for the Borough, as he had done for many years. Paul had thanked Members of the Council for granting him with the award and asked that this be passed on at this meeting.

### (b) Leader of the Council

The Leader said that he wanted to take the opportunity to feedback on some of the good work that the Council was doing to support families during the cost of living crisis, through the Household Support Fund. Struggling families from all parts of the Borough had benefitted from the money that had been allocated. It was particularly nice to see the letters of thanks from the Primary Schools who had been allocated funding for them to deliver, ensuring that it reached those most in need.

The Council continued to support the campaign for Eurostar to resume stopping services in Ashford – a topic that had been discussed at the recent Ashford Strategic Delivery Board meeting. The economic benefits to Ashford and the surrounding areas were widely acknowledged and they hoped that if competition did come forward it would encourage a rethink.

The Leader advised that, following the question raised by Councillor Lyn Suddards at the October Full Council Meeting, he had taken the opportunity to discuss the matter in full with Officers and the Portfolio Holder and he was pleased to announce that they would be setting up a Civic Events Advisory Committee. This group would advise and make recommendation to Cabinet (and Full Council where appropriate), on matters both civic and ceremonial. Membership would be cross-party and include all relevant Members including the Portfolio Holder, the Leader, the Mayor, Deputy Mayor and shadow Portfolio Holders. Other Members would be invited to Meetings where events were being considered in their Wards. Councillor Suddards had raised an important point and he agreed that the Council should be proud of their Borough and its residents, both present and throughout history.

Finally, the Leader said that nutrient neutrality was never far from his thoughts and they continued to lobby Government for a solution to this national issue. In parallel, Officers were working towards local solutions to help unlock the Council's affordable and social housing schemes, including the delivery of much needed temporary and "move on" accommodation. At this point he would like to pass over to Councillor Barrett to give an update on the homelessness situation and the actions being taken by his very competent team.

**(c) Councillor Barrett – Portfolio Holder for Homes and Homelessness**

Councillor Barrett said that before he began his update which had been provided by Officers, he thought it was important to take a few seconds to assess the situation as it stood, because it was somewhat grim. With regard to homelessness, as things stood they had approximately 205 families/persons in temporary accommodation, being housed privately by this Council – some of those people were currently being housed outside the Borough. He had never known a situation so bad in his three years plus as Portfolio Holder for Housing and, being perfectly honest, he was worried. Net expenditure was currently at about £1.3m and was expected to rise to £1.4m by April. This was a vast amount of money that the Council was spending on housing people that in all honesty they should be able to house in their own stock, but currently could not. They currently had 3900 Council houses, flats and bungalows and about 1800 properties within Housing Associations and the primary problem was that they had too many people with too big a need for the Council to be able to fulfil.

With regard to rough sleeping, Councillor Barrett advised that since the Government's initiative "*Everyone In*" during the pandemic there hadn't been a night shelter in Ashford since winter 2019/20. This was a directive from the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. What Ashford was doing was providing a wrap-around service. In 2022 they had been successful in bidding for money from the Rough Sleeping Initiative Grant (2022-2025) and this funded a number of resources to help prevent people from becoming homeless, including paying for Officers to work with people who are on the street, and to work with single people in temporary accommodation to help them find more settled accommodation. They had also been successful in bidding for money under the Rough Sleeping Accommodation Programme to buy 15 one bedroom properties. This provided a supply of "move on" accommodation for people who were previously sleeping on the street and they had currently placed eight people into this accommodation with a further seven due on-line in spring 2024. On the 15<sup>th</sup> November 2023, they had carried out a formal rough sleeper count and verified two rough sleepers. Intelligence from other outreach shifts in the previous weeks suggested they had eight verified rough sleepers, however the fact that they were not out on the night would suggest that they did have somewhere to stay on occasions. Officers were working with this group to try and identify more suitable, settled accommodation. They also had SWEP (the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol) which was an emergency humanitarian response to severe weather conditions, the primary aim of which was to preserve life. On the 28<sup>th</sup> November SWEP was implemented due to the cold weather. They had a number of Officers carrying out daily outreach shifts and they identified five people who were bedded down at that time and they were placed into temporary accommodation. He hoped this gave the Council just a gist of what Officers did for them as Members and for their residents and if anyone had any questions on rough sleeping, he asked them to contact the housing department or him at any time.

Finally, with regard to the HRA Business Plan that had gone live a couple of weeks ago, it was fair to say that the temporary accommodation list was getting close to running away from the Council and the minimum of 50 on street purchases would have to be undertaken more quickly. At present they could not build due to Stodmarsh so the only real option was to buy and therefore he would be vastly accelerating the on-street purchase programme in the New Year. He asked if any colleagues were aware of developers that would be interested in potentially selling the Council a bulk supply of

stock, that they please contact the Housing Department as they were currently setting up a database.

The Mayor asked what Ashford's ratio of homeless people as a proportion of the entire population was as these figures were currently a very topical issue. Councillor Barrett said he did not have those figures to hand, but he would pass these on outside of the meeting.

## **258 Cabinet – 26<sup>th</sup> October and 30<sup>th</sup> November 2023**

### **(a) Cabinet – 26<sup>th</sup> October 2023**

In moving the Minutes, the Leader proposed a minor amendment to Minute No. 189 and Appendix D, Paragraph 8 of the Council Tax Base report to include 'tenant health reasons' to the list of exceptional circumstances. This would allow mould and damp and other health related issues to be eligible for the class D discount to the Hardship Fund. This was following discussion with Members from across the Council.

#### **Resolved:**

- That (i) **the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 26<sup>th</sup> October 2023 be received and noted with the exception of Minute No. 189.**
- (ii) **Minute No. 189, Council Tax Base 2024/25 be approved and adopted subject to the addition of 'tenant health reasons' to Appendix D, Paragraph 8 of the Council Tax Base report.**

### **(b) Cabinet – 30<sup>th</sup> November 2023**

#### **Resolved:**

- That (i) **the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 30<sup>th</sup> November 2023 be received and noted with the exception of Minute Nos. 227, 228 and 230.**
- (ii) **Minute Nos. 227, 228 and 230 be approved and adopted.**

## **259 Selection and Constitutional Review Committee – 5<sup>th</sup> December 2023**

The Leader said he would be proposing adoption of the Minutes as Chair of the Committee, but he did need to advise that he would be voting against the Minutes due to the recommendation on the term of office of the Leader of the Council. He was a firm believer in democracy and an annual vote for a Leader of the Council did appear to be the will of a majority of the Members of this Council. However, he believed that in a time of financial difficulties and Political uncertainty the Council's partners and Officers deserved a little bit of certainty going forwards. A potential change of Administration every year would not give confidence to commercial partners and he believed this would

create nervousness and send out a message of complete instability. For those reasons he would be voting against this.

**Resolved:**

**That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Selection and Constitutional Review Committee held on the 5<sup>th</sup> December 2023 be approved and adopted**

## **260 Audit Committee – 28<sup>th</sup> November 2023**

**Resolved:**

**That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Audit Committee held on the 28<sup>th</sup> November 2023 be received and noted.**

## **261 Notices of Motion**

### **(a) Motion Submitted by Councillor Feacey**

Councillor Feacey introduced a Notice of Motion that he had given pursuant to Procedure Rule 11 and was detailed in full in the Supplementary Agenda.

He said that the Council's residents' surveys indicated that keeping residents safe was by far their most important concern. One of the most important mechanisms for delivering that service is the 24 hour live coverage of the Monitoring Centre - helped enormously by the Safer Streets and digital radio initiatives. In the past - this monitoring had literally saved lives. In the current financial climate, it was understandable that all sorts of unpalatable measures had to be investigated and perhaps implemented.

Councillor Feacey moved the following Motion: -

*“That the Council resolves that any reduction in service away from current 24 hour live coverage of the Monitoring Centre (particularly to a “recording only” model) would be so impactful that it should only be considered as an absolute last resort. And even then, any change, and all of its ramifications, should be clearly and transparently flagged up to all Councillors. Ideally, this Council believes that a commitment should be made to keep the service in place at least for the duration of this council term up to the next election in 2027.”*

The content of the Motion was seconded by Councillor Forest.

The Mayor advised that in accordance with General Procedure Rule 13.15, the Motion would stand referred to the Cabinet.

Councillor Bartlett raised a Point of Order and asked for clarification of Procedure Rule 13.15. In his view this Procedure Rule related to material financial measures and this Motion made no hard or fast commitment to spend more money, so he thought it should be debated at this Meeting. If it were to be referred to Cabinet, it would appear that decisions had already been made. He thought it would only be a material financial matter if a decision had already been made to end the 24 hour monitoring. What the

Motion was seeking was no change from the current position. The Leader said that the nature of the Council's budget (set every year rather than every four years) meant that this did inevitably have financial implications. He also advised that a Working Group had been set up to review community safety well in advance of this Motion being submitted and he believed this Motion was a little premature, pending the work of that Group. The Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer reiterated his advice regarding procedure but explained that if the Council took the view that the matter fell outside Procedure Rule 13.15 then the matter could be debated at this Meeting. Following further discussion, a vote was then taken on whether to debate the Motion at this Meeting. This was carried.

Councillor Feacey, as mover of the original Motion, said that protecting its residents had to be the number one priority of any Council. Ashford had always been a great place to live, work and play and over the years this Council had done so much to ensure the safety and wellbeing of its citizens. He believed that taking away the human factor in the Monitoring Centre would be a retrograde step for this Council and its residents. So much had been done in recent years including: - digital radios; the award winning Ashford Partnership Against Crime; Best Bar None; the Street Pastors; and the Safer Streets Initiative. The Safer Streets App actually asked residents to use safe routes with adequate lighting and CCTV coverage, and if there was an attack, any resident would not want to view this footage some 12 hours later, they would hope for an immediate response. The Council took part in the annual march for safety for women and girls, but this was not enough on its own – there was a duty to prevent incidents and, if they did occur, to respond promptly and offer support when it was most needed – not merely observe but act swiftly, decisively and with a genuine care.

These comments were reiterated by other Councillors. There was some reference to the leveraging in of funding from the Police and Crime Commissioner to install new cameras in the past few years so a commitment to keep the current level of service and actively monitoring the feed from those new cameras 24/7, was seen as essential - ideally with a commitment from the Cabinet until the next election in 2027. This sort of monitoring was also vital, not only in gathering evidence after the event, but also dealing with an issue as it happened. At present suspects could be tracked and this had actually led to arrests within the minutes and hours of an event taking place. All Councillors, particularly newly elected ones, were encouraged to tour the Monitoring Centre and see the work that went on there currently.

Other Members said they supported the principle of a certain amount of live CCTV coverage for the town centre, however there needed to be a proper assessment of whether live 24/7 monitoring was needed. A Cross-Party Working Group had been set up to assess this matter and discuss all of the valid points, so there was a slight concern that any potential decision at this meeting would be premature and whether all of the Members in the room had sufficient information at hand to make a decision.

Councillor Wright, as Portfolio Holder for Safety and Wellbeing, wanted to say how proud she was of the work that had been undertaken over recent years to make Ashford a safe and caring Borough. Nothing had yet been decided on future commitments, but there may be difficult choices in the future. There were a number of things she would like to see expenditure on including a safe space for rough sleepers, safety training for women and girls, more activities for the youth and improving the perception of safety – all of this would need to be looked at in the round so there were many options for how to spend available funding.

The Leader said he wanted to reassure colleagues that the Monitoring Centre was in the budget for the coming financial year and there was no intention of making any changes this year. What they were potentially looking at was future budgets in future years. He totally agreed with the Motion, but did think it would have been better for it to stand referred to the Cabinet so that all of the discussions they had had tonight could have happened with the benefit of further background information being available. Final decisions on such matters would always then be referred back to Full Council. He said it was important to point out that whilst he would like the Monitoring Centre to stay open, manned 24 hours a day in perpetuity, they could not have everything. The Monitoring Centre was not a statutory service, it was a luxury and the Council had to pay for those luxuries and decide which luxury items they wanted to prioritise. Members had referenced a 'last resort' but when there was a significant budget gap, coupled with reducing income levels, they weren't far from that 'last resort' and he thought it would be healthy to discuss all of the options available to them in a frank and honest way.

Following discussion and questions of the Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer, he confirmed that the wording of the Motion as it stood did not commit the Council to anything. Councillor Spain said he thought the wording of the Motion provided a degree of latitude and its direction was fairly clear, although he wondered if the 'sticking points' were around some of the terminology used and if a simple amendment to two of the lines would be acceptable. He therefore proposed to amend the word "resolves" to "notes" and that the issue be deferred for further consideration by the Cabinet and the Cross-Party Working Group. This suggested change was agreed by the original proposer and seconder of the motion. A vote was then taken on the amended motion. This Motion was carried.

**Resolved:**

**That the Council notes that any reduction in service away from current 24 hour live coverage of the Monitoring Centre (particularly to a "recording only" model) would be so impactful that it should only be considered as an absolute last resort. And even then, any change, and all of its ramifications, should be clearly and transparently flagged up to all Councillors. Ideally, this Council believes that a commitment should be made to keep the service in place at least for the duration of this council term up to the next election in 2027. The issue be deferred for further consideration by the Cabinet and the Cross-Party Working Group."**

**(b) Motion Submitted by Councillor Lyn Suddards**

Councillor Suddards advised that, given the announcement made by the Leader earlier at the Meeting, she would be withdrawing her Motion.

## **262 Questions by Members**

**(a) Question from Councillor Mulholland to Councillor Campkin, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Climate, Environment and Transport**

"Would the Council support the principle of cost transparency for parking in Tenterden and be prepared to provide a breakdown of costs and associated income received from

parking charges in Tenterden? What are the direct costs for administrating the parking, with those costs broken down to show the different elements? For example, in Chipping Norton, a town just a little smaller than Tenterden, almost all the parking is free and regulated by time controlling the particular areas, with a parking area 300 yards from the town centre which has a 12 hour limit on free parking and closer areas with shorter limits. They have one traffic warden. Would for example, making the under used parking areas on Bridewell Lane free for up to 12 hours reduce the pressure on street parking, encourage visitors to the town knowing they can enjoy a visit without worrying about parking charges and also reduce the cost of administration to ABC? There is a view that the parking charges in Tenterden, perhaps unjustified, are nothing more than a stealth tax. For example, a week or so ago we had a very successful Christmas weekend, with the town rammed with visitors, and I understand that Parking Wardens were paid overtime to work late because the feeling was there would be 'rich pickings' in the town. So, what would be the implications of completely free parking in our car parks?"

### **Reply by Councillor Campkin**

"Mr Mayor, I believe that Councillor Mulholland has been furnished with the data he requested and this data can be made available to anyone else who wishes to see it. This shows a small margin of around £310,000 which contributes towards external costs and the running of this Council. The suggested lifting of parking charges in Tenterden could imply a scrapping of parking charges across the Borough which would of course be financially untenable as demonstrated by the data. As for the perception that car parking charges are some kind of 'racket' that we are running as a Council, it is down to Members to communicate the facts and confront mis-information. The financial implications would be bankruptcy."

### **Supplementary Question by Councillor Mulholland**

"I thank Councillor Campkin for his response and the data received in the last few days which we are now currently examining. The allegations of taking advantage in some way is a perception of residents of the town and we may well come back to ABC in the future with any further queries and a proposal for free parking."

### **Reply by Councillor Campkin**

"I would just respond that there is a Parking Strategy Working Group which I would like to invite Councillor Mulholland to attend – Councillor Heyes is already a Member of that and I would be happy for them to work together. I do know that there are private car parking operators who work in the area who are operating unscrupulously and I would like to be a bit stronger on this as I have been a victim myself. Any other questions can always be emailed to me or the parking team themselves."

### **Supplementary Question by Councillor Bell**

"Would the Portfolio Holder also consider the implications of parking charges in Tenterden's competitor small towns? Not too far up the road is Cranbrook, run by Tonbridge Wells Council, where I believe there is free parking. Folk will realise that Tenterden and Cranbrook are very similar towns and if you can get free parking in

Cranbook and not Tenterden, this may well drive people to Cranbook instead – to shop, invest etc. Some sort of comparison between the two would be welcomed.”

**Reply by Councillor Campkin**

“Yes Mr Mayor. I would also like to invite Councillor Bell to the Working Group meetings. Any of these points can be brought to these meetings, where we work on these things and can discuss anything that is thrown in to the mix, with the team.”

**(b) Question from Councillor Gauder to Councillor Betty, Portfolio Holder for Economic Growth and Investment**

“The Stour Centre swimming pools were closed for a period of seven days last week due to failure of the heating system being able to heat the water in the pools to a safe and adequate water temperature. Bearing in mind that the Council heavily invested in the Stour Centre refurbishment, including the new environmentally friendly heat pumps and the pools only reopened in August 2021, does the Portfolio Holder consider that the heating and air conditioning system that was specified, designed and installed on behalf of the Council in the Stour Centre is fit for purpose and will adequately function in the future?”

**Reply by Councillor Betty**

“Thank you Mr Mayor, yes as this relates to asset related matter rather than one related to the Leisure Contract, I would like to respond to the question. I can advise that the air source heat pumps, along with the air handling units, fan motors, low energy lighting, 598 solar panels, pool pump motor upgrades, upgrades to the building management system and a pool cover were all installed following the securing of funding by the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme – resulting in a spend of £1.45m at the Stour Centre. A number of these works would have been required to be upgraded in any event, so the success of the funding also reduced the impact on the Council’s budget. We worked with Leisure Energy, who are a recognised contractor in the industry, to deliver this technology and Sport England are also advocating this technology in the next round of their swimming pool support fund. Whilst this sort of air source heat pump is recognised and used by many leisure operators, as with any new technology issues may arise and we are constantly working with contractors and suppliers pro-actively to minimise these. We are therefore actively engaging with the installers of the air source heat pumps and also Leisure Energy who provided additional technical advice and support in the project to fully understand the recent issues, why they occurred on new equipment, and to get the reassurance that the same problems will not reoccur.”

**Supplementary Question by Councillor Gauder**

“Thank you Mr Mayor. I’m pleased to hear that the Council is taking responsibility for the failure of the heating system, but what I would like to know is what are the Service Level Agreements regarding the repairs and maintenance of the air source heat pumps and the new equipment in the Stour Centre and what is going to be the Council’s financial liability going forwards?”

**Reply by Councillor Betty**

“As I sort of stated in my previous answer, Officers are currently working with consultants and contractors to get to the bottom of the issues and a full report will come forward on this once those issues have come to light. So a report will follow from Officers in due course.”

**Supplementary Question by Councillor Bell**

“Will the Portfolio Holder please keep in mind the importance of keeping swimming pools open? Down in Tenterden we had a closed swimming pool for quite a while and I think people are often misled into thinking this is a purely leisure matter, however schools take children to these pools to teach them to swim, so there is a huge safety function, so please do keep this as a level of high priority.”

**Reply by Councillor Betty**

“Thank you Mr Mayor, noted.”

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