

Ashford Borough Council

Minutes of a Meeting of the Ashford Borough Council held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **17th October 2019**.

Present:

Her Worshipful the Mayor, Cllr. J Webb (Chairman);

Cllrs. Anckorn, Barrett, Bartlett, Mrs Bell, Bell, Blanford, Buchanan, Burgess, Campkin, Clarkson, Clokie, Dehnel, Farrell, Feacey, Forest, Gideon, Harman, Hayward, B Heyes, T Heyes, Howard, Howard-Smith, Iliffe, Krause, Ledger, Link, Mulholland, N Ovenden, Pickering, Rogers, Shorter, Smith, Spain, Sparks, C Suddards, L Suddards, Turner, Ward, Wedgbury, White, Wright.

Also Present:

Chief Executive, Director of Law and Governance, Director of Finance and Economy, Head of Corporate Property and Projects, Member Services Manager (Operational).

Apologies:

Cllrs. Chilton, Knowles, Michael, K Ovenden, Walder.

Prior to the commencement of the meeting Members remained standing in respect of the late James Felix Ellis Smith who was the Borough Council Member for Chilham from 1973 to 1991 and Mayor in 1981/82, and for the late David Bradberry who was the Borough Council Member for the Norman Ward from 2007 to 2011. The Reverend Mackenzie then said prayers.

185 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 Director of Law and Governance advised that there were none.

186 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Council and the Extraordinary Council Meeting held on the 18th July 2019 be approved and confirmed as correct records.

187 Announcements

(a) The Mayor

The Mayor welcomed everyone to the meeting. She advised that they had had a very busy and enjoyable few months, meeting many amazing people and organisations as they travelled through this Mayoral year. They had attended a variety of events, from greeting the Hare Krishna Peace March (standing in front of two enormous bullocks for a photo call had been a real experience!), to discovering even more of what the Borough had to offer, as well as the continued work of Ashford's volunteer sector. She said that they had been delighted to have been able to share and celebrate the many anniversaries of local businesses that had occurred so far in 2019, including the Ashford Museum, Willesborough Windmill and Biddenden Vineyard. To have been able to invite them in to the Parlour to recognise their incredible achievements had definitely been one of their many highlights, and she was sure they would still have many more to celebrate.

In this Year of the Environment, as a Council they were leading the way in encouraging the Borough's schools to engage in gardening competitions. She would not forget the delight and excitement of the school children when presented with their awards after winning, as well as the success of the 'Ashford in Bloom' competition and the opening of new play areas and outdoor spaces. Even if the free ice creams given out were not a healthy option, they always went down a treat, especially with the adults!

The Mayor said that the Council's own Aspire team were more than worthy of praise. It had been extremely interesting to attend their presentation day recently to find out about all the diverse training that the staff had undertaken and achieved, and that it was not just all about planting. Councillors who had been unable to attend really missed the opportunity to see just how great this team was and the enormity of their contribution to the Borough. Members would, however, be able to see their creativity when they joined her at the reception in the Committee Rooms later that evening.

She was extremely privileged and filled with pride in being able to welcome for the first time the Mayor's Cadets who would accompany her at her key Civic Ceremonies in Ashford. She wanted to give an enormous thank you to the Ashford Sea Cadet and Royal Marine Cadet who were in attendance this evening. It was, however, with much sadness that she announced that her Chaplain, Reverend John Mackenzie would be moving on in December. She said that she would miss his good counsel very much and wished him every success and happiness in his new venture. She also wanted to thank John for his support of the Borough and the Mayors over many years.

The Mayor advised that in February of this year, it had been agreed that the Council should recognise the commitment, hard work, vitality and vision towards the Borough of Ashford's growth that past Councillors had contributed to. She said that being a Councillor was not about just being voted in at elections, but caring about Ashford's residents, their worries, concerns, the places they called home, their safety and their wellbeing. It was an enormous responsibility and she thought it was right and fitting that this commitment was being recognised and celebrated later that evening. Therefore, she felt extremely proud and humbled to be a part of this 'history in the making' event, being able to welcome Ashford's first Honorary Aldermen and to thank them personally for

their years of dedicated service to the Borough of Ashford at that evening's very special ceremony.

(b) Leader of the Council

The Leader said that over the last few months there have been a number of developments which he would like to share with colleagues. Members would be aware that earlier that day a deal had been struck with the European Union over the EU exit which would be discussed in Parliament this coming Saturday. Whilst nobody could say what outcome would emerge from those discussions, many would know that the Borough had been working hard over a number of months with KCC and other agencies to prepare for a No Deal Brexit. This had been the subject of a presentation to Members that past week and many had been present. There had been a need to respond to the action of Government and this had in turn undoubtedly impacted on the Council's ability to get on with many matters that it would normally be dealing with.

Having said that, he was pleased to note that after a long and robust procurement exercise, the Council had announced Freedom Leisure as the new operator to run Ashford's main leisure facilities. The move would see a significant investment in leisure facilities and a transformation in the way they were provided, which would boost participation and improve the health and wellbeing of the Borough's residents - something he was sure all colleagues would agree was very important for a growing Borough. As outlined at the Cabinet in September, as part of the new arrangements Ashford Leisure Trust (ALT) would step back from the future management of the operation of the Stour Centre, Julie Rose Stadium and other leisure sites owned by the Council, allowing ABC to contract directly with Freedom Leisure. ALT would now focus their time on fulfilling their charitable objectives of improving the health and wellbeing of the residents of Ashford, with a particular focus on those who were in disadvantaged groups or with health challenges. On behalf of the Council he wanted to put on record their thanks to ALT for the work they had undertaken over the years. In the meantime it was very much business as usual at the town's leisure sites, with no impact on services or customers and ALT employees would be transferred across to Freedom Leisure when they took over day to day operation of the facilities next year.

The Leader said that parks and play areas were among the facilities that continued to be improved across the Borough. This was thanks to the hard work of the Council's planning team in securing Section 106 funding from the developers of housing and other schemes. More than three quarters of a million pounds had been collected in Section 106 funding in 2018/19. In recent weeks two revamped play areas had opened as a result of such contributions. Church Road play area in Sevington had been refurbished with new equipment, including a wooden multi tower climbing unit with slides, zip wire, swings and trampoline. Funding had come from Highways England as part of its development of Junction 10A. Whilst the St Anne's Road play area now had a new toddler climbing frame, adventure trail, swings, surf swing and spinning seesaw. Section 106 funding from the development next to the park paid for the work.

He was sure that colleagues would be pleased to hear that the Council had successfully defended an action in the High Court brought against the Ashford Local Plan 2030. The owner of the former Bombardier site in Beaver Lane, had objected to Network Rail's plans to bring part of the site back into use as a light maintenance train depot. Lawyers acting for the Council presented a robust defence against these allegations and, after

carefully considering the legal arguments, the Court rejected the claims. He was delighted that Ashford's Local Plan had withstood this examination in the High Court and he wanted to congratulate all the staff who had worked diligently in preparing for the case.

Ashford Borough Council was continuing with its commitment to protect the environment and to have a zero tolerance attitude to anti-social and criminal behaviour. This had led to yet another successful prosecution which involved in an incident where domestic rubbish was found dumped in one of the Borough's country lanes. He said that this Authority would not tolerate fly-tipping in its beautiful Borough. It was a scourge of the countryside and the Council was determined to do all it could to stamp it out. This case demonstrated that, where it had sufficient evidence, the Council would have no hesitation in pursuing people through the courts. Just that past week, Friends of the Earth had ranked Ashford in the top 10% of Local Authorities for performance on climate change. Out of 339 Local Authorities in the UK, Ashford was joint 14th in their table with an 80% score. Although this Council did not declare a "climate emergency", they were determined to become 80-100% carbon neutral by 2025 and in any event totally carbon neutral by 2030. The Council was adopting a holistic approach to addressing climate change and would therefore be assessing its buildings, surveying its trees, and looking to work with businesses and communities. They were also looking into opportunities around renewable energy, particularly solar energy and they were working on an action plan that would address the key issues regarding climate change.

The Leader said he was pleased to see Ashford listed as one of Britain's "thriving communities" in an article in *The Times* a few weeks ago. Ashford was among 20 places mentioned where economies were growing, and house prices buoyant. The paper was quoting from research by leading estate agents Savills and the Government's Office of National Statistics. They had studied nearly 450 settlements and used a range of criteria to identify the towns which were not just surviving, but were thriving. Ashford's fast reliable rail links to London were highlighted, whilst a healthy rise in population and employment growth over the past decade had also contributed to Ashford's all-round success. This was though not a cause for complacency and it was recognised that there was a great deal more to do. Not only did Ashford have excellent links to the capital, it also benefitted from unrivalled European connections and works on the signalling solution were due to finish in December with the new E320 Eurostar trains using Ashford International Station from January. The third daily Paris service would also resume in May 2020 when Eurostar's new summer timetable came in.

He was sure that colleagues would want to join him in encouraging the Borough's families to have some fun in Ashford Town Centre over the Half Term holidays. Loveashford was organising a "Day of the Dead" Halloween celebration event on Saturday 26 October, from 11am to 6pm which he was sure would prove very popular. Visitors to the town could now benefit from free parking after 3pm at Elwick Place car park and patrons of Picturehouse Cinema could also benefit from free parking when they booked a ticket to go to the cinema. He could also reveal that there were exciting plans in the pipeline for Ashford's Town Centre in the run up to the festive period which were set to entertain people in a way not seen before!

Finally, the Leader wanted to advise that Roger Gough had earlier that day been confirmed as the new Leader of Kent County Council. Ashford was the only one of the 12 Kent Districts that had a District Deal with KCC, signed by the previous Leader Paul

Carter, and he was sure that would be carried forward by the new Leader. It was so important that this Council continued to work closely in partnership with Kent County Council colleagues, as they had done for the last five or six years.

188 Cabinet – 12th September and 10th October 2019

(a) Cabinet – 12th September 2019

Resolved:

That (i) the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 12th September 2019 be received and noted with the exception of Minute Nos. 125 and 128.

(ii) Minute Nos. 125 and 128 be approved and adopted.

(b) Cabinet – 10th October 2019

Councillor Spain said he would like to speak on Minute No. 179 – Housing – Current Delivery, Finance and Onward Strategy. He said he wanted to congratulate the Portfolio Holder and Officers involved in producing the report as it was obvious that a lot of hard work had gone in to its production. He did have some concerns over whether, as a Council, they were in a position to challenge and question the information contained within the report. During the meeting they had been presented with information about the numbers of Council owned housing, approximately 5000 houses out of a total housing stock of approximately 50,000 households across the Borough – so around 10%. Looking ahead, and looking at the graphs in the report, he did have a concern around whether that ratio of 10% would be maintained in the future. He believed it would be very important to maintain that kind of level in the overall build out of housing across the Borough. That level would allow the Council to do things such as tackle homelessness and other issues and he knew this was a shared concern of all Members of the Council. Within the information presented to the Cabinet, he felt it would have been beneficial to have a forward projection of that level of Council owned housing against general housing and he sought an assurance that the Council would be looking to at least maintain that 10% level in the period mentioned. He noted from the Local Plan that about 9000 houses were due to be built out by the end of 2024, so could figures for Council owned affordable housing, and different types of tenure be included in future reports? This would allow all Members to be able to test and challenge what was being done more effectively.

Councillor Barrett, Portfolio Holder for Housing, thanked Councillor Spain for his kind comments on the report. It was true to say that a lot of work had gone in to its production. In succinct terms the report outlined that this Council, by 2023, would have built or purchased an additional 500 Council houses. The idea being that if this rate continued in line with the Business Plan until 2048, this would accumulate the Council an approximate tally of 7,800 Council houses. Clearly this could alter as the years went by, but he would be more than happy to have a discussion with Councillor Spain and the Head of Housing over the graphs, statistics and the report in full at a mutually convenient time.

Resolved:

That subject to the expiry of the period by which decisions arising from the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 10th October 2019 may be called in, i.e. 24th October 2019: -

- (i) the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 10th October 2019 be received and noted with the exception of Minute No. 184.**
- (ii) Minute No. 184 be approved and adopted.**

189 Audit Committee – 30th July and 1st October 2019

(a) Audit Committee – 30th July 2019

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Audit Committee held on the 30th July 2019 be received and noted.

(b) Audit Committee – 1st October 2019

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Audit Committee held on the 1st October 2019 be received and noted.

190 Appointments Committee – 21st August 2019

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Appointments Committee held on the 21st August 2019 be received and noted.

191 Selection and Constitutional Review Committee – 10th October 2019

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Selection and Constitutional Review Committee held on the 10th October 2019 be approved and adopted.

192 Questions by Members

(a) Question from Councillor L Suddards to Councillor Gideon, Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Wellbeing.

"I have written to the Portfolio Holder concerning the A&E at the William Harvey and I am grateful for her response. However, I would like to ask the Portfolio Holder if she could outline what she has done on behalf of the Administration to protect A&E at the William Harvey for the benefit of all Members of Council?"

Reply by Councillor Gideon

"Madam Mayor, I wish to reassure Councillor Suddards that the issue of health provision for our local community is one of my highest priorities. As Councillor Suddards knows, there have been several opportunities for Members and the public alike to become involved in the developing plans of both the Hospital Trust and the Ashford CCG. A recent example was the NHS hospital consultation workshop that I attended, along with my Deputy Portfolio Holder. This was an opportunity to hear more about the options, highlight local concerns and challenge some of the assumptions being made. Also, I recently organised a meeting on the proposal by the Ashford CCG to merge with the other Kent CCGs. This enabled a small group of Members, who are particularly interested in this area, to hear about the CCGs plans, discuss the advantages that it could bring and the importance of protecting local services. I am hoping that this group will meet again as proposals develop, including the possible changes at the hospital.

As far as the hospital changes are concerned, we will in due course have an opportunity to respond to a formal consultation and before then I know that the Trust is more than happy to provide updates should Members so require. Of course, they have already sent out regular briefings that you can sign up to. What I would, however, like to stress is that we all need to engage in these important decisions and support our constituents to become involved in the decision-making process. I will also emphasise that the majority of health activity takes place outside the hospital setting. We need to support the hospital and the CCG to make the necessary changes to improve services across the board, for example, ensuring that the primary care estate is modernised and fit to support our growing Borough. This is an area that I am particularly involved in, working closely with my Service."

Supplementary Question by Councillor L Suddards

"Thank you Madam Mayor. Whilst I appreciate Councillor Gideon's response, I am significantly involved in many of the workshops and activities that are going on in the Borough, but my specific question was very much around A&E. As a former nurse of over 35 years, I well understand how much care has changed and is moving out into the community, but I know that I speak for not just the residents of Beaver Ward, but for all Ashford people, particularly those out in the villages who are particularly concerned about the potential loss of our A&E department. We have seen across the country that not only are these being lost, but also undermined by having reduced staffing hours. Anyone in Ashford who faces tackling the A28 with a young child or in an emergency situation, faces an absolutely terrifying prospect. So, given that our own MP was a former Deputy Prime Minister and our Portfolio Holder is on the Conservative Panel, I

am asking what is being done with this supposed influence to guarantee the future of our A&E department and what pressure is being applied to the decision makers? The population of Ashford have a right to know what lead the Council is going to take over this matter which I think is very serious.”

Reply by Councillor Gideon

“Madam Mayor, since I have become Portfolio Holder I have offered Councillor Suddards the opportunity to be briefed monthly on the Portfolio. She has taken up this opportunity, although she missed the last meeting, she has also joined the Inequalities Sub-Group of the Ashford Health and Wellbeing Partnership and I have always responded promptly to her emails, so I find it a bit disappointing that she seems to imply a lack of activity in the Health Portfolio. I do have to say that this does smack somewhat of a Politically motivated question. Councillor Suddards mentions our MP and I am sure all Members will know that Damian Green has been very vocal about the options for the East Kent Trust and retaining our A&E. However, as you all know, and as I have said in my previous answer, we are in the middle of a consultation period and therefore there is nothing we can do at this moment in time except express our opinions. If Councillor Suddards has a specific plan that she wishes to share, I would welcome that input. I have had input from Independent Councillors, Councillor Hayward and Councillor Walder for example, and I have worked very well with people who have had constructive ideas and I would welcome Councillors Suddards’ input and suggestions on this. Health should not be a Party Political issue and I think it is really important that we come together and anybody who has any ideas as to what they would like to see happen, should share them. As far as I am concerned it is clear that we want to protect the A&E in its full capacity in Ashford and I am sure that everybody in this Council Chamber would agree. When the consultation results come back, there will be more opportunity to input in to this, but I am really not sure that anything else can be done at this moment in time.”

Supplementary Question by Councillor Clarkson

“Madam Mayor. I would ask if the Portfolio Holder would agree with me that this Council will fight vigorously for the right decision to be made? This is the largest of the twelve Districts in Kent and we have very good road networks and access, but I agree we must quite correctly wait for the outcomes of the consultation. This is where we marshal our case on facts, knowledge and understanding and we do not want to be doing anything too premature. We want to be having an impact and I know my colleague here, the Deputy Leader, has been quoted in an article in the Kentish Express today on this subject. We fully recognise what is happening but we have to look at it holistically and look and what’s being planned across the piece because if we go in to bat too prematurely, in a vocal way, they will quite rightly say “hold on, you haven’t even seen the proposals yet because they are not finalised at this stage”. So we do have to be careful but I am sure people know that I am not renowned for being slow in coming forward on these matters. We will certainly be knocking at the door when we have marshalled our case properly and effectively, based on full knowledge and understanding.”

Reply by Councillor Gideon

“Madam Mayor, yes I would agree with the Leader and I think he has said it all. I think we are all in agreement in this Council Chamber that we want the best for Ashford and getting the timing right is crucial in that.”

(DS)

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