

Ashford Borough Council

Minutes of a Meeting of the Ashford Borough Council held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **19th December 2019**.

Present:

Cllr. J S Link (Deputy Mayor in the Chair);

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

Prior to the commencement of the meeting the Reverend Mackenzie said prayers.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Barrett, Gideon, Krause, Rogers, Smith, Walder, Ward, Webb.

Also Present:

Chief Executive, Director of Law and Governance, Director of Finance and Economy, Head of Legal and Democracy, Head of Finance and IT, Head of Planning and Development.

257 Exempt or Confidential Information

The Deputy 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.

258 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Council held on the 17th October 2019 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

259 Announcements

(a) The Deputy Mayor

The Deputy Mayor said it was a great pleasure to be the Chairman for this evening's Full Council meeting, the final one for 2019. At this point, on behalf of the Mayor, he wanted to extend Councillor Jenny Webb's apologies for not being present at this meeting. Owing to the change of date, due to the General Election, the Mayor had

been committed to attending the Ashford Sea Cadets Prize Giving and Awards evening. As one of her chosen charities the Mayor wished to be there to present the prizes to the young people at this special event. However Members would be pleased to know that the Mayor would arrive a little later on and had invited all to join her in the Committee Rooms after the meeting for the annual Christmas Reception.

He said he would like to take the opportunity to pass on some “well-dones” following last week’s General Election.

Firstly, his sincere congratulations were extended to Damian Green who had been re-elected as the MP for Ashford. He also wanted to give a special message of recognition to everybody who stood in Ashford and those who were involved in the campaigns for the various candidates. Any Election was a very intense time for everyone involved and all should be acknowledged for their efforts.

Secondly, he wanted to give congratulations to one of their number, Councillor Jo Gideon, who had been elected as MP in the seat of Stoke-on-Trent Central. This was clearly some achievement and they wished her well.

Thirdly, as some would know, this evening was the final engagement for their very dear friend, Reverend John Mackenzie. Reverend Mackenzie had accepted the honour to be the Mayor’s Chaplain for Cllr David Smith, Cllr Winston Michael and this year for Cllr Jenny Webb. John was known to all for his kindness and dedication to the Borough over many years and always being there to support, not just the Council, but also the Town and its projects. All would greatly miss his inclusive approach and willingness to extend the hands of friendship and love across cultures. So, on behalf of the Mayor of Ashford and all present, he said he would like to wish he, Sophie and all the family good luck in their new adventure at Holloway.

Finally, the Deputy Mayor said he would like to take this opportunity to wish all present a very enjoyable Christmas break and a happy and successful New Year.

(b) Leader of the Council

The Leader began by echoing the Deputy Mayor’s comments about John Mackenzie. He had been delighted to have the opportunity to have breakfast with John and his wife Sophie in the Mayor’s Parlour the previous day. He was moving to pastures new in Holloway, which was an area he personally knew well, and whilst their gain would be Ashford’s loss, he was sure John’s love and kindness would be very well received.

As had also already been mentioned, they had experienced the General Election the previous week and it had resulted in many re-arranged meetings, including this one, and it would be nice to get back to normal after Christmas! He did want to pass on a thank you to the Returning Officer and her staff who had been working so hard over a number of weeks to make sure everything worked smoothly. From polling stations, postal votes, right through to the counting on the night, it was a massive drain on the staff of the Council and he wanted to thank all involved. He also wanted to congratulate one of his Cabinet Members, Councillor Jo Gideon, who had been elected as an MP for Stoke on Trent Central and would be a hard person to replace.

The Leader said that as the year drew to a close he wanted to reflect on a small number of achievements and developments they had seen in the Borough, and pick out one or two highlights that had occurred over the last twelve months.

The arrival of a 1.6 acre craft brewery experience – The Curious Brewery from English wines expert, Chapel Down – was enabling it to grow its domestic and international distribution and contribute to the Borough’s strong tourism offer. This had been a great achievement for the Borough and Chapel Down seemed to be branching out all over the world and had a great reputation. The multi-million pound, state-of-the art, custom-built brewery which had opened in May was proving to be very popular indeed.

The McArthurGlen Designer Outlet had expanded – a £90m investment adding 100,000 square feet of retail space and creating 500 new jobs through the introduction of 50 new luxury and premium brands. The expansion, which opened in October, had seen an exciting new ‘Garden of England’ themed playground, new dedicated events space, a Changing Places facility and Europe’s largest living wall added to the centre. The Centre welcomed 3.6m visitors per year, and this was expected to rise to around five million plus per year over the next five years. The expansion would create a flagship shopping and leisure destination in the South East, providing a complementary offer to the town centre and driving long-term economic benefits for Ashford.

October had also seen the partial opening of Junction J10a of the M20 motorway. The long-awaited junction was being built 700 metres south east of the existing J10 and promised to be a catalyst for further economic and commercial development, providing much-needed extra transport capacity. He had also been advised that the junction was going to be operational from that evening so it was probably happening as he spoke!

In early December, Eurostar International Ltd, in partnership with Network Rail, High Speed 1, the Office of Rail and Road, Ashford Borough Council and Kent County Council, had successfully tested their new Class 374 trains on the Ashford railway spurs. This meant that Eurostar’s new Class 374 (e320) trains were now able to serve Ashford International Station to and from Paris, Lille and Brussels. While there would still be some refurbished Class 373 trains in operation (and these would, as always planned, be retained on the Disney, Ski and Marseille services), the new Class 374s would very quickly become the norm at Ashford International Station. The fully restored service of three daily trains each way between Ashford and Paris would commence from the summer timetable, which was due to start on 17 May 2020. Tickets for this extra Paris service would go on sale in January (as well as the existing daily Lille and Brussels trains each way). This multi-million pound investment in state-of-the-art signalling equipment at Ashford International Station would secure the long-term future of Ashford’s place on the European rail map. It was also worth re-iterating that whilst other areas of the country talked about High Speed 2 which may or may not ever happen, Ashford had High Speed 1 and all should be very proud of that.

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The Leader advised that Ashford Borough Council had worked with award-winning Carl Turner Architects on adapting several disused industrial buildings into a mixed-use campus providing a stylish food and drink destination, flexible indoor/outdoor event space and co-working space aimed at start-up firms. Carl Turner had designed projects like Pop Brixton and Peckham Levels, which had seen areas of London transformed into popular leisure and workspaces and he was sure Ashford would see the same here. The Coachworks had welcomed an estimated 1000 visitors during its opening weekend, with a Christmas market drawing in the crowds. On the same weekend several thousand people enjoyed the six showings of Glow International and followed the Winter Forest trail through the town centre as part of the Illuminities events and a week later the Carnival of the Baubles had brought Ashford Town Centre to life on a Saturday evening creating a fantastic atmosphere and a wonderful spectacle. All had been very pleased with how successful these events had been and the feedback from the community had been really positive.

Finally, given that this was the last Full Council meeting of the year, the Leader said he would like to join the Deputy Mayor in wishing a Merry, Safe and Happy Christmas and New Year to colleagues, Officers and most importantly the people of Ashford.

Councillor Chilton said that he also wanted to place on record his thanks to the Returning Officer and all involved in the election. He also wanted to pay tribute to his colleague Councillor Dara Farrell, who stood in Ashford and actually did quite well given the broader national picture. He wanted to ask in light of the threat to A&E services and the public concern about the risks involved, when they could expect to see a replacement for the Portfolio Holder covering Health, now she had been elected as an MP?

The Leader said that the upcoming Christmas break would give an opportunity to reflect and he was sure that there would be an announcement about the filling of this vacancy shortly after Christmas.

Councillor Campkin asked if given that Councillor Gideon was the only female Portfolio Holder, would the gender balance be reflected with the appointment of the new Portfolio Holder?

The Leader replied that his history would show that he was not slow in appointing female colleagues, given that in his previous life he had employed the first full-time female firefighter in London, but on this occasion, as he always did he would look to appoint the best person for the job in his judgment, irrespective of gender.

260 Cabinet – 28th November 2019

Resolved:

- That (i) the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 28th November 2019 be received and noted with the exception of Minute Nos. 212, 217, 218 and 220.**
- (ii) Minute Nos. 212, 217, 218 and 220 be approved and adopted.**

261 Audit Committee – 3rd December 2019

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Audit Committee held on the 3rd December 2019 be received and noted.

262 Standards Committee – 9th October 2019

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Standards Committee held on the 9th October 2019 be approved and adopted.

263 Questions by Members

(a) Question from Councillor Ledger to Councillor Clarkson, Leader of the Council

“Now that we have a settled and strong Government with an expressed wish to ‘let the healing begin’, I feel there is a role for this Administration to actively and positively lobby on behalf of all sectors of our community. Could we therefore have an assurance that the Leader and Cabinet Members will fight for justice and fairness for everyone? That they will lobby our MP and the Government on behalf of our residents, prioritising our community’s needs to ensure that Ashford grows in a way that provides opportunity for all?”

We as a Council need to ensure that affordable housing is truly affordable by local people and is prioritised as a rural must. Local needs housing requires prompt and full attention so that young people do not have to move out of their community to set up home.

Our villages have a vital role to play in the biggest issue facing us all, which is not Brexit, but the unforgiving and undeniable global and local effects of climate change. Our countryside also needs support, not pressure, from Government to have swathes of large four and five bedroom houses imposed.

Like many Councils we need tools that help us ensure that planned development delivers on time and in full so that we can meet our housing targets and importantly, protect our countryside and it play a proper and sound environmental role for our future generations.

We need our MP to take these messages to Parliament and stand up for our rural corners, not just standing up for Ashford and Tenterden. Will the Leader please give us the assurances our rural communities so desperately need?”

Reply by Councillor Clarkson

“Firstly I would like to thank Councillor Ledger for what I consider to be more of a Party Political statement than a question. However I must in fairness concede that the statement does embody a question or two in terms of seeking certain assurances. I am somewhat surprised at both the tone and content but this gives me an opportunity to not only answer the questions, but to also explain just what we have done and are doing as a caring Authority about these matters. It also gives me an opportunity to correct factual inaccuracies and seriously misleading statements.

With regard to your first point about us lobbying Government, I can advise you that Members of this Administration are not slow in lobbying Central Government, indeed on occasions they lead with things like Space Standards for housing development, where the Government follows us 18 months later, and for arrangements for removing HGVs from inappropriate locations and being the only Local Authority in the United Kingdom to ask for and be given clamping powers.

In your second paragraph you seek assurances about justice and fairness for everyone. This Council, under a Conservative Administration, cares passionately about everyone in our Borough and we pride ourselves in supporting everyone in most need – be it financially or in terms of disability or other matters. This Conservative Administration has been able, through sound and prudent financial management, to levy the lowest Council Tax in the whole of the county for over a decade. Furthermore this Authority has one of the most generous Council Tax Support Schemes in the county and is the only Councils in Kent to employ two Welfare Support Officers, who will engage directly with those in most need. This will in turn ensure that real and meaningful support is available to those in most need. This Council Tax scheme for lower income groups is one of the fairest in the Council and we are also the only Authority in Kent to give additional rate relief to those with disabilities in the lower income group. In addition to that we further support people through the Exceptional Hardship payment scheme which is set to rise from £50,000 to £200,000 in April 2020. We are also about to embark on a project to make significant improvements to the six least affluent Wards in our Borough. We are taking positive steps to increase facilities and improve access for those with disabilities – this is particularly so in terms of Changing Places toilet facilities where we lead the entire UK in this field. In the New Year we will be undertaking a Borough wide residents survey to update and better understand the needs of all sections of the Borough and their communities, something we do every two to three years. ABC supports events that are available for everyone to enjoy such as the Create Festival which attracts over 15,000 people, and the recent Winter Events Programme including Glow International and the Festival of the Baubles attracting another 1000 people with a procession of lanterns made by local school children from across the Borough through the town centre– again indicative of how we feel about our Borough.

ABC had enabled rural transport schemes such as the Wealden Wheels, Rolvenden Rocket and Woodchurch Wagon, ensuring that those living in the more isolated parts of the Borough can actually access services and meet with friends and family. Only last week, the Chief Executive and I met with the Principals at Stagecoach to discuss further rural bus services for the villages. There is regular support for rural projects

through the Community Grant Fund and recent examples include £10,000 for Smarden Stores towards the cost of running a community Post Office and store, to Chilham Parish Council for footpaths around the recreation ground and Section 106 funding in places such as Bethersden etc. There is support for Parish Councils through KALC and a dedicated ABC Liaison Officer and advice and support to Parish Councils on issues such as open space and play as and when required.

In your third paragraph you mention the question of affordable and local needs housing. This Conservative led Administration continues to lead the way in delivering affordable and local needs housing. Our Rural Housing Needs Scheme is the best in the South East. We have 40% affordable housing in rural developments, seven rural exceptions sites which have delivered 45 properties since 2011, 219 rural properties delivered since 2011 and a further six homes to be delivered in the New Year. In addition the Council has since 2013 purchased some 78 street properties, 11 of which were indeed in the rural areas. The delivery of affordable rural housing is essential for rural life, for example in Smarden it has kept the local school open and maintained facilities. The Community Land Trust in Tenterden is another example of where we are supporting the delivery of affordable rural housing. As the Borough's largest social housing provider we continue to lead the way and influence the market in a positive way. ABC continues to fund local needs surveys to ensure we are responding to what local people want and this often means a variety of housing products to ensure balanced communities, for example we always try our hardest to ensure that shared ownership homes are taken up by local people first enabling them to get on the housing ladder and stay in their villages. This does not mean that our work on this is in any way complete and conversations continue to find ways to further enhance young people getting on the housing ladder. Our work has been recognised by others and we continue to win, or be shortlisted for, housing awards for schemes such as Farrow Court, Danemore and Noakes Meadow. We also work with Housing Associations to provide local needs housing, just like the scheme that was opened by HRH the Princess Royal last week in Warehorne and I believe that we are ahead of all other Authorities in the South East for housing provision for the ageing population. Our programme for sheltered and supported accommodation is also well ahead of other Local Authorities, yet we do need to understand that there is still more to do. In terms of homeless families we lead in terms of providing good quality temporary accommodation and support such as Christchurch House and Christchurch Lodge are examples of better Short Stay accommodation rather than B&B and gives us an important capital asset that serves the needs in a much better way and saves the rate payers money – a win-win situation.

In your fourth and fifth paragraphs you mention climate change and make reference to Government pressure for the countryside to have a swathe of four and five bedroom houses – this is just factually inaccurate. Ashford has a strong planning policy to ensure that the right homes are built in the right place. We continue to be a plan-led Authority to ensure that homes are built in a sustainable way that protects the Borough from inappropriate housing development and therefore protecting the villages. We undertake housing needs assessments to ensure a mix of housing is available to meet the needs of local people and that communities are balanced. ABC has pledged to become carbon neutral by 2030 and 80% by 2025. By actively seeking to address climate change the Council will be improving the wellbeing and prosperity of all its residents. A Carbon Neutral Strategy and Action Plan is currently

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being developed and we must show leadership by becoming carbon neutral and reducing our own emissions and we will work closely with residents, community groups and local businesses to enable them to achieve carbon neutrality as well.

In your last paragraph you do a grave injustice to our local MP by implying that he does not stand up for all in our Borough. I quote – “we need our MP to take these messages to Parliament and stand up for our rural corners, not just standing up for Ashford and Tenterden. Will the Leader please give us the assurances our rural communities so desperately need?” I do not need to give you that assurance but I would ask that elected Members refrain from making such remarks that could be seen to create division between the rural and urban areas. I also need to remind colleagues that Damian Green, the MP for most of our Borough, stands up for all parts of this Borough and has intervened and lobbied hard to support this Borough on many matters and many occasions and I can assure you he has no delineation between rural and urban.

Mr Deputy Mayor, this Conservative Administration is a very caring one that does serve all of the people of Ashford and will continue to do so.”

Supplementary Question by Councillor Ledger

“Thank you Mr Deputy Mayor. I just really want to reflect on one issue that the Leader has mentioned and that was the very positive social housing scheme that was opened by the Princess Royal in Warehorne last week. The Leader, Chief Executive and The Mayor were all present and I am really proud to say that this is in my Ward. There needs to be something of a culture change of landowners that want to maximise land values and I would ask that this Administration research and find ways of how we can best persuade landowners to present and supply land, whether to the Borough Council, or to Housing Associations, at a reasonable cost to ensure the viability of other social housing schemes like Goldfield in Warehorne. This development is a beacon of light and an example to be followed. It was a lifeline to some Warehorne residents who would otherwise have had to move away, and many colleagues here tonight would I’m sure recognise that it would be a similar lifeline in many other villages as well if we could turn the tide. Whether there is a need for incentives to come from Central Government, or perhaps ourselves, I can’t answer that, but I would ask that we push this initiative forward with vigour and priority and I ask the Leader if he could come back to our next Full Council meeting with a message of how we could take this forward?”

Reply by Councillor Clarkson

“I would firstly respond to Councillor Ledger that Full Council Meetings are not really an avenue to do business like that. If you want to know what we are doing on that you can always discuss that with our Officers or myself and Cabinet colleagues. You do need to understand that when mentioning land values and Government activities, unfortunately I did not stand in the General Election and therefore my ability to influence these is somewhat limited. As I mentioned earlier we do often lobby MP’s and other agencies on matters relating to this Borough. You also mention the site in Warehorne, but there are other sites in this Borough where we have exactly the same sort of development and we work with landowners and we call these

‘exceptional sites’ – where you don’t get the full value but you can get affordable housing and we will bridge some of that gap. So we are doing some of this. We have approximately 100 Officers in our Housing Revenue Account who are working on all of these issues. I think we are doing fairly well, that does not mean we are complacent and will not be pressing for more and it is why we are doing all of the things I mentioned earlier. I do welcome the aforementioned scheme and I am keen for young people to get on the housing ladder. The first house I bought with my wife was with the help of Wandsworth Borough Council, so I do understand. However I do think we are very progressive in this Borough which is why we get nominated for so many awards. I do take on board what you say and you are welcome to come and talk to me about it at any time.”

Supplementary Question by Councillor Wedgbury

“Does the Leader agree with me that having and maintaining the lowest Council Tax in Kent also helps the poorest and most vulnerable in our society, particularly those on fixed incomes by keeping their costs down and as a Council we should all be working hard together to maintain that for the people of Ashford?”

Reply by Councillor Clarkson

“I am delighted to agree with Councillor Wedgbury. Not only does it help, but this Authority has also not cut any services. In fact we have increased services. When I took over as Leader seven years ago we were the lowest ranked Authority for recycling and the people of our Borough worked hard to now make us the best recycler in the County. We are also the only District in Kent with a District Deal with KCC to work together and we have used that to take the Grounds Maintenance service in-house to make our lovely Borough in the Garden of England look nice again. We bought a yard and all new equipment for them and they are now working hard and doing a brilliant job for our Borough. That’s how we view things here – not only do we keep the Council Tax low, through prudent financial management we’ve been able to do much more than they do in other Boroughs. I am passionate about this Borough and passionate about the people in it, and I want to provide them with a brilliant and continually improving service, which we’ve done without raising the Council Tax.”

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