

Selection & Constitutional Review Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Selection & Constitutional Review Committee held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **30th January 2020**

Present:

Cllr. Clarkson (Chairman);
Cllr. Bartlett (Vice-Chairman);

Cllrs. Buchanan, Chilton, Clokie, Farrell, Forest, Harman, Hayward, Mulholland, Ovenden, Shorter.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 1.2(c) Councillors Forest, Mulholland and Shorter attended as Substitute Members for Councillors Howard-Smith, Barrett and Feacey respectively.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Barrett, Feacey, Howard-Smith.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Burgess, Pickering, Sparks, White.

Head of Legal and Democracy, Principal Solicitor (Strategic Development), Member Services Manager (Operational).

278 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Bartlett	Made a Voluntary Announcement that he was a Member of the Kennington Community Council.	280

279 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 10th October 2019 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

280 Dissolution of the Grouped Parish Council for Mersham and Sevington

The report set out details of the request from the grouped Parish Council of Mersham and Sevington. This asked the Borough Council to make an order dissolving the current grouping arrangements that saw the parish areas of Mersham

and Sevington being overseen by one Parish Council, and that two separate Parish Councils be created. The report also outlined the consultation that the Parish Council had undertaken, as well as details of the order that the Borough Council would need to make in order to bring into effect the dissolution.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 9.3 Mr Turley of Mersham and Sevington Parish Council spoke on this item. He advised that he was pleased to see the recommendation to separate the Parish Councils and the existing Parish Council unanimously supported this course of action. The area had changed significantly in recent years leading to diverging priorities for residents in the existing Parish, particularly Sevington South which was now a significant urban extension, as opposed to the rural village of Mersham. Each now had their own distinct identities. However, both areas had the critical mass to operate as standalone Parish Councils. He did have one point he wanted to expand on which was the recommendation to undertake elections to the new Parish Councils on the 7th May 2020. As per the Portfolio Holder comments in the report, the Parish Council would also support co-option for the newly created vacant seats, rather than elections for all seats. In their experience new candidates had to be encouraged to put themselves forward and there was never a surplus of volunteers, so any potential election in 2020 was extremely unlikely to be contested with an unnecessary cost in time and effort. Additionally, new Councillors elected in May 2019 would then have to stand down prematurely and possibly not be re-elected, so he hoped that the Committee would support the co-option route. He concluded by thanking both the Ward Member Councillor Bartlett and the Council's Solicitor Sarah Hartles for their valuable advice, support and guidance throughout the process.

The Committee discussed the issue of elections or co-options and were unanimously supportive of the co-option route. It therefore agreed to amend recommendation (iii) accordingly.

A Member made particular reference to the parish wards and it was explained that there were some anomalies with the existing boundaries, but these would best be resolved as part of a future wider Boundary Review, rather than through this exercise. The Member said that he supported the proposals but hoped that any co-option process would take into account the distinct nature of Finberry and ensure representation for that area. Another Member said he also supported the principle of co-option but hoped the process would not become unnecessarily political.

The Chairman wished the representatives from Mersham and Sevington well in developing their new Parish Councils.

Recommended:

- That**
- (i) the request to dissolve the grouping arrangements be noted.**
 - (ii) the order dissolving the grouping arrangements be made in the form attached at Appendix 2 to the report.**
 - (iii) existing Parish Councillors remain in office and the vacancies be filled by co-options.**

281 Planning Committee – Reduction in Size

The Leader introduced the report which sought agreement to a reduction in the number of Members appointed to the Planning Committee. This followed an approach from the Leader of the Labour Group. The report also proposed an increase in the quorum of the Committee. If approved, the proposals would be in place for the new Municipal Year (2020/21). He said that it was clear when comparing to other Authorities that Ashford's Planning Committee was probably now too large. Historically, when the Administration had had a much larger majority on the Council, the number of Members on the Planning Committee had been increased to ensure that the smaller Political Groups had representation. Given that the May 2019 Election had produced a smaller Administrative Party, that need was now less stark and he therefore agreed that the Committee should be reduced in size.

Members were generally supportive of the proposals to reduce the size of the Committee. Some Members expressed the view that perhaps the size could be reduced even further and were also concerned that the number proposed would result in the Administration having an overall majority on the Committee of two Members, rather than one as currently. There was also some concern expressed about the mix of urban and rural Members, the Leader being an ex-officio Member and Cabinet Members being appointed to the Committee.

The Leader advised that the number of voting Members proposed (14) had been selected carefully as it allowed the Green Party to retain their seat on the Committee. The balance of the Committee was determined by the Political Balance calculation so it was prescribed for them and he believed the number should not be engineered. On a wider point he considered that the Planning Committee, in its quasi-judicial capacity, should not be political and he did not think that Members voted on political lines at Planning Committee meetings. If Members of his Group did not act appropriately he said he would have no hesitation in taking action as Group Leader and he hoped that other Group Leaders would follow accordingly. The Committee thought there was some merit in implementing a mix of urban and rural Members on the Planning Committee, but this was something for Group Leaders to action informally and could not be prescribed. Seats were allocated in accordance with the Political Balance calculation and it was for Group Leaders to appoint to those and make decisions on the number of urban, rural or Cabinet Members appointed. The appointment of the Leader as an ex-officio Member of the Planning Committee was set out in the Constitution and would require Full Council approval to change. Group Leaders present agreed that the future operation of the Planning Committee was a subject that could be discussed informally at future Group Leader Meetings.

Recommended:

- That**
- (i) the number of Members appointed to the Planning Committee be reduced from 17 (plus 1 ex-officio) to 14 (plus 1 ex-officio) for the new Municipal Year 2020/21.**
 - (ii) a quorum of 50% of the total membership (seven voting Members) be applied for Meetings of the Planning Committee.**

- (iii) the Terms of Reference of the Planning Committee be amended to reflect (i) and (ii) above.**
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