

Cabinet

Minutes of a Meeting of the Cabinet held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **30th January 2020**.

Present:

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

Cllrs. Bell, Buchanan, Clokie, Pickering, Shorter.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Barrett, Feacey, Pauley.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Mrs Bell, Burgess, Forest, Harman, Hayward, B Heyes, Krause, Mulholland, Ovenden, Spain, Sparks, White.

Chief Executive, Director of Law and Governance, Director of Finance and Economy, Head of Legal and Democracy, Head of Finance and IT, Head of Housing, Community Safety and Wellbeing Manager, Senior Revenues and Benefits Officer, Refugee Resettlement Co-Ordinator, Communications Apprentice, Member Services Manager (Operational).

282 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet held on the 19th December 2019 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

283 Leader's Announcements

The Leader advised that he wanted update colleagues on a small number of changes he proposed to make to the Cabinet Task Groups and Advisory Committees. He said he was very conscious that the Council already had a Joint Transportation Board with KCC and clearly, as Ashford was now becoming busier, there was a need for that Board to embrace some of the emerging opportunities around highways and transportation matters. Accordingly, and to avoid duplication, he intended to stand down both the Public and Private Transport Advisory Committee and the Integrated Transport Strategy (Road, Rail and Passenger) Task Group. The Portfolio Holders for Community Safety and Wellbeing and Planning and Development, as well as the relevant Service Heads, would continue to work with

KCC and the Ashford Strategic Delivery Board on those matters, but he considered there was no need for those two additional Groups. He also advised that he intended to stand down the Royal Military Canal Task Group. The Lead Member for the Romney Marsh and Partner Organisations, Cllr Mick Burgess, would continue to work with the Culture, Leisure and Tourism Service on this project. In addition he was proposing to rename the existing Climate, Environment and Conservation Task Group to the Climate Change Advisory Committee. This was to reflect the importance of this subject and give a sharper concentrated focus on Climate Change Proposals. The Advisory Committee would report directly to the Cabinet and he, as Leader, would personally oversee the Carbon Neutral Action Plan. Environmental and Conservation matters would continue to be dealt with by the Head of Environment and Land Management. Two other Task Groups which had been set up last October, but had not yet met, would also change names. The Cultural Centre Scoping Task Group would be renamed Elwick Road Phase II Redevelopment Advisory Committee and the Vicarage Lane and Multi-Storey Car Park Task Group would become the Vicarage Lane Redevelopment Advisory Committee. Both of those Advisory Committees would report to the Regeneration, Masterplanning and Project Co-Ordination Board, and ultimately the Cabinet.

Cabinet colleagues indicated their support to those proposed changes

284 Revenues and Benefits Recommended Write-Offs Schedule

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which proposed the formal write-off of £356,566.67. The proposals were in line with the Council's Revenues and Benefits Service Write-Off Policy. The Director of Finance and Economy had been consulted along with the Heads of Service for relevant areas. The Portfolio Holder praised the work of the Senior Recovery Officer and her team and said that it had been a real "eye-opener" for him to see the lengths they went to in retrieving debts. He said he would be happy to arrange a briefing session in this area for any interested Member who contacted him. He advised that he had also asked the report authors to include the collection rate in future reports to put the write-offs totals in context.

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Development said it was worth noting that whilst it was an important accounting exercise to write-off such debts, they would still stand against the individuals and if opportunities to recover them emerged in the future, they would be pursued.

Resolved:

- That (i) the action that accounts totalling £57,761.81 had been written off under delegated powers be noted (Financial Regulations 11.1)**
- (ii) the write offs listed in the Exempt Appendices totalling £298,804.86 be approved.**

285 Council Tax Reduction Scheme

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which set out the Council's new Council Tax Reduction Scheme from 1st April 2020. He said he was pleased to note the proposed amendments to the scheme following consultation and was proud that Ashford's scheme offered an enhanced exceptional circumstances scheme and continued to be the only one in Kent that offered additional protection to the disabled and carers.

The Deputy Leader said it was also worth noting that from 1st April 2020 Kent County Council had agreed to reimburse Council Tax for care leavers for a three year period. Whilst a separate initiative, this was an important development that would financially support a number of people adjusting to the challenges of living independently for the first time.

Resolved:

That the new Council Tax Reduction Scheme be implemented from 1st April 2020.

286 Parking Charges Review

The Leader introduced the report which addressed car parking charges within Council owned/operated car parks. Charges were reviewed on a three yearly basis with the last increase taking place in 2017. The report also described the Council's ongoing investment in public car parks and sought authorisation for the Head of Community Safety and Wellbeing, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder, to modify charges as necessary outside of the usual three year review period, for example to promote car park usage, offer discount schemes, and/or to achieve wider corporate economic, community and environmental objectives.

A Member said he had some concerns about the proposed increases for hourly parking and season tickets, which were above inflation. Cabinet Members advised this was mainly due to rounding up and, having not been increased for the last three years, did only reflect a modest increase of 10 pence per hour. The increase in the season ticket charge was only to recover the administrative costs involved in processing and would not be profit making.

Recommended:

- That**
- (i) an increase in on-street and off-street parking charges be agreed from 1st April 2020, across the Borough by approximately 10% on current tariffs (e.g. £1.10 to £1.20, £2.20 to £2.40 etc.) and in accordance with the specific rates detailed within the report.**
 - (ii) an increase in season ticket parking charges be agreed from 1st April 2020, across the Borough by approximately 10% on current tariffs and in accordance with the specific rates detailed within the report.**

- (iii) **an increase in resident parking charges be agreed from 1st April 2020, across the Borough by £5 a year and in accordance with the specific rates detailed within the report.**
- (iv) **the Head of Community Safety and Wellbeing be authorised, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Wellbeing and the Head of Finance and IT, to modify charges as necessary outside of the usual three year review period, for example, to promote car park usage, offer discounts, and/or to achieve wider corporate economic, community and environmental objectives. This delegation will not permit variation to the base tariffs which will continue to be reviewed every three years and presented to the Cabinet for approval.**

287 Continuation of Planned Refugee Resettlement Beyond End of Current Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme

The Leader introduced the report which advised that in October 2015 Members had approved the planned resettlement of up to 250 of the most vulnerable refugees from Syria to Ashford, under the Government's Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme up to 2020. Following the success of the scheme nationally, in June 2019 the Government had announced the amalgamation of all current planned refugee resettlement schemes into one scheme to continue beyond 2020. This was to be called the Global Resettlement Scheme (GRS).

Ashford had achieved considerable success in supporting refugees into employment and continued to work with partners and potential employers to improve prospects. Around 40% of those available to work had secured paid employment (way above the national and regional figures of 3% and 11% respectively) and Ashford's scheme had been flagged by the Home Office as a particular success. The report also gave an overview of the national and local scheme and described the Council's plans to continue to play its part in the national commitment to planned refugee resettlement under GRS.

A number of Members expressed their support for the continuation of the scheme and their pride in what Ashford had already done. Particular thanks were given to the Council's Refugee Resettlement Co-Ordinator who had led, developed and taken ownership of this whole scheme. Indeed her efforts had been recognised in the Queen's New Year's Honours last year and the Council had been listed as a finalist in the LGC Awards. Members also congratulated the Leader of the Council who had taken the brave political decision five years ago to pursue this course of action and had led by example on this initiative.

Members considered it would be important to dispel some of the myths about the scheme. Ashford did not take people who had been through various countries and they were not using the existing Council Housing stock or jumping waiting lists. It was about taking vulnerable families with children, identified by the Home Office,

directly from Syria, and housing them in available private rented property. The 50 people per year equated to about 10 families with children. The Chief Executive agreed that it would be useful to devise some sort of micro-site to be added to the Council's website which would explain what the Scheme was actually about and hopefully dispel some of the myths that had appeared on social media. Whilst it would not be useful or productive for the Council to respond to critical individuals on social media, a factual on-line resource where the public could be directed to in order to understand more about the scheme would be useful and she would task Officers to get that done.

There followed a wider discussion on homelessness and the need to re-double efforts to deal with the increasingly visible problem of rough sleeping in Ashford. The Head of Housing gave an outline of current and upcoming initiatives and assured Members that, whilst this was by no means a simple or straightforward issue, the Council was working with a number of agencies and partners and had recently been successful in bidding for funding from the Ministry of Housing, in order to tackle the targets set by Government on rough sleeping. A Member advised that in the county, Ashford was seen as an exemplar authority in the way it dealt with homelessness, and in a way had perhaps become a victim of its own success. Whilst there was clearly more to do, it appeared that Ashford was certainly tackling this issue in the right way.

Resolved:

- That (i) the success of the current Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme to date be noted.**
- (ii) the planned resettlement of refugees In Ashford be extended to offer new lives to up to 50 people each year (approximately 10 families) under GRS, subject to availability of suitable private rented property.**
- (iii) the continuing development of projects and infrastructure be supported to promote and enable successful integration and promote community cohesion to benefit the wider Ashford community.**
- (iv) authority be delegated to the Head of Housing, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing, to agree the details of the delivery of the scheme beyond 2020, with further reports/information being circulated to Members at appropriate points.**

288 Joint Transportation Board – Minutes of 10th December 2019

It was clarified that Minute 243 should refer to “the newly established Community Councils in Ashford”, rather than Community Forums.

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Resolved:

- That (i) the Minutes of the Meeting of the Joint Transportation Board held on the 10th December 2019 be received and noted with the exception of Minute No. 237.
- (ii) Minute No. 237 be approved and adopted.

289 Economic Regeneration and Investment Board – Notes of 3rd December 2019

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Economic Regeneration and Investment Board held on the 3rd December 2019 be received and noted.

290 Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group – Notes of 29th November 2019

Resolved:

That the Notes of the Meeting of the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group held on the 29th November 2019 be received and noted.

291 Schedule of Key Decisions to be Taken

Resolved:

That the latest Schedule of Key Decisions as set out within the report be received and noted.

Queries concerning these minutes? Please contact Member Services
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