

DARTFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday 14 July 2020 at 1.30 pm.

PRESENT: Councillor Sacha Gosine (Chairman)
Councillor Brian Garden (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Calvin S McLean
Councillor David J Mote
Councillor Victoria Oguntope
Councillor Lucas J Reynolds
Councillor Avtar Sandhu MBE

ABSENT: Councillor Sue Butterfill
Councillor Danny Nicklen
Councillor Tom Oliver
Councillor Denzil J Reynolds

Dartford Borough Council Officers:-

Sheri Green	– Strategic Director (External)
Sarah Martin	– Strategic Director (Internal)
Peter Dosad	– Head of Housing Services

CABINET MEMBERS: Councillor Jeremy Kite MBE, Cabinet Chairman and Council Leader

24. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors; Butterfill, Nicklen, Oliver and D J Reynolds. Councillors McLean and Moat attended as Substitutes.

The Chairman welcomed Members to the first virtual meeting of the Scrutiny Committee via the Zoom platform, and noted the remote presence of the Leader of the Council (participating as Chairman of Cabinet), the Strategic Directors Internal and External, the Head of Housing Services, the Democratic Services and Transformation Managers, and the Committee Clerk to present agenda items 11, 12 and 13.

He confirmed that the proceedings were being streamed live to the public via YouTube, which could be accessed via the link published on the Council website. Given the virtual nature of proceedings he would be concentrating on the content of the various debates, with the Vice-Chairman kindly filling an enhanced role regarding the order of proceedings and Members' requests to speak and contribute to individual agenda items.

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25. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Leader of the Council declared a prejudicial interest in respect of agenda item 11 – Princes Park Annual Update 2019-20 - given his role as a Director of Dartford Football Club.

26. CONFIRMATION OF THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 20 NOVEMBER 2019

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 November 2019 be confirmed as accurate.

27. URGENT ITEMS

The Chairman announced that there were no urgent items for consideration.

28. TO CONSIDER REFERENCES FROM OTHER COMMITTEES (IF ANY)

There were no references from other committees.

29. CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE

The Chairman reminded Members that the previous scheduled meeting of the Committee [14 April 2020] had been cancelled in light of Government advice on the measures required to combat COVID-19.

He welcomed the recent easing of those Government restrictions and the opportunity for Council business to return to 'normality', albeit in a reduced virtual Committee format, and hoped that a return to a full and transparent democratic process would be possible soon [Item 10 (draw-down) Min No. 33 refers].

30. REGULATION 9 NOTICE

The Chairman advised Members that the Regulation 9 Notice was for noting, but that any item could be drawn-down for consideration at a future meeting of the Committee if Members wished.

RESOLVED:

That Members note the contents of the Regulation 9 Notice [Forward Plan] for the period 15 June 2020 to 31 October 2020.

31. TO CONSIDER THE COUNCIL'S ARRANGEMENTS FOR HOMELESSNESS SINCE MID-MARCH 2020 [DRAW-DOWN]

The Chairman advised that he had drawn-down the topic on behalf of the Labour Group for discussion by the Committee. He proposed that debate

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proceed on the basis that Members had read the report from the Head of Housing Services, who would answer any questions or respond to any points of concern Members might have.

The Ward Member for Temple Hill asked what plans the Council had to help the homeless in Dartford going forward, following the gradual easing of Government restrictions into 2021. In particular, what was proposed for rough sleepers in terms of shelter arrangements and defining their ongoing needs.

The Head of Housing Services advised the Committee that the Council's arrangements to meet the needs of rough sleepers in the Borough during the Covid-19 pandemic continued to evolve in line with Government guidelines. The first 'pinch-point' in those ongoing arrangements would be in December, as it was unlikely that the Winter Shelter would be able to re-open. From March 2020 the Council had taken the widest possible view of the Government's guidance regarding rough sleepers and those in temporary accommodation [including those that had been sofa-surfing prior to Covid-19], in an effort to meet all requests for temporary accommodation during the pandemic to date. This had been a significant challenge for both the Council's Housing Department and its clients, given the need to assess and provide services remotely. At the outset of the pandemic in mid-March 2020 the Council had had some 80 families in temporary accommodation (TA), with the number rising to 129 families by mid-June. The Council had identified the need to provide its private landlords with the right support during Covid-19 and for the remainder of the year. Specific numbers for rough sleepers helped during the pandemic were not to hand, but would be supplied to Members following the proceedings. It was expected that further Government funding would be released soon with a further tranche prior to Christmas, but the cost to the Council of providing temporary and shared accommodation since March 2020 had been significant, totalling some £150,000 to date, and remained ongoing. The Housing Department was in touch with Members regarding the ongoing needs of their constituents, but the financial impact of the pandemic in the current financial year would inevitably impact on Council spending in the next financial cycle.

In response to a further specific question from the same Member, the Head of Housing Services confirmed that the Council was committed to continuing to meet the needs of rough sleepers going forward, in line with the Government's proposals post Covid-19.

A number of Members spoke in support of the Council's significant efforts to meet the needs of rough sleepers and others in need of temporary accommodation during the pandemic. They paid particular praise to the excellent work undertaken by the Council's Housing Department in response to the Government's general guidance to local authorities to help rough sleepers, and the additional Dartford centric initiatives Officers had put into effect. The closing of the Winter Shelter was unfortunate, but the number of rough sleepers in Dartford had declined significantly in recent years, and it was noted that Council Officers still provided much pro-active work to that

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cohort in terms of temporary accommodation and assistance with life-style changes including seeking employment.

The Leader of the Council also acknowledged the significant efforts of the Head of Housing Services and his Officers during the pandemic. However, he also emphasised the primary role of Members and in particular the Cabinet, in setting the Council's housing policy with regard to preventing homelessness. He advised that 'prevention rather than cure' was the motto, and that the Council fully endorsed the statement by Dame Louise Casey [Chair of the Government's COVID-19 Rough Sleeping Taskforce], that Government and local authorities now had an extraordinary opportunity to help keep rough sleepers inside and off the streets, and to turn their lives around with new ways of working going forward to a 'better life', through direct interventions, including through the use of leasehold properties.

The Chairman expressed his concern over the apparent exclusion of so called 'sofa surfers' from the Council's measures [report para 7.4 and 7.5 agenda p.11 refers]. The Strategic Director (External Services) advised of an editing error. The final sentence in para 7.4 of the report should have been placed at the end of para 7.5 and the final sentence in 7.5 should more appropriately have appeared at the end of para 7.4 in the report.

The Leader of the Council concurred and confirmed for the record that 'sofa surfers' made homeless during the pandemic for whatever reason, *did* form part of the Council's housing client base.

In response to a question from the Vice-Chairman, the Head of Housing Services advised that quarterly returns revealed that between 80-150 people across all categories had been saved from homelessness by the Council during the pandemic to date.

In response to a further separate enquiry from the Chairman, the Head of Housing Services advised that details of incidents of domestic abuse (DA) during COVID-19, and whether such incidents were rising given the strains of 'lock-down', were not readily available, given the sensitive nature of the offence. He undertook to revert with any available data in due course.

The Leader advised that the Council had undertaken a significant communications exercise immediately following the announcement of lockdown, which had included re-assuring victims of DA that help was still available, and what trigger points to be aware of and what course to take. The Council had also targeted noisy neighbours and the perpetrators of ASB (anti-social behaviour), whilst also advising the public of the relaxation of parking restrictions in the town centre to help ease the constraints of lock-down and facilitate food shopping and delivery.

RESOLVED:

That Members note the report.

32. TO CONSIDER THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC [DRAW-DOWN]

The Chairman advised that he had drawn-down the report [originally presented to Cabinet on 28 May 2020] for scrutiny by the Committee. He again proposed that the report be taken as read, and that Members pose any questions or points of concern they had to the Strategic Directors as co-authors, or to the Leader of the Council in his role as Cabinet Chairman.

The Ward Member for Temple Hill expressed her concern that the Council's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in terms of keeping residents informed, had been both delayed (until mid-April) and when posted on the Council website, had lacked sufficient sign-posting for residents to access help and services.

The Strategic Director (Internal Services) advised Members that all and any available information had been posted on the Council website as soon as it was available, and had been supplemented by the Leader's video and Facebook page.

The Leader of the Council believed that the Authority had performed well in informing the residents of the impact and consequences of COVID-19. He cited the launch of the 'Dartford Together' brand on 23 March 2020 [lock-down day] and the re-allocation of Council staff to run the Dartford Hub response operation. In addition, all 47,000 Dartford households had received a postcard advising them of the measures the Council had undertaken and how to access them, as soon as printing deadlines had permitted. He accepted that some authority's may have sought to recruit volunteers earlier, but the Council's considered and systematic approach, which combined Council staff and volunteers in a structured and planned network, had proved effective, and been in operation some two weeks earlier than similar measures deployed by some neighbouring authorities.

He advised that in terms of informing residents of the risks posed by COVID-19 and what measures the Government proposed to combat it; the national and social media, TV and radio, had inundated the public with detail. As soon as the Government announced the lock-down [23 March 2020] and made its specific measures known, and most importantly the roles expected to be played by local government, the Council had responded and published the details on its website. Council information and advice to the public had expanded exponentially from Day1 of lock-down, and remained ongoing.

The Chairman and the Ward Member for Temple Hill disagreed with the Leader's summary of the Council's timely efforts to inform residents. Particularly in regard to the Council's Facebook page, which they felt had lagged behind the Government's Facebook announcements in the early weeks of the pandemic, prior to lock-down.

The Leader of the Council advised that the Government's Facebook page during the early weeks of the pandemic prior to lock-down had been a general

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sigh-posting mechanism, which the Council saw no value in replicating. As soon as the role of local government had been defined, in terms of local service provision to residents, the Council Facebook page had issued targeted information to residents, advising how services would be variously provided by the Council, KCC or Government as appropriate, and had met every trigger point to do so.

The Vice-Chairman and several Committee Members spoke in support of the Leader's comments, asserting that the Council had responded well to the challenges imposed by the Coronavirus pandemic, and gave positive verbal evidence of their own and their residents experiences, of the Council's timely support during lock-down. The 'Dartford Together' scheme and the ongoing help provided by the Council to small businesses, were cited as particularly successful components of the Council's overall effort to combat the effects of COVID-19 in the Borough.

The Ward Member for Temple Hill maintained her view that the elderly in her Ward and those without the benefit of internet access, had not experienced the same prompt response from the Council to their needs during the pandemic, as the Leader and other Members claimed.

The Chairman re-focussed debate by asking the Leader what had been the most difficult problem for the Council to overcome in their response to the pandemic. He had appreciated his inclusion in the informal weekly Cabinet update meetings, but sought greater insight into the Council's over-arching strategy to combat COVID-19 going forward.

The Leader of the Council thanked the Chairman for his comments and identified the lack of a 'blue-print' to combat COVID-19 as the single biggest challenge the Council had faced. The subsequent tragic death of the Council's long serving Managing Director, Graham Harris, had been a significant loss in terms of the Council's corporate memory. The enforced closure of the Civic Centre and the need for the vast majority of staff to adapt to remote working, had also impacted on the direct and speedy delivery of services to residents during early lock-down. Existing delegated authorities to Directors and Senior Managers under the Council's Standing Orders (SOs) had been fully utilised, and where necessary, expanded by Cabinet. Transparency in that process had been maintained by briefings to key Members (including the Leaders of the minority Groups represented on the Council) via the weekly ad-hoc Cabinet briefing sessions. However, despite all those checks and balances, Cabinet had struggled to be certain that the Council had deployed the correct measures to combat COVID-19 in the Borough, in the absence of an acknowledged 'blue-print'.

He noted that feed-back from residents via Facebook and other social media had been very positive, and that the Dartford community had displayed an extraordinary collectiveness and neighbourly goodwill during lock-down. He believed that the Council had effectively managed the significant increase in demand for its services, without breaking its capacity to do so, and had increasingly adapted to meet the majority of residents' requests and needs, as

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lock-down had progressed. There had been significant losses in the leisure sector, but it was hoped to regain ground in that area soon.

In summary, the Leader of the Council advised the Committee that the lack of an acknowledged plan to combat COVID-19, allied to a lack of prior knowledge that the Government would impose such a comprehensive and lengthy national lock-down, had been the two major challenges the Council had faced. As the Government's lock-down measures continued to be relaxed, and circumstances permitted, the Council would draw breath and consider the lessons that had been learned during these unprecedented times and circumstances, and put in place firm plans and established networks and procedures to combat COVID-19 in the future. Advances in technology would aid that process and help the Council to adapt in its working practices going forward, such as holding Council meetings remotely via Zoom.

The Chairman thanked the Leader for his response and noted that Dartford was No. 11 on the Government's list [of Towns and Cities] that might need to be locked-down, because of a further spike in COVID-19 cases. He asked what specific plans the Council had in place for such an eventuality.

The Leader of the Council advised Members that the Borough's geographic proximity to London [the national epicentre for COVID-19 in England] had, and would continue to pose, a risk of a second COVID-19 spike in Dartford. Darent Valley Hospital served an area beyond Dartford and continued to treat a high number of cases, and the Council was prepared for a second spike and to act in accordance with all Government, NHS and Resilience Forum instructions and guidelines as required. He gave the Council's recent re-opening of the Town Centre as an example of the Authority's general preparedness and positive adherence to government policy and advice concerning COVID-19.

In response to further questions from the Chairman and the Ward Member for Temple Hill, regarding the Council's plans going forward post COVID-19, and what specific lessons had been learnt to adapt Council procedures, the Leader gave the following detailed response.

The prudent management of the Council's finances in the past, under the guidance of the late Managing Director Graham Harris, had ensured that the Council was not exposed over its investments portfolio, and had allowed sufficient reserves to be built up, to enable the Authority to be resilient and able to deploy the necessary fiscal resources to effectively combat the effects of COVID-19. The future task for the Council was to continue that fiscal prudence, and use available technology to adapt and improve Council working methods, and convince residents to return to 'normal' life at an appropriate and safe pace, in line with Government and NHS advice and guidelines.

The Chairman thanked the Leader of the Council and all Members of the Committee for their responses, and contribution to what he judged had been a

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very useful and necessary debate, to re-assure both residents and Members over the Council's response to the Coronavirus pandemic in Dartford.

33. TO CONSIDER THE ARRANGEMENTS THE COUNCIL HAS MADE TO ENSURE THE CONTINUED DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION OF MEMBERS IN COUNCIL BUSINESS DURING COVID-19 [DRAW- DOWN]

The Chairman advised that he had drawn-down the topic given the reduction in the size of the Scrutiny Committee, and sought assurances that all Members would be able to participate in the democratic process going forward.

The Leader of the Council responded in his role as Cabinet Chairman. He advised the Committee that; given the Government's instructions and guidance on the safe conduct of local authority business and the need to ensure safe distancing measures at all times; the Council's largest Committee's [including Scrutiny] had been reduced in size, but had retained political proportionality.

In the initial absence of virtual Committee meetings, operational delegations to Directors and senior managers had been expanded to ensure the continued good conduct of Council business during lock-down. Cabinet had continued to function and operate throughout, and had also held informal briefing meetings with the Shadow Leader and the Leader of the S&GRA to explain the procedures that had been adopted as a consequence of the Government's lock-down measures. The Planning and Licencing Committees [and Sub-Committee] had continued to function through-out lock-down, to meet the Council's statutory obligations within published deadlines. The next step in the democratic process was a virtual meeting of the General Assembly of the Council, proposed for **Monday 27 July** from **5 p.m.** to allow for any work commitments Members may have, and ensure as full a participation as possible.

In terms of the Scrutiny Committee, the first virtual meeting was in progress, and the Leader hoped that participation of all Committee Members would soon be possible, utilising a mix of actual and virtual participation, which he advocated for the conduct of business in the Council's larger Committees. It represented the 'new normal' for meetings going forward, and the live-streaming [via YouTube] further empowered residents. He believed that he had taken positive steps to involve the Opposition in the democratic process by including the Chairman in his role as Shadow Leader, in the Council's Cabinet briefing sessions.

The Chairman thanked the Leader for his comments and said that he appreciated the difficulties the Council had faced in continuing to conduct 'normal' business during lock-down. He did not foresee a return to full physical meetings in the near future, but given the limited number of Members in his political Group, he hoped that Committee's would soon be able to meet in full virtually, within the constraints of the current technology.

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34. PRINCES PARK - DARTFORD FOOTBALL CLUB (DFC) ANNUAL REPORT 2019-20 (WP)

The Leader of the Council absented himself from the virtual proceedings following his declaration of prejudicial interest as a Director of Dartford Football Club (DFC).

The covering report from the Communities & Leisure Officer enclosed at Appendix A, the Princes Park Annual Report for 2019/20 compiled by Dartford Football Club (DFC) Operations Manager, under the terms of the lease with the Council. In the agreed absence of the report author, the Committee Co-ordinator introduced the report and undertook to respond to Members' questions.

The Chairman noted [report para 3.3. agenda p.17] that the Council grant payable to DFC in 2019/20 [for the maintenance of Princes Park and all its facilities] had been £90,000 and that the same grant would be payable in 2020/21. He asked whether, given the operating constraints imposed by Government on sport and leisure facilities to combat COVID-19, whether DFC had received the full Council grant for the period under review, and would do so in 2020/21.

The Committee Co-ordinator believed that this was indeed the case on both counts, but undertook to confirm the points for the Chairman and Members.

RESOLVED:

That Members note the report and the contents of Appendix A.

35. COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2019-20 MUNICIPAL YEAR (WP)

The Leader of the Council re-joined the virtual proceedings at the conclusion of the previous agenda item [DFC annual report on Princes Park].

The draft annual report and appendices from the Committee Co-ordinator presented a summary of the work undertaken by the Committee during the previous 2019-20 municipal cycle. Members were advised that a full and comprehensive record of the Committee's proceedings for the period under review were contained in the meeting minutes, as published in full on the Council website.

RESOLVED:

That Members note the draft report and appendices as submitted, for submission to the General Assembly of the Council (GAC) in due course.

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36. COMMITTEE ROLLING WORK PLAN 2020-21

The report from the Committee Co-ordinator attached at Appendix A, a rolling Work Plan for the 2020-21 municipal for Members' consideration.

Members were reminded of the importance of utilising the draw-down facility to scrutinise Cabinet decisions *post* implementation, to supplement the standard annual reports items for Princes Park, The Orchard Theatre, and Dartford Cricket Club.

RESOLVED:

1. That Members note the report and Appendix A.

In concluding the virtual meeting, the Chairman thanked the Vice-Chair for his particular assistance in helping to manage proceedings and all Members for their contributions to the debates, and the Leader of the Council for attending and responding to items draw-down by the Chairman on behalf of his Group.

He also thanked the Strategic Directors for their report, and the Head of Housing Services for his, and the efforts of his all Officers in helping to meet the continued needs of the homeless in Dartford during the pandemic, and he hoped in the future.

The meeting closed at 3.00 pm

Councillor S N Gosine
CHAIRMAN