

DARTFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE COUNCIL

MINUTES of the proceedings of the meeting of the General Assembly of the Council held on Monday 26 July 2021.

PRESENT:

The Mayor

Councillor R M Currans

The Deputy Mayor

Councillor P Cutler

Councillor Mrs A D Allen, MBE

Councillor A R Lloyd

Councillor A E D Barham

Councillor D J Mote

Councillor J Burrell

Councillor D T Nicklen

Councillor S P Butterfill

Councillor A J Oakley-Dow

Councillor L A Canham

Councillor T Oliver

Councillor M J Davis

Councillor E E Palmer

Councillor L H K Edie

Councillor R S L Perfitt

Councillor B Garden

Councillor M I Peters

Councillor S N Gosine

Councillor L J Reynolds

Councillor D A Hammock

Councillor A S Sandhu, MBE

Councillor P M Harman

Councillor C J Shippam

Councillor D E Hunnisett

Councillor Mrs R F Storey

Councillor R A S Jones

Councillor D Swinerd

Councillor M B Kelly

Councillor R J Wells

Councillor J A Kite, MBE

ABSENT:

Councillor E H Ben Moussa

Councillor S H Brown

Councillor D Butler-Ruhle

Councillor A Gaskin

Councillor R Gosine

Councillor K J Grehan

Councillor T A Maddison

Councillor V Oguntope

Councillor Mrs J A Ozog

Councillor D J Reynolds

Councillor Mrs P A Thurlow

24. PRAYERS: REVEREND KENNETH CLARK

The Mayor's Chaplain led the Council in prayer. Special mention was made of Mrs Doreen Coleman, who had served as Mayoress on three occasions, and Jo Shippam, both of whom had recently passed away.

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25. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Ben Moussa, Brown, Butler-Rhule, Gaskin, R Gosine, Grehan, Maddison, Oguntope, Ozog, D Reynolds and Thurlow.

26. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interests.

27. MINUTES

The General Assembly of the Council considered the minutes of the Annual Council meeting held on 28 April 2021.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Annual Council meeting held on 28 April 2021 be confirmed as an accurate record.

28. MAYOR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Mayor expressed her condolences to Councillors Shippam and Ozog and their families following the recent passing of Jo Shippam. She also expressed her sadness at the passing of Doreen Coleman, who had served as Mayoress on three occasions and who had been steadfast in supporting her husband, Pat Coleman, during his 40 years as a Councillor. Doreen had worked tirelessly on the Charity Committee for over 30 years and had been looking forward to returning to attend upcoming meetings.

The Council sent its condolences and best wishes to the families and friends of the deceased.

29. LEADER'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Leader of the Council made the following announcements:

- Welcome back, Management Team and Direction of Travel

The Leader of the Council welcomed Members and officers to the first in-person Council meeting for nearly 18 months. He introduced Caroline Hicks, the new Director of Growth & Community, who was attending her first meeting of the GAC and said that she was a pivotal part of the new Management Team established following a recent restructure of the organisation which would take the work of the Council forward.

- Recent Losses

The Leader of the Council explained that a lot had happened since the last physical meeting of the Council and that the world had changed in the interim with a full range of experiences, highs and lows. Some were sad and difficult

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to fathom, such as the recent death of a child, Lily, following a road accident in Watling Street, and his thoughts went out to everyone who had lost a loved one over recent months. In particular he sent his condolences and best wishes to the family and friends of Doreen Coleman and Jo Shippam. He recalled Jo Shippam as being a very formidable and funny lady, who had once stood for election as a UKIP candidate in the same ward as her own son. Doreen Coleman had been a stalwart supporter of her husband, Pat, and was always by his side. Both would be sorely missed and he sent his condolences to their loved ones.

- Euro 2021

The Leader said that there had also been some uplifting moments, such as the tremendous achievement of the England football team which had raised the national spirit by getting to the final of the Euro 2021 football tournament. This had been marred by the behaviour of a small number of bigoted people who had tried to make something bad out of something good by their racist attitude. He stressed that they would never succeed and that humanity would prevail. He congratulated the football team on their performance.

- Councillor Oliver

The Leader of the Council also wished to congratulate Councillor Tom Oliver on his recent marriage to his partner, Kyle, at a lovely ceremony. He commented on how wonderful it was that people who loved each other could freely celebrate and embrace their love.

- Looking Ahead

The Leader of the Council noted the many challenges and pressures ahead as the nation recovered from the COVID pandemic and the need for space to relax and contemplate. The Planet Dartford initiative had made progress during the pandemic, such as the work undertaken on edible flowers and the creation of two new community orchards, and he hoped that the initiative could now gather momentum. He said that he had been approached by the Leader of the Alliance Group, Councillor Edie, over proposals to create a net work of wildflower meadows which he felt was worthy of consideration. Rather unusually he had asked Councillor Edie to address the Council on her proposals.

- Dartford Wildflower Network

Councillor Edie addressed the General Assembly of the Council. She explained that the numbers of pollinators across the world was falling at a concerning rate. In the UK 27 species of bee had previously been recorded, but 3 of these were now extinct and half of the remaining 24 were in rapid decline. Pollinators such as bees, butterflies and moths were crucial to eco

systems, allowing plants to fruit, set seed and breed, providing food and habitats to many other creatures.

Wildflower meadows were not only important habitats for wildlife, they also stored carbon and prevented flooding. These types of native flower-rich grasslands could store 500% more carbon than fields of pure grass but, sadly, 97% of wildflower meadows had been lost since the 1930's.

She informed Members that the Council had planted a couple of beautiful wildflower meadows as part of the Planet Dartford initiative, which had proved to be very popular and had been welcomed by residents. She was proposing that the Council should build on this enthusiasm by creating a joined up approach across Dartford to establish a network of wildflower meadows. Because bumblebees could only fly for about 40 minutes between feeding this network would create vital pit stops for bees, allowing them to fly further and flourish across the borough.

She explained that this strategy would complement the fantastic work supporting wildflower meadows, already being undertaken by Kent County Council's Plan Bee, the Saving Meadows project by Plantlife and B-Lines project from Buglife.

Residents would be offered packets of local wildflower seeds and/ or advice, with as little as 1sq metre being enough room to create a mini wildflower meadow. Green space would be better utilised and dedicated wildflower areas and signs explaining the importance of creating these habitats could be created in local parks. It was also proposed to create an interactive online map to show the Dartford Wildflower Network, to encourage participation and to create both a physical and virtual community.

Local schools, businesses and organisations would be encouraged to get involved. Even Bus stops had the potential to be transformed into Buzz stops, with a wildflower roof. The Dartford Wildflower Network would be a celebration of wildflower meadows. A way of empowering the community to look after vital pollinators and the local environment.

She thanked the Leader of the Council for allowing her to address Members and looked forward to working together on such initiatives.

30. QUESTIONS FROM POLITICAL GROUP LEADERS

The following questions were submitted by the Shadow Leader of the Council:

Question 1

'Has the council included in its equality report for Dartford the views of those with disabilities as you said you would the last time, I asked the question?'

Question 2

'Does the Leader of the Council agree with our local MP who voted in favour of our local residents who are lease holders footing the bill to change the

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cladding on their property despite it not being their fault if it doesn't meet health and safety regulations?'

Question 3

'There was a two week suspension of recycle collections by Urbaser in another borough council in Kent due to staff shortages recently. What measures are this council taking to ensure waste and recycle doesn't suffer the same consequence here at some point?'

In accordance with Standing Order 14 the questions and answers, including any supplementary questions and answers, are recorded in a book kept for this purpose in the Members' Area.

31. MOTIONS

The Mayor announced that no motions had been submitted under Standing Order 10.

32. URGENT ITEMS

The Mayor confirmed that there were no urgent items.

33. COUNCIL IN COMMITTEE

It was moved by Councillor RM Currans, seconded by Councillor J A Kite and

RESOLVED:

That in accordance with Standing Order 11(13) the General Assembly of the Council go into Committee and the rules of Procedures for Committees do apply.

THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL, COUNCILLOR J A KITE MBE, IN THE CHAIR

34. REFERENCE FROM THE ELECTORAL PROVISIONS SUB-COMMITTEE HELD ON 8 JULY 2021: REVIEW OF PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES 2023

The General Assembly of the Council considered a report which detailed the initial proposals for revised parliamentary constituencies by the Boundary Commission for England following a nationwide review of parliamentary boundaries to broadly equalise the electorate's of each constituency by bringing them within a defined range. Dartford's existing parliamentary electorate was larger than the maximum permitted and consequently the Boundary Commission was proposing changes to bring the electorate within the permitted parameters. The existing constituency comprised the Borough of Dartford plus the Sevenoaks District Council ward of Hartley and Hodsoll Street. The Boundary Commission's initial proposals were to remove Hartley

and Hodsoll Street ward, which would be moved to the Gravesham constituency, and to move the Dartford borough wards of Darenth and Wilmington, Sutton-at-Hone & Hawley to the Sevenoaks parliamentary constituency. These proposals were currently subject to public consultation and had been considered by the Electoral Provisions sub-committee on 8 July 2021 which had formulated the Council's proposed response which asked the Boundary Commission to consider an alternative proposal. This noted the strong historic and community links that both borough wards had to Dartford but noted that the recently created ward of Wilmington, Sutton-at-Hone & Hawley contained two distinct communities which were served by separate Parish Council's. It was therefore suggested that Wilmington, Sutton-at-Hone & Hawley ward could be split, with part of that ward transferring to the Sevenoaks constituency and the remaining part being retained in the Dartford constituency, along with Darenth ward. The proposed alternative arrangements would fall within the Boundary Commission's electorate parameters.

The Leader of the Council said that the proposed changes were unwelcome and created confusion and instability for residents but that some change was unavoidable because the constituency in its current form exceeded the permitted electorate threshold. He stressed that there would be no changes to borough boundaries or wards.

The Deputy Leader of the Council, who was also the Chairman of the Electoral Provisions Sub-Committee, explained that the Commission was just interested in cutting the number of electors so that it was inevitable that some parts of the constituency would be moved elsewhere. The removal of Hartley & Hodsoll Street ward, which was never part of Dartford historically, could be accepted but his concern was to preserve the integrity of Dartford and to keep as much of that as possible within the constituency.

The Shadow Leader of the Council said that he had served on the Electoral Provisions Sub-committee and did not agree with the proposed submission. He said that there were four political groups on the Council but the response seemed to only reflect the views of the majority group which was being expressed as the view of the entire Council. He noted that it was likely that there would have to be further change following another review in eight years' time as a result of the borough's growing population. This view was supported by another Member who felt that the views of other groups were not being fully reflected in the proposed submission.

The Leader of the Council reminded the Shadow Leader that anyone could make a submission to the Boundary Commission's consultation, either as an individual or as a group and that the Commission had regard to all the views that it received. He couldn't predict what might change in the next eight years or second-guess the future. He encouraged residents and other groups to submit their views to the Boundary Commission but said that it was also appropriate for the Council to respond to the consultation. He pointed out that the response was not driven by seeking to gain a political advantage and, had this in fact been the case, this could have been achieved by removing Ebbsfleet from the Dartford constituency. Not only did the Council's proposal not do this, it also sought to retain Darenth ward, which was a swing ward, but that he considered this area to be an intrinsic part of Dartford. The Council's

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proposals sought to respect historic ties and balanced communities within the Boundary Commission's parameters.

Another Member stressed the importance for as many people as possible to make their views known to the Commission so that it could come to an informed decision. He felt that it was particularly important for Councillors, the Parishes and other community groups to respond to the consultation.

RESOLVED:

That, following consideration of the Boundary Commission for England's proposals for the Dartford Parliamentary Constituency, the Council submits an alternative proposal as put forward by the Electoral Provisions Subcommittee, as detailed in Appendix B to the report.

35. PUBLICATION OF THE DARTFORD LOCAL PLAN

Members were reminded that a special meeting of the Council had been held on 1 February 2021, at which the Council agreed the publication of the draft Dartford Local Plan to 2037 as a 'sound' plan. However, following the publication of the plan, Natural England had given notification of a significant new proposed Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in the Borough. This meant that it was necessary to make focussed amendments to the Local Plan and for it to be published for consultation again.

The General Assembly of the Council was informed that an updated Local Plan was essential to maximise local influence over the future of the Borough through planning applications, and investment and infrastructure decisions. The report outlined the steps and issues ahead which were necessary to move the Plan towards adoption by the Council, after Examination by an independent Planning Inspector. Adoption of the Plan was expected to take place in 2022, at which point it would come into fully statutory force.

The revised Local Plan had taken into account evidence and the results from previous consultations, and a further publication would allow final representations to be made on the Plan, as amended. The Plan would not normally be expected to change after this point prior to Examination, unless further issues of significance were raised which would lead the Council to review its position. Members had regard to the revised Local Plan and its appendices, including subsequent updates.

The Leader of the Council reminded Members that the Local Plan had been subject to detailed consideration by the cross-party Member Working Party, chaired by Councillor Hunnisett. He thanked the Working Party and officers for their work in producing a high quality and comprehensive Plan and supporting documentation.

Councillor Hunnisett also thanked the Working Group, the Head of Planning Services, the Planning Policy Manager and the Planning Policy Team for their diligence and commended the revised Local plan to the GAC.

Councillor Davis prefaced his comments on the Local Plan by paying his own tribute to Jo Shippam and sending his condolences to her family. He then went on to comment on the addition of land at Sandpit Road to the strategic extension to employment areas, referenced on page 27 of the agenda. He asked that it be noted that this land was an open space, green-field site, which bordered the Dartford Marshes and the River Darent, and that this site had never previously been developed. There was however a neighbouring site, of some 12,000sqm, where a warehouse would be closing and which could be developed.

The Head of Planning Services commented that this was actually a water treatment works area which was partially developed, although a significant part of the site was still unused. She explained that there had been representations by other developers about identifying economic development floor-space and that she felt that the site could be retained as 'employment land'.

The Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Finance observed that if the Local Plan did not identify suitable land to meet the Borough's housing delivery requirements, it was open for developers to apply to build housing on any piece of land. By having a comprehensive plan, which identified suitable residential development opportunities, the Council would be able to oppose development that was incompatible with the Plan.

The Leaders of the Independent and Alliance Groups both welcomed the Local Plan and the protection that it provided for green spaces and wildlife.

A Member commended the Council for being a leader on housing delivery within Kent. He drew attention to long-standing local flooding locations in Swanscombe, and whilst recognising that flood prevention was a county council function, wondered whether the Local Plan could reference the need to do something to tackle localised flooding in Swanscombe in terms of sustainable drainage and flood prevention by inclusion in policy E1, the Ebbsfleet and Swanscombe Strategy.

The Head of Planning Services said that it was not possible to address flooding in this way, as the Local Plan was a land-use document. But policies within the plan could address flooding when development proposals came forward and this could offer opportunity to mitigate existing surface water flooding issues. However, the flooding referred to, was a matter for Kent County Council as local lead flood authority.

A Member from Swanscombe informed Members that he was aware of the locations where localised flooding was a problem and that he was working with Kent County Council to identify solutions.

The Head of Planning Services explained the implications of the designation of the new SSSI by Natural England and the impact that it could have on development in Swanscombe. She explained that the board of Natural

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England would be considering the SSSI in November and that the Inspector examining the Local Plan could take into account any changes that might occur to the boundary of the SSSI, following the Natural England board determination, and these could be considered as modifications to the Local plan.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Dartford Local Plan 2017 to 2037 and associated Policies Map changes, at Appendices A and C to the report, be published to enable written representations;
2. That the Head of Planning Services be granted delegated authority to agree final graphics/diagrams/tables/appendices/titles and non-material editing of the Plan (Appendix A) and supporting documents prior to publication;
3. That the Local Plan Publication Consultation Statement, Sustainability Appraisal, Habitats Regulations Assessment, Customer Access Review and Local Development Scheme July 2021, at Appendices B and D to G, be endorsed;
4. That the Head of Planning Services be granted delegated authority, in consultation with the Chairman of the Local Plan Members' Working Group, to determine whether the representations made on the published Plan raise any matters of major significance;
5. That, should issues of major significance be raised by representations that would prevent the published Plan documents proceeding directly to submission for 'Examination in Public' by an independent Planning Inspector, a further report be presented to the General Assembly of the Council;
6. That, in the event that no issues of major significance are raised by representations on the published Plan, the Head of Planning Services be granted delegated authority to submit the published Local Plan and supporting documents to the Secretary of State for 'Examination in Public';
7. That the Head of Planning Services be granted delegated authority to sign and submit to the Secretary of State, Statement(s) of Common Ground on cross-boundary development matters with public bodies, including local authorities, where consistent with the Dartford housing requirement level and other policies set out in the Local Plan document; and
8. That the Council consider the new Local Plan to be a material consideration with weight being accorded to the Plan with regard to the stage that it has reached towards adoption, and the degree of unresolved objections (if any), on the soundness of particular policies.

36. POLITICAL GROUPS, REPRESENTATION ON COMMITTEES AND OTHER ANCILLARY MATTERS

The General Assembly of the Council received a report which detailed the outcome of a review of political proportionality undertaken following the results of two Borough Council by-elections held on 6 May 2021, and the subsequent formation of a new political group on the Council, the Alliance Group, by two existing Councillors. The report also advised Members of the political structure of the new group and the appointments made by the political groups to fill new committee seats and seats held vacant pending the outcome of the by-elections. The report also noted the appointment of Councillor D T Nicklen to serve on the Board of the Ebbsfleet Garden City Trust by the Cabinet, and the appointment of Councillor T Oliver as Vice-Chairman of the Crime & Disorder (Overview & Scrutiny) Committee.

The Leader of the Council congratulated Councillor M B Kelly and Councillor E E Palmer on their election as the new Councillors for Darenth Ward and Wilmington, Sutton-at-Hone & Hawley Wards respectively.

The Leader of the Alliance Group, Councillor L H K Edie expressed the desire of the new political group to work constructively with Members and officers.

RESOLVED:

That the General Assembly of the Council notes the Review of Political Proportionality and the appointments detailed in the report.

37. REVIEW OF SCHEME OF DELEGATION TO OFFICERS

The General Assembly of the Council received an update on the Scheme of Delegations to Officers. The report reminded Members that legislation permitted the delegation of the respective functions of the Council and Executive to officers. The delegation of functions to officers reduced the amount of detailed decision making required to be carried out directly by the General Assembly of the Council and by the Cabinet, enabling those bodies to focus on strategic policy issues, major matters of substance and maintaining oversight of the Council's activities. The Scheme of Delegations detailed the parameters of the delegations and who could exercise the delegations. To ensure that the Scheme of Delegations remained fit for purpose an annual review was carried out by the Head of Legal Services, in conjunction with Directors and Heads of Service. However, in view of recent organisational change, and the fact that the delegations had not been considered by the Cabinet and GAC for some time, it was considered appropriate to present the updated Scheme of Delegations to them for approval.

RESOLVED:

1. That the General Assembly of the Council notes the delegation to Officers of executive functions made by the Cabinet on 22 July 2021; and

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2. That the General Assembly of the Council, in pursuance of powers under Sections 101, 151 and 270 of the Local Government Act 1972 and all other powers enabling, continues to delegate to Officers, to the extent of its respective powers, the Council functions referred to in the Preamble to the Scheme of Delegations to Officers and the Sub-delegations, at Appendices A and B to the report.

38. REVIEW OF CONTRACT STANDING ORDERS

The General Assembly of the Council received a report which detailed revised Contract Standing Orders following Brexit and the organisational restructure of the Council directorates.

RESOLVED:

That, having considered a summary of the amendments set out in paragraph 3.8 of the report, the Contract Standing Orders attached at Appendix A to the report, be adopted.

39. CAPITAL PROGRAMME INCLUDING PRUDENTIAL INDICATORS - OUTTURN 2020/21

The General Assembly of the Council received a report which detailed the final pre-audit figures for the 2020/21 Capital Programme, the capital resources that were used to fund it and those that remained available to fund future investment. There was also an addendum to the report, which had been circulated electronically and published on the Council's web site, which contained a revised Appendix C and the revised recommendations contained in the addendum.

RESOLVED:

That the recommendation of the Cabinet to carry forward the total capital budgets set out in revised Appendix C to the Addendum, be approved.

40. GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE COUNCIL WORK PLAN 2021/22

The General Assembly of the Council considered its proposed Work Plan for 2021-22.

The Leader of the Council noted the important work ahead for the Council and that it was good to be meeting together. He welcomed back Councillors Burrell and Jones following their recent periods of ill health.

RESOLVED:

That the Work Plan, attached at Appendix A to the report, be approved as the General Assembly of the Council's Work Plan for the 2021-22 Municipal Year.

41. ACTION TAKEN UNDER STANDING ORDER 38: COUNCIL TAX HARDSHIP RELIEF SUPPORT SCHEME 2021/22

The General Assembly of the Council received a report, in accordance with the requirements of Standing Order 38(2)(b), of delegated action taken by the Strategic Director (Internal Services) [now the Chief Officer & Director of Corporate Services] under Standing Order 38(2)(a), in consultation with the Leader of the Council and the Mayor, to finalise and implement the necessary system changes to apply council tax relief from 1 April 2021, in accordance with the Council Tax Hardship Relief Support Scheme 2021/22, and to make any necessary revisions to the Council Tax Hardship Policy.

RESOLVED:

That the General Assembly of the Council notes the action taken by the Strategic Director (Internal Services), in consultation with the Leader of the Council and the Mayor, to finalise and implement the necessary system changes to apply council tax relief from 1 April 2021, in accordance with the Council Tax Hardship Relief Support Scheme 2021/22, and to make any necessary revisions to the Council Tax Hardship Policy.

42. RE-CONVENING OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE COUNCIL

It was moved by Councillor J A Kite, seconded by Councillor C J Shippam and

RESOLVED:

That in accordance with Standing Order 11(14) the General Assembly of the Council now re-convene.

THE MAYOR, COUNCILLOR R M CURRANS, IN THE CHAIR

43. RESERVED MINUTES

No Cabinet minutes had been reserved for debate.

The meeting closed at 8.29 pm

MAYOR

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