

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 10 October 2022.

PRESENT:

The Mayor

Councillor P Cutler

The Deputy Mayor

Councillor R M Currans

Councillor A E D Barham
Councillor S H Brown
Councillor J Burrell
Councillor D Butler-Ruhle
Councillor L A Canham
Councillor M J Davis
Councillor A Gaskin
Councillor R Gosine
Councillor K J Grehan
Councillor D A Hammock
Councillor P M Harman
Councillor G R Holt
Councillor D E Hunnisett
Councillor R A S Jones
Councillor M B Kelly
Councillor J A Kite, MBE

Councillor A R Lloyd
Councillor T A Maddison
Councillor D J Mote
Councillor D T Nicklen
Councillor V Oguntope
Councillor T Oliver
Councillor Mrs J A Ozog
Councillor M I Peters
Councillor D J Reynolds
Councillor A S Sandhu, MBE
Councillor C J Shippam
Councillor Mrs R F Storey
Councillor K Stealey
Councillor D Swinerd
Councillor R J Wells

ABSENT:

Councillor E H Ben Moussa
Councillor S P Butterfill
Councillor L H K Edie
Councillor B Garden
Councillor S N Gosine
Councillor A J Oakley-Dow
Councillor E E Palmer
Councillor R S L Perfitt
Councillor Mrs P A Thurlow

49. PRAYERS: REVEREND KENNETH CLARK

The Mayor's Chaplain, Reverend Kenneth Clark, led the Council in prayer.

50. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Ben Moussa, Butterfill, Edie, Garden, S Gosine, Oakley-Dow, Perfett and Mrs Thurlow.

51. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interests.

52. MINUTES

The General Assembly of the Council considered the minutes of the meeting held on 25 July 2022.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting of the General Assembly of the Council held on 25 July 2022 be confirmed as an accurate record.

53. MAYOR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Mayor commented on the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II since the last meeting and thanked her for her devotion to duty and service throughout her long reign. He had also had the privilege and honour to deliver the local proclamation of the new King, Charles III on 11th September at Dartford Library, which was a significant moment in the Borough's history.

The Mayor also informed Members that he had recently visited the Borough's twin town in France, Gravelines, which was celebrating thirty years of town twinning with Dartford. The visit had been very enjoyable and during the visit the friendship agreement between the two towns had been reaffirmed.

54. LEADER'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Leader of the Council informed Members that Councillor Thurlow was currently experiencing a period of ill health. He sent her the Council's best wishes for a speedy recovery.

He also announced that there had been a number of events in the town centre since the last meeting, most notably the recent visit of a Spitfire and the launch of 'Black History' month on Saturday 1st October.

The Leader also commented on the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and her remarkable reign. He also recounted his personal experience of paying his respects to Her Majesty at Westminster Hall which he had found to be a moving and enriching experience. He congratulated the Mayor for his role in delivering the local proclamation of the new King and also thanked everyone who came to the War Memorial to observe the national minute's silence on 18th September.

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55. QUESTIONS FROM POLITICAL GROUP LEADERS

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

Question 1

'Minister of State for Local Government, Paul Scully said at Conservative Conference that 'there is fat to be trimmed' from council budgets. Does the Leader agree with this assessment and if so, what fat does he feel we can trim in Dartford?'

Question 2

'Dartford celebrating Pride with an event, this year was very welcome. However, the council does not appear to have made any mention of Black History Month on its social media channels and there has been no event advertised. Can the Leader explain the rationale for this please?'

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.

56. MOTIONS

No motions were submitted under Standing Order 10.

57. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

58. COUNCIL IN COMMITTEE

It was moved by Councillor P Cutler, 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

59. REFERENCES FROM OTHER COMMITTEES (IF ANY)

There were no references from other committees.

60. LIVING WAGE FOUNDATION AND COST OF LIVING MID-YEAR PAY INCREASE

Members considered a report which detailed measures that were proposed to be taken to assist staff during the current cost of living crisis. The Council was aware that 2022 would be a difficult year financially for many employees, especially those on the lowest incomes and felt that supporting those on the lowest pay was not only fair but improved the motivation, loyalty, productivity and retention of hard working staff. The Council was already undertaking various measures to support staff and was also committed to paying no less than the Living Wage as determined annually by the Living Wage Foundation, which had recently increased by 10%. In July 2022 National Employers had offered all NJC workers in local government a pay increase of £1,925 per employee. In contrast the Council, which sets pay locally and was not part of the national negotiations, had awarded staff a 2% pay increase for 2022-23, much below the current rate of inflation and below the National Employer's offer of an £1,925 to staff, which would have equated to a 5.3% increase for Dartford's staff.

Having assessed the options available to the Council, to help mitigate the rising cost of living, a number of recommendations were being proposed, with a view to avoiding an erosion of pay for staff at the lower end of the grading structure and minimise the impact on pay differentials. This included the deletion of the lowest grade in the Council's pay structure, Grade B Starter, and implementing the Living Wage Foundation's Living Wage increase with effect from 22 September 2022 for the lowest paid staff. To mitigate against the impact of this increase on Grade C Starter and to minimise the impact on pay differentials between grades, whilst also helping to address the cost of living challenge faced by all staff, it was proposed that all other salary bands, including Specified Posts and Chief Officers, should be raised by £1,000 with effect from 22 September 2022. The application of an additional mid-year set amount pay increase, as opposed to a percentage increase, would ensure that the increase benefited lower paid staff the most to try and help mitigate the rising cost of living, whilst keeping costs below that of a 3.3% increase across the board. It was envisaged that the Council would return to a percentage wage increase from April 2023.

The Leader of the Council said that the Council negotiated its own wage settlements with staff which had delivered stability and good sense for staff, and provided greater flexibility. The Council recognised the pressures facing staff due to the current cost of living crisis and was proposing to make a mid-year adjustment to assist those staff on the lowest grades the most rather than waiting for the end of the financial year to take action. This included the removal of the lowest grade in the pay structure.

A Member asked for clarification of the basis of the Living Wage Foundation Living Wage. The Leader of the Council explained that the Living Wage Foundation based its calculation of the Living Wage on a basket of measures and indices and that its Living Wage was higher than the National Living Wage. The Council had committed to paying staff at least the Living Wage Foundation's Living Wage some years ago and this was factored into the annual pay awards. This had resulted in the Council continuing to increase pay for staff in recent years whilst some other authorities had frozen pay.

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When the Council had originally set the pay award for 2022-23 at 2% in February this had seemed to be a reasonable increase but circumstances had changed significantly since that time and it seemed only fair and sensible to make a mid-year adjustment.

Members welcomed the adjustment to salaries, which would be backdated to September 2022. A Member questioned whether it might be possible to backdate the increase to April 2022 as he observed that there had been pressure on salaries from before that time. The Leader said that when the increase for 2022-23 had been set it had been considered fair and had been accepted by staff. The proposal to backdate the adjustment to September was to coincide with the timing of the Living Wage Foundation's increase to the Living Wage rather than selecting an arbitrary date. He also noted that although the NJC settlement had been agreed it had not yet been implemented and the Council was acting quickly to ensure that its locally negotiated mid-year adjustment would be implemented immediately.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance confirmed that one of the reasons why the Council had determined to make its own arrangements for pay rather than joining the national settlement was that the national negotiations took too long. This had also allowed the Council to commit to paying at least the Living Wage Foundation Living Wage, which was significantly higher than the National Living Wage.

The Leader of the Council said that it was important to treat staff fairly and to recognise current cost of living pressures. The Council also took care to ensure that staff working for contractors employed by the Council were also fairly paid.

RESOLVED:

That, to mitigate the impact of the rise in cost of living and improve the motivation, loyalty, productivity and retention of hard-working staff:

- (a) Grade B Starter be deleted from the Council's pay structure and replaced by Grade B Market, as the Council's lowest grade in its pay structure;
- (b) That the Living Wage Foundation's Living Wage be implemented with effect from 22 September 2022, bringing Grade B Market salary to £21,034; and
- (c) an increase of £1,000 for all other salary bands, including Specified Posts and Chief Officers, be made with effect from 22 September 2022.

61. SCRUTINY COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2021-22

The Council considered the work carried out by the Scrutiny Committee during 2021/22 which was described in its annual report.

RESOLVED:

That the Scrutiny Committee Annual Report 2021/22 be noted.

62. CRIME AND DISORDER (OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY) COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2021-22

The Council considered the work carried out by the Crime and Disorder (Overview & Scrutiny) Committee during 2021/22 which was described in its annual report.

The Chairman of the Committee thanked Members and Officers for their input to the work of the Committee, and in particular, Inspector Jenner and Will Lay.

The Leader of the Council said that the Committee was carrying out vital work and that it was important to continue to work with the police to tackle all crime and to reassure them of the Council's support for working in partnership and to ensure that there was an understanding of the Council's priorities as well as their own. He noted the impact that criminal acts, however minor, could have on people and for the need to tackle crime at all levels.

RESOLVED:

That the Crime and Disorder (Overview & Scrutiny) Committee Annual Report 2021/22 be noted.

63. 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 P CUTLER, IN THE CHAIR

64. RESERVED MINUTES

No Cabinet minutes had been reserved for debate.

The meeting closed at 7.40 pm

MAYOR

CHAIRMAN'S INITIALS