
COUNCIL

MINUTES of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, ME10 3HT on Wednesday, 15 June 2022 from 7.00 pm - 8.25 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Mike Baldock, Cameron Beart, Monique Bonney, Lloyd Bowen, Derek Carnell, Roger Clark, Simon Clark (Mayor), Richard Darby, Steve Davey, Mike Dendor, Oliver Eakin, Tim Gibson, Alastair Gould, James Hall, Nicholas Hampshire, Angela Harrison, Mike Henderson, Alan Horton, James Hunt, Ken Ingleton, Elliott Jayes, Peter Macdonald, Peter Marchington, Ben J Martin, Pete Neal, Richard Palmer, Hannah Perkin, Ken Rowles, David Simmons, Paul Stephen, Sarah Stephen (Deputy Mayor), Bill Tatton, Eddie Thomas, Roger Truelove, Tim Valentine, Ghlin Whelan, Tony Winckless and Corrie Woodford.

OFFICERS PRESENT: David Clifford, Jo Millard and Larissa Reed.

OFFICERS PRESENT (Virtually): Billy Attaway and Robin Harris.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Ann Hampshire, Carole Jackson, Denise Knights, Lee McCall, Ken Pugh, Julian Saunders and Mike Whiting.

87 **Emergency Evacuation Procedure**

The Mayor outlined the Emergency Evacuation procedure.

88 **Minutes**

The Minutes of the Full Council meeting held on 30 March 2022 (Minutes Nos. 732 – 741) and the Minutes of the Extraordinary Council meeting held on 27 April 2022 (Minutes Nos. 766 – 770) were taken as read, approved and signed as correct records.

89 **Declarations of Interest**

No interests were declared.

The Monitoring Officer advised that he had issued a dispensation to all Members in respect of Item 9 – Review of the Members' Allowances Scheme.

90 **Mayor's Announcements**

The Mayor said that he had represented Swale Borough Council (SBC) at the funeral of the former Mayor of Swale, Alderman Don Jordan. He said Mr Jordan had served as a ward Councillor for West Downs from 1987 to 2007 and as Mayor of Swale from 1995 to 1996. He invited other Members to pay tribute.

The Leader spoke of working closely with Alderman Jordan on issues in Rodmersham and said he would be greatly missed. Councillor David Simmons said Alderman Jordan was passionate about rural issues in Rodmersham and he sent his condolences to the Jordan family. Councillor Roger Truelove said that Alderman Jordan had been a considerable presence and an outstanding Councillor and was still interested in local issues up to the time of his passing.

Councillor Monique Bonney spoke of his time involved in research projects in Africa and his knowledge of Agriculture and Agronomy in the area and she said he would be greatly missed by the residents of Rodmersham.

There was a minute's silence in memory of Alderman Jordan.

The Mayor said he had been busy attending functions during his first few weeks as Mayor and he highlighted celebrations for the Platinum Jubilee including the lighting of beacons in the area. The Mayor then spoke of other functions he had attended including an event with a Vintage Motorcycle Group, tree planting in St. Michael's churchyard, Sittingbourne and celebrations at Diversity House, Sittingbourne also attended by the Deputy Mayor.

91 **Leader's Statement**

In presenting his statement, the Leader firstly paid tribute to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on her Platinum Jubilee and to residents of Swale who celebrated the unique occasion. He said it was a memorable event and compared it to the Silver Jubilee in 1977. The Leader referred to some elements of the media calling Swale a miserable borough and defended this by highlighting the beacon lighting across towns and villages, church services, local events and many street parties which brought communities together to make lasting memories. He said that SBC had awarded grants totalling £36,500 to events held across the Borough.

Turning to the Government's Levelling Up paper, the Leader thanked Gordon Henderson Member of Parliament (MP) for his time in discussing it. He said, although still vague, there were opportunities in the paper and he hoped that amendments would come forward to address local issues. The Leader said that SBC would continue to work towards a Local Plan that suited the Borough, and he would be looking towards Parliament for changes and amendments that meant Kent would no longer face an unsustainable level of house building and the ongoing lack of infrastructure needed to cope with current levels of housing. He said for truly sustainable communities, good local jobs were needed and the ability to provide local people with the skills to access those jobs, if long commutes and the stress on wellbeing was to be avoided.

The Leader gave an update on the energy rebate payments that had been paid out to date. He said that SBC staff had processed a total of 43,324 rebates (80% of the total expected to be awarded). This totalled just over £6.4million. He said around 39,000 of the rebate payments had been paid into bank accounts and 4,300 credits had been applied to Council Tax accounts. The Leader paid tribute to the staff involved in processing the payments.

The Leader said that 16 June 2022 was the Sixth Annual Clean Air Day and he had signed a letter calling for the target to be strengthened. He referred to the theme of this year's event which was 'Air Pollution Dirties Every Organ in your Body'. The Leader quoted Larissa Lockwood, the Director of Clean Air at Global Action Plan, saying that everyone could do something to cut pollution to benefit health, the planet and community and he gave examples of actions that could be taken.

Finally, the Leader said he was delighted that the first Policy and Resources Committee had been held the previous week. He said it was a radical change in how SBC operated and whilst it might take time to bed in, Members would get out of it what they put into it.

He said every Member had the opportunity to suggest ideas, make comments and help shape Swale's future policies and he welcomed ideas and suggestions for improvements in delivering from all parties.

In response, the Leader of the main opposition group, Councillor Alan Horton, acknowledged that SBC were now working differently, and his group were looking forward to working with the administration in a better way than previously. He gave his personal experience of celebrating the Platinum Jubilee at a street party and paid tribute to the Queen's commitment to public service. Referring to the rebate payments, the Leader of the main opposition group praised the outstanding effort of SBC staff and said that the Government did not always consider the practicalities of administering a scheme and the issues it might cause staff. The Leader of the main opposition group praised a presentation given by the Active Travel Coordinator at the Area Committees who shared ideas of how to improve air quality, in not using a car to move about. The Leader of the main opposition group finished by saying that his group would support the Leader when they believed he was right, and would point out and explain why, if they felt he was wrong.

Other Members asked questions and raised points including:

- Government apprenticeship scheme was not working as well as it needed to or could be and sought the Leader's help in putting pressure on Government to improve apprenticeships;
- gave thanks to organisers of Platinum Jubilee celebrations in the Borough, in particular to Teynham Parish Council and to the development of the new play area in Teynham which was opened on Platinum Jubilee weekend;
- did the Leader think the MP understood that the levelling up of areas in the south was as important as those in the north?;
- had the Leader spoken with the Faversham MP, Helen Whately on Levelling Up?;
- could the Leader put pressure on Government via local MP's to abandon the Right to Buy scheme which just reduced availability of desperately needed affordable and social housing?;
- was the Leader speaking to local MP's about the impact of rail strikes on residents in Swale?;
- the Platinum Jubilee celebrations had brought communities together;
- hoped there would not be job cuts in Local Government as staff would not be able to cope with any future pandemics; and
- praised the grant funding to help fund Platinum Jubilee celebrations.

In response, the Leader thanked Members their comments, questions and support. He welcomed the Leader of the main opposition group's suggestion to meet regularly. The Leader said that the Council paid the Living Wage to apprentices and he would include the issue of apprenticeships in his discussions with the local MP's. Referring to Levelling Up, the Leader said he thought that Gordon Henderson MP was genuinely interested and saw it as a great opportunity although it might not meet the Borough's hopes and aspirations, and he would feed back his thoughts. The Leader confirmed he would be meeting with the Faversham and Mid-Kent MP, Helen Whately, soon and would raise the issue of abandoning the Right To Buy scheme. He said he would not be wasting the MPs' time in discussing the rail strikes. The Leader finished his response by agreeing that services could not be delivered with continual job cuts and could not cope if there was another pandemic.

Questions submitted by the Public

The Mayor advised that one question had been received from a member of the public. Sonia Jackson was unable to read out her question and the Mayor did so on her behalf. In the absence of the Chair of the Environment Committee, the question was put to the Vice-Chair:

Question 1 – Sonia Jackson

Given the need to increase biodiversity, and reverse the alarming decline of insects (60% decline since 2004 according to a recent report from Kent Wildlife Trust and Buglife) and in view of the urgency in mitigating the dangerous effects of climate change, as acknowledged in Swale's Climate Emergency declaration, **what action is the council going to take to pressure relevant parties against further installation of artificial turf and plastic grass in Swale**, the increasing use of which results in pollution through its whole life cycle, from manufacture, to shedding of microfibres, the creation of a sterile environment hostile to all forms of wildlife, and eventual end of life disposal through incineration or landfill? **What action will the council take to demonstrate to Swale businesses and private residents that their actions in relation to use of outdoor space can have a positive, beneficial effect in reversing loss of biodiversity?**

Response – Vice Chair of Environment Committee:

Thank you for your question. The increasing use of artificial turf and plastic grass is a concern to this council. Unfortunately, there is little we can do to limit its use beyond our own estate. There is only one instance where artificial turf is used by the Council. This is for the dressing of graves in the cemeteries which we manage. Between graves being dug and the coffin being lowered, the sides are protected with artificial turf. After being removed the turf is cleaned and then reused – we get many uses from the same piece of turf. We are considering use of alternative materials. Elsewhere our estate is artificial turf free. The requirement for biodiversity net gain should stop larger developers from considering the use of artificial turf but the main installers are householders.

The Council does not have any legal powers here, but it can play a role in educating residents about the impact of artificial turf as part of the work it does in promoting biodiversity.

More generally the Council shares your concern about the decline in biodiversity and is taking action to improve biodiversity in the borough via our Climate and Ecological Emergency Action Plan.

We have committed to the following actions:

- To minimising the use of pesticides and herbicides on our own estate and have reduced the number of cuts of grass to enhance biodiversity.
- To establish a baseline of trees and woodland on council land and develop an action plan to increase tree cover in Swale. Last winter alone, 5000 whips and 32 mature trees have been planted on Council land. We will be planting 6,000 more trees during the next winter.

- To use planning policy to improve development outcomes which support recreation, access to green spaces, and climate change adaptation and mitigation.
- To ensure the installation and maintenance of landscaping in new developments to contribute to biodiversity net gain via suitable conditions or Section 106 agreements.
- To encourage coppicing of council woodland to promote biodiversity and use of local woodland products. For example, coppicing in Perry Wood has been increased to meet the targets in the woodland management plan. Timber is used locally to produce fencing products.
- To engage business and community groups to support tree planting and conservation work in Swale.
- To support Swale in Bloom working with schools, community groups, voluntary groups and Town and Parish Councils to enhance local habitats and wildlife corridors improving biodiversity across Swale.

The Council has been awarded funding for a second Great Big Green Week in September which will promote actions to enhance biodiversity to the public.

The Council runs the 'Green Grid' - a forum for community groups, NGOs and Parish and Town Councils to keep up to date with projects on biodiversity and climate action across the borough. Participants are kept in contact with a regular Green Grid newsletter.

The Council has also made environmental grants available to community groups for biodiversity enhancement.

93 **Questions submitted by Members**

One question had been received from a Member but had been withdrawn.

94 **Review of the Members Allowance Scheme - Report of the Independent Remuneration Panel**

The Leader introduced the report and proposed the recommendation which was seconded by the Deputy Leader who reserved her right to speak.

Using his mayoral authority under section 3.1.16.4 of the Constitution, the Mayor then waived the requirement for amendments to be notified in advance of the Council meeting and allowed the Leader to propose a minor amendment to the recommendation:

That the word 'opposition' be removed from the 'Leader of the smaller opposition groups' on page six of the report.

This was seconded by the Deputy Leader. The Leader of the main opposition group spoke in support of the amendment. On being put to the vote, Members agreed the amendment.

Members then debated the substantive recommendation.

In the debate that followed Members made comments including:

- The Independent Remuneration Panel were there for a reason;
- it was reasonable for Members to receive increases; and
- should not cherry pick the recommendations.

With the agreement of the Mayor, Councillor Mike Henderson proposed a further amendment:

That the Chair of the Standards Committee receives a Special Responsibility Allowance (SRA) equivalent to the Chairs of the Audit and Area Committees as it carries broadly equivalent workloads.

This was seconded by Councillor Richard Palmer and on being put to the vote was agreed.

Members continued to debate the substantive recommendation and made points including:

- Drew attention to paragraph 4.5 on page 22 clarifying that parental leave had already been agreed;
- it was important that Members were remunerated in order to be inclusive and encourage diversity of candidates;
- consideration that Members may need to be available during day and evening was important;
- acknowledged that working in a Committee System was more work for all councillors;
- support for the proposals of the Remuneration panel;
- clarification on how the Constitution working group calculated their proposals;
- clarification on whether costs increased or decreased under the existing scheme;
- every member would need to commit to more time under the Committee System; and
- queried the panel's rates per hour and suggested they needed to be adjusted.

The Leader acknowledged the Constitution Working Group's proposals. He confirmed that overall costs, including the amendment to award an SRA to the Chair of Standards Committee, were lower overall than the previous budget.

On being put to the vote, Members voted in favour of the amended recommendation.

Resolved:

(1) That the Council adopts the Members' Allowance Scheme proposed by the Independent Remuneration Panel subject to the amendments set out, to exclude the word 'opposition' at page six of the report and to include an SRA to the Chair of the Standards Committee, equal to the Chairs of the Audit and Areas Committees.

95 **Creation and appointment of an Access and Disability Champion**

In introducing the report, the Leader said this was a positive step to ensure the Council looked at including more Members in decision-making. He proposed the recommendation which was seconded by the Deputy Leader who reserved her right to speak.

The Leader of the main opposition group said he agreed there was a need to consider those with a disability in policies and in the workplace but said there had not been enough thought in the implications and the process was being rushed. He acknowledged that other Councils had implemented a scheme but questioned whether they had done so at speed and without the thought necessary. The Leader of the main opposition group said that champions should have the relevant experience and insight, which members did not necessarily have, and the opportunity to be a champion could be opened up to staff. He gave examples of varied disabilities that individuals may have, and advised that on asking those with disabilities about the proposal, feedback had been negative, which was not the Council's intention. Under section 3.1.15 sub section 4 of the Constitution, the Leader of the main opposition group proposed a motion without notice to refer the matter to the relevant Service Committee. This was seconded by Councillor Bill Tatton. The Leader of the main opposition group said the decision on which Service Committee the matter should be referred to should be with the Leader.

On being put to the vote, the motion was agreed.

Resolved:

(1) That the creation and appointment of an access and disability champion be referred to the relevant Service Committee.

96 **Kent Health and Wellbeing Board appointment**

Councillor Roger Truelove proposed that Councillor Angela Harrison be nominated to sit on the Kent Health and Wellbeing Board. This was seconded by Councillor Ben J Martin.

Councillor Alan Horton proposed that Councillor Pete Neal be nominated to sit on the Kent Health and Wellbeing Board. This was seconded by Councillor David Simmons.

On being put the vote, it was agreed that Councillor Angela Harrison be nominated to sit on the Kent Health and Wellbeing Board.

Resolved:

(1) That Councillor Angela Harrison be nominated to sit on the Kent Health and Wellbeing Board.

Chair

Copies of this document are available on the Council website <http://www.swale.gov.uk/dso/>. If you would like hard copies or alternative versions (i.e. large print, audio, different language) we will do our best to accommodate your request please contact Swale Borough Council at Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, Kent, ME10 3HT or telephone the Customer Service Centre 01795 417850.

All minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel