
COUNCIL

MINUTES of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, ME10 3HT on Wednesday, 5 April 2023 from 7.00 pm - 8.41 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Mike Baldock, Monique Bonney, Lloyd Bowen, Derek Carnell, Simon Clark, Richard Darby, Steve Davey, Mike Dendor, Tim Gibson, Alastair Gould, James Hall, Alan Horton, Carole Jackson, Denise Knights, Peter Macdonald, Peter Marchington, Martin, Lee McCall, Padmini Nissanga, Richard Palmer, Hannah Perkin, Ken Rowles, Julian Saunders, David Simmons, Paul Stephen, Sarah Stephen, Eddie Thomas, Roger Truelove, Tim Valentine, Ghlin Whelan, Mike Whiting, Tony Winckless and Corrie Woodford.

PRESENT (VIRTUALLY): Councillors Oliver Eakin and Elliott Jayes.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Lisa Fillery, Chris Lovelock and Jo Millard and Larissa Reed.

OFFICERS PRESENT (Virtually): David Clifford and Kellie Mackenzie.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Ann Hampshire, Nicholas Hampshire, Mike Henderson, James Hunt, Ken Ingleton, Pete Neal, Ken Pugh and Bill Tatton.

804 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Mayor outlined the emergency evacuation procedure.

805 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

806 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 22 February 2023 (Minute Nos. 685 -702) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Mayor as a correct record.

807 MAYOR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Mayor announced that he had attended eight different events since the previous Council meeting. He thanked the Deputy Mayor, Councillor Sarah Stephen, for standing in for him when he was ill.

The Mayor sent his best wishes to Councillor Ken Ingleton who was in hospital.

808 TRIBUTES

The Leader led the tributes to former Mayor and Councillor, Alderwoman Anita Walker who sadly passed away recently. He said that Alderwoman Walker was dedicated to Faversham, had been a very fair Mayor and was friendly and honest. The Leader said that Alderman Walker's memories and achievements should be celebrated.

Councillor David Simmons spoke of Alderwoman Walker's civilian role at Faversham Police station and of her love of amateur dramatics. He said that as well as representing the residents of Abbey Ward and sitting on several outside bodies, she had served as both Mayor of Swale and of Faversham, roles she had been very proud of. Councillor Simmons said that Alderman Walker was kind-hearted, quirky and generous and would be sadly missed by her many friends and family.

Councillor Ben J Martin said Alderwoman Walker was supportive and kind to all Members, regardless of their political party and she gave her time freely and willingly.

There was a minute's silence in memory of Alderwoman Walker.

809 LEADER'S STATEMENT

In introducing his final statement of the civic year, the Leader recounted how the current coalition of five groups had formed the administration after the 2019 Borough elections. He referred to the previous inexperience of any of the administration in leading the Council, and of how they came together to build a strong programme for the future that included investment in the community and making Swale Borough Council (SBC) a 'do something' Council. The Leader said the programme was set to boost Swale's heritage and tourist potential, and urban and rural businesses, and to increase environmental standards. It also sought a cleaner, healthier Borough, to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping and to provide more affordable housing.

The Leader said the coalition also sought better engagement with residents and organisations, and with all members of the Council irrespective of their political party. He referred to the introduction of Area Committees and the move to the Committee System.

The Leader said that many people thought the coalition would not last but it supported each other through difficult times such as the Covid-19 Pandemic and kept going. He said that SBC were already planning and rebuilding local communities, economies, green spaces and tourism before the Pandemic and stayed on course afterwards.

The Leader said the administration had achieved much to be proud of including being in the list of the top 140 greenest Councils in the world, Sittingbourne being one of the five most resilient towns in the country and the Isle of Sheppey being recognised as a hidden gem. He thanked staff, and members from all parties for working together in the interests of the communities of Swale.

In response, the Leader of the main opposition group, Councillor Alan Horton, thanked the Leader for his statement. Referring to the administration's achievements, he said there had been some good, some OK and some work his group did not support and he acknowledged that the administration had listened to some of the opposition's concerns. Councillor Horton highlighted some of the difficulties that staff had to cope with throughout the previous four years and he said

they were outstanding in difficult times. He referred to the initial feedback from the recent peer review which found staff to be exceptional.

Other Members made comments including:

- Highlighted the successes in housing including the delivery of more social housing and large reduction in rough sleeper numbers;
- praised staff for supporting residents during Covid-19 Pandemic and beyond;
- improvements were not always about spending money;
- acknowledged and thanked the opposition's input, particularly the 'Not every disability is visual' campaign;
- referred to good relationships formed with outside organisations;
- strength was in the membership of the group; and
- highlighted the skills and achievements of the coalition Cabinet, before moving to the Committee System.

In response, the Leader thanked Members for their comments and wished all Members good luck in the future, especially those not standing in the borough elections.

810 QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY THE PUBLIC

No questions were submitted by the public.

811 QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MEMBERS

The Mayor advised that eight questions had been submitted by Members.

Question 1 – Councillor Angela Harrison

Would the Chair of Regeneration & Property Committee update Members on what steps have been taken since we were informed of our successful Levelling Up Bid?

Response – Chair of Regeneration and Property

On 18th January 2023 the Department for Levelling-Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) announced the award of £20m investment in the multi-faceted *Sheerness Revival* project.

Since this time, we have:

- Appointed the delivery team, consisting of a Capital Programme Officer and Capital Programme Manager – both of whom will start in April 2023
- Held internal and external steering groups to kickstart progress
- Agreed the formal project oversight arrangements with members, to ensure reporting and project change processes are robust. This includes regular member oversight of communications and engagement work
- Drafted the Heads of Terms for the transfer of Swale Borough Council's Bridge Road car park to EKC Group, as part of our match funding contribution to the project

- Answered questions from DLUHC regarding subsidy control, which has unlocked the grant funding agreement and means the first payment will be made in May 2023.
- Drafted a mirror funding agreement with EKC Group, setting out our working relationship and commitments regarding the Sheppey College extension and
- Agreed the contracting route for the Beachfields and public realm works

Supplementary Question

Would the chair agree that after 18 years of Conservative administration, and many thousands of pounds spent on consultants, Sheerness and its residents were finally getting well deserved attention in the form of improvements in areas which should also impact the rest of the Isle of Sheppey? This was hopefully the start of better in Sheerness and I pay tribute to officers.

Response

This week we have finally signed the memorandum of understanding, a critical document for the funding arrangement. This project showed that we really want to make the Isle of Sheppey great again. The Isle of Sheppey had a lot to offer, Sheerness has been completely underrated. It had a marvellous amount of heritage which could be built on. What started as a small High Street project and the work at Master's House with the help of the Levelling Up fund had put Sheerness back onto a platform of where it should be and the coalition haD put that at the very heart of what it wanted to do.

Question 2 – Councillor Roger Truelove

When we first opened the Multi Storey Car Park in the centre of Sittingbourne its usage was a little sparse. How is it performing now, above or below expectation?

Response – Chair of Communities

The multi-storey car park was part of the wider Spirit of Sittingbourne regeneration project. It was built to provide high quality, safe and secure parking close to the town centre. We sometimes receive comments that the car park looks empty. This was because the MSCP was future-proofed for increased town centre parking and the potential use of other surface car parks for housing. Another reason is due to the fact the ground level which can be seen clearly as you walk or drive past, hosts the electric vehicle, disabled and parent/child parking bays. The disabled bays are not used as there is closer, free parking in the town centre, but have to be provided by law in the MCSP. The next three tiers are often busy and the usage figures below clearly show an increase in usage over the years. There is still ample capacity in the upper tiers as mentioned, the car park was built bigger than needed for future growth in usage.

Year	Total Transactions	% increase/decrease on previous year	Comment
2019	2223	n/a	1 st year of opening (September)

2020	16,256	^ 631%	Covid impact
2021	36,849	^ 126%	
2022	70,064	^ 90%	

In the 2022-23 financial year the car park has performed above expectations against predicted income. Income has been difficult to predict accurately given it was a new car park and the impact of the pandemic but we are on target to take £100,000 over the predicted budget by the end of March.

Question 3 – Councillor Denise Knights

The administration pledged to improve the heritage aspect of the Borough. Can Swale's Heritage Champion indicate whether he feels this has been achieved.

Response – Leader

I'd like to thank the Councillor for her question.

Since the administration came into power in 2019, the Council adopted its first ever borough-wide Heritage Strategy in March 2020. The strategy has a particular focus on tackling the Borough's heritage at risk. The administration provided a sum of £250,000 to be used to undertake important pro-active heritage work including appointing a Senior Conservation & Design (Projects) Officer who was appointed at the end of September 2020.

Since that time we have conducted more Conservation Area Reviews in 4 years than had been done in the previous 2 decades, and additionally have designated one more conservation area. 9 have so far been completed, and another 8 are already underway.

Work is also underway in respect of a number of important heritage projects, including the further development of the Sheerness Port Heritage at Risk Project, and of course the restoration work on the Grade II listed Sheerness Clock tower and other buildings.

We have also undertaken a large number of smaller projects in various churchyards for which the Council is responsible, ensuring all repairs are done to a heritage status rather than merely being 'made safe'. The most visible of these works is the repairs to Sittingbourne Church Wall, but we have also partially rebuilt the curtilage listed party boundary wall to the Grade I listed Parish Church of St. Mary of Charity, Faversham. Much of this work had been outstanding for many years, and the situation was badly deteriorating. The interventions made under this administration have enhanced many of our churchyards, and also have helped saved the Council from larger bills in the future.

Further, we also carried out repairs and significant enhancement of the Grade II* listed Eastchurch Aviators Memorial.

We are also developing a GIS data layer for Swale curtilage listed buildings/structures which will prove invaluable in the future.

We have also begun work on our own Swale Local Heritage list, whereby local people and groups can nominate buildings or monuments or structures for inclusion on a local list thereby enabling them to get a degree of recognition and protection. This is a really important development that for the first time in Swale means we are able to locate and protect important aspects of our heritage which may otherwise pass us all by.

Phase 1 of the Swale Designed Landscapes Study has also been completed, and the Swale Heritage at Risk Register has also been updated.

This is not a complete list, and clearly there is still much more to be done going forward in terms of pro-active work to ensure that the Borough's historic and irreplaceable environment is properly understood, recognised, protected and where possible enhanced.

However, I certainly feel that I can conclude with some confidence that the heritage aspect of the borough is slowly but surely being improved, and I only hope that this direction of travel can be maintained in the future.

Finally I would like to thank our officers, Simon Algar, Jhilmil Kishore and Trevor Wentworth who have all been involved with these projects and who continue to work hard and creatively to seek to do justice to this Borough's heritage.

Question 4 – Councillor Lee McCall

In light of the claims local conservatives are making about the lack of a Local Plan, does the Leader believe delaying a Local Plan until the Government passes the Levelling Up Bill was the correct move?

Response – Leader

I would like to thank the Councillor for his question.

He is indeed correct that locally the Conservatives are criticising this council claiming we lack having a local plan. Of course, it is factually inaccurate to say we have no local plan as the current Local Plan - the questionably named Bearing Fruits, remains up to date as it is in general conformity with the National Planning Policy Framework and therefore retains weight in the decision making process.

Meanwhile, the current central government are continuing to progress the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill and as with the way in which legislation develops the Bill will continue to evolve. There are very sound reasons why the Administration paused work on the Local Plan, and these reasons remain very relevant. If the Government sticks to its word and removes the imposition of housing targets on local authorities, then we will be able to move forward with a sound and sustainable new Plan with a significantly lower housing number.

To have not paused work on a Local Plan would have required this council to have demonstrated that 11,000 extra houses could be sustainably imposed on Swale. The fact that the Conservatives repeatedly criticise the administration for not having

a new local plan clearly indicates that either they would have supported such a high number, or that they don't believe their own Government.

Question 5 – Councillor Corrie Woodford

The administration made as one of its aims an increase to tourism into the Borough. Can the chair of the Regeneration & Property demonstrate that this has indeed happened?

Response – Chair of Regeneration and Property

The Cambridge Model (an economic impact assessment of volume and value) is commissioned through Visit Kent and is the primary means of measuring performance in the visitor economy across the county. It is undertaken by independent analysts, Destination Intelligence and is carried out bi-annually unless there are exceptional circumstances.

The modelling undertaken in 2019 was used to provide a clear direction on visitor economy priorities. There were 5.4m visitors to Swale with the sector generating £232m to the economy of Swale, supporting 5,307 jobs.

This administration period includes the challenging period of the pandemic when the visitor economy sector was hugely impacted by the global and national restrictions. An additional economic impact assessment was therefore undertaken in 2020 to look at the immediate impact of the pandemic and to provide a new baseline for performance and to measure recovery.

In 2020 the pandemic caused disruption to the visitor economy and the economic impact results showed a significant drop in volume of trips and related expenditure, compared to 2019. The results considered the impact of interventions such as the 'Eat Out to Help Out' scheme and the 'We're Good to Go' assurance scheme along with the Job Retention Scheme, known as furlough. There were 3.3m visitors to Swale with the sector generating £102m to the economy of Swale, supporting 3,264 jobs. Swale saw the smallest decline in total visits of any district across the county (39.4%).

In 2021 sector performance continued to be affected by the pandemic as restrictions were still in place in the first half of the year. Results, however, showed an encouraging picture of recovery for the tourism industry in Swale, as domestic tourism returned, albeit not to the pre-pandemic levels of 2019. There were 4.6m visitors to Swale with the sector generating £173m to the local economy, supporting 3,884 jobs.

A further assessment for 2023 will determine the resilience of the visitor economy sector in Swale. It is envisaged Swale will return to its pre-pandemic levels of performance. Targeted investment made in tourism products through the Welcome Back Fund has added value through extensive marketing and promotion initiatives, improved the quality of public realm and upgraded tourism product in town centres. The return of larger events and increased confidence amongst visitors linked to the desire for short breaks and longer holidays will support a move towards pre-

pandemic performance levels of performance. We are supporting the sector through appropriate use of Swale's allocation of UK Shared Prosperity Funding.

Specific delivery highlights during the period include:

Partnership working:

- Supported the Visit Kent and Kent Downs AONB Interreg Experience project, with a focus on active travel and visitor product development (public realm improvements, signage & interpretation).
- Supported the successful development of Murston Old Church as a community arts hub
- Supported the relocation of the nationally networked Faversham Visitor Information Centre into the Town Council's premises
- Supported Queenborough Harbour Trust in piloting town quay market
- Supported Historic Swale and launch of Wheels of Time product ahead of county-wide roll-out
- Supported re-launch of the Faversham Destination Marketing Group ensuring stronger links with Visit Faversham/Visit Swale
- Re-launched B2B support tools (such as 'how to' guides, research and development information, image library), now embedded in the Visit Swale platform and Swale Means Business
- Attendance at travel trade exhibitions to support coach travel.

Product development:

- Worked with pleasure boat operators to establish permanent product at Queenborough (Jet Stream Tours)
- Secured additional beach hut provision
- Refurbishment/new toilet provision
- Development of a walking and cycling map for Sittingbourne and Faversham in conjunction with Explore Kent
- Piloted coach park at Macknade (Faversham) and identified new coach parking sites (Sheppey and Faversham)
- New Swale Visitor Map
- Management of town centre 'start-back' events post Covid, including the 20s festival in Sittingbourne and three Christmas events using a festive land train to reconnect residents with high streets
- Launch of visitor economy e-bulletin for businesses
- Supported the pilot of a new seafront festival 'Fun Face Boards' in Sheerness and supporting a new annual week-long Festival of the Sea
- Supported familiarisation visits to area post-Covid including journalists and social media influencers.

This performance is against a backdrop of officers with responsibility for the visitor economy being redeployed to community support for 16 months during the height of the pandemic.

Question 6 – Councillor Corrie Woodford

How much has this administration had to spend on maintenance of Council assets in comparison to the previous decade?

Response – Chair of Regeneration and Property

As of 16 March 2023, the total annual spend on the maintenance of Swale's operational and tenanted estate (including churchyards and war memorials) was £289,624. This was the 3rd highest spend of any of the years across the past decade. The highest spend was the first year of the new administration when £396,241 was spent on building maintenance.

In the period 2019 – 2023, the administration spent just under £1.5m on building maintenance (£1,473,087) or an average of £368,000 per year. This compares with an average of £266,742 per year in the first six years of the decade.

In addition to maintenance expenditure, the current administration has invested heavily in restoring the condition of Swale Borough Council's estate.

For example:

- Spending over £100,000 on the restoration of Sheerness Clock Tower
- Investing £1.3m to bring Masters House back to sustainable reuse.
- Committing £1.9m to environmental improvements at Swale House

This administration sought external funding to relieve demands on SBC's own finances, securing, for example, £275,000 Salix investment in energy reduction works at Masters House.

This administration acknowledges that more needs to be done and has commissioned Condition Surveys for our built estate which concluded at the end of the last financial year. We are also revising the Property Asset Strategy, which we have added to the forward plan for the Regeneration and Property Committee in September

Question 7 – Councillor Richard Palmer

Can the Leader of the Council explain what the Council has done with the £80 million provided to the Council by HM Government which was highlighted by Cllr Horton, in an article in the Kent online.

Link to article <https://www.kentonline.co.uk/sittingbourne/news/crunch-time-for-boroughs-budget-282616/?fbclid=IwAR0NKVq0meZ6PdjC7-11C7I0UIB4IbF3Q9k4FFvDOKVBJl7pXMG52UIQZg4>

Extract from the article:

Cllr Horton added: "The Rainbow Coalition of Swale Independents, Labour, Green and Liberals has received almost £80 million from the Conservative government in additional funding throughout its term.

"That's almost four times the council's annual budget. And yet it has overspent by £4 million this year and needs to take desperate measures to stay afloat."

Response – Leader

Thank you for your question. Oddly, I am unable to identify £80m additional funding awarded by the government to this Council to deliver its services over the term of the current administration.

In fact, the council's whole income for the entire 4 years of this administration, including council tax and business rates, totals just £78.4 million, compared with the £73 million of the previous administrations 4 year term.

It is worrying that such spurious claims can be made and that the press run with these wild stories without even bothering to check up on the basics.

In actual fact, the entire amount of Government grants in the 4 years of this administration totalled just £8,553,000 - a decrease of £8,889,000 from the previous 4 years when the previous administration received £17,442,000.

I think the other difference is that this administration has invested that money in our communities rather than leave it to devalue in the bank.

Now it's just possible that the opposition got a bit confused with the Covid money, when during the pandemic the council acted as an agent for central government to passport grants to businesses which amounted to £55m. However, just to make this crystal clear for anyone who might not understand, this funding was not attributable to council services. It was not money granted to us. It was money to be given to businesses and our staff did an excellent job in doing so.

The other peculiar claim made in the article is that this administration has overspent by £4 million. As you will all be able to see from tonight's papers, the overspend was actually just £531,000 - most of which is attributable to this administration's recognition of the need to support homeless people.

So, Cllr Palmer, I cannot explain what this Council has done with the money referred to by the opposition, because quite simply it doesn't exist in the world of truth.

Question 8 – Councillor Tim Valentine

The forthcoming local elections will be the first in which voters will be required to produce an approved photographic identification. The government has enacted this legislation in order to tackle voter fraud. Please will you tell me how many cases of voter fraud have been detected in Swale in recent local elections, and how many of these cases have resulted in a conviction? Do you have an estimate of the number of voters in Swale who will not already have an approved ID, and many voter authority certificates have been applied for?

Response – Leader

It is a worrying one as I have encountered many, many people on this election trail who are still not aware of this requirement. There are many, many more who are vaguely aware but are not sure of what is required of them and turn out will be hit considerably as a result. So we must assume that such a measure affecting voter turn out and the extra financial burdens on Councils up and down the country is utterly necessary to combat a deluge of fraudulent activity and deception.

In Swale, no cases of voter fraud have been detected in recent local elections, and there have been no convictions. In terms of the number of voters without photo ID, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has estimated that between 2% and 4% of the adult population nationally does not have photo ID, which with an electorate of 110,000 would equate to between 2,200 and 4,400 voters in Swale. As at mid-March, we had received 117 applications for voter authority certificates.

Supplementary

Could the Leader ask staff at polling stations to record the number of voters who were turned away for not having suitable photographic identification and report the number to Council at the earliest opportunity?

Response

I cannot instruct the Chief Executive to do that but it was already being considered.

812 BOUGHTON AND DUNKIRK NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

In introducing the report, the Leader praised the excellent work carried out in putting the plan together and proposed the recommendation which was seconded by Councillor Alastair Gould who thanked Parish Councillors Tutt and Fichett. He said it formed a good model for planning for the future for the needs and aspirations of the community.

The leader of the main opposition group acknowledged the work carried out on the document and gave his support.

Resolved:

(1) That the Boughton and Dunkirk Neighbourhood Plan be made.

813 STREET TRADING POLICY

Councillor Derek Carnell, Chair of the Licensing Committee introduced the report which sought to agree amendments to the current Swale Street Trading Policy. He proposed the recommendation which was seconded by the Vice-Chairman, Councillor Tony Winckless.

The leader of the main opposition group gave support to the changes and thanked and praised the Licensing Team Leader and her team for their work in getting the amended policy to Full Council.

Resolved:

(1) That Council adopts the amendments to the Swale Street Trading Policy 2021-2024, as attached as Appendix I to the report, to come into effect from 17 April 2023.

814 SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

Councillor Hannah Perkin, Chair of the Standards Committee, proposed the recommendations which sought agreement to adopt the social media policy and to provide social media training after the borough elections in May 2023. She thanked the Chief Executive and members of the Standards Committee and said that social media was an important platform. She drew attention to the inclusion of the health and wellbeing of Councillors in the policy and said it was an excellent addition.

In seconding the recommendation, Councillor Lloyd Bowen reserved his right to speak.

In the discussion that followed, Members made points including:

- Full support for the policy;
- described the impact of online bullying;
- was a good reminder of responsibilities;
- stressed the importance of transparency;
- should be able to stand up for beliefs without being abused;
- could contact social media providers if defamatory comments were received; and
- spoke of personal experiences.

Councillor Bowen said social media was a tool that was not going away and could promote negative thoughts and actions. He said that Members should set the standard.

Resolved:

(1) That the social media policy be adopted.

(2) That Members receive training on the policy as part of their induction following the May 2023 election.

815 APPOINTMENT OF MONITORING OFFICER

The Leader introduced the report and proposed the recommendation which was seconded by the main opposition Group Leader who reserved his right to speak.

A Member thanked Mr David Clifford, the current Monitoring Officer for his support, particularly at the Standards Committee. Another Member said they felt privileged

to work closely with Mr Clifford at the Scrutiny Committee and Policy, Development Review Committee and they gave praise for Mr Clifford's clarity and guidance. He wished good luck to Mr Clifford and to his replacement, Mr Robin Harris.

The Mayor thanked Mr Clifford for his help and guidance.

The Leader of the main opposition group extended his thanks to Mr Clifford who he said had made judgements professionally, impartially and without favouritism. He said Mr Clifford had been an excellent Monitoring Officer and it was a shame that he was leaving. The Leader of the main opposition group said that Mr Clifford's replacement, Mr Harris, had been a superb Deputy Monitoring Officer and had the confidence of the chamber to be the new Monitoring Officer.

Resolved

(1) That Robin Harris be appointed as Monitoring Officer for Swale Borough Council with effect from 25 April 2023.

816 RECORD OF THANKS

Councillor Mike Whiting proposed a vote of thanks to Mr Clifford for his service to the Council, which was seconded by Councillor Ben J Martin. Members voted unanimously to support the vote of thanks.

Mayor

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