
Council

MINUTES of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, ME10 3HT on Wednesday, 29 January 2025 from 7.00 pm - 10.16 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Mike Baldock, Monique Bonney, Lloyd Bowen, Hayden Brawn, Derek Carnell, Ann Cavanagh, Lloyd Chapman, Shelley Cheesman, Simon Clark, Alex Eyre, Charles Gibson, Tim Gibson, Alastair Gould, Angela Harrison, James Hunt, Carole Jackson, Elliott Jayes, Mark Last, Rich Lehmann, Peter Marchington, Claire Martin, Ben J Martin (Mayor), Charlie Miller, Kieran Mishchuk, Lee-Anne Moore, Pete Neal, Tara Noe, Tom Nundy, Chris Palmer, Richard Palmer, Hannah Perkin, Julien Speed, Paul Stephen, Sarah Stephen, Terry Thompson, Mark Tucker, Karen Watson (Deputy Mayor), Mike Whiting, Tony Winckless, Ashley Wise and Dolley Wooster.

PRESENT (VIRTUALLY): Councillors Carrie Pollard and Ashley Shiel.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Robin Harris, Kellie MacKenzie and Larissa Reed.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Andy Booth, Roger Clark and Kieran Golding.

577 Emergency Evacuation Procedure

The Mayor outlined the emergency evacuation procedure.

578 Minutes

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 4 December 2024 (Minute Nos. 451 – 467) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Mayor as a correct record.

579 Declarations of Interest

No interests were declared.

580 Mayor's Announcements

The Mayor reported that the Senior Democratic Services Officer was unwell and wished him a speedy recovery.

The Mayor advised that he had attended events inside and outside of the borough and had attended the Mayor of Maidstone's fundraiser at the Gurkha Kitchen. The Mayor reported that he had also attended the Sheppey Ladies Rugby Club team match and their Christmas party. He referred to the step-down of the various carnival courts across the borough during the festive period, and that it had been a privilege to watch the young ladies confidence levels develop over the year and wished them well for the future. The Mayor reported that his quiz night was now fully booked.

The Mayor welcomed Councillor Kieran Mishchuk to his first Full Council meeting following his election as ward member for Milton Regis in December 2024.

581 Questions submitted by the Public

There were no public questions.

582 Questions submitted by Members

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

Question 1 – Councillor Mike Whiting

Councillor Whiting, who submitted question one was not in attendance and a written response would be provided.

Question 2 – Councillor Mike Baldock

Does the Leader agree that the decision on the Highsted Valley Planning Application 21/503914/EIOUT was unreasonably delayed by this Council?

Response – Leader

Thank you for your question Cllr Baldock, no I do not believe that the decision on the Highsted application was unreasonably delayed by this Council.

As Chair of Planning Committee, I am sure that you will be well aware, that at the point at which Swale Borough Council was set to make its decision, despite several months of effort to secure the required information from the potential developer, the application still required additional information to be submitted, such that legal advice confirmed our view that it could not lawfully have been approved.

Applications of all scales must be appropriately assessed against national and local policies, and evidence needs to be provided to allow those assessments to be consistent and robust. In the case of a planning application of this magnitude, the quantity of evidence to assess of course is vast. Likewise, applications need appropriate and commensurate consultation with the public and stakeholders. For the Highsted application this meant considerable time dedicated to engagement and review of representations received.

Throughout the process Officers maintained dialogue with the applicants representatives and I am confident that due process was followed as expediently as possible.

Supplementary Question:

As the statement regarding the Highsted applications being unreasonably delayed was a direct quote from Kevin McKenna, Labour MP for Sittingbourne and Sheppey in his request to the Secretary of State to call-in the applications, would he now agree to write to Kevin McKenna outlining why his comments were so long?

Response:

I think the term that was used by the MP Kevin McKenna was that it 'may' have been unreasonably delayed. In terms of writing to him I really don't understand what that would gain us, we have said this in a public meeting here, and what I have written is a matter of public record and I intend to do nothing further.

Councillor Lloyd Bowen raised a point of order, that the decision at the last Council

meeting in December 2024 was binding for six months, so writing the letter would not have been able to be actioned under the Council's Constitution.

The Monitoring Officer said that given the Leader's response, he did not consider there was any need to debate this but took the Member's point.

Councillor Mike Baldock raised a point of order, that new information had come to light since that meeting, and the content of the letter was unknown so it would have been in response to the letter and not the alleged comments in the Press Release.

Question 3 – Councillor Hannah Perkin

Following multiple consecutive years of parking charge increases, combined with issues of large puddles, potholes and lines which are difficult to see, residents have been become increasingly frustrated. There have been increasing incidents of cars going the wrong way around many car parks due to the arrow pointers being complete worn.

Could the chair of the community committee confirm when car parks will be resurfaced and lines be repainted, particularly at Faversham Central Car park, the busiest car park in the borough, and at Queens Hall car park?

Response – Chair of Community and Leisure Committee

Income from pay and display car parking is used to offset the cost of services across the Council. Whilst our parking charges have risen, so have our costs, such as the cost of materials/electricity and labour. An annual budget is provided for car park maintenance and management. Our officers inspect each car park regularly and prioritise health and safety works from this budget.

We can also utilise income from penalty charge notices to improve the car parks and this is often used for larger renovations such as those recently done at the Ship on Shore car park in Sheerness.

We will be formulating a programme of works for the 2025-26 financial year in due course and will reassess the car parks above.

Supplementary Question:

Does the Chair agree that in 2024 the Community and Leisure Committee Parking Working Group put forward an equitable policy which was then halted at the last minute, and at the next budget we should look to rectify that situation?

Response:

Yes, I do recall and yes, you are quite correct, and I think at the next budget it is down to Members to make the decision at the time of the budget.

Question 4 – Councillor Hannah Perkin

With the government white paper on devolution, and the apparent keenness of the administrations at KCC and Medway to undertake an accelerated path to local government reorganisation, many residents in Faversham have been in contact with

councillors about the possible make-up of the proposed new unitary authorities.

One of the key concerns that has been highlighted is the possibility of a significant disconnect between local health structures and the new unitaries, especially given that Faversham sits in a different PCN meaning residents access healthcare to the East of the county.

Will the leader ensure that this concern is highlighted in discussions about possible new unitary council boundaries?

Response – Leader

Thank you for your question. We are at the early stages of discussions with our Kent Authority Partners about what any Local Government Reorganisation proposal would look like and I can share that there isn't a common position across Kent. I understand that Health Structures are important and I certainly have been considering the impact on Health of any proposed unitarization. My main priority is that any Local Government reorganisation proposal is the best that it can be for all of Swale. Ensuring our councillor and resident voice is heard is paramount to the work we need to do over the coming months. I have set up a working group for Group Leaders to ensure that we can ensure that all voices across the political spectrum are heard and any proposal coming from Swale is co-produced and has our residents best interest at its heart.

Supplementary question:

There was no supplementary question.

583 Leader's Statement

The Leader said:

“Thank you Mr Mayor and good evening, one and all I will commence this evening by echoing Mr Mayors words and offering my congratulations and welcome to Councillor Kieran Mishchuk who was successful in being elected at the recent Milton Regis by-election.

Can I now beg your indulgence whilst I turn to Mr Mayor and wish him a very happy birthday indeed, what better way to spend it than chairing a Swale Full Council meeting.

As you will all be aware the Council coalition administration has ceased and it would be remiss of me not to thank all of those colleagues who were a part of it for the valuable contribution that they all gave to it. And to that end I am hoping that going forward the representation of those that we serve will be framed in an even more inclusive way through a wider participation and collaboration of all groups and members.

This is of particular significance as, we as a council face interesting times ahead with emerging issues like devolution and local government reform on the horizon and one thing that is certain is that this will present a range of challenges for us all. But so often it's the challenges in life that provide the opportunities and it is important that where there are opportunities that we cease them when we can.

What I will say is, that going forward it is imperative that we have clarity on the

Government's proposed devolution and reorganisation timelines, in both the short and longer term to assist in shaping and informing our direction and decision making. I am of course anticipating that much of this will be resolved in writing by the Government later this week together with the decision on whether Kent will be on the Devolution priority programme.

Furthermore it would also be helpful for us to have firm assurances amid genuine concerns on some of the proposals, but more specifically around local government reorganisation, which will undoubtedly be an emotive and polarising issue for many members and Towns, Parishes and residents.

From a personal perspective I would want to see decisions being made based on robust data and evidence and whilst there are diverging views on some of the many questions that are evolving, our collective weight and voice remain our most powerful tool in seeking positive change for our residents and ensuring that proposed reforms will bring benefits for our all of our communities across Swale.

That is why I have committed to setting up regular meetings with all group leaders specifically to provide a collaborative and consensual approach to our aspirations. As we strive to ensure that this council has the foundation to secure the devolution and reorganisation deal that works best for our local economies and of course our residents. Whilst clearly the group leaders will be bringing forward their respective views it is equally important that all 47 councillors are afforded the opportunity to feed into that discussion in an informed and inclusive way.

In the best traditions of the post festive month that is January we are subjected to a whole plethora of advertisements on how we may improve our health ranging from dry January to wonder diets and dance yourself fitter programs. I therefore thought it appropriate to highlight some of the things that we are doing as a council to address health issues in Swale.

Firstly we are working with Kent County Council to deliver a series of Smoke Free Public Spaces across the borough. The initiative aims to reduce second-hand smoke exposure by restricting smoking in public spaces and educating smokers about the harm caused to both themselves and those around them when they smoke. Ultimately the goal is to improve public health whilst supporting and encouraging both smokers and non-smokers to live healthier lives.

One of the drivers for this initiative is that In 2023 the number of smokers in the over 18 group in Swale were identified as being higher than the national average, as was the respiratory disease mortality rate with the Borough. Furthermore pregnant women in Swale who were smoking at the time of delivery were also identified as being higher than the national average.

Part of the ongoing work is to consult on where smoke free spaces are most needed, for example play areas, train stations, bus stops, outside libraries, schools and hospitals.

The smoke free area project will also promote KCC's, Kent Stop Smoking Service which supports around 3,000 people a year to quit smoking.

Plans to improve access to health and leisure facilities in Sheerness have also been approved by the council's planning committee.

The project in Beachfields is a key component of the council's £20 million Sheerness

Revival programme which aims to improve the health and wellbeing, education and leisure facilities on the Island and create new employment and training opportunities for local people.

GP facilities will be improved and modernised and the surgery will be relocated to the ground floor to improve access to this important healthcare provision.

There will also be improved leisure facilities within the centre and Sheppey Matters, health and well-being charity will have a purpose-built space to help them continue providing their valuable and important services to locals.

Elderly, vulnerable or disabled residents can get help to repair, adapt or improve their homes through our Staying Put team.

The team provide health and safety checks in the home, identifying any repairs or adaptations that people may need and assisting them in completing grant applications. They address issues that may lead to falls, injuries or even hospitalisation through their fall and hospital admission prevention programme.

We worked with over 1,200 people in Swale last year to give them advice and practical assistance, helping them regain their independence, confidence and dignity with life changing adaptations. A number of those of course were helped to return home from hospital more quickly as their discharge was expedited by those adaptations providing a safe and healthy environment in which they can live.”

In response, the Leader of the Swale Independent Alliance (SIA) Group spoke of his disappointment that he found out about the end of the coalition administration via a phone call with no discussion beforehand. He referred to messages from the Labour Group on Facebook that they wanted to ‘broaden the church’, he asked was it the case that if Members wanted to know what was happening at Swale Council they should look at the Sittingbourne and Sheppey Labour Facebook page? With regard to devolution, he said he hoped that Kent would not be part of the ‘fast-track’ to devolution, as the Leader had not discussed the way forward with other Members. He was aware that the Leader had met with the Leader of Medway Council, and he hoped their discussions would be shared with other Members. The Leader of the SIA Group referred to the ‘Smoke Free Public Spaces’ initiative and considered the money could have gone to so many other better causes such as health or the pensioners fuel allowance.

The Leader of the Conservative Group welcomed Councillor Mishchuk. He also welcomed the Smoke Free Public Spaces initiative and spoke about the harm it caused to non-smokers. Referring to devolution he reminded Members that they still had a job to do and to remain focused in supporting the residents of Swale.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group said the lack of ‘clarity’ around devolution was frustrating for Members and staff. She agreed that robust data and evidence was needed but that also the Council needed to collect qualitative data from residents about how they considered themselves to be represented. The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group welcomed the Smoke Free Public Spaces initiative and that it was good to protect others from passive smoking. She said that Staying-Put was crucial and noted that the Disabled Facilities Grant was often underspent and that it was incumbent on Members to ensure residents were able to access the grant. She welcomed Councillor Mishchuk.

The Leader of the Green Party welcomed Councillor Mishchuk. He explained that he had just attended a Kent County Council (KCC) meeting which had agreed to reconsider the decision to withdraw the contract with the Seashells Children's Centre, Sheerness at their next Full Council meeting. He referred to devolution and raised concern that to-date the government had not held any public meetings about it which was disappointing. He raised concern that local government reorganisation would have on Faversham and the surrounding villages and cause a split between the social and healthcare provisions. Advice from the ministry was that new unitary authorities would be based on the current district boundaries. The Leader of the Green Party said that smoking needed to be discouraged, but that it was easy to focus on the individual factors for health, whilst ignoring the health problems caused by car dependency and inequality.

Other Members were invited to speak and made points which included:

- Raised concern about the amount of cigarette butts found at school gates and in play areas and asked that this was better enforced by the Council;
- the staying-put team provided a valuable service, and asked that if Members were aware of reliable tradespeople to let the relevant officers know so that their details could be added to the portal on the Council's website;
- asked that the Leader considered inviting a Member from the Isle of Sheppey to sit on the Group Leaders Devolution Working Group;
- welcomed Councillor Mishchuk and hoped, as the other ward member for Milton Regis, that they could work together on ward issues;
- considered that smoking should be illegal;
- believed that passive smoking was more harmful than smoking;
- welcomed the desperately needed £20 million from the Sheerness Revival programme and Beachfields project;
- welcomed the improved leisure facilities and health care at Beachfields but wondered how they would cope with the amount of housing proposed for the Isle of Sheppey; and
- welcomed the improvements to the GP facilities at Beachfields but considered this was 'pointless' if there were no GPs and what was the Leader doing to improve this?

In response, the Leader noted the comments from the Leader of the SIA Group and agreed that the Labour Group did want to 'broaden the church', and that they had not been the ones to exclude a group from a Working Party. He said that the Leader of the SIA Group had also attended meetings regarding devolution and that he had had discussions with several Leaders from Kent. He emphasised that he had no executive powers in relation to devolution, but that it was for the 47 Members of the Council to decide what direction to go. The Leader agreed there had been a lack of clarity from Government about devolution and that robust evidence to support it was needed. He agreed to consider the request that a Member from the Isle of Sheppey attend the Group

Leaders meeting on devolution. He reminded members that they had a responsibility to lobby government about attracting GPs to Swale.

The Leader of the SIA Group raised a point of information. He said the decision to exclude the Conservative Group from the Working Group had been made by the administration members at an informal Waste Group meeting.

584 **Motion - Highsted Park planning applications**

In proposing the motion, as set out on the Agenda, Councillor Lloyd Bowen reported that the application site was not within the constituency of the MP who had called-in the application, nor was it within the built-up area of Sittingbourne. The Secretary of State (SoS) needed to visit the Highsted Park application area and engage with ward members, members of the Planning Committee, local representatives and local residents to demonstrate that the government was being fair and transparent and to restore public confidence. He also thanked officers for their hard work on the application.

In seconding the motion, Councillor Julien Speed reserved his right to speak.

In the debate that followed, Members made points which included:

- Supported the motion and said there was lots of evidence that the applicants had not previously submitted that the SoS needed to see;
- this was a very important motion as the majority of Swale were concerned about the application;
- concerned that developers would be able to go straight to the SoS for them to decide large applications; and
- hoped that by seeing the application site, the SoS might understand the impact it would have on the local community.

Councillor Speed said that the Highsted Park applications would be a 'blight' on the countryside. The loss of arable land was contrary to national and local policy. This was the largest application nationally and it was imperative that the SoS visited the site to view the harm to Swale's heritage assets and wildlife areas. Councillor Speed was concerned that the MP that called-in the application had not consulted the MP for the area.

In summing up, Councillor Bowen said the Planning Inspector could visit the site, but they would not be able to consider the strength of feeling against the application.

In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 3.1.19(2), a recorded vote was taken, and voting was as follows:

For: Councillors Baldock, Bonney, Bowen, Carnell, Cavanagh, Chapman, Cheesman, Eyre, C Gibson, T Gibson, Gould, Hunt, Jackson, Jayes, Lehmann, Marchington, B Martin, C Martin, Mishchuk, Moore, Neal, Noe, Nundy, C Palmer, R Palmer, Perkin, Speed, P Stephen, S Stephen, Thompson, Tucker, Watson, Whiting, Winckless and Wise. Total equals 35.

Against: Councillors Brawn, Harrison and Miller. Total equals 3.

Abstain: Councillors S Clark, Last and Wooster. Total equals 3.

The Mayor announced the Motion had been agreed.

Resolved:

This Council notes the call in decision regarding the Highsted Park planning applications, following a request by the MP for Sittingbourne and Sheppey and others.

This Council believes that a visit to Swale by the Secretary of State prior to the release of the Planning Inspector's report would provide invaluable first-hand insight into the local context of the development. Such a visit would enable the Secretary of State to engage directly with ward members and other local representatives - ensuring their voices and concerns are understood and considered. Demonstrating proactive engagement by senior government officials will strengthen public confidence in the transparency and fairness of the planning process which has been tarnished by the actions of the MP for Sittingbourne and Sheppey.

This Council resolves to formally request that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government visits the Highsted Park application area to meet with ward members, planning committee members and, potentially, other local representatives affected by the Highsted Park development.

The Council instructs the Leader to communicate this request to the Secretary of State and to work with relevant parties to organise the visit prior to the Inspector's report being submitted.

585 **Motion - Support for a More Democratic Process for Kent**

The Mayor announced that an alteration to change DLUHC to MCHLG, due to a name change of the organisation, had been put forward by the proposer and seconder of the motion. On being put to the vote the alteration was agreed.

In proposing the motion, as set out on the Agenda, Councillor Rich Lehmann spoke about the risks of centralisation of power and to rural areas.

In seconding the motion, Councillor Alastair Gould reserved his right to speak.

The Mayor invited Members to speak and points raised included:

- Had some sympathy with the motion, but could not support the Supplementary Vote system;
- electoral reform was needed;
- the proposal would not benefit the smaller groups;
- the motion needed to ensure engagement with KCC and government happened;
- concerned regarding the proposal to establishment of a democratically elected assembly;

- it was clear that devolution would happen irrespective of what Members wanted;
- the government were trying to manipulate democracy for their own purposes;
- creating interest and encouraging residents to vote was the way forward;
- the current costs to stand as a councillor did not allow for diversity;
- the Local Government Association should look at a system;
- there was an important reason why the mayoral system was being brought back in;
- the government should not rush devolution through;
- cancelling the county elections due in May 2025 was very undemocratic and demonstrated a lack of engagement by the government;
- appreciated the intent of the motion, but could not support it;
- agreed that the £5,000 deposit and £5,000 contribution for inclusion in a candidate booklet was too much money;
- the motion raised more risks than it resolved; and
- needed to be cautious as there were a lot of unknowns with devolution.

Councillor Gould said it was a complicated area and whilst they did not have all the facts regarding the devolution proposals they had highlighted the principle areas. He considered the motion would increase the democratic process and that scrutiny was much needed.

In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 3.1.19(2), a recorded vote was taken, and voting was as follows:

For: Councillors Baldock, Bonney, Carnell, Chapman, Eyre, Gould, Jayes, Lehmann, B Martin, C Martin, Mishchuk, Nundy, C Palmer, R Palmer, Perkin, P Stephen, S Stephen and Thompson. Total equals 18.

Against: Councillors Bowen, Brawn, Cavanagh, Cheesman, Clark, T Gibson, Harrison, Hunt, Jackson, Last, Marchington, Miller, Moore, Neal, Noe, Speed, Tucker, Watson, Wooster, Whiting, Winckless and Wise. Total equals 22.

Abstain: Councillor C Gibson. Total equals 1.

The Mayor announced the Motion had fallen.

586 **Annual Climate and Ecological Emergency Progress report**

The Chair of the Environment and Climate Change Committee, Councillor Lehmann, introduced the report and proposed the recommendation. He said that the Council was doing good work to combat climate change.

Councillor Dolley Wooster, Vice-Chair of the Environment and Climate Change Committee, seconded the recommendation and reserved her right to speak.

The Leader of the SIA Group welcomed the report and asked that future reports highlighted what the Council could realistically achieve.

The Leader of the Conservative Group said that whilst the Council was not likely to achieve net zero carbon it should continue to try to. He was concerned that only 1% of parking provided electric vehicle charging points. He raised concern regarding proper

waste recycling and that education was key to achieve this. The Leader of the Conservative Group was not convinced that the car share scheme was of any benefit and queried how much it cost to implement.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group spoke about the importance of ensuring the Council had a Local Plan as it impacted a lot of what was included with the report. She referred to the emergency planning section of the report and considered there had been some missed opportunities and that the Council should be encouraging residents to sign-up to the Flood Line and looking at the effects of extreme heat on residents. She asked that communication with local businesses on reducing their carbon footprint be improved moving forward.

Other Members were invited to speak, and points raised included:

- The Council should provide compost bins;
- the Council should invest in services for local people rather than climate change;
- this would have no impact on climate change;
- just because the Council could not do everything to reduce carbon globally that was not a reason to do nothing;
- the longer the Council did nothing to reduce its carbon footprint the more radical the changes would need to be in the future;
- contaminated recycling waste bins was not just about education, as some residents just could not be bothered to recycle;
- referred to the savings made by the Council due to work carried out to reduce the Council's carbon footprint as set out in the report;
- America and China needed to do better in relation to climate change; and
- requested that more detail be included on wetlands as Swale was a coastal borough.

The Mayor welcomed the report and requested that as a coastal borough more work be included on the borough's wetlands. He said he was disappointed that no schools from Swale had been nominated at the Green School Awards 2024. He was aware that schools in Swale were doing good work in this respect, and he encouraged Members to raise awareness of the awards in their areas.

Councillor Wooster reminded Members that the Council had declared two emergencies, housing as well as climate change and hoped that before devolution happened, they would both be a priority of the Council. She said that climate change affected every resident in the borough and one which all parties should work together to resolve, and that the Council needed to be realistic on what was achievable. With regard to car sharing club schemes, Councillor Wooster said more clarity from Government was needed. She spoke about the setbacks the Council had endured with the Covid-19 Pandemic and cuts to the waste budget, and praised how the Council had reacted to those challenges and made positive improvements.

On being put to the vote, Members voted in support.

Resolved:

(1) That the Annual Climate and Ecological Emergency Progress Report be noted.

587 Housing Historic Delivery & Local Plan Review Housing Target

The Leader introduced the report and proposed the recommendations.

In seconding the recommendations, Councillor Monique Bonney, Vice-Chair of the Planning and Transportation Policy Working Group reserved her right to speak.

The Leader of the Conservative Group said this was another example of the impact of the Highsted Valley applications and that the Council's hands were effectively 'tied'. He said that were a lot of unknowns at the moment. This was not in the best interests of residents and left the Council open to similar applications.

The Leader of the Green Group, deferred to Councillor Gould who said it was important to note that the housing targets the Council were agreeing had been imposed by the Government. He said that the Local Plan process was very constrained and that a lot was not decided locally, and the Council had to follow the National Planning Policy Framework which did not consider important local factors such as best and most versatile agricultural land.

The Leader of the SIA Group, did not consider the recommendations were exactly what had been agreed by the Policy and Resources Committee (P&R) who had considered challenging the housing targets. He referred to paragraph 2.9 on page 67 of the report and said that was an essential part of what had been discussed by P&R. He then referred to the final sentence of paragraph 4.2 on page 68 of the report, which he considered should not be under 'Alternative Options Considered and Rejected', it was what the Council should be doing.

Councillor Baldock referred to recommendation (4) in the report to P&R and referred to Appendix III of the report, Housing Targets Exceptional Circumstances Study, that indicated there might be problems in delivering the proposed housing targets and may need further work as evidence comes forward as agreed at P&R but missing from the report and should be reinstated.

Councillor Baldock moved the following motion without notice. That the following be included as a recommendation. That further work be carried out on the Housing Targets Exceptional Circumstances Study. This was seconded by Councillor Bonney.

The Mayor said he would not accept the motion and suggested the item be deferred, and he considered the options with the Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer.

Councillor Baldock raised a point of information, that the recommendations at P&R supported the additional work so it did not need to come to Full Council for decision. The Monitoring Officer advised that the recommendations being considered by Full Council were the 'verbatim' recommendations agreed by P&R, but the content of the report was different.

The Chief Executive clarified that P&R had not agreed the additional funding for modelling, but had agreed work on unsustainable commuting patterns, and it was not a recommendation to Full Council.

A Member referred to recommendation (2) and whilst he had no issues with the proposed delegations, he was aware of large developments coming through which he

felt should be considered by the Planning and Transportation Policy Working Group.

Councillor Mike Whiting moved the following motion without notice: That any additional planning permissions granted, new dwellings completed, annual changes in government published statistics and any evidence which concludes previously granted or allocated sites are no longer deliverable be considered by the Planning and Transportation Policy Working Group. This was seconded by Councillor Baldock. On being put to the vote the motion was agreed.

The Mayor invited other Members to make comments, and points raised included:

- The Council needed to get on with its Local Plan as it had been delayed too many times;
- officers had already advised Members prior to money being spent on work to establish that the Council did not have any exceptional circumstances and Members needed to be mindful of that in the future to avoid wasting money;
- the Council could not reach the current housing targets so how would it meet these increased ones;
- Members should continue to raise at Planning Committee the lack of GP facilities and serious problems in relation to traffic, highways and education; and
- the Council needed to take a stand as the houses were not being built for local residents, but for people to move down from the London boroughs as it was cheaper.

Councillor Bonney said that the Council were in a 'hideous' position with the imposed housing targets and that a contributing factor was the government-owned site at Queenborough and Rushenden. The Government had previously promised 2,100 dwellings and only 95 had been built, and now they are saying this was due to no funding. This meant that applications such as Highsted Park were going to be 'pushed through', because the government could not deliver on its own site. She said that it was a 'hideous farce from some kind of nightmare'. She reported that the NHS had advised they had enough property and yet Swale had the worst GP-to-patient ratio in the country. Over the last ten years the Council had increased its housing stock, which sadly was not affordable, far more than the rest of Kent but did not have the health and education infrastructure and there was no plan for it. This did not meet the plan for the Borough's needs.

In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 3.1.19(2), a recorded vote was taken, and voting was as follows:

For: Councillors Bowen, Brawn, Cavanagh, Cheesman, S Clark, Eyre, C Gibson, T Gibson, Harrison, Hunt, Jackson, Last, Lehmann, B Martin, C Martin, Miller, Perkin, Tucker, Watson, Wooster, Whiting, Winckless and Wise. Total equals 23.

Against: Councillors Baldock, Bonney, Carnell, Chapman, Jayes, Marchington, Mishchuk, Moore, Neal, Noe, Nundy, C Palmer, R Palmer, Speed, P Stephen and Thompson. Total equals 16.

Abstain: Councillors Gould and S Stephen. Total equals 2.

Resolved:

(1) That the approach to setting a Local Plan housing target, as set out in paragraphs 3.1 and 3.2 of the Planning and Transportation Policy Working Group report on Housing Targets, including the 5% buffer for consultation and examination resilience be considered.

(2) That the proposed growth within the draft Plan Regulation 18 consultation of 7,990 dwellings, including the review of the remaining Local Plan Bearing Fruits (1,703 dwellings), as well as the balance of housing need (6,287 dwellings) be considered, and that the Planning and Transportation Policy Working Group consider prior to delegation being given to the Head of Place to amend figures, with the Policy and Resources Committee Chair and Vice-Chair, solely in line with any additional planning permissions granted, new dwellings completed, annual changes in government published statistics and any evidence which concluded previously granted or allocated sites that were no longer deliverable.

588 Local Government Boundary Review - Council size submission

In proposing the recommendations, Councillor Baldock thanked the Policy & Engagement Officer for her hard work in producing a good report. He said that based on the response of Members and work undertaken, the Council had made the case that the Council size should be increased to 55. Councillor Baldock added that it was a shame that due to devolution it would probably never happen.

The Leader seconded the recommendations and reserved his right to speak.

The Leader of the Conservative Group said that the financial implications of the additional Members needed to be considered and was it the most efficient use of the Council's resources? He said that whilst the Committee system allowed broader participation, it could lead to longer processes and potential inefficiencies compared to the Cabinet model. The Leader of the Conservative Group said that the balance between inclusivity and streamlined governance needed to be carefully managed. He considered that whilst the increase in Members might help to distribute workload, it would not assist with case working efficiencies, digital engagement demands or support for councillors and that improved technological tools, increased officer support, or processed streamlining should be explored.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrats Group said that she fully supported increasing the size of the Council as there had been good cross-party input to the report and also because case work was far more complex than it previously had been. She referred to the diversity and equality section of the report, and said it was important that people with different life experiences were able to speak in the chamber and to allow greater accessibility to enable people to represent their residents effectively.

The Leader of the Green Group noted the cost of the additional Members and considered that the value for money they would bring would be 'enormous'. Members were very stretched and decreasing the workload would help to make the councillor role more accessible to those in employment, on low incomes and from diverse backgrounds.

In response to a question from a Member, the Chief Executive advised that officers had asked the Local Government Boundary Commission whether they should continue with the review in light of devolution. They had responded to say they were in discussions

with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and central government about this, and until those discussions were concluded the Council should continue with the review.

The Mayor opened the debate to other Members, and points raised included:

- Disagreed that 55 councillors would spread the workload and the calculations were 'flawed';
- workloads were determined by issues, so extra councillors would not reduce workloads;
- the proposal would increase costs to the Council and officer time;
- considered that some wards would benefit additional councillors;
- considered that there was already a diverse mix of councillors;
- supported more councillors that worked to really represent their area; and
- Parish and Town Councils were an important 'voice' for residents especially with devolution, suggested another governance review to ensure all areas of Swale had such representation.

The Leader supported the proposal which he considered would 'spread the load' and increase diversity.

In concluding, Councillor Baldock said that the country had the lowest ratio to elected residents anywhere in Europe, and he fully supported the report which he considered really represented the work of councillors at Swale. He said it should be considered for submission to the next Boundary Commission review for devolution.

Resolved:

- (1) That the Council Size Submission document, as attached at Appendix I of the report, be approved as the Council's formal submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England as part of the Council's Local Government Boundary Review.***
- (2) That the Government policy position set out in the English Devolution White Paper on 16 December 2024 on devolution and local government reorganisation, may have an impact on the progression of the boundary review in Swale be noted.***

589 Review of Polling Districts and Places

The Leader introduced the report and proposed the recommendations. The Deputy Leader, Councillor Ashley Wise, seconded the recommendations.

A Member welcomed the review of polling stations and said that it was easier for residents if they were more centrally located within the wards.

Resolved:

- (1) That the consultation responses to the Polling District and Place review as set out in Appendix 1 of the report be noted.***
- (2) That, subject to the outcome of the Boundary Review, recommendations of***

proposed changes to polling districts and places be considered by Council at a future date.

590 Political Balance - Allocation of Committee Seats

The Mayor confirmed that all Members had received the to-follow appendix.

The Leader introduced the report and proposed the recommendations.

In seconding the recommendations Councillor Baldock reported that it had been agreed that the rounding-up on the political calculations was incorrect and that the Labour Group had agreed to gift a seat on the Licensing Committee to the SIA group.

Resolved:

- (1) That the political balance calculation as set out in Appendix II of the report be agreed, subject to the amendments to the Licensing Committee as minuted.***
- (2) That seats to those Committees and appointment of Members to those Committees, in accordance with the wishes of Group Leaders, as set out in Appendix III be allocated and agreed subject to the amendments to the Licensing Committee as minuted.***

591 Recommendations for Approval

Resolved:

- (1) That the recommendations from the Environment and Climate Change Committee on 15 January 2025 in respect of Minute No. 548 Waste and Street Cleansing Contract Scrutiny Review report be noted.**

592 Adjournment of Meeting

There was an adjournment from 8.35 pm until 8.50 pm.

593 Extension of Standing Orders

At 10 pm, Members agreed to the suspension of Standing Orders in order that the Committee could complete its business.

Mayor

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