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## WESTERN AREA COMMITTEE

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**MINUTES** of the Meeting held at Bobbing Village Hall, Sheppey Way, Bobbing, Sittingbourne ME9 8PL on Wednesday, 2 July 2025 from 7.00 pm - 8.36 pm.

**PRESENT:** Councillors Lloyd Chapman, James Hunt, Paul Stephen (Chair) and Sarah Stephen (Vice-Chair).

**NOMINATED PARISH COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVES:** Parish/Town Councillors Sue Chapman, Sarah Poole and Ross Richardson (Bobbing Parish Council (PC)), Allison Stuart (Leysdown PC) and Vivien Rich (Tunstall PC).

**NOMINATED PARISH COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVES (Virtually):** Nicola Butlin (Borden PC) and Brian Clarke (Bredgar PC).

**OFFICERS PRESENT:** Steph Curtis and Janet Dart.

**OFFICER PRESENT (Virtually):** Andre Bowen.

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE (Virtually):** Councillors Monique Bonney and Ann Cavanagh.

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:** Kent Police Officers Phil Clemens, Katie Radford and Marie Roostan.

**APOLOGIES:** Councillors Mike Baldock, Roger Clark, Chris Palmer and Richard Palmer.

### 124 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chair read out the emergency evacuation procedure.

### 125 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

### 126 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meetings held on 13 February 2025 (Minute Nos. 647 – 655) and 14 May 2025 (Minute Nos. 32 – 33) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as correct records.

### 127 CUSTOMER ACCESS STRATEGY

The Service Improvement & Project Manager, Andre Bowen, gave a presentation on the Customer Access Strategy.

He stated that Swale Borough Council's (SBC) current Customer Access Strategy was written in 2013, which ensured easy, clear and convenient access to Swale's

services for all. While the overarching aim still existed, the way this was achieved needed to be revisited. In the last decade there had been a shift in local demographics, political control, technological developments and social norms post the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit and soon to be Devolution.

The Service Improvement & Project Manager went through the various channels available to customers currently and the trend in customer contact over the last few years. He also explained the stages of reviewing the Customer Access Strategy before asking for feedback from everyone in attendance at the Sittingbourne Area Committee meeting.

The following comments were raised:

- Email contact was often preferred as a record of the contact could be kept;
- some residents lost confidence with online forms after the problems experienced in 2024 in the early stages of the implementation of the new waste contract;
- borough councillors were often the next point of contact when all other methods had not worked;
- residents still preferred face-to-face or telephone contact, but were frustrated by the restricted hours. Perhaps the timings could be revised;
- the use of an Artificial Intelligence (AI) chat service and Quick Response (QR) codes might be worth considering;
- queries submitted were not always followed up on by officers;
- the website would benefit from an upgrade on the search engine;
- a communications campaign would be useful to make sure people were aware of the different methods of contact;
- all contact methods should be made obvious on the website; and
- in the Woodstock Ward there were a lot of older residents who did not have internet access and did not want it.

## 128 REVIEW OF AREA COMMITTEES

The Chair said that earlier this year, the Council agreed that a review of Area Committees should take place and he would like to hear everyone's thoughts on how effective the meetings were.

After a short presentation by the Policy & Engagement Officer on the background and purpose of Area Committees, a discussion took place.

The following comments were raised:

- Very few members of the public attended the Western Area Committee (AC) meetings;
- were AC meetings worth the time of parish councillors and SBC officers when most of the agenda items were also discussed at the Local Councils' Liaison Forum meetings?;
- there were no parish councils in the Sittingbourne area;
- a lot of people were not aware what wards Western covered;

- interest in AC meetings had declined since funding was withdrawn;
- other methods of engagement needed to be considered;
- when workshops were held at previous AC meetings, they were very good but no feedback was provided after;
- more explanation about items was needed;
- AC meetings were a waste of time/money;
- councillors heard the same messages at different meetings;
- there needed to be engagement with parish councils separately on specific issues;
- residents attended more when there was an emotive issue on the agenda; and
- less formal sessions such as a surgery or pop-up café style might be more effective.

## **129 PUBLIC FORUM**

No issues were raised.

## **130 LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION UPDATE**

The update in the agenda pack was noted. A Parish Councillor requested that an update be provided which could be included in parish council newsletters. The Policy and Communities Manager agreed to provide this.

## **131 LOCAL BUS FORUM MINUTES FOR NOTING**

The Minutes of the last Local Bus Forum were noted.

Councillor Monique Bonney said that Section 106 funds were provided for bus services and Kent County Council (KCC) held the funds. She requested that Members were kept informed about the allocation of the Section 106 funding via the Swale Local Bus Forum. It was agreed to raise this issue with the Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods.

## **132 MATTERS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS MEETINGS**

Members noted the progress on actions.

Bobbing Parish Council gave an update on the work they had been doing on the Loneliness Project. They held regular Friendship Cafés and Repair Cafes which were very popular. They would also be holding a Christmas lunch.

## **133 LOCAL ISSUES TO BE RAISED**

Councillor James Hunt said that a public bench in Argent Way and Jacinth Drive, Sittingbourne had been removed and were now in an area of trees. He had advised officers but no action had been taken yet.

Sarah Poole, Bobbing Parish Council, said that Juliet Webster, NHS Kent and Medway Talking Therapies, would like to liaise with parishes to do work on suicide prevention. Swale and Dartford had the highest suicide rate in Kent.

Councillor Monique Bonney suggested SBC Members and parishes work together to engage with the Integrated Care Board (ICB) and KCC to improve healthcare provision in Swale as there had been no improvement in services. Responsibility for healthcare sat with KCC, so they should hold the ICB to account. There was no urgent care provided in Sittingbourne, residents had to travel to other areas.

Councillor Sarah Stephen gave an update on the Baby Memorial bench and garden in Sittingbourne.

**134 MATTERS REFERRED TO SERVICE COMMITTEE CHAIRS FOR CONSIDERATION**

No issues were raised.

Chair

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