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COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting held by Video Call on 15 October 2020 at 5.30 pm.

Present: Councillor Jason Savage (Chairman); Councillors Albon, Ara, Ashbee, Bailey, J Bayford, R Bayford, Boyd, Coleman-Cooke, Crittenden, Currie, Day, Dennis, Dexter, Duckworth, Cllr Everitt, Farrance, Fellows, Garner, Green, Gregory, Hart, Hopkinson, Huxley, Keen, Kup, Paul Moore, Ovenden, Parsons, L Piper, Cllr Rev. S Piper, Potts, Pugh, Rattigan, Rawf, Rogers, Roper, Rusiecki, D Saunders, M Saunders, Scobie, Scott, Shrubb, Taylor, Tomlinson, Helen Whitehead, Wing, Wright and Yates

1. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Campbell.

2. **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

It was proposed by the Chairman, seconded by the Vice-Chairman and agreed that the minutes of the meeting of Council held on 10 September 2020 be approved and signed by the Chairman.

3. **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Congratulations were offered to Councillor Ashbee, the new leader of the Conservative party.

4. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

5. **PETITIONS**

(a) **Uncle Mack Petition**

Mr Perkins presented an e-petition regarding the removal of the Uncle Mack plaque in Broadstairs. Members noted that the following petition contained 281 signatures:

"We the undersigned petition the council to preserve and not remove the plaque next to Viking Bay memorializing James Summerson (also known as Uncle Mack)."

In accordance with the Council's Petition Scheme, the petition was referred to Cabinet without debate for report back to the Council within three ordinary meetings.

(b) **Petition regarding Dog Restrictions on Thanet Beaches**

Council noted the response from Cabinet to the petition, as detailed in the report.

6. **QUESTIONS FROM THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

(a) **Question no.1 - the delegation of functions to Council Officers**

Mr Hughes, Committee Services Manager, asked the Leader the following question on behalf of Mr Green:

“Public opinion is that increasingly over the years, senior officers at TDC have increased decision making powers over and above those found in other local councils, without effective democratic control. Will he seek to introduce mechanisms to limit these powers together with timely public reporting of decisions taken?”

The Leader responded with the following points:

- The last major review of the Constitution (including non-executive delegations) was undertaken in 2015/16. This was in response to a recommendation from the LGA Peer Review. It was a huge piece of work led by a lawyer commissioned from Essex County Council.
- Council Members were responsible for considering, amending and approving the constitution. This work was carried out at eight meetings of the Constitutional Review Working Party and two meetings of the Standards Committee during 2015/16. The Constitution was then approved by the Council on the 25 February 2016. All these meetings were held in public.
- The Local Government Act 2000, required the Leader of the Council to prepare a scheme of delegations (for executive functions) which is presented at the annual meeting of Council.
- Since its adoption by Council in February 2016, the changes, considered by the Constitutional Review Working Party and agreed by Council, related to; Contract Standing Orders; Standing Orders for Statutory Officers; mandatory training for Members; a variation to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel; and some minor procedural matters.
- The delegation of non-executive functions to officers was considered in great detail and agreed by elected Members in 2016. The delegation of executive functions is solely the responsibility of the Leader. These are local decisions, so would differ from council to council.
- Any specific suggestions for improvements were welcome as the Council should always be open to improvements.
- The Leader felt that Members were at least as engaged in decision making as they were in 2015 and before.
- It may be the case that the public had an incomplete understanding of the different roles of Members and Officers, this could result in unrealistic expectations.

7. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

(a) Question No.1 - The use of Weed Killer

Councillor Wing asked Councillor Albon the following question:

“I have been informed that TDC only uses weedkiller in 'emergency situations', what are these emergency situations, please give examples, what weedkiller was applied and how many litres has TDC used so far in 2020?”

Councillor Albon responded that:

- The term 'emergency situations' was not a trigger for weedkiller use.
- The Council has not used glyphosate based weed-killer within the District since 6th February 2020.
- There were no immediate plans to use products containing glyphosate, however it may be used again in the future if it is considered the best solution at the time. Alternative non glyphosate products would also be considered.
- A total of 1.6 litres of glyphosate based herbicide diluted in 60 litres of water was used between 1st January and 6th February 2020.

- Weed clearance has been on a reduced this year due to the need to prioritise services elsewhere in response to the current pandemic.
- Only manual weed clearance has taken place in public open spaces since February.

Councillor Wing did not wish to ask a supplementary question.

8. NOTICE OF MOTION

There were no motions on notice.

9. LEADERS REPORT

The Leaders report had been circulated to Members and published on the Council's website before the meeting. The report has been attached as an annex to these minutes.

Councillor Ashbee as Leader of the Conservative Party made the following points:

- She thanked Members for their congratulations and welcome into her new role as Leader of the Conservative group.
- She wished to thank the housing officers for their hard work during the transition of the service in house, and hoped the benefits to residents would soon become obvious.
- She appreciated the sentiment that the Council remained open to external advice on how to improve.

The Leader replied to Councillor Ashbee's comments with the following points:

- Congratulations were offered to Councillor Ashbee and the Leader looked forward to working with her. He believed that he had a good working relationship with all the group leaders, and highlighted that they were all working for the benefit of the residents.
- The Leader reiterated his thanks to the Housing team and noted that Councillor Whitehead also deserved recognition for her efforts.

Councillor Reverend Piper as leader of the Thanet Independents Party made the following points:

- It was the right decision not to undertake a peer review that would have caused additional uncertainty for the Council.
- The Council continued to get things done despite the Covid pandemic, it was good to see some positive social media comments.
- The District would cope with Brexit and further delays to the reopening of the airport.
- Congratulations were offered to Councillor Ashbee.

The Leader replied to Councillor Reverend Piper's comments with the following points:

- The peer review decision was made collectively and was an example of how well the Council worked together. This would need to continue in the face of the Covid resurgence.
- There was a need to understand how London's allocation to tier two could impact the District.

Councillor Garner as Leader the Green Party made the following points:

- He wished to offer his thanks to staff for their work at this time.
- He believed that a peer review in the new year would be beneficial to the Council.
- He shared concern about the potential for pollution as a result of the Manston Airport proposals.
- Levels of pollution were an issue of growing concern across the District.

- It was highlighted by residents that there needed to be more clarity regarding plans at the Port of Ramsgate, it should be easier for residents to engage with the Council.
- Housing should be high on the Council's agenda, and he hoped to be involved in this in future. Congratulations were offered to Councillor Whitehead and others involved in bringing the Council's housing stock back under Council control. There was a need for more social housing in the District.
- He was pleased that the Council had supported the Thanet Community Land Trust, and hoped that support would continue.
- All new buildings should support environmental enhancements, residents felt strongly about this and the enhancement of biodiversity should be at the forefront of all the Council's decisions.

The Leader replied to Councillor Garner's comments noting that:

- There was concern about potential impact that an additional 4000 lorries would have on the District. The Council would ensure that Central Government was aware of these views.
- With regard to berths four and five at the Port, the Council would be following the proper planning process. This would be the same process that would be carried out anywhere in the Country.
- Councillor Garner was thanked for his comments.

10. REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Councillor Bayford, Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel, advised Members that the item was before them because it was a standing item on the agenda, however the Panel had not met since the last meeting of Council, therefore the report was substantially the same as that brought to the last meeting.

Members noted the report.

11. ANNUAL TREASURY MANAGEMENT REVIEW 2019-20

Councillor Yates, Cabinet Member for Finance, Administration and Community Wealth Building presented his report, it was then proposed by Councillor Yates and seconded by Councillor Albon and Members agreed that the recommendations as detailed in the report be approved, namely:

"That council:

- Notes the actual 2019-20 prudential and treasury indicators in this report.
- Approves the Annual Treasury Management report for 2019-20."

12. CHANGES TO COMMITTEES, PANELS AND BOARDS - 2020/21

There were no changes to nominations put forward by any of the group leaders.

Meeting concluded: 6.05pm

Leader's report for Council (15 October 2020)

“This October council meeting completes one year of the current administration. The circumstances have probably been the most testing that Thanet District Council has faced, with the last seven months dominated by issues arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. This crisis continues and its effects seem set to go on for many months to come.

“I am grateful therefore for the way that officers and members have worked together, to the extent that all four group leaders were recently able to issue a joint statement in respect of the proposed Local Government Association review, which noted that “the council is currently performing well at all levels”.

“We also decided – jointly, and with all members having had the opportunity to talk to Will Brooks from the LGA about what a review could do – not to proceed with such a review in the current circumstances. This decision was not driven by complacency but by practicality and we remain open to external advice about improvements the council can make.

“Cabinet must lead the council, even when there is no majority group, but it is also right that on such matters we all work together and strive to reach a consensus where possible. That is the approach I have taken as leader over the last 12 months and I believe it is the right one, particularly in these unprecedented times.

“Since that decision about the LGA review was taken, Cllr Lesley Game has resigned as leader of the Conservative group and I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for her constructive and useful contribution as shadow leader of the council.

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“The shadow of Covid-19 is once again looming over us, although happily the infection rate in Thanet has recently remained below the Kent average and well below the national average, meaning we were not affected by the initial spate of local lockdowns and are currently in the lowest tier of the new arrangements introduced this week.

“This does mean that any fears that the influx of visitors to our beaches over the summer posed a significant risk of spreading the virus locally have not been substantiated. The boost to the district’s economy was much needed. It also shows that our residents and businesses have generally behaved responsibly and we need them to continue to do so.

“Very recently we have seen the infection rate start to rise in the South East and it is now clear that we face many more months of restrictions. The council has had to show agility in responding to the changing expectations of central government, most recently in respect of a new scheme designed to support residents required to self-quarantine.

“It should be noted, however, that this scheme is very limited in its scope and funding, so as with other announcements there is a risk that government creates expectations we cannot meet.

“As well as unquantifiable impacts on residents and businesses over the coming months, Covid-19 continues to create financial challenges for the council, with the consequent uncertainty now extending into the 2021/22 financial year. That applies not only to our own revenue but also to the basis of government funding. This will complicate the budget-setting process.

“We also face the uncertainty of the end of the Brexit transition period and the potential use of the Manston site for up to 4,000 lorries, at a time when Covid infection rates are rising. Even without Covid that would be a considerable risk to our district.

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“It is only five weeks since our last meeting and the significant event in that time has been the transfer of responsibility for management of the council’s housing stock back to direct control after nine-and-a-half years under East Kent Housing.

“I am conscious that a great deal of work has been done by officers to provide as smooth as possible a transition for tenants and former EKH staff and I thank them for that. In one respect, however, we do want tenants to notice the difference. We want to do better.

“I have been consistently impressed by our housing officers in all facets of their work and nobody could be more committed to her role than the housing portfolio holder Cllr Helen Whitehead, the deputy leader, something which I believe is recognised across the council.

“Next week’s cabinet will consider plans to add 36 new council homes for rent over the remaining lifetime of this council using right to buy receipts, although we have to meet 70% of the cost from our own Housing Revenue Account business plan. There are strict rules to ensure that we cannot use the 30% from receipts in conjunction with planning agreements with developers or other subsidy, which limits our approach.

“Despite this, Thanet has been providing new council homes. This 36 will mean the council has directly provided 191 since 2015. However, in that period the total provision of new affordable homes by the council and local housing associations has been 265, whereas the estimated requirement in the 2016 strategic housing market assessment was 397 every year. That demand is likely to rise in future.

“The council recognised that it needs to do more in its Housing, Homelessness and Rough sleeper strategy earlier this year and I was reassured by the engagement it received from members.

“However, this shortfall has human consequences. As Newington ward councillor I represent an area where the effects on some people’s lives are apparent. A significant proportion of the casework I receive is from residents who are housed in intolerable conditions, but nonetheless cannot easily be rehoused because of the shortage of suitable available homes.

“These issues include overcrowding, disabled people stranded in their homes or unable to access bathroom facilities on an upper floor and others with a variety of mental and physical health conditions for whom their housing situation is seriously affecting their quality of life.

“Too often these conversations start, never mind end, with the belief that nothing can be done. It is a dispiriting experience for all concerned.

“This is not the result of council officers being unwilling to help, or an unfair rationing system. It is the consequence of long-term structural failure in housing supply at national level, dictated by national policy. Even the government’s new planning white paper focuses on helping people to buy, when the priority for Thanet is affordable rent.

“We should not confuse this with an argument about the desirability of individual housing sites in the local plan, which can be contentious. It is about the unacceptable conditions in which some of the people we represent already live in Thanet, whether as council tenants or in the private rented sector.

“These individual cases are, of course, confidential and don’t usually make headlines. They necessarily affect a minority of residents who may be concentrated in particular wards, whereas issues with services that affect everyone or become the subject of controversy tend to consume our collective attention. Every year as councillors we subject the general fund budget to scrutiny but rarely spend much time on the housing revenue equivalent.

Minute Item 9

“There is a risk that in talking about numbers, reassuring ourselves that our policies are fair and that our officers are doing everything they can, we can fail to recognise the individual suffering that continues. We rightly prioritise tackling homelessness because rough sleeping is highly visible and temporary accommodation is expensive. But I do not believe that collectively we give the problem of residents who are unsuitably housed enough attention.

“That is why I am arguing that the return to direct management of our housing stock needs to mark a significant refocus, not just on providing all our tenants with a better service, but in putting housing at the heart of the council’s agenda.

“The deputy leader and I have asked for a standing cabinet advisory group to be established so that members who have a particular interest in housing can meet on a regular basis to discuss all facets of the service we provide.

“Setting up another committee won’t solve anything of itself, but it is recognition that housing matters to members of this council and that to our tenants it is the single biggest difference we make to their lives. I believe we can do better, and therefore that we must.”

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