
COMMUNITY, ECONOMIC GROWTH AND PROPERTY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, ME10 3HT on Tuesday, 5 October 2021 from 7.00 pm - 9.21 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Cameron Beart, Mike Dendor, Simon Fowle, Tim Gibson, Alastair Gould, James Hall, James Hunt, Denise Knights, Peter Macdonald, Tony Winckless (Vice-Chairman) and Corrie Woodford (Chairman).

OFFICERS PRESENT: Billy Attaway, Martyn Cassell, Joanne Johnson, Kellie MacKenzie and Emma Wiggins.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE : Councillors Monique Bonney (Cabinet Member for Economy and Property), Steve Davey (Remotely), Richard Palmer (Cabinet Member for Community), Ken Rowles (Remotely), Tim Valentine (Remotely) and Mike Whiting (Remotely).

APOLOGIES: Councillors Roger Clark and Eddie Thomas.

324 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chairman drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.

325 CONFIRMATION OF CHAIRMAN AND VICE-CHAIRMAN

Following a query from a Member on whether the correct procedure to elect the Vice-Chairman had been followed at the previous meeting, Members agreed that the Committee would vote again. However, Councillor James Hall, who was previously nominate, stated that he was happy that Councillor Tony Winckless had been elected Vice-Chairman, so it was not necessary to vote again.

Councillor Corrie Woodford was confirmed as Chairman, and Councillor Tony Winckless was confirmed as Vice-Chairman.

326 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 6 July 2021 (Minute Nos. 133 – 139) were taken as read, agreed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

327 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

328 VERBAL UPDATES FROM CABINET

The Chairman welcomed the Cabinet Member for Community to the meeting.

The Queen's Platinum Jubilee – Thursday 2 to Sunday 5 June 2022

The Cabinet Member for Community reported that further information about the event and grants available would be sent out to Members. He asked Members to liaise with the Council's Economy and Community Services Manager, and the Economy and Community Services Project Officer about any known activities or events in their Wards to commemorate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. This would allow officers to engage with organisers and use the Visit Swale web portal to promote if suitable.

The Cabinet Member for Community gave a verbal update on various projects currently being supported by the Community Team which included:

- the 1920s festival held in Sittingbourne High Street which had been well attended and supported by local traders;
- a grant awarded to Sheerness Town Council for an event held on 31 August 2021;
- the Kent Isolation Support Fund which provided support to those having to self-isolate during the Covid-19 Pandemic;
- the recently launched Sheppey Community Bus which was supported by Swale Borough Council (SBC) and Kent County Council (KCC); Age Concern (Sittingbourne and Faversham) including exploring possible dementia services for the Sittingbourne area;
- the Sheppey Digital Inclusion project which aimed to improve digital accessibility for residents on the Isle of Sheppey;
- local food banks;
- the Re-Connect Fund and events they had worked with at The Light Cinema, Sittingbourne;
- local arts and crafts; and
- The Raybel Heritage Workshop.

The Cabinet Member for Community outlined the various workshops and meetings he had attended.

Referring to Parking Services the Cabinet Member for Community advised that Members would be aware that revenue had dropped significantly during the Covid-19 Pandemic, and income levels were not back to pre-covid times, but things were starting to get back to normal. The Cabinet Member reported that the agency that collected the cash from the car park ticket machines had recently gone into receivership. However, officers had done an excellent job in ensuring a replacement company were in post very quickly and there were no issues to report.

The Cabinet Member for Community advised that the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) had reported an increase in domestic violence. He reminded Members that a briefing from the CSP for all Members was scheduled for Tuesday 12 October 2021.

In response to a Member's question on the shortfall in revenue from Council car parks because of the Covid-19 Pandemic, the Cabinet Member for Community said it was approximately £400,000 and there was an anticipated shortfall for 2022. He added that there had been financial support from Central Government in the last financial year but that had not covered the whole shortfall.

A Member welcomed the provision of the Sheppey Community Bus but was disappointed that the scheduled trip to Leysdown and Warden had been cancelled. The Cabinet Member for Community agreed to look into the reason for the cancellation.

A Member asked specifically what projects the Cabinet Member for Community and the Council were instigating? The Cabinet Member explained that he considered that it was better for the Council to support the work of external organisations rather than try and do the same work. He added that the Council were looking at how to engage better with the 9 to 17 age groups in order to reduce anti-social behaviour. A Member suggested that the Cabinet Member looked to engage better with people with special needs up to the age of 25.

The Chairman welcomed the Cabinet Member for Economy and Property to the meeting.

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property gave an economic update. She spoke about the recent Sheerness High Street Task Force which involved taking government representatives on a tour of Sheerness High Street and she advised that the representatives report was awaited. She hoped that the report would provide details of support services the Council could access. The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property spoke about the Queenborough & Rushenden HIF funding and said that the date of mid-2022 was under discussion with Homes England due to delays on the construction of the pumping station. She added that there was potential for underspend on some of the work and an open space area at the Creek might be possible, and she welcomed Members comments. The Council had applied for the UK Community Renewal Fund in June 2021 and there were 11 Swale related projects submitted but still no announcement from Central Government on the successful projects. The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property stated that there were on-going discussions with the East Kent College Group to make preparations should its bid prove successful.

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property reported that the Covid-19 Pandemic had a major impact on employment levels in Swale and there had been a sustained decrease since February 2021. The current claimant count i.e. people claiming out of work benefits for Swale from August 2021, was 5.5%. The Isle of Sheppey had the highest claimant count in Swale at 7%, Sittingbourne 5.5%, the eastern area 4.8 and western area the lowest at 3.2%. The Cabinet Member reported that youth unemployment 18-to 24-year olds was high at 9.3%. There were currently 2,500 furloughed jobs in Swale up to the end of July 2021 and the number of jobs eligible for the scheme was 4% the lowest in Kent. Unemployment in Swale from August was 5.5% an improvement of 19% since 2020. The Isle of Sheppey was the lowest improved area in terms of employment at 16.6%.

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property reported that the Council had received a £3,903.00 top-up grant to the Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) and at end of June 2021 had spent £4.34million. The £443,000 remaining could be used for direct business support and had to be spent by 31 March 2022.

Referring to the dismantling of the Sheerness clock tower, the Cabinet Member for Economy and Property hoped that the work would take five months to complete.

She spoke positively of the engagement with the local community and businesses on the project. The lamp posts had been replaced and the benches refurbished, baskets and evergreen planting and streets deep cleaned, but would need additional cleaning. The lamp posts in Sittingbourne High Street were due to be repainted and benches refurbished with small projects in Faversham high street and the Forbes underpass works underway. The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property stated that green area works were planned for Sittingbourne High Street and the public would be consulted on the proposals. She also spoke about the Welcome Back Funding to support local events which included funding the free bus over the summer. The Council would be liaising with bus companies to establish where the bus was most needed and whether it was possible to roll-out every summer. She suggested the Committee might want to consider this as a agenda item.

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property spoke positively about The Light Cinema, Sittingbourne the increase in footfall, especially following the opening of Nandos, there were two vacant units and several companies had shown interest.

In response to a query from a Member, the Cabinet Member for Economy and Property reported that the Master's House construction contract had recently been signed and a local company were the successful contractors. It was hoped that the work would take approximately 6 months to complete.

In response to questions from a Member, the Cabinet Member for Economy and Property reported that skills were high on the Council's agenda and they wanted to encourage businesses to seek advice and outlined the importance of the Council acting as an "enabler" between businesses and young people. She confirmed that the Council were liaising with Quick Start and spoke about the importance of creative and art projects to engage with those young people who were more creative.

The Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods confirmed that the lease for 34 High Street, Sittingbourne had been signed so the project could be moved forward.

Members raised points and comments which included:

- Considered that being able to commute from the western area of Swale could be the reason why employment was improving more in that area;
- delighted with the improvements to Sheerness High Street;
- the railings around Rose Street toilets were in need of repair and a re-paint;
- considered that small starter units were needed in Sheerness to encourage businesses onto the Isle of Sheppey;
- needed to ensure that the street cleansing was kept up-to-date;
- needed to ensure that the Committee received updates on points raised at previous meetings;
- concerned that the Cabinet Advisory meetings would jut become discussion meetings;
- was funding for Master's House still available?
- had the Cabinet Member for Economy and Property lobbied government about youth employment;

- had the Cabinet Member for Economy and Property written to government to lobby for the Renewal Fund bid?; and
- did the Cabinet Member for Economy and Property consider that free parking would assist in the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic?

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property confirmed that funding for Masters House was available and the Council had negotiated an extension and it was important money.

In response to points raised the Cabinet Member for Economy and Property said that she was happy to provide updates on comments raised by the Committee. With regard to the Levelling-up Fund she explained that each parliamentary area could submit a levelling-up bid but it needed the support of the MP. She reported that there had been a legal challenge to the Levelling-up Fund and the decision was awaited. There had been a lot of work behind the scenes to write the bid and she welcomed the newly appointed Head of Regeneration and Economic Development who had experience of writing Levelling-up bids. The Cabinet Member advised that officers were looking at the Council's waste collection and street cleansing contracts including how often streets were cleaned.

The Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods advised that officers had considered comments made by Members at the previous meeting and that once the criteria for the Levelling-up Fund was known the Council could prepare its bid.

The Cabinet Member spoke about the improved footfall to Sittingbourne High Street and reported that the Leader of the Council was liaising with KCC and Central Government about the Renewal Fund bid.

329 COVID-19 MEMORIAL GARDEN PROJECT

The Cabinet Member for Community introduced the report which set-out proposals for a Covid-19 Memorial Garden in Swale. He spoke about the lives lost during the pandemic and the impact it had had on all of our lives.

The Cabinet Member for Community drew attention to the specific questions outlined in the report and welcomed the Committees comments. He advised that the Area Committees would also be consulted on the proposals.

Members considered the report and points and comments raised included:

- Suggested a possible site for Sittingbourne was where the war memorial used to be near Borden Grammar School;
- considered that it was a bit premature to be considering a memorial garden as the Covid-19 Pandemic was far from over;
- welcomed Area Committee input;
- welcomed the idea and there may be funding coming forward from central government;
- needed to involve Town and Parish Councils;
- could include an area within the existing war memorials;

- would need to bear in mind the on-going maintenance costs once the gardens had been set-up;
- suggested granite sets be used instead of planting to keep maintenance and costs down and keep the area presentable;
- there were four towns in the Borough not three; and
- parish councils had interest in some council land and might be prepared to dip-into their precept to fund and assist with the maintenance.

330 SWALE VOLUNTEER AWARDS

The Cabinet Member for Community introduced the report which set-out proposals to run a daytime networking and awards event for the Swale Volunteer Awards on 26 March 2022. It was proposed that there would also be a Community Inspiration Award chosen from all the nominations.

Members considered the proposal and comments made included:

- Considered the award categories were too specific and needed to be more general;
- considered the awards event should be separate from the networking event;
- needed to consider the legal implications and any liabilities for volunteers;
- needed to consider that a lot of volunteers did not like the limelight so might not want to come forward;
- promotion for the event was key and suggested the name “The Volunteers In Swale Exhibition (The VISX)”;
- needed to involve young people in the project;
- the CVS were the umbrella for this sector so need to include the word community;
- requested that a Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) over 18 year olds or a Special SEND Award be included to recognise the great work that they did;
- the events should be separate as some volunteers did not put themselves forward and might feel uncomfortable attending a networking event;
- suggested that the networking event be scheduled for May/June 2022 and the awards event held in October 2022;
- welcomed the proposed networking event which was a good way for groups to publicise their activities;
- welcomed the report and the importance of the volunteer awards in creating a network of volunteers; and
- it was important to ensure a fair judging system.

The Cabinet Member for Community thanked Members for their comments and stated that it was for all Members to ensure that they were aware of all volunteers in their area and to nominate them.

331 PARKING SERVICES

The Cabinet Member for Community introduced the report which set-out how the Covid-19 Pandemic had impacted on town centres and the downturn in income from the pay and display car parking machines.

The Chairman drew attention to the questions outlined in the report and welcomed comments from Members.

A Member asked whether blue badge holders using electric vehicles (EVs) were able to park for free or whether they received free electric? The Head of Environment and Leisure advised that the current Council Fees and Charges for 2021-2022 was a combined parking and electricity charge which meant that the EV user would get a subsidised lower charge for parking. The Council proposed to make that a far simpler process within fees and charges and that EV usage was a growth area. The Head of Environment and Leisure advised that currently disabled users paid the same rate as the able bodied when using an EV space.

Members considered the report and comments made included:

- Considered that the Pay and Display replacement needed to be bottomed-out before it was considered who got charged;
- liked the Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) system they had in Canterbury and considered it was easier to use;
- simple payment was the way forward;
- the Council should consider providing disabled only car parks that were closer to town centres;
- should explore whether the Forum car park should be used as disabled parking only and able bodied use the multi-storey car park?;
- did not think that the Council should look at parking just as a way to make money;
- the Council should not subsidise disabled drivers using EV charging points in council car parks;
- did not favour the ANPR system;
- essential that contactless was offered as a payment option on all pay and display machines; and
- supported the provision of blue badge car parks only and referred to an underused car park in Sheerness which was always empty which could be considered for this use;
- the ANPR system did not work as well for visitors to the Borough especially those with a blue badge;
- would advocate that disabled EV drivers pay via the machines and the Council collected electricity charges via the App per kilo watt hour;
- needed to encourage people to drive EVs so needed competitive electricity charging points;
- blue badge holders should have free car parking;
- EV charging points should be contactless;
- the Council could have an announced policy that EV charging would be charged at cost. This would be fair and encourage people to buy EVs and would be no detriment to council tax payers;
- bulk buying of electricity by Local Authorities was not necessarily the cheapest option; and
- how much could SBC do to meet the private industry innovations in respect of EV charging to ensure efficient and cost effective EV charging points in Swale?

In response to comments about the ANPR system, the Cabinet Member for Community explained the downside of that system. He stated that it resulted in a loss of parking spaces and more expense, and he explained that due to Government legislation Local Authorities could not operate the ANPR systems without barriers like private companies could.

A Member asked whether there was a hybrid solar and electric pay and display machine available rather than using two separate machines? The Head of Environment and Leisure explained that it would be a combination, but in cases where the lack of light was an issue the electric power would be used as a back-up.

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Property considered there were not many EV charging points in Swale and considered it important to ensure high speed charges were available for both residents and visitors to the Borough.

The Cabinet Member for Community thanked Members for their comments.

In response to questions and points made the Head of Environment and Leisure clarified that income from Pay and Display parking was not ring-fenced and went into supporting Council services. He explained that all Pay and Display machines would have the contactless, cash and via the app payment options. Officers were currently working on an EV Strategy for Swale, and the current EV usage figures showed that Swale currently had ample EV charging points.

Chairman

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