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NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES

Meeting of the Council held in the Council Chamber, District Council Offices, Letchworth Garden City
on Thursday, 11th November, 2021 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillors: Councillor Val Bryant (Chair), Councillor Terry Tyler (Vice-Chair), Ian Albert, Amy Allen, Daniel Allen, Kate Aspinwall, David Barnard, Clare Billing, Judi Billing, Simon Bloxham, Ruth Brown, Paul Clark, Adam Compton, Juan Cowell, George Davies, Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg, Morgan Derbyshire, Sarah Dingley, Faye Frost, Simon Harwood, Terry Hone, Keith Hoskins, Mike Hughson, Tony Hunter, Steve Jarvis, David Levett, Ian Mantle, Nigel Mason, Jim McNally, Ian Moody, Gerald Morris, Michael Muir, Sam North, Sean Prendergast, Mike Rice, Adem Ruggiero-Cakir, Carol Stanier, Claire Strong, Mandi Tandi, Richard Thake and Tom Tyson

IN ATTENDANCE: Anthony Roche (Managing Director), Jeanette Thompson (Service Director - Legal and Community), Ian Couper (Service Director - Resources), William Edwards (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer) and James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer)

ALSO PRESENT:

At the commencement of the meeting no members of the public were present.

53 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 2:02

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Michael Weeks, John Bishop, Gary Grindal, Sam Collins, Lisa Nash, Kay Tart and Jean Green.

54 MINUTES - 23 SEPTEMBER 2021

Audio Recording – 2:36

Councillor Val Bryant proposed, Councillor Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg seconded and on the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 23 September 2021 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

55 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 3:27

There was no other business notified.

56 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 3:28

- (1) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be audio recorded and live streamed to the Council's YouTube channel;
- (2) Members were reminded that this Council had declared a Climate Emergency. This was a serious decision and meant that, as this was an emergency, all of us, officers and Members had that in mind as we carried out our various roles and tasks for the benefit of our District.
- (3) The Chair drew attention to the item on the agenda front pages regarding Declarations of Interest and reminded Members that, in line with the Code of Conduct, any Declarations of Interest needed to be declared immediately prior to the item in question;
- (4) Members were reminded that the normal rules of debate and speaking times would apply;
- (5) Members were reminded that a special meeting of Council was to be called for 7 December to discuss the results of the public consultation on the Electoral Cycle.

57 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 5:16

There was no public participation at this meeting.

58 NOTICE OF MOTIONS

Audio recording – 5:22

There were no motions on notice.

59 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS

Audio recording – 5:34

There were two questions from Members presented at this meeting.

1) Councillor David Levett to Councillor Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg:

“North Hertfordshire has a long standing tradition of involvement with the organisation of the Remembrance Day Services in Letchworth Garden City and other North Hertfordshire towns which have shown increased attendance from the community in recent years.

Could the Leader of the Council please confirm what involvement NHDC has had with the organisation of the Remembrance Day Services this year? In particular any liaison with the Royal British Legion to ensure that these services that are much valued by the community take place.”

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg responded as follows:

“I'm sure that members will be aware given the amount of information that's been sent out through our weekly Members Information Service Bulletins, what's been done around Remembrance Day. This year's process actually commenced way back in August, and Officers were in contact with the previous year's organizers for each town and village which usually holds a Remembrance Day parade or service, just the same as they do every year in order to remind them of the processes that are involved.

As the organizers started to put their applications together, some contacted us and let us know that there were issues with things like insurance cover, because the Royal British Legion's insurance could no longer be used for this particular purpose. Some were able to use things like the Parish Council insurance or Guides' Association insurance instead. Some did say that they had been told that it was a civic duty, and therefore everything should be organized by the Council because other councils locally do that.

In addition to the having the necessary level of insurance, road closures can only be enforced by an accredited traffic management company or by the police and organizers were contacted again during the process to let them know. So before issuing the closure, North Herts Council has to ensure that road closures are done safely, and I think the majority of the organizers do appreciate this. However, we do know that clearly, communities are going to be disappointed if Remembrance Sunday events don't take place due to the high cost of accredited traffic management companies. Officers at this council have discussed with the police their availability to install and enforce road closures and the majority of proposed events are now able to be supported in this way, which I think actually does also include Letchworth - which if you've got specific follow on questions perhaps around the Letchworth events Councillor Levett I've got further events specific info on that. I can also email it over to you.

Members have, as I said at the beginning, already been informed through the MIS bulletins what's been going on. I've got information from the police about what the police have done and their commitments as well. But I think to cut a really long rambling answer to a quite pertinent question short; this Council has been liaising with community groups and doing everything we can to make sure that these events can take place this year since the summer."

Members have already been informed through MIS what has been going on, info from police commitments, this Council has been liaising with community groups to ensure that events can take place this year since the summer."

Councillor David Levett asked a supplementary question:

"Thank you for the information on that and yes, I would be interested in a bit more about the Letchworth event in particular by email because I believe the Heritage Foundation actually paid for the road closures and the insurance in that case because the Council couldn't.

Thank you for that information, but bearing all that in mind. Why did you as Leader of the Council, hang up the phone on the Chairman of the Letchworth branch of the Royal British Legion when he was trying to discuss this with you?"

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg responded as follows:

"I don't recall hanging up the phone to any particular member when I've spoken to them and had my conduct ever been out of kilter with what would be expected from a Councillor I would expect any member of the public to follow the usual Council complaints process."

2) Councillor Mike Hughson to Councillor Ian Albert:

"Following the UK Chancellor's spending review statement on local authority funding, can the executive member for Finance and IT explain how this will impact upon North Herts Council, more especially residents and business in the district?"

Councillor Ian Albert responded as follows:

They're all welcome points in the Spending Review, but what hasn't been addressed is the serious underfunding of Local Government. Looking back to our 2010/11 budget, we had £9.8 million of council tax funding and £8 million of Government support, a total of £17.8 million with 55% funded by council tax payers.

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The 2021 budget - we effectively had no government support: £11 million of council tax funding, £2 million of retained Business Rates, some New Homes Bonus, a total of £15.2 million, which was around just under 40% less than we received in real terms in 2010/11, and effectively 77% had to be funded by council taxpayers, and most of those years are under Conservative administrations at national and district level.

The Chancellor announced new grant funding of £1.6 billion a year. We don't know yet whether this will just mainly go to fund social care. Government has promised it will fund the employer burdens on local authorities for increasing national insurance, it is expected that this will need to come out of that grant funding I just mentioned; the retail hospitality and leisure relief will be extended 50% for 22/23. That's welcome.

There was no announcement, though, on whether there'll be an extension of additional funding to support authorities with the increased cost of localized Council Tax Support, and it's unclear whether there'll be business rates reset this year; a reset would remove any historic growth in the business rates base for local authorities. It's unclear if and when there'll be a new local government funding formula. There was no news or any additional funding for the continuing impact of COVID-19. We've set aside money in the coming years for that, but that is a detriment to our overall reserves. There was no news on New Homes Bonus and its longer term future. And I set out in our medium term financial strategy, we will assume that there will not be a funding formula in place for the next financial year, and that negative RSG will not be applied until confirmed otherwise; we will see where any new funding formula would have a similar redistributed effect to that.

So therefore, at this stage, we cannot expect to receive any additional General Grant funding beyond that, which reimburses us for additional costs incurred for our residents. That means we have to continue on the basis of potentially finding next next year savings of £200,000 and up to £1.8 million over the next four years.

Now we will continue to look at ways of generating income and delivering transformation savings - we will recognize we have to consider that there will be difficult choices ahead for all district councils across Hertfordshire. It's very likely that any increases in funding will come from increases in the Council Tax and Business Rates paid by residents and businesses. Government - and I want to be very clear about this - has built into its funding assumptions that all Councils will increase their Council Tax. But despite the challenges that faces this joint administration, we will continue to protect the services that our residents value; green spaces, leisure services, our community and housing outreach, and so much more. And we will continue to fix the mess left behind by the last Conservative administration who cut services to unacceptable levels."

Councillor Mike Hughson asked a supplementary question:

"It's obviously clear that government has forced local authorities into increase into council tax by starving them of funds, perhaps for the record Cllr Albert, could you also explain how the Council has provided additional support to residents with their Council Tax payments over the last year?"

Councillor Ian Albert responded as follows:

"I'm really proud of the work done by the staff of this Council to support our residents most in need, especially those through the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, and also the work done to pay out quickly millions of pounds of grants to businesses during the lockdown periods.

Under the leadership of this joint administration, we have developed and implemented with partners like Citizens Advice, and the Money Advice Trust, our Fair Collection Policy, which is an exemplar for what all Local Authorities should do. This means we work with our customers to help them with long term payment arrangements when they're in difficulty. But over and above this, the money received for Council Tax debt support; we designed a scheme whereby

every working age claimant on the Council Tax Reduction Scheme received £150 deduction in their liability. Nearly 4,500 individuals and families overall benefited from that hardship support, and we're now looking to make a further credit of up to £100 to every working age claimant with a residual council tax balance; this could benefit up to nearly 3000 people across our district on our current caseload. That's how this joint administration will continue to run North Herts: taxing fairly and spending wisely.”

60 ITEMS REFERRED FROM OTHER COMMITTEES

Audio recording – 17:01

8(a) Referral from Licensing and Regulation Committee: Statement of Gambling Licensing Principles 2022-2025.

The Chair advised that referral 8(a) would be taken with agenda item 9.

61 STATEMENT OF GAMBLING LICENSING PRINCIPLES

Audio Recording – 17:26

Councillor Daniel Allen presented the referral 8a from the Licensing and Regulation Committee: Draft Statement of Gambling Licensing Principles and moved the recommendations as in the referral.

Councillor Allen thanked the Licensing Team and the Licensing Manager for their efficiency, hard work and support in putting this report and policy together.

Councillor Daniel Allen proposed, Councillor Paul Clark seconded and on the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That Council adopts the Statement of Gambling Licensing Principles 2022-2025 as attached at Appendix A.

REASONS FOR DECISION:

- (1) Licensing authorities are required to publish a policy every three years by virtue of section 349 of the Gambling Act 2005 (“the Act”).
- (2) A new policy must be published by 3 January 2022 to comply with this statutory requirement.
- (3) The Policy builds on the effectiveness of the existing policy with minor amendments to reflect changes in legislation, statutory guidance, consultation responses and an updated local area profile.

(4)

62 CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS

Audio Recording – 19:47

The Service Director – Legal & Community and Monitoring Officer presented the report entitled Constitutional Amendments along with Appendices A and B detailing the proposed changes to the constitution, along with an additional amendment as follows:

- “in relation to the revenues and benefits manager” to read “in relation to the revenues manager”

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg proposed, Councillor Paul Clark seconded and on the vote it was:

RESOLVED: That Council:

- (1) Approves the changes made under Delegated Decision 21 October 2021 (subject to title of Revenues Manager being amended); and
- (2) Approves the further amendments set out in section 7 and 8.

REASON FOR DECISION: To ensure the Constitution remains up to date, and continues to improve its working practices where legally possible.

63 INDEPENDENT MEMBER OF FINANCE, AUDIT AND RISK COMMITTEE

Audio Recording – 21:38

Councillor Keith Hoskins presented the report entitled Independent Person on the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee and proposed the recommendations in the report.

Councillor Clare Billing seconded the motion.

The following Members asked questions and took part in debate:

- Councillor Claire Strong
- Councillor Keith Hoskins

In response to questions the Service Director – Resources advised that the Council would look to adopt similar recruitment practices used by other Local Authorities – comparable to Stevenage and HCC – in line with the Council’s usual recruitment policies.”

On the vote it was:

RESOLVED:

- (1) That Council agrees to there being an independent person on the Finance, Audit and Risk (FAR) Committee.
- (2) That Council instructs the Service Director: Legal and Community to make the required changes to the constitution.
- (3) That the Service Director: Resources is instructed to recruit to the position, in consultation with the Chair of the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee.
- (4) That the IRP be asked to consider an appropriate allowance for this role as part of their consideration of Members Allowances.

REASON FOR DECISION: To allow the Council to conform to best practice.

64 USE OF URGENCY IN RELATION TO CALL-IN FOR DECISION ON BUSINESS RATE POOLING

Audio Recording – 25:46

The Service Director – Resources presented the report entitled Use of Urgency in Relation to Call-In for Decision on Business Rate Pooling.

Councillor Ian Albert proposed, Councillor Sam North seconded and on the vote it was:

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RESOLVED: That Council notes the use of urgency provisions in relation to the Business Rate Pooling decision made by Cabinet on 8 October 2021.

The meeting closed at 7.58 pm

Chair

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