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NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES

Meeting of the Council held in the Council Chamber, District Council Offices, Gernon Road,
Letchworth
on Thursday, 28th September, 2023 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillors: Daniel Allen (Chair), Chris Lucas (Vice-Chair), Ian Albert, Amy Allen, Matt Barnes, Clare Billing, Ruth Brown, Val Bryant, Adam Compton, Mick Debenham, Elizabeth Dennis, Chris Hinchliff, Terry Hone, Keith Hoskins, Steve Jarvis, David Levett, Ian Mantle, Daniel Marsh, Nigel Mason, Bryony May, Ian Moody, Gerald Morris, Ralph Muncer, Michael Muir, Lisa Nash, Sean Nolan, Louise Peace, Sean Prendergast, Claire Strong, Mandi Tandi, Richard Thake, Tamsin Thomas, Tom Tyson, Phil Weeder, Alistair Willoughby, Dave Winstanley and Daniel Wright-Mason

IN ATTENDANCE: Ian Couper (Service Director - Resources), Jo Doggett (Service Director - Housing & Environmental Health), Anthony Roche (Managing Director), Jeanette Thompson (Service Director - Legal and Community), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager), Callum Reeve (Democratic Services Apprentice), Melanie Stimpson (Democratic Services Manager) and Sjanel Wickenden (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer)

ALSO PRESENT: At the commencement of the meeting there were 4 members of the public.

226 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 1 minute 45 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Simon Bloxham, Dominic Griffiths, Tom Plater, Sam Collins, Terry Tyler, Juan Cowell, David Barnard, Raj Bhakar and James Denselow.

An apology for absence was received on behalf of Councillor Cathy Brownjohn who might arrive late to the meeting.

227 MINUTES - 13 JULY 2023

Audio Recording – 2 minute 17 seconds

Councillor Daniel Allen, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Elizabeth Dennis seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 13 July 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

228 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 3 minutes

There was no other business notified.

229 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 3 minute 7 seconds

- (1) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be audio recorded.
- (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) The Chair advised that the normal procedure rules in respect of debate and times to speak applied.
- (5) The Chair advised that 4.8.23(a) of the Constitution did not apply to this meeting. A comfort break would be held at an appropriate time, should proceedings continue at length.
- (6) The Chair advised that a referral from the Cabinet meeting on 19 September regarding the Financial System Budget, which was circulated as supplementary document, would be considered alongside Agenda Item 8.
- (7) The Chair advised that a Polling District Review would commence on Monday 2 October, with a Members Briefing scheduled on Monday 16 October. The final report would be presented to Council on 23 November 2023 for determination.
- (8) The Chair reminded the Committee about the upcoming Chair's Civic Event and Awards 2024, being held on Friday 1 March 2024.
- (9) The Chair held a minute's silence in memory of former District Councillor Geoff Woods and Members paid tribute.
- (10) The Chair congratulated Councillor Tom Plater on the birth of his daughter.

230 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 10 minute 29 seconds

The Chair advised that he had invited Ms Laura Hyde, Chief Executive Officer at Resolve, to make a presentation to Council as one of his chosen charities for the Civic Year. Ms Hyde thanked the Chair for the opportunity and provided a presentation for Members, which included that:

- The primary aim of Resolve was to help service users, move to a manageable and positive lifestyle where they could contribute and enhance their community.
- They ran a free substance misuse service with sites in Letchworth and Welwyn.
- They provided high quality, abstinence based, drug and alcohol treatment, with an end goal of total abstinence.
- They assessed the needs of the client and provided day services including group and individual therapy.

- They offered 1 to 1 counselling which had been proven to help addiction particularly to alcohol.
- They were due to commence an evening support group after feedback from clients, so support could be offered to those with daytime employment.
- They also provided support for the families and carers of their clients.
- Ideally each client would attend two 90 minutes sessions a week, and a monthly catch up with their key worker.
- Initially clients had a 16-week programme that could be repeated. However repeated reattendances were discussed and assessed.
- They provided confidential, professional counsellors.
- They supported loved ones and clients with their physical health and mental health needs, leading to their clients being self-reliant.
- Their biggest advocates were their clients who lives they had turned around.
- Last year 122 clients used the Letchworth based service.
- This year they had an average of 40 clients per month and received about 13 referrals monthly.
- Last year the cost of the Letchworth service was £165K, mainly due to salaries and clinical supervision.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Adam Compton
- Councillor Val Bryant

In response to questions Ms Hyde stated that:

- There was a lack of support within the Royston area, The Living Room provided some cover for this area.
- When a referral come through for a client from Royston or the Southern Rural area they endeavoured to help, but were often hindered by transport issues.
- Public transport was limited within these areas, clients had to rely on family and friends, although Letchworth train station was very close to the Resolve office.
- Further information on the number of clients and their transport issues for the Royston and Southern Rural areas could be provided outside of this meeting.
- Across the two sites the majority of referrals came from the Stevenage area.
- Royston clients may have access to Cambridge or Hertford sites.
- The clients and staff desired to break all stereotypes, but recovery was tough.

The Chair thanked Ms Hyde for her presentation.

231 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS

Audio recording – 28 minute 52 seconds

In accordance with Standing Order 4.8.11, two questions had been submitted by the required deadline set out in the Constitution.

(A) Council Responsibility to House Asylum Seeker Granted Leave to Stay.

Councillor David Levett to Councillor Sean Prendergast (Executive Member for Housing and Environmental Health).

"Given the significant number of asylum seekers being accommodated in North Hertfordshire by the Home Office what plans does the Council have to house any of the families should they be granted leave to stay and it becomes the responsibility of North Hertfordshire District Council to find homes for them?"

Councillor Sean Prendergast gave a response as follows:

"I do think that it's perhaps a question that Councillor Levett should be asking the government. Almost every Local Authority will be in this situation which begs the question, what is the government long term strategy to house people, furthermore do we know how long the government is going to take to process asylum claims, the answer is we don't. There is a huge backlog of applications that will inevitably be putting increasing pressure on Local Authorities, quite frankly the whole situation is completely unacceptable. What this also highlights is that need to build more affordable social housing which has been another significant failure of this Government. However, we are where we are and this Council does have a plan to try and manage the situation, a report was provided to Cabinet last week that provides an answer to Councillor Levett's question, however I am more than happy to summarise this for Members tonight. This administration has a strong track record of supporting refugees, we have successfully housed 70 refugees in direct response to Government resettlement schemes over recent years. This includes refugees from places such as Syria and Afghanistan. Although asylum seekers are ineligible for Local Authority Housing services if they're successful with their applications they will be granted refugee status by the Home Office. The Home Office is currently using two hotels in this District with a total of around 250 occupants. Our local registered providers have been very supportive of refugee resettlements to date and the Local Authority Housing fund will provide more affordable housing to help with these demands. However, it is anticipated that there will be much more focus on the option on using the privately rental sector for resettlement of refugees going forward. In view of this a new fixed term member of staff has been recruited based on the Council's housing team in order to manage resettlement activities as part of the Council's wider housing role, in an attempt to try and minimize the numbers that may come homeless. It is worth noting that around 12 months ago the Home Office asked Hertfordshire to assist with the placement of 801 asylum seekers by December 2023 with North Herts allocation being 97, we are seeking further clarity from the Home Office on this extra demand bearing in mind the relatively recent procurement of 12 hotels in Hertfordshire accommodating approximately 1800 asylum seekers. While this Council is trying to be proactive in managing this situation, already high housing demands are almost certainly going to increase, therefore all Local Authorities will be reliant on Government funding to manage the situation effectively, a situation that I must add was creative by this government. Councils deserve better, but more importantly so do asylum seekers, we must not forget these are people that have come from war torn countries who need support and assistance and although the Government continues to fail these people we will be here, to offer support."

Councillor David Levett asked a supplementary question, as follows:

"A report in the Daily Express on Monday September 25, there was an article that said the Home Office must now consult Councils legally to ask the number of people they can accommodate, have we been asked that question yet and what would the answer be?"

Councillor Prendergast responded:

"I have not seen that article but bearing in mind it's in the Daily Express I will probably take that with a pinch of salt, but I don't know the answer to that question Councillor, but I can find out for you and come back to you."

(B) Council Financial Relationship with Birmingham City Council.

Councillor Ralph Muncer to Councillor Ian Albert (Executive Member for Finance and IT):

"To ask the Executive Member for Finance and IT whether North Hertfordshire District Council has a financial relationship with Birmingham City Council, and if so, to provide detail as to the nature of this relationship?"

Councillor Ian Albert gave a response as follows:

“I can confirm that North Hertfordshire District Council does not have a financial relationship with Birmingham City Council.”

In response to a supplementary question proposed by Councillor Muncer, having sought advice from the Monitoring Officer the Chair advised Councillor Muncer that as his supplementary question did not relate to the original question, that it would not be accepted.

232 NOTICE OF MOTIONS

Audio recording – 36 Minute 1 second

There was one motion submitted in accordance with Standing Order 4.8.12.

Council of Sanctuary

Councillor Alistair Willoughby proposed the submitted amended motion as follows:

“North Herts is proud of its diversity and history of welcoming people from across the world to the District.

There is a tradition at the heart of North Herts’ communities, those of faith and of none, of working together to welcome, host, feed, clothe and support people seeking sanctuary here.

North Herts is enhanced by the contribution of those from a diverse range of backgrounds.

Over the last few years, the council has, with the support of residents, partners and community groups, co-ordinated the resettlement of refugees and supported asylum seekers. This has included:

- Supporting the resettlement of 55 individuals through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme
- Hosting 289 Ukrainian refugees escaping war (including 106 children)
- Resettling 15 refugees through the Afghanistan Citizens Resettlement Scheme
- Committing to playing our part in tackling modern slavery and trafficking.

We are committed to continuing to work with partners, schools, and the voluntary, community and faith sector to create a welcoming and secure borough for those seeking sanctuary.

The District Council of Sanctuary is awarded by City of Sanctuary to institutions that are welcoming to those fleeing violence and persecution in their own countries, and protecting the rights of all migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees.

Council believes that:

- Standing up for those facing persecution, and welcoming refugees, asylum seekers and migrants is a moral responsibility that enriches our district and country.
- North Herts must continue to support its migrant communities and that the journey to become a District Council of Sanctuary will solidify this commitment.
- Refugee & asylum seekers are much more likely to be subject to both criminal and sexual exploitation as well as modern day slavery.
- We owe a moral duty towards children, and vulnerable and trafficked adults in our District, and this should extend, where possible, to refugees and migrants.

This Council commits to continuing its work:

- Embedding our organisational principles of equality and inclusion at the heart of our work with refugees and asylum seekers when supporting them in our community and engaging with district council services
- Challenging anti-migrant sentiment wherever we find it and championing the rights and dignity of refugees and asylum seekers.
- Finding opportunities across the Council and the District to celebrate our migrant communities, tell their stories, and promote their voices.
- Developing the Council's formal approach to how we engage with, listen to and support those seeking sanctuary, including the development of a Refugee strategy and accompanying action Plan.
- Working with local community, health, and education partners, including those with lived Experience. This will include working with these partners to shape North Herts' District of Sanctuary ambition and strategy.

That the Council resolves to:

1. Launch the journey to become an awarded District Council of Sanctuary by joining City of Sanctuary's local authority network.
2. Embody and commit to the City of Sanctuary 'Charter' values of Inclusive, Openness, Participation, Inspire, and Integrity in all we do.

In addition to taking local action, we will call on the Government to:

1. Guarantee the safety of all children.
2. Create a proper plan for resettlement."

Councillor Sean Prendergast seconded the amended motion.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor David Levett
- Councillor Gerald Morris
- Councillor Tamsin Thomas
- Councillor Ralph Muncer

Councillor Alistair Willoughby summarised that the motion:

- Was not a party political motion, it was about helping people who were fleeing their homes due to conflict.
- This motion would say to refugees that the Council, was here for them, they can make a home here and be part of our community.
- This motion was about working with an organisation and network of people who cared about people.
- This motion set out a vision and the journey, to help make the lives of many people better, showing that the Council cared and wanted to help people.

Councillor Daniel Allen requested a recorded vote on this item.

Having been proposed and seconded and, following a vote, the result was as follows:

YES	:	32
ABSTAIN	:	5
NO	:	0
TOTAL	:	37

The individual results were as follows:

Cllr Daniel Allen	YES
Cllr Adam Compton	YES
Cllr Alistair Willoughby	YES
Cllr Amy Allen	YES
Cllr Bryony May	YES
Cllr Chris Hinchliff	YES
Cllr Chris Lucas	YES
Cllr Claire Strong	YES
Cllr Clare Billing	YES
Cllr Daniel Marsh	YES
Cllr Daniel Wright-Mason	YES
Cllr Dave Winstanley	YES
Cllr David Levett	YES
Cllr Elizabeth Dennis	YES
Cllr Gerald Morris	ABSTAIN
Cllr Ian Albert	YES
Cllr Ian Mantle	YES
Cllr Ian Moody	YES
Cllr Keith Hoskins	YES
Cllr Lisa Nash	YES
Cllr Louise Peace	YES
Cllr Mandi Tandi	ABSTAIN
Cllr Matt Barnes	YES
Cllr Michael Muir	YES
Cllr Mick Debenham	YES
Cllr Nigel Mason	YES
Cllr Philip Weeder	YES
Cllr Ralph Muncer	ABSTAIN
Cllr Richard Thake	ABSTAIN
Cllr Ruth Brown	YES
Cllr Sean Nolan	YES
Cllr Sean Prendergast	YES
Cllr Steve Jarvis	YES
Cllr Tamsin Thomas	YES
Cllr Terry Hone	ABSTAIN
Cllr Tom Tyson	YES
Cllr Val Bryant	YES

As such it was:

RESOLVED: That the motion was carried.

233 FINANCIAL SYSTEM BUDGET

Audio recording – 53 minutes 10 seconds

Councillor Ian Albert, Executive Member for Finance and IT, presented the report 'Financial Systems Budget' and advised that:

- This was a request to approve a £200K budget to purchase an IT System that would be cost effective and allow the Council to have an accurate financial system, which was especially important given the reported overspend at Hertfordshire County Council this week.
- A tender exercise had taken place to identify the best value option.

- The new system would provide efficiency improvements and would improve the production of our accounts.
- This report had been approved by Cabinet and now required Full Council approval.
- The new system would produce cost savings that would recover the revenue costs and revenue impact of the purchase.
- This was an off the shelf package with some customisations.
- Once purchased, work would commence with Officers and Members to ensure that the benefits were achieved.
- The report highlighted the alternative options explored, including extending the current contract.
- The new system included Cloud based technology.

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis, Leader of the Council presented the referral from Cabinet of the 'Financial Systems Budget' and advised that Cabinet had considered this item and fully supported the expenditure.

Councillor Terry Hone raised a point of clarification that the overspend at the County Council referred to expected revenue and not capital expenditure, as was suggested by Councillor Albert.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Adam Compton

In response to questions, Councillor Ian Albert stated that:

- The efficiency savings would be achieved over the 10-year lifetime of the system.
- The request to review financial data on the existing systems for errors ahead of budget setting was noted.
- Any service improvements that occurred during implementation could be noted.

Councillor Ian Albert proposed and Councillor Elizabeth Dennis seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That Council approved a capital budget allocation in 2023/24 of £200k for the initial work to develop and implement the new finance software system.

REASON FOR DECISION: A new finance system was expected to lead to more efficient processes and a better customer experience. A new finance system would incur up-front installation and development costs. These costs can be charged to capital but require a capital budget. Additions to the capital programme above £50k required approval by Full Council.

234 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Audio Recording – 59 minutes 49 seconds

Councillor Daniel Allen, as Chair proposed and Councillor Terry Hone seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972, the Press and Public be excluded from the meeting on the grounds that the following report will involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the said Act (as amended).

N.B Councillor Amy Allen left the Chamber at 20:32.

235 SETTLE PENSION AGREEMENT - PART 2

N.B. This item was considered in restricted session and therefore no recording is available.

RESOLVED: That Council agreed to a new Admission Agreement between Hertfordshire County Council (as the Hertfordshire Pension Fund administrator), Settle Group and North Hertfordshire District Council to allow settle to achieve a partial exit from the Local Government Pension Fund. The terms of that new Admission Agreement would be in line with what is set out in paragraph 8, including the recommended actions outlined in 8.6.1 to 8.6.3 of the Part 2 report.

REASON FOR DECISION: Settle had requested that the Council consider the proposal that it has made. Settle felt that it was in their best financial interests and it was possible that it could allow greater capacity for Settle to invest in housing, which could be in North Herts.

236 SETTLE PENSION AGREEMENT - PART 1

N.B Councillor Lisa Nash left the Chamber at 20:58 and returned at 21:02.

N.B Councillor Amy Allen returned to the Chamber at 20:59

Audio Recording – 1 hour 29 minutes 47 seconds

The Service Director – Resources presented the item 'New Pension Admission Agreement for Settle Group - Part 1' and stated that following the Part 2 discussion, Council had adopted the Part 2 agreement in line with paragraph 8 of the report.

Councillor Ian Albert proposed and Councillor Elizabeth Dennis seconded and, following a vote, it was

RESOLVED: That Council agreed to a new Admission Agreement between Hertfordshire County Council (as the Hertfordshire Pension Fund administrator), Settle Group and North Hertfordshire District Council to allow settle to achieve a partial exit from the Local Government Pension Fund. The terms of that new Admission Agreement would be in line with what is set out in paragraph 8 including the recommended actions outlined in 8.6.1 to 8.6.3 of the Part 2 report.

REASON FOR DECISION: Settle had requested that the Council consider the proposal that it has made. Settle felt that it was in their best financial interests and it was possible that it could allow greater capacity for Settle to invest in housing, which could be in North Herts.

The meeting closed at 9.02 pm

Chair

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