

WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL

HELD REMOTELY

9TH DECEMBER 2020 (6PM)

Present:

Councillors: S Miah (Chairman), P W M Young (Vice-Chairman), J Aston, G W Ballinger, C J Barnett, J F Byng, V Caulfield, S J Chambers, A Coleman, R H Coleman, B S Dawes, N J Desmond, H E Dyke, P Dyke, C Edginton-White, N Gale, S Griffiths, I Hardiman, P Harrison, M J Hart, K Henderson, L J Jones, A L L'Huillier, N Martin, F M Oborski MBE, T L Onslow, M Rayner, C Rogers, S E N Rook, D R Sheppard, J W R Thomas, A Totty and L Whitehouse.

C.47 Prayers

Prayers were said by Rev Robert Legge, Team Vicar for The Parish of Kidderminster East.

The Chairman announced that, due to an error on the website which could have affected some of the consultation responses, item no. 11 - Polling Place Review, had been withdrawn from the agenda; a detailed note would be sent to all members to explain this. He advised that the consultation would be re-run and a full report brought to the next meeting of the Council.

C.48 Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

C.49 Declarations of Interests by Members

No declarations of interest were made.

C.50 Minutes

Decision: The minutes of the meeting held on 23rd September 2020 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

C.51 Public Participation

There was no public participation.

C.52 Questions

Four questions had been submitted in accordance with Standing Orders

(Section 7, 1.8) by Members of the Council.

1. Question from Councillor Anna Coleman to the Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Community Protection

With an aim to safeguard the future of the Bewdley Museum and the Guildhall and give a reassurance to the taxpayers, would Cabinet Member agree to investigate a Right of First Refusal to WFDC or other community organisations/funding partners with a public consultation prior to a Right of First Refusal being exercised?

Answer from Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Community Protection

Thank you for your question. As I have repeated at Overview and Scrutiny, Cabinet and the recent Bewdley Museum Management Committee on December 1st, we as a Council are approaching the establishment of Bewdley Museum as a fully independent trust in a positive way. I was also pleased to hear the comments made by some members of the management Committee on December 1st, who also saw it as a positive way forward. I again repeated at that meeting this is not Wyre Forest District Council walking away. The Council envisaged entering a grant agreement with the Museum and our hope is that Bewdley Museum will continue to be successful for the residents of Bewdley and the wider Wyre Forest for many, many years to come. I will investigate the idea of a right of first refusal that you mention in your question but feel that I must remind you at this point that Cabinet has already taken the decision at its meeting on the 10th November not to include a reversion clause as part of this project, and so may after investigation be in the same position with regard to a right of first refusal. I would ask if you could supply me with any contact details, which I imagine would include Bewdley Town Council, for those bodies or organisations you feel would like to be considered with regard to being contacted as part of a discussion on your request.

2. Question from Councillor L Whitehouse to the Leader of the Council

Does the Leader believe he has the resilience required to perform the role of Leader of the council during this pandemic?

Answer from the Leader of the Council

Thank you Councillor Whitehouse for your interest, the answer is yes, thank you.

3. Question from Councillor L Whitehouse to the Leader of the Council

Can the Leader describe what he & his Cabinet are doing to address the financial position?

Answer from the Leader of the Council

This is a surprising question because in fact we have been very open with what we are proposing to do. It is all contained in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy. There has been considerable debate about it; it went to Cabinet on 10th November, so lots of opportunity for you to read them. I suggest you take the opportunity to have another look at them. It is well laid out there for all to see.

4. Question from Councillor L Whitehouse to the Leader of the Council

Can the Leader make assurances that he will do everything in his power to ensure all WFDC staff members will not be made redundant & local residents are supported, given the probability many of them have / will face losing their homes & livelihoods?

Answer from the Leader of the Council

Thank you, no I should not think any Leader in the Country would be prepared to make that sort of reassurance at this stage with the financial climate that all local authorities are facing. Yes, we are doing all we can to help. We will be looking to save as many jobs as possible and moving forward we will continue to support people in the community in the way that we have been doing now for several months due to the hard work of our Revenue and Benefits Staff. So, we are doing okay but thank you again for your interest.

C.53 Chairman's Communications

The Council received a list of functions attended by the Chairman or Vice-Chairman since the Council's last meeting.

C.54 Leader of the Council Announcements

The Leader of the Council referred Members to his tabled report.

C.55 Motions Submitted under Standing Orders

One motion had been received in accordance with Standing Orders (Section 7, 4.1)

1. Notice of Motion from Councillor M Hart on behalf of the Conservative Group

Given that the Coronavirus restrictions are likely to be with us for some time and given the social distancing requirements it is highly unlikely if not impossible even at 1 metre apart to hold a meeting of full council physically given the number of people that would need to be present in the council chamber and that all members are now fully acquainted with zoom and

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how virtual meetings work and in the interests of democracy this Council:-

Resolves to reverse the emergency constitutional amendments made at our extraordinary meeting of Full Council on 21st April in respect of length of virtual meetings of full council and all other such meetings of the council and the other such amendments in respect to limiting the number of notices of motion and for members questions and return to the previous full suite of constitutional arrangements in respect of all democratic areas of the council including planning and resolves that the Chief Executive and Solicitor to the Council take the necessary steps for implementation by 31st December 2020.

Councillor Hart presented the motion on behalf of the Conservative Group. He explained that the authority was a democratic organisation and the Council meetings were the right place for democratic debate in an open and transparent way. He said that, when the Progressive Alliance took office in May 2019, they wanted to be open and transparent and were going to do things differently. He said that the Conservative Group felt that, when push came to shove, it was all words and no action.

He further explained that, when the pandemic struck, it was absolutely right that the Council united as one because members were here to serve the electorate, and the public do not like politicians making cheap political jibes or taking pot shots each other; it was important that members worked collectively for the benefit of the Wyre Forest community. He said that his group were not asking questions vehemently in the early days of the pandemic as they wanted to be united and there were more pressing real issues going on at the time.

Councillor Hart added that in the early days he had never used zoom but now it was the “new normal”, and as there was a possibility that the Council could be using zoom until May 2021 or even a date beyond then, why was it not business as usual? He said that in a democratic organisation members should be able to hold the administration to account. If a member asks a question, they ought to be entitled to a right of reply to be able to drill down into some of the detail. He questioned what the Progressive Alliance were afraid of, and could not see what possibly could be harmful in allowing an elected member the opportunity to ask a supplementary question.

In conclusion he said that he and his group believed it was in the interests of all the tax-payers across the district, that members should unite properly and revert back to the full suite of constitutional arrangements. He said he was saddened that there was not very much support for this when the item was discussed at a recent meeting of the Group Leaders, and therefore the Conservative Group were left with little option than to put the motion forward. He formally moved the motion for approval and requested a named vote.

The motion was seconded by Councillor N Desmond.

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A robust discussion ensued. Several members spoke in favour and against the motion. Upon a show of hands, the call for a named vote was lost.

Decision: Upon a show of hands the motion was defeated.

C.56 Urgent Motions submitted under Standing Orders

There were no urgent motions submitted under Standing Orders.

C.57 Policy and Budget Framework

(a) Recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 5th November 2020

- Treasury Management Strategy Statement and Annual Investment Strategy Mid Year Report 2020/21

The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Councillor M Hart presented the recommendations and formally moved them for approval. The proposal was seconded by the Chairman of the Treasury Management Review Panel, Councillor S Miah.

Upon a show of hands, the vote was carried unanimously.

Decision: The Treasury Management Mid-year Review and updated Prudential Indicators and Ratios in the report be approved.

(b) Recommendations from Cabinet – 10th November 2020

- Capital Portfolio Fund Temporary Arrangements for Acquisition Geography

The Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration, Planning and Capital Investments presented the recommendations and formally moved them for approval.

The Leader seconded the proposal and upon a show of hands, the vote of carried unanimously.

Decision: Council AGREED;

1.1 That until further notice, only within district purchase proposals are considered for the balance of the Capital Portfolio Fund.

1.2 That the Capital Strategy is temporarily amended to reflect 1.1 above.

1.3 That for the duration of the period in 1.1 above, for acquisitions made through the Capital Portfolio Fund a threshold of a score of 200 will be used when assessing proposals against the scoring criterial matrix.

(c) Recommendations from Cabinet – 10th November 2020

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- Response to Homeworking Consultation

The Cabinet Member for Housing, Health, Well-being and Democratic Services presented the recommendations.

She advised that she was concerned to read some of the responses, especially those relating to mental health and the personal circumstances of some of the Council's staff; however they did not necessarily reflect the majority and was assured and confident that a platform was available for issues to be raised and dealt with going forward.

She explained, like Wyre Forest, many other council's across the country found themselves in times of significant change, some of which are put upon councils on a daily basis, particularly around the financial position. She said the Cabinet want WFDC to remain a council that is resilient to such changes and for that reason would proceed to explore different ways of working to continue to be effective for our residents and community.

She added that the Administration wanted to explore a smaller office footprint. As time was of the essence, the process would be robust and effective. She said that Service Managers would start reviewing working arrangement for their teams in early 2021. She said that was the reason she was unable to accept the recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to put a hold on the proposals until April 2021. She thanked Councillor Hart and his committee for the time they had given to the subject and formally moved the recommendations for approval.

The proposal was seconded by the Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Community Protection.

On behalf of the Conservative Group, Councillor Hart formally moved an amendment, which was seconded by Councillor N Desmond. The proposed amendment was displayed electronically for all members to read and consider

http://www.wyreforest.gov.uk/council/docs/doc56259_20201209_council_report.pdf

Councillor Hart presented the amendment and said he was sorry that the Cabinet Member was unable to accept the Scrutiny recommendations. He said that 9 out of 10 members of the Committee supported the non-political recommendations, which were based on facts. He added that members had expressed concern that only 28 responses had been received (8% of the workforce).

He said Council should not embark on Covid being used as a red herring in the debate. He said it right that the authority followed the Government advice on home working. However the post covid world was unknown and therefore members do not know what they are signing up for. He said that there needs to be a clearer picture of the Council's budget position, office footprint and the post covid world before a decision is made. He implored all members that had expressed concerns to support the measured and

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sensible proposal put forward by the Conservative Group.

Councillor S Rook lost connection for a period during the debate so abstained from voting on the item.

At 7.57pm Council agreed unanimously to suspend the Council Procedure Rules (Standing Orders) 1.1 (iii) to allow the meeting to continue past 8pm.

A lengthy, robust debate ensued. A vote on the amendment was taken, and defeated.

Upon a show of hands, the vote on the substantive motion was agreed.

Decision: Council;

- 1.1 Noted the responses which were submitted in response to the consultation process;**
- 1.2 Agreed to proceed with a review of teams and the services they deliver with a view to enabling more individuals to operate on a hybrid model working at home and in the office where it is feasible for employees to do so; and to introduce such working from 1st April 2021 or when the Government advice is such that a return to working from the office is safe, in the event that this is later than 1st April 2021.**

(d) Recommendations from Cabinet – 10th November 2020

- Green Homes Grant – Local Authority Delivery Scheme

The Cabinet Member for Housing, Health, Well-being and Democratic Services presented the recommendations and formally moved them for approval.

The proposal was seconded by Councillor V Caulfield. She said it was a great project and thanked Officers for their hard work.

Councillor Hart welcomed the government grant and said the proposal would be fully supported by the Conservative Group.

Upon a show of hands, the vote was carried unanimously.

Decision: There is an amendment to the Capital Programme to include expenditure of £300,000 to provide Green Homes Grants fully matched by the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) funding.

(e) Recommendations from the Licensing and Environmental Committee – 7th December 2020

- Review of Fees and Charges for the Council's Licensing and Regulatory Services Function 2021/22

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The Chairman of the Licensing and Environmental Committee, Councillor P Dyke, presented the recommendations and formally moved them for approval. The proposal was seconded by Councillor L Whitehouse.

Upon a show of hands, the vote was carried unanimously.

Decision: The proposals for fees and charges within the Council's Licensing, Food, Health, Safety and Pollution Control functions for 2021/22, as detailed in the report, be included in the Council's 2021/22 budget strategy.

There being no further business, the meeting ended at 8.24pm.