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**DACORUM BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**MEETING OF THE COUNCIL**

**12 JULY 2023**

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Present:

**MEMBERS:**

Councillor Williams (Leader) Councillors, Adeleke, Allen, Banks, Barry, Bhinder, Birnie, Bristow, Bromham, Capozzi, Cox, Deacon, Dhyani, Douris, Durrant, England, Freedman, Gale, Guest, Hannell, Hobson, Hobson, Johnson, Link, Link, Maddern, McArevey, Mitchell, Patterson, Pesch, Pound, Pringle, Reynolds, Riddick, Santamaria, Silwal, Stevens, Stewart, Symington, Taylor, Timmis, Tindall, Walker, Weston, Wilkie, Williams and C Wyatt-Lowe

**OFFICERS:**

The meeting began at 7.30 pm

**1 MINUTES**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 17 May 2023 were approved as a correct record.

**2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest from members.

**3 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

Mr Philip Aylett was introduced.

PAylett, Chair of Dacorum Health Action Group, commented that emergency care at a specialist hospital should be at a clear central site. Action group members have expertise in construction, finance, planning and in health services and PAylett noted that the group is pleased that the Health in Dacorum Committee is being retained. PAylett welcomed Cllr Tindall's pledge to press for fair health funding in Dacorum and for a new modern health facility in the centre of Hemel Hempstead. PAylett commented on Hemel Hospital, noting that many services are held, including bowel screening, MRI and cardiology, with 250,000 patient episodes at the hospital each year. PAylett advised that West Herts Trust's clinical strategy claims that Hemel Hospital will be the centre for planned medical services in the area and he stated that this was not true, noting that Watford General has many more planned medical

appointments and that there are not plans to increase these at Hemel Hospital in the coming years, leaving no distinct role for it. PAylett stated that many vulnerable people in the area will instead have to travel to Watford and it is therefore vital that a good health facility be maintained. PAylett commented that he has heard from a number of sources regarding doubts that the current Hemel Hospital site will be retained, which raises a number of serious questions, such as if the suggested facility will be able to provide the same range of services, what will be the location of this facility, and how will it be funded? PAylett noted that West Herts Trust's plans will take money away from Hemel Hospital, though a vision has been put forward for Hemel Hempstead that looks at integrated services for social care, health care and voluntary organisations.

PAylett asked the Leader of the Council to give an update on his statement made on 30 May regarding hospital funding and what the Council will do to ensure that Dacorum has its fair share of funding.

The Leader of the Council advised that they have been working with partners, including the hospital trust, to discuss how hospital services can be provided in the borough and ensure that health inequalities are narrowed so they achieve the best services for Dacorum residents. In relation to funding, the Leader of the Council stated that the breakdown of the funding envelope has not been confirmed but that they recently met with the Chair and Chief Executive of West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust to discuss opportunities to co-create a model for health and wellbeing services that can meet the needs of the people of Dacorum now and into the future. It is hoped that the Chair and Chief Executive of the Integrated Care Board will also be met with soon for a similar conversation. The matter remains a priority and the Leader of the Council advised that they will continue to keep members and residents informed as plans progress and new funding information becomes available.

PAylett asked the Leader of the Council how he intends to make sure that West Herts Trust engages with the Council given that public engagement over the last year has been very limited and the Trust has been previously unwilling to see the Health in Dacorum Committee to discuss their plans publicly.

The Leader of the Council responded that they are a new administration with a different approach and that it's understood that the Trust also has a new administration. The Chair and Chief Executive were met with yesterday and the Leader of the Council advised that it was a positive meeting that took place over two hours but no agreement could be made as the government are yet to release funding details. The Leader of the Council confirmed that a further update would be made when more information was available.

#### **4 ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chair noted the passing of former county councillor, Ian Laidlaw-Dickson. The Chair described Mr Laidlaw-Dickson as a dedicated citizen who engaged in local activities and in supporting residents he served, including many years of dedicated service as a trustee of Community Action Dacorum. The Chair described him as a spirited local character, and whilst they did not have party affiliation, he noted the spirit

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of local service that they enjoyed. The Chair passed on his and the Council's sincere condolences to his partner and family.

Cllr Tindall commented that he did not work with Mr Laidlaw-Dickson and noted his devotion to Hemel Hempstead as well as his involvement in voluntary work. Cllr Tindall commented that Mr Laidlaw-Dickson was a member of the Council for 8 years from 1979 to 1987, and was also a county councillor, through which he became a member of the police authority and Chair for 5 years, and that he had received an OBE for his services to the police in 2009. Cllr Tindall stated that Mr Laidlaw-Dickson would be sorely missed and he extended his condolences to his family.

Cllr Williams referred to Mr Laidlaw-Dickson's work with the police and as a county councillor, noting his long life in public service. Cllr Williams noted that Mr Laidlaw-Dickson had only stood down from the Council at the last AGM and that his contribution to Dacorum had been significant.

Cllr Guest referred to her memories of Mr Laidlaw-Dickson on the Warner's End Neighbourhood Association Committee, which he sat on as the local county councillor and that he would be remembered for the financial acumen that he brought to meetings. Cllr Guest passed her condolences to Mr Laidlaw-Dickson's partner and family.

Cllr Pesch thanked the Council on behalf of Mr Laidlaw-Dickson's partner, who was in attendance, and his daughter, for their kind words. Cllr Pesch referred to Mr Laidlaw-Dickson's career since becoming elected in the 1979 local elections, noting that in the past 12 years he had been a member of the Board of the Community Action Dacorum where he was appreciated for his insight, knowledge and understanding of the bodies that he served on. Cllr Pesch advised that Mr Laidlaw-Dickson had been a member of the local Labour Party for almost 50 years, having joined in 1974, and held a number of various local positions, including the CLP Chair and was providing advice up until his death. Cllr Pesch commented that many members owe much to Mr Laidlaw-Dickson's dedication and hard work as he tried to improve people's lives and that he would be greatly missed by all the lives that he touched. Cllr Pesch noted that a celebration of Mr Laidlaw-Dickson's life would be held on Friday 28th July at 2pm at Warner's End Community Centre.

Cllr Douris noted the references made to Mr Laidlaw-Dickson's involvement with Community Action Dacorum and commented that he had worked with Mr Laidlaw-Dickson in the last year when he chaired Hertfordshire Independent Translation Services, a trading offshoot of CAD, and he had developed HITS into a formidable translation service that is recognised across the county and wider still. Cllr Douris advised that Mr Laidlaw-Dickson made HITS a profitable organisation that is highly respected and contributed to the benefit of CAD.

A minute's silence was held in memory of Mr Laidlaw-Dickson.

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The Chair noted events that had taken place in the last month, including Armed Forces Day, and thanks were passed on to DBC staff for the work put in to making it such a successful and vibrant occasion.

The Chair commented the Windrush commemoration and noted the number of well-run events that took place in the borough that DBC staff should be commended for. The Chair advised that up to 30% of applicants to the Windrush Fund are still awaiting to hear the outcome of their applications and that the borough needs to be mindful of this. The Chair stated that he was struck by how many members of the chamber attended events but that events were not as widely attended by black and minority ethnic communities. The Chair advised that he has met with black and minority ethnic representatives and that engagement with communities will be a focus going forward to help ensure an even more vibrant and engaged event next year.

No announcements were made by the Chief Executive.

Cllr Tindall asked to give apologies as Councillor Mottershead

Cllr Williams gave apologies on behalf of Cllrs Anderson, Barradell and Elliot.

Cllr Pesch gave no apologies.

### **Portfolio Holders Updates**

#### **Cllr Tindall – Leader**

Cllr Tindall provided an update as Leader of the Council, noting that his update on meeting with West Herts Trust had been given under item 3 through the public question and that he had no further updates to report.

Cllr Williams commented that the Council has previously supported the view of the campaign group that the best provision for hospitals is within Dacorum and would be on a cleared site, not the refurbishment that Watford Hospital has proposed. Cllr Williams asked Cllr Tindall to confirm that the Council's policy has changed, given that the supported view is now unlikely, and that it is accepted that they will no longer get the best outcome for their communities.

Cllr Tindall confirmed that his personal preference is for a new hospital but that he recognised the significant role that funding would play in this process. Cllr Tindall explained that it has been announced that the plans of the hospital group will be funded but there are no further details, adding that a strategy can't be set until there is an understanding of what is being proposed and what has been agreed. Cllr Tindall welcomed an offer to work cross-party and confirmed that he would be in touch with other group leaders once further information has been received.

#### **Cllr Symington – Corporate & Commercial**

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Cllr Symington provided the update for Corporate and Commercial Services, noting it has been decided to realign the portfolio holders with the strategic directorates.

Cllr Symington confirmed that the draft 2022-23 financial statements have been published and are awaiting external auditors. The 2021-22 external auditor's annual report has been published and this outlined no risks of significant weakness in the Council's financial stability, governance or economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Cllr Symington confirmed that the Q1 report will be brought to members in September.

Cllr Symington next reported on revenue and benefits, noting that the 2023 annual council tax billing cycle has been successfully implemented and the collection process is underway for 2023-24. Cllr Symington noted that a team has been set up to administer the government's energy support payments for residents who did not receive them automatically and over £100,000 has been paid out to date. Council tax has been collected for 67,000 residents and over 4,400 business rate payers.

Cllr Symington next looked at legal and democratic services, noting that the local elections were successfully conducted on 4th May and that over 45,000 ballot papers were verified and counted across all borough and parish areas with over 400 staff employed to assist. Cllr Symington advised that feedback forms were sent to staff, group leaders and election agents to understand what went well and improve services in the future. The election teams also delivered two successful member induction days followed by the annual council and mayor making ceremony, and the teams have been recognised for their work through the annual staff recognition awards held at Shendish Manor. The legal services team continues to represent the Council in various courts and tribunals on a regular basis, and successfully prosecuted an individual for fly-tipping offences in early June. It is hoped that the successful completion of this case will help deter others from similar actions.

Cllr Symington next provided a commercial development update, noting that proposals have been developed to increase parking tariffs and amend parking policies with proposals presented to the Finance and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee and will go to Cabinet on 18 July. The proposals include tariff increases to reflect inflation and cost of service delivery and the introduction of a more consistent application of charging policies across council car parks. Proposals were also submitted to Cabinet in June for a strategic asset review as it has been many years since the Council's housing revenue account and general fund assets were reviewed and officers across the Council will undertake a series of reviews to consider strategic opportunities for development and repurposing of assets to help support place-making, housing, regeneration and commercial objectives.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe asked if it was recognised that charging for parking could negatively impact usage across a broad spectrum of residents using facilities, such as the splash park, bowling greens, health walks, and UA3 who use the car parks before going on coach trips. Cllr Wyatt-Lowe suggested that the proposal is a 'pay to play' strategy rather than a coherent car parking fee increase strategy.

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Cllr Symington thanked Cllr Wyatt-Lowe for the comments and stated that the Council is engaging in an extensive consultation process with all stakeholders and users of car parks to ascertain the effects of the policies being proposed. Cllr Symington acknowledged that people would be affected differently by the changes in car parking charges and policies and that this will be taken into consideration when assessing the impact.

Cllr Guest asked if the impact of the proposed parking charge increase on retailers recovering from the impact of Covid restrictions and the challenge of online retail has been considered.

Cllr Symington responded that the impact on all stakeholders will be considered and that they will take into account that they are recovering from the pandemic and that they are currently in a cost of living crisis. Cllr Symington also acknowledged the high-inflationary environment and advised that all issues will be considered. Cllr Symington noted, as someone linked to the retail sector, that Cllr Guest would be concerned about this and confirmed that they will engage with retailers. The move to online shopping has affected behaviours around car park usage and therefore the car parking strategy needs to be looked at holistically with all other policies, particularly place-making, which will be key in shaping what communities will look like.

Cllr Guest asked if residents will specify in the consultation if they are individuals or businesses so that the Council can gauge the potential impact of a car parking charge on retailers.

Cllr Symington advised that this question had been raised at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and that confirmation was given by the officer attending that this question will be included in the consultation.

Cllr Mitchell commented that the residents of Gadebridge will be greatly impacted by a car parking charge at Gadebridge Park and that local residents will be impacted if visitors instead choose to park on local streets.

Cllr Symington thanked the member for the feedback and acknowledged the potential impact, noting that this is why they are looking to engage with all stakeholders. On wider displacement, Cllr Symington advised that many residents want controlled parking zones and better enforcement.

Cllr Birnie asked if the portfolio holder could inform the Council of the cost of the strategic review and if they were reassured that this price would not increase. Cllr Symington stated that she could send the figures included in the financial resources papers and suggested that the amount is £100-150k. Cllr Birnie responded that the papers suggest the cost will be £500k. Cllr Symington suggested that this is a net increase on what has been budgeted from the previous administration for this work. Cllr Symington confirmed that she would circulate the figure.

**ACTION: Cllr Symington to circulate cost of the strategic review to members.**

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Cllr Bhinder commented to the reference that the reason for the car parking review is inflation and asked if the intention is therefore to bring the cost back down when inflation decreases. Cllr Bhinder noted that there has been a continuing number of reports regarding the erosion of the Chiltern Beechwoods and asked if these concerns are being considered.

Cllr Symington advised that unless inflation becomes a negative value then prices will not fall and that she could therefore not commit to prices coming down if the rate of inflation falls. With regards to the Chiltern Beechwoods, Cllr Symington confirmed that there is a full consultation on the impact of charging people to access open spaces and that there are other spaces that people can access free of charge.

Cllr Tindall raised a point of clarification, noting that most questions raised related to actions that commenced in the previous administration and suggested that opposite members concentrate on questions on items that they may be responsible for in the future and not what they were responsible for in the previous administration.

Cllr Williams commented that Chiltern Beechwoods is a national issue beyond the administration and that the questions are therefore relevant.

### **Cllr Dhyani – Housing & Property Services**

Cllr Dhyani provided the Housing and Property Services update, noting that a key priority of the housing strategy is to improve existing homes for tenants with an average of 24,000 repairs and improvements carried out each year and work is underway to achieve the net carbon target with retrofitted energy saving measures to existing housing stock into 90% of council homes with B energy ratings by 2030. Fire risk assessment work was completed at two supported housing schemes where all doors have been upgraded to the current legislative standard. Cllr Dhyani confirmed that a two-year contract has been awarded to deliver community alarm upgrades. The management process of complaints has been revised to ensure that they are closed within target and reduce the number of stage 2 complaints. The 2023-24 capital investment programme has been finalised and has commenced with improved monitoring. Cllr Dhyani confirmed that planned visits will be made to each of the supported housing schemes to listen to senior tenants with face-to-face visits and allow for property spot-checks to help prevent complaints and dissatisfaction.

Cllr Dhyani advised that the planned strategy for next year will include plans to invest £369m in council homes over the next 10 years, £263m in existing homes, £106m in new council homes, including £28m for climate action. There are a number of new housing projects that are currently being worked on, including the development of 5 former garage sites, and 4 new homes have been completed in Beechfield and Kings Langley. A strategic asset review has been approved for the next 2 years with 8 construction site projects delivering 165 new council homes. To further improve the lives of tenants, the housing operation service is currently engaging with voluntary sector partners to explore opportunities to enhance amenities and green areas in some wards with proposals in development.

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Cllr Dhyani commented on the Building Safety Act, noting that resident engagement strategies have significantly progressed with the draft framework to be taken to the tenant and leaseholder committee in July. The Housing team participated in district council roundtable discussions to support and prevent a central government funding decision relating to humanitarian responses and, as a result, the Council is now in receipt of a number of grants. The Council is providing coordination across multiple agencies and ongoing support and 4 private sector rental properties have been acquired to help prevent homelessness for Afghani households. Community services are working with a range of partners to tackle key priorities, including cost of living, homelessness prevention and migration safety.

Cllr Pringle noted that a new initiative to visit supporting housing has been introduced and asked how this is helping the most vulnerable residents.

Cllr Dhyani advised that the team is coordinating well with the work and are responding to residents when visiting with positive comments from residents. Cllr Dhyani noted that there are several issues that residents don't report and that most appreciated council visits.

Cllr Pringle asked if any particular visits have stood out.

Cllr Dhyani referred to a bungalow that looked very deteriorated and that there was no response when knocking on the door. The door was opened and Cllr Dhyani advised that the resident and property were not in good condition, so it was decided that the resident needed to be cared for through a different approach.

Cllr McAreyve commented on the cost of living crisis and asked if contact has been made with DENS.

Cllr Dhyani confirmed that she has visited DENS and noted that DENS have strong standards with a good approach towards residents as they look to train and educate them so they can move to new properties.

Cllr Douris thanked Cllr Dhyani on bringing attention to to the successful completion of the residential accommodation referred to in the report, which were implemented and commenced under the previous administration.

Cllr Capozzi asked for further information regarding the Rough Sleeper Accommodation Programme.

Cllr Dhyani advised that the Rough Sleeper Accommodation Programme has obtained £300,000 in grants towards the new building and this has been match funded. This will provide single apartments for temporary accommodation for 2-3 years and further grants will be required.

Cllr Birnie congratulated Cllr Dhyani on the initiative to visit so many residents and noted the strong team of officers within the department. Cllr Birnie commented that the

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maintenance of council housing is not at the desired level and asked if there are any policies to review the current contract in this regard.

Cllr Dhyani explained that a review will take place this year. The contract was extended for 2 years with Osborne and there is still a further year to make a decision.

Cllr Birnie asked what measures are in place to monitor the efficiency of the current contractor and the length it takes for reports of damage or repairs to be concluded.

Cllr Dhyani stated that day-to-day management is being more closely monitored and an officer is situated in the Osborne office to act as a bridge between complaints and improve communication.

Cllr Mitchell asked if emergency temporary accommodation has been looked into.

Cllr Dhyani advised that temporary accommodation is to provide a base before an individual is moved onto their property and points are allocated on a number of areas. Cllr Dhyani confirmed that they are actively working with people to get them onto the property ladder when they are ready.

### **Cllr Bromham – Neighbourhood Operations**

Cllr Bromham provided the update on Neighbourhood Operations. Regarding environmental matters, Cllr Bromham advised that 900 items of clothing were swapped at a recent clothes swap event and that there was a successful compost and tree giveaway event with 5,000 trees taken. The mowing teams are on their third cut of the season with some bedding plants in and the 5-day deep clean of the A5 has been completed. When the splash park was closed for a number of days, local management engaged entertainment, which proved popular. Cllr Bromham advised that there is a backlog of category C tree maintenance and there is a plan to engage with residents on the positive aspects of services. New waste collection routes are being launched at the end of the month, which will require date changes for some households and those effected will have received first communication, to be followed by further communication and a bin tag. The change in collection routes will save approximately £1m per year. Cllr Bromham advised that challenges with collection lorries will be focused on with the team over the coming months.

Cllr Bromham advised that they have been using fuel, including 50% hydrotreated vegetable oil, costing around 60p a litre more than standard diesel. There is a global shortage of vegetable oil due to the situation in Ukraine and there will be a move to standard diesel to bring considerable annual savings to the Council. Currently 59% of 55,000 eligible households have signed up to the green bin subscription service and there is likely to be an imminent waste conformity legislation, which may mandate food and green bin collection. The two-tier waste system needs to be optimised.

Cllr Bromham noted that 4 people were prosecuted in April for fly-tipping offences and 13 offenders who did not pay FPNs, resulting in average payments of £453 each. The air quality management area in Northchurch was revoked in April as air quality in the

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area has improved with NOx being below the threshold for several consecutive years and the real-time air quality function will be moved to Apsley.

On bereavement services, Cllr Bromham commented that the intention for the Poppy Fields Cemetery and adjacent crematorium is to have poppies in the grasses and wildflowers from next year.

Cllr Mitchell referred to tree management, noting that this is causing residents distress and asked if the administration are looking to increase the budget for tree management next year.

Cllr Bromham commented that tree management is currently years behind schedule and that they will endeavour to work out what budgets are required, noting that he has requested a plan to bring that back on schedule over the coming years.

Cllr Guest asked if the new administration intends to take forward the policy of verge hardening.

Cllr Bromham advised that there is enormous pressure on parking in residential areas and that there may be more verge hardening until the infrastructure is enabled, partly through central government.

Cllr Guest commented that the verge hardening policy has been on hold and asked if there is a timescale for this.

Cllr Bromham advised that there isn't currently a timescale but that a written answer could be provided on this.

**ACTION: Cllr Bromham to provide written answer regarding timescale for verge hardening.**

Cllr Freedman commented that a substantial amount was previously invested in new lorries for the bin fleet and that they have a number of performance issues, made worse by the technological knowledge to maintain them is abroad and this can't be brought in due to Brexit regulations. Cllr Freedman asked what actions are being taken to save this extra cost.

Cllr Bromham advised that the loader is not properly fastened onto the hopper, which is partly due to the poor specification of the lorries when they were purchased, which has been exacerbated by long lead times on spare parts, which is partly a result of Brexit, and some trucks have had to be hired. Cllr Bromham also commented on the freedom of movement and that the support they receive from the Dutch company is reduced as they are now less likely to embed field service employees in the UK.

Cllr Pringle referred to a life-threatening event that occurred in Northchurch recently with a tree on land belonging to Hertfordshire County Council and asked for further details regarding the backlog of tree management given the number of trees that are not being maintained and therefore pose a danger to life.

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Cllr Bromham explained that tree maintenance is categorised and stated that officers are diligent and monitoring trees. When a tree is identified as being a safety risk, it is typically actioned quickly and Cllr Bromham stated that the topic is under investigation.

Cllr Pringle commented that a considerable backlog had built up under the previous administration and asked if this is the case.

Cllr Bromham advised that a large backlog had built up for non-safety related incidents and that there have been difficulties with suppliers due to labour shortages. Cllr Bromham confirmed that he has approved 2 new arboreal companies to help clear the backlog and noted that it was previously difficult for issues to be reported so that the Council could respond quickly.

Cllr Taylor asked if the issues with the bin lorries is a benefit of Brexit.

Cllr Bromham commented that the Dutch company is able to deal with other EU countries and that the UK is often dealt with last.

Cllr Barry-Mears commended the additional activities brought in when the splash park was closed and asked if there are plans to continue these activities.

Cllr Bromham advised that this was a quick initiative and that they will need to assess whether they can afford to maintain these activities in future.

### **Cllr England – Climate Change**

Cllr England provided the Climate Change update, noting that the portfolio has been newly created to address climate concerns and that Dacorum will be working alongside other communities to keep people, places and properties out of harm. Cllr England recognised the work carried out by officers and Cabinet since 2019 and commented that the previous administration included climate change duties in with the other duties of the Leader, resulting in a 90% level of ambition. Cllr England advised that he has attended the Hertfordshire Climate and Sustainability Partnership briefing and meetings and that he has taken on the position of Chair of the partnership, putting Dacorum at the centre of the important work both in Hertfordshire and the wider region. Cllr England noted that by striving to reinvent Dacorum for self-preservation, climate generation rather than climate emergency can be chosen and a better future can be achieved.

Cllr England noted the importance of attaching the proper cost to the CO2 being used and that the initial programme has to work within the budget established in February and includes a big step in active travel, cycling and easing parking. There has been a strong focus on recycling, particularly removing food waste from grey bins and making green waste easily compostable. There will be a focus on funding streams to draw in investment for decarbonisation and giving people the confidence to invest in solar panels. 104 charge points will be installed across council-owned car parks this year and the future needs for the borough will then be assessed. Cllr England commented

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that climate regeneration is bringing a can-do attitude to the borough and the recognition that if the borough doesn't want a climate emergency then they all have to attach the proper cost to the CO2 that they demand or use.

Cllr Pringle referred to work with schools and asked for further information.

Cllr England gave credit to officers and the previous administration for Dacorum Climate Action Network, noting that there are currently 73 organisations and 580 individuals signed up, including 14 schools. Cllr England advised that communications are going out to the other schools not signed up with an invitation to get involved and that they hope to see increased engagement.

Cllr Pesch noted the installation of solar panels and asked if they will be installed in existing council houses.

Cllr England commented that he is keen to look into this and that he would like to have seen more progress in this area. Cllr England advised that Dacorum is in the top 20 in terms of the amount of social housing it has and that this is a huge opportunity to use this real estate to harness solar power.

Cllr Pesch asked if any funding will be put into the budget in future for the installation of solar panels in existing council houses.

Cllr England advised that they are in the early stages of budget planning and that he will feed these ideas in. Cllr England continued that the team of officers that he works with is very small and that they work with a number of members.

Cllr Bromham commented that the Dacorum Environmental Forum has been neglected over recent years and only kept running by a small team of dedicated members. Cllr Bromham asked if more work will be done in future to ensure that the forum survives.

Cllr England stated that with local government cuts and the effects of both Brexit and the pandemic, there are huge pressures on budgets and an urgent consultation needs to be held.

Cllr Guest raised a point of order regarding Cllr England's use of the word 'bloody' and asked if it was appropriate to swear in the chamber. Cllr England apologised for his language.

### **Cllr Wilkie - Place**

Cllr Wilkie presented the update on Place, noting her pride in being the portfolio holder and that she hoped that all members can work together to produce the gold standard in service for councils. Cllr Wilkie commented on the broad range of areas that the portfolio covers and she thanked officers who work on all items.

On planning services, Cllr Wilkie noted that the public enquiry regarding the plan to build 1,400 new homes at Marshcroft has now closed and that the decision is now

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awaited by the Secretary of State. Cllr Wilkie advised that there are currently no timescales and there will be a significant impact on the draft local plan. Cllr Wilkie advised the the Space Scrutiny Committee received a comprehensive report on the planning enforcement service and she thanked members for their input on this. The update allowed the Committee to look at the proposals to bring down the caseload for the service from 400 to 300 per annum. Cllr Wilkie noted the ambition of this target and acknowledged the achievement of reaching 400 given the current size of the team. A report will go to Cabinet on 18th July on how this will be achieved and will include a temporary officer for 16 months.

Cllr Wilkie next looked at proposals being worked up across the Council on the remaining aspects of the Chilterns Beechwood Mitigation Strategy, which will allow for the provision of suitable SANGs to support the borough in delivering the number of houses required.

Cllr Wilkie advised that work is progressing on the new draft local plan and a new timetable is being prepared by officers to take the Council to the next stage with a regulation draft. Cllr Wilkie stated that she hoped to be in a position to consult members soon.

Cllr Wilkie noted that the Strategic Director for Place attended the UK Retail Investment and Infrastructure Forum ("UKREiiF") in May, which acted as a soft-launch for the Hemel Town Centre Vision. Cllr Wilkie noted the importance of investment in Hemel Hempstead and that the launch was particularly effective with over 50 new contacts and follow-ups on these enquiries will be fed back to members through SPAE and the usual processes.

Cllr Wilkie confirmed that work continues on the Old Town Place Project and she noted the summer planting and wooden planters built by the Community Action Dacorum Repair Shed and were planted by Sunnyside Rural Trust with art work from a local artist. Cllr Wilkie noted that the Maylands masterplan work has been tendered and submissions from consultants are being evaluated.

Cllr Pringle congratulated everyone involved in DBC securing over £1.7m of funding from the UK Prosperity Fund and asked for further information on how this funding will be allocated to help residents of the borough.

Cllr Wilkie credited officers and the previous administration for their work in securing this funding and confirmed that £1.763m was awarded. On how the money will be used, Cllr Wilkie advised that this has provided the Council with an opportunity to reach out to the community and to ask them what their priorities are. Submissions of interest were submitted by council officers, including for the Canal Trust, and submissions were also sent by voluntary sector groups and stakeholders. These submissions have resulted in a robust investment plan approved by the Department for Levelling Up and, since approval, officers are undertaking further due diligence to ascertain if grants are still required and what projects can be delivered. Community Action Dacorum can reach out to smaller grants, such as assisting victims of domestic

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abuse and human trafficking, and will be given a specific sum that can then be distributed amongst these smaller groups in the area.

Cllr Johnson referred to 2 controversial planning appeals in the last 9 months in his ward that have been fast-tracked, noting that the fast-tracking process has been used for a number of years but that this is the first time it has been used for cases where the officer's recommendation has been overturned by the Development Management Committee. The decision to fast-track an appeal is therefore made against the Committee's decision by Dacorum and not the planning inspectorate. Cllr Johnson advised that this process gives the appellant another opportunity to include disputed information but that neighbours and ward councillors who objected the application are denied a role or fair hearing. Cllr Johnson noted that the previous portfolio holder banned fast-tracking controversial appeals resulting from the first case but that this now appears to have been discontinued. Cllr Johnson asked the portfolio holder if she agrees that fast-tracking these cases is unfair and whether she will reinstate the ban to stop this from happening.

Cllr Wilkie stated that she was unfamiliar with the cases referred to and that she would look into this further. Cllr Wilkie asked Cllr Johnson to send further information on the cases being referred to so that she could assess these with officers. On fast-tracking, Cllr Wilkie confirmed that she would look into this further and provide a written response.

**ACTION: Cllr Wilkie to provide written information on fast-tracking to Cllr Johnson.**

Cllr Birnie raised a point of order and asked that all written information be circulated to all members. The Chair confirmed that Member Services will distribute written responses to all members.

### **Cllr Weston – People and Transformation**

Cllr Weston provided the update on People and Transformation, noting that that the portfolio covers people and HR, digital and IT, communications and transformation, with much of the work focused on delivering council-wide improvements, such as a new digital platform and recruitment issues. Since the last full Council, teams have made significant progress with the People team focused on delivering the people strategy, particularly regarding recruitment. Recruitment has been a particular challenge in the public sector and is a strong focus of the team, and the recent introduction of the Market Forces Policy and Agency Framework will help alleviate the challenge and cost. A number of successful recruitment campaigns have been run recently and there will be a large number of new starters joining the Council imminently.

Cllr Weston advised that the Digital Team has an important role in ensuring that the Council's technology continues to function efficiently and safely and that the team is leading the way to introduce a new digital platform that will be a major building block in the ambitions for how the Council operates. The team recently introduced Gov Wi-Fi

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across all Dacorum buildings and a kit refresh is being rolled out to staff to allow for more agile working and upgrading functionalities so members can be more accessible to residents.

Cllr Weston explained that the Transformation Team are driving forward the customer strategy work to ensure that residents are at the heart of all activities. The team are progressing telephony to allow for a quicker and more straightforward process for those calling the Council and webpages are being updated and organised to be more helpful. This will help residents as well as reduce the number of calls that the Council receives, allowing officers to focus on those residents who need the most help. The team are also working with services to ensure that the most useful information is being provided upfront.

Cllr Weston referred to the two recent flag-raising events for Armed Forces Day and Windrush Day at Gadebridge Park, with both events well attended. The Communications Team also delivered the annual staff award ceremony, recently held at Shendish Manor and the team secured sponsorship for the event where individuals and teams across the council were recognised for their excellent work. Cllr Weston thanked her team for all their work and assistance.

Cllr Guest asked the portfolio holder if she is working with Hertfordshire County Council to promote professional roles that are difficult to recruit to as career choices in schools.

Cllr Weston confirmed that she works with all portfolio holders and members to help promote any positions.

Cllr Guest asked what work is being done with Hertfordshire County Council to help promote these roles with young people.

Cllr Weston stated that she would provide a written reply to this question.

Cllr Guest clarified that the question is how they are working with Hertfordshire County Council to work with schools to encourage young people to choose these professions.

Cllr Weston confirmed that she would work with Hertfordshire County councillors to obtain the information required and that a written response would be provided.

Cllr Mitchell asked what the HR team is doing to access new recruitment channels.

Cllr Weston advised that vacancies can exist for a number of reasons and do not necessarily mean a systematic problem. Cllr Weston commented that the Council has a healthy turnover and has seen recruitment successes in recent months with many recruits joining in weeks and months to come. There are still hard-to-recruit roles and this is not unique to the Council, but developments such as the Market Forces Policy means the Council can compete with the market. Cllr Weston advised that any further information could be provided via a written reply.

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Cllr Mitchell asked what will be done to recruit in more challenging areas, such as landscaping, particularly given how visible these roles are to residents.

Cllr Weston responded that they are doing all they can to recruit the right people and any recruitment should come from SLT.

Cllr Pringle noted the prioritisation given to recruiting new members of staff given recent challenges and asked the portfolio holder if she is willing to work imaginatively with colleagues and local colleges, such as West Herts College, and other revenues could be used to invest in creating apprenticeships with the college.

Cllr Weston confirmed that there has been a significant recruitment drive to ensure they have as many permanent staff as possible and that they are exploring all avenues, including schools and apprenticeships, but that this has to first come from the SLT to be approved.

Cllr Bromham commented that some staff are working in particularly arduous roles, including bin loaders, for 37 hours a week and that sickness rates in these roles are quite high. Cllr Bromham advised that other staff have had more flexible working patterns and asked if they would be looking at greater flexibility for those working in more challenging roles.

Cllr Weston commented that vacancies can exist for a number of reasons and do not necessarily mean a systematic problem. Cllr Weston advised that the Council's turnover is healthy and has seen recruitment successes in recent months with many recruits joining in weeks and months to come. It is still hard to recruit professionals but developments such as the Market Forces Policy mean they can compete favourably within the market.

Cllr Bromham asked if people in more physical roles will be prioritised to work out ways to improve their working conditions.

Cllr Weston confirmed that they are looking to ensure they get the right people in the right conditions.

## **5 MOTIONS**

Cllr Pringle proposed the motion, noting that it arises as a result following elections across the country on 4th May. Cllr Pringle read out the following motion:

"Given the findings of the electoral commission and the experiences of many legitimate voters in Dacorum who either were turned away at polling stations or who wished to vote but did not attend the polling station because they did not have photo ID, it is proposed that the Leader of the Council write to the Home Secretary to ask that voting ID requirements be suspended immediately for all elections and bi-elections until there can be a full enquiry into the proportionality and efficacy of this requirement."

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Cllr Barry-Mears seconded the motion.

Cllr Pringle spoke as the proposer of the motion, stating that, as elected representatives, they welcome voters and that they represent the voices of all those in their wards. Cllr Pringle suggested that the interim findings of the electoral commission following the introduction of photo ID was concerning in terms of how it discriminated against particular voter groups. Cllr Pringle suggested that these groups are more vulnerable and are generally less empowered in society where their only method of having power over their circumstances is at the ballot box. Cllr Pringle commented that it is concerning for democracy and that they must encourage participation as well as reflect the values of democracy to ensure that every single person's vote matters. Cllr Pringle stated the preclusion of voting must not be forced on people by unjustified regulations.

Cllr Pringle advised that the basis for introducing the voter ID scheme has no clear evidence and she queried the motivation of bringing it in, noting that it did result in a number of undesirable consequences and should therefore be reviewed. Cllr Pringle explained that general awareness of voter ID was reasonably good at 87%, though awareness was significantly lower amongst black and minority ethnic voters and young people. Cllr Pringle commented that those in underrepresented groups were excluded even more with the most concerning being that those without valid photo ID are 13% less likely to vote. Cllr Pringle stated that many people can't afford a car or don't travel abroad and therefore don't have a driving licence or passport and that no one should be excluded from democracy because of this.

Cllr Pringle referred to particular residents who had not been able to vote, including one resident in social housing who was also a carer and was unable to vote due to not holding valid photo ID. Cllr Pringle referred to another resident in sheltered accommodation who was retired and was turned away for producing his National Service registration.

Cllr Pringle asked the Leader of the Council to write to the Home Secretary to demand that this impediment to people be removed, noting that these marginal numbers will affect outcomes and could disenfranchise vulnerable people.

Cllr Williams commented that they would not be supporting the motion, noting that voter ID is used across the world and described it as a positive step forward. Cllr Williams stated that other countries can manage voter ID and that he felt the residents of the UK could equally cope with presenting ID. Cllr Williams suggested that everybody in the room is likely to know someone who has voted for someone else and that voter identification is a positive step forward.

Cllr Banks supported Cllr Williams' comments, stating that the Electoral Commission's report is not due until September and that the interim report released in June shows that 92% of people were aware of voter ID with 0.7% initially turned away and 63% of these returned to vote. Cllr Banks described the matter as a small issue and suggested that voter fraud is a more significant issue, having risen from 300 cases 5

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years ago to 2,000 last year and that this is likely to become a larger problem with globalisation.

Cllr Weston supported the motion, noting that residents were turned away and that members should trust their residents to vote without ID.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe acknowledged the sentiment behind the motion, stating that it is a concern if the need for voter ID prevented people from voting. Cllr Wyatt-Lowe commented that it is essential to have voter ID in some areas of the country to help protect the rights of all votes and she confirmed she would not be supporting the motion. Cllr Wyatt-Lowe stated that she was reasonably confident that voters would embrace these new measures and that initial issues will be resolved, adding that members should ensure that these problems are being addressed by recognising that some people in the community do require protection.

Cllr Guest commented that, during the recent election campaign, she and her team informed people that they needed voter ID to vote and that most people were glad that their votes were being protected. Cllr Guest advised that most people stated they had valid voter ID and, for those who didn't, they were informed of how to apply for free voter ID through the Council and that Cllr Elliot went through the process of applying with someone on the doorstep. Cllr Guest noted the need for ID to protect people's identity from those looking to steal it for malicious purposes and asked why people should not be protected at the ballot box and that she would therefore not support the motion.

Cllr Pesch confirmed that Labour would be supporting the motion, noting that there was a small proportion where people may have voted in someone's place and that deterring people from voting for the sake of a few was not acceptable. Cllr Pesch advised that a number of people do not have valid photo ID and that she supported the motion.

Cllr Freedman referred to statistics raised by Cllr Banks, stating that he was not comfortable with there being anybody turned away, regardless of number. Cllr Freedman stated that they all played a part in encouraging people to sign up for voter ID if required. Cllr Freedman noted 37% voter turnout, which needs to be improved, and that they should focus on encouraging people to vote rather than creating additional obstacles.

Cllr Bhinder confirmed that he would be voting for change and would not be voting to change it back.

Cllr Bristow commented that they have conducted many elections without the need for voter ID and that putting in extra bureaucracy was more work. Cllr Bristow confirmed that he would support the motion and described it as a ridiculous move by the government.

Cllr Hobson referred to an earlier comment that voter ID is common practice and noted that mandatory ID is in place in a number of European countries. Cllr Hobson

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suggested that the threat to democracy is more relevant from the actions of Cambridge Analytica and claims on the sides of buses rather than voter fraud.

Cllr Wilkie supported the motion, stating that the motion is about people having the fundamental right to vote and that it is a disgrace that a bar is being put on already disenfranchised people. Cllr Wilkie stated that these measures impact those who are already in a difficult position and that she was appalled by the suggestion that it was acceptable if only a few voters were disenfranchised, stating that even one disenfranchised voter is a stain on democracy.

Cllr Patterson supported the motion, stating that the opposition does not appreciate how central government introduced the measures, such as senior bus passes being acceptable but student bus passes not. Cllr Patterson noted that Jacob Rees-Mogg admitted that it was an attempt to play the system in the Conservatives' favour. Cllr Patterson stated that there were more cases of postal vote fraud and queried if the opposition were not raising this as postal voters are more likely to vote Conservative.

Cllr England referred to unconscious bias training and urged members to check their bias when motions are brought to them. Cllr England commented that unless there is evidence that can be shown, they should not let process get in the way of democracy, and that there is no evidence in this case. Cllr England advised that he had spoken to over 300 people on polling day and that a significant number were not planning to vote as they didn't feel it was worth it and that they should therefore focus on encouraging people to vote. Cllr England noted that other European countries have a culture of ID cards, which the UK does not have. Cllr England asked why people should be prevented where there is no significant evidence in place for it.

Cllr Barry-Mears seconded the motion, firstly referring to the argument made by the opposition that people would get used to the new measures and suggested that similar comments may have been made in Nazi Germany. Cllr Barry-Mears referred to an earlier comment that everyone had voted on behalf of someone else and suggested that they should look to report anyone involved in voter fraud. Cllr Barry-Mears noted that student photo ID was not allowed and that the measures could also impact newly wedded women who are awaiting new ID. Cllr Barry-Mears suggested that if the opposition knows people who have conducted voter fraud then it suggests this is an ingrained issue and it is not within the people that they want to stop voting. Cllr Barry-Mears noted that voter turnout fell, that some people returned with valid ID but that others had been unable to. Cllr Barry-Mears commented that she was confident that the motion would pass and that this shows the change in administration required.

The Chair commented that he was uncomfortable with analogies involving Nazi Germany and that such parallels should be drawn with extreme caution.

Cllr Pringle summarised, noting that the passion of Cllr Barry-Mears was justified as she understood how hard she worked to encourage young people to sign up for voter registration. Cllr Pringle commented that student loans are increasing and that young people turning 18 just after an election may mean they don't get to vote until they are 23. This portion of the demographic is disenfranchised and Cllr Pringle questioned the

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decision to deprive young people of their vote. Cllr Pringle stated that it was not a democratic decision and was therefore autocratic. Cllr Pringle stated that she was proud to make a decision based on evidence and to apply rational decision-making to her thoughts before speaking and that was she was therefore unsure about some of the comments made. Cllr Pringle advised that the motion was worded to propose that the arrangements be suspended, not abolished, to allow for a full enquiry for the proportionality and efficacy. Cllr Pringle suggested that everyone who spoke against the motion was not in favour of evidence-based decision-making and she asked why they are putting staff in a position of having to deny people their democratic right. Cllr Pringle added that a helpline needs to be in place to assist people and enable everybody to vote rather than depriving people of their right to vote. Cllr Pringle noted her surprise at Cllr Williams' comments that everybody knows someone who has voted for someone else and suggested that Cllr Williams doesn't know anyone who has committed voter fraud, unless he is providing evidence to the police.

The Chair asked Cllr Pringle to be careful of casting doubt over Cllr Williams' comments.

Cllr Pringle retracted the comment and noted her surprise that anyone would know anyone who openly talks about committing voter fraud. Cllr Pringle suggested that there is a tendency to speak ideas that will be taken up as fact and she asked members to consider the evidence. Cllr Pringle stated that believing everyone has a passport or driving licence shows members are out of touch with reality and that they should look to inspire people to vote. Cllr Pringle referred to an earlier comment regarding stealing votes and suggested that the inadequate, underfunded measure means that the Conservative government is stealing votes.

Members voted on the motion. The motion was approved with 30 votes for and 15 votes against.

It was confirmed that the Leader of the Council would therefore be called upon to act accordingly.

## **6 QUESTIONS**

Cllr Hannell asked Cllr Wilkie what percentage of social housing proposed to be built across Dacorum will be council-owned social housing.

Cllr Wilkie thanked Cllr Hannell for the question. Cllr Wilkie noted that the administration has brought this up a number of times and commented that whilst the local plan and affordable housing comes under her portfolio, social housing comes under Cllr Dhyani's portfolio. Cllr Wilkie confirmed that she would provide an additional response and that any supplementary questions would be answered by Cllr Dhyani.

Cllr Hannell advised that he had not asked a particular individual to answer the question.

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Cllr Wilkie advised that the starting point to seeking affordable housing on a development site is the council's adopted planning policies and, in most cases, this is 35% of new units being proposed on sites of 10 units or more in urban areas and 5 dwellings or more in rural areas. Cllr Wilkie referred members to the Affordable Housing Supplementary Planning Document 2023, Affordable Housing 2013 and the subsequent Affordable Housing SPT clarification note from 2022. Cllr Wilkie explained that future social housing needs will be addressed through the new local plan, underpinned by the most recent evidence, and the national planning policy framework defines social housing within the wider definition of affordable housing, representing a starting point for which future applications will be determined until the new local plan is adopted in due course. Whilst an extremely important consideration, the delivery of social housing needs to be considered with all other issues.

Cllr Hannell asked if the administration will commit to holding developers to account over social housing numbers and not allow them to renege on their commitment to complete the building of genuinely affordable housing across the borough.

Cllr Wilkie advised that the provision of affordable housing is a high priority and that exact numbers on each site will depend on proposals during the planning application stage for each site. Where a developer seeks to provide fewer affordable homes against the council policy, this will need to be justified through a viability assessment. There may be occasions where other considerations, such as a specific infrastructure taking precedence, including a developer offering to buy a residence for assisted living rather than social housing, which falls under affordable housing.

Cllr Hannell asked if it was agreed that the current administration will silence a number of objections that residents have with the amount of house building proposed if they provide a large number of genuinely affordable homes with a local connection qualification criteria that will allow their children and grandchildren to remain in Dacorum.

Cllr Wilkie commented that the question was regarding whether social housing numbers would be given in advance.

Cllr Hannell responded that he was under the impression that he could be nimble with his supplementary questions.

The Chair agreed, stating that only the first written question needs to be pre-stated.

Cllr Wilkie asked Cllr Hannell to repeat his question.

Cllr Hannell asked if the current administration would silence a substantial number of the objections constituents have with the amount of house building proposed if they provided a large number of genuinely affordable homes with a local connection qualification criteria that will allow their children and grandchildren to be able to stay in Dacorum.

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Cllr Wilkie agreed that there is a strong argument for the points made in terms of allowing a larger number of affordable homes and that the local connection is already established in local housing. Cllr Wilkie commented that they could look at how to progress matters to ensure that local people benefit from the social housing being built.

## **7 BUSINESS FROM THE LAST COUNCIL MEETING**

No outstanding points from the previous meeting were noted.

## **8 CABINET REFERRALS**

Cllr Tindall moved CA-52-23, the Provisional Outturn Report.

Cllr England seconded the referral.

Agreed

## **9 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REFERRALS**

No referrals.

## **10 CONSTITUTION UPDATE REPORT**

Cllr Tindall noted the motion to change the constitution to ensure that reports are appended to the agenda so members can review them ahead of Council meetings. Cllr Tindall advised that this will assist members as well as speed up meetings.

Cllr Tindall noted the motion regarding minute taking and advised that all Council, Cabinet and Committee meetings will be recorded and retained and displayed on the Council's website and stand as a record of debate rather than long-written minutes. The final decision will be confirmed as a written minute.

Cllr England seconded the motion and stated that this will improve the experience of residents.

The motion was agreed by the chamber.

## **11 APPOINTMENT OF THE INDEPENDENT PERSON AND INDEPENDENT MEMBER**

Cllr Tindall noted the appointment of Michael Brown as the Council's independent person and Susan Johnson as the independent member. Both roles support the Monitoring Officer and Standards Committee. The recommended appointments follow an interview process that involved the Chairman of the Standards Committee, Cllr Gale, and MBrookes. The Council's gratitude to Susan Johnson was noted for serving as independent person for the past 4 years.

The recommendations in the report were agreed.

## **12 OUTSIDE BODIES**

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Cllr Tindall moved the report for the individuals named, noting there are a number of vacancies. Cllr Tindall confirmed that he would consult with the leaders of other parties to determine any amendments, noting that there should be a complete list by September.

**ACTION: Leaders to discuss outside bodies list**

**13 CHANGES TO COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP**

Cllr Tindall proposed that Cllr Cox fill the vacancy on the Financing and Resourcing Committee.

**14 CHANGE TO COMMITTEE DATES**

None.

Cllr Hobson made a point of order and asked if a comfort break could be arranged for future meetings. The Chair noted that members can leave when required and confirmed that this would be considered.

The Chair closed the meeting.

The Meeting ended at 10.10 pm

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