
DACORUM BOROUGH COUNCIL

MEETING OF THE COUNCIL

15 APRIL 2020

Present -

MEMBERS:

Douris (Mayor), Anderson, Banks, Barry, Beauchamp, Bhinder, Birnie, Claughton, Elliot, England, Freedman, Griffiths, Guest, Su Mahmood, Riddick (Deputy Mayor), Rogers, Stevens, Symington, G Sutton, Taylor, Tindall, Uttley, Williams, (23)

OFFICERS:

The Chief Executive, Corporate Director (Finance and Operations), Corporate Director (Housing and Regeneration), Assistant Director (Corporate and Contracted Services), Group Manager (Legal & Corporate Services) K Mogan (Corporate and Democratic Support Lead Officer) and T Angel (Minutes).

The meeting began at 7.30 pm.

1. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 February 2020 were agreed by the members present and will be signed by the Mayor at the next available opportunity.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor England declared he was an employee of the East of England Ambulance Service Trust.

Councillor G Sutton declared that he ran a small business in the town and was a recipient of a small business grant.

The Mayor declared the firm he was the principal shareholder in had applied for a small business grant.

Councillor Suqlain Mahmood declared he was the Director of a small business based in the Old Town.

Councillor Beauchamp declared he was the Chairman of a Community Association and was a recipient of a small business grant.

Councillor Symington declared she was DBC representative of the Berkhamsted Town Hall Trust and had applied for a grant.

3. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

4. COVID 19 – EMERGENCY CONSTITUTION AMENDMENTS

The recommendation to Council was to approve and amend the Constitution to provide additional emergency decision making powers and agree procedures for the remote conduct of meetings.

Councillor Williams said members have had the opportunity to read through the proposed amendments as part of the contingency arrangements whilst we work our way through the current situation in line with the advice given by Central Government. He recognised that some of the restrictions on our current operations are less than satisfactory and using technology overcomes some of that but doesn't enable us to overcome all of the issues that members might have concerns about in the report. He gave a couple of updates following conversations between himself, Councillor Tindall and the responsible officers earlier today, firstly relating to the role of overview and scrutiny in the current arrangements. In order to facilitate the scrutiny process and in light of the possibility of reduced officer availability, the suggestion was that we reduce the workload of scrutiny by taking it down to the core minimum to effectively operate. He said he recognised that caused some concern but we will endeavour to maximise and run scrutiny as normal as possible, however we will ask members to bear in mind that items such as performance reports may be effected by officer availability.

He said the other concern from members was how we take forward Development Management Committee in these current circumstances and recognise that recommendations in the report do in some way restrict the role of ward members and also the involvement of Town and Parish Councillors. With all that in mind Councillor Williams proposed the following additional recommendation:

“That the proposals for Development Management Committee as set out in paragraph 29-36 shall be for an interim period to allow officers time to test the use of remote meeting systems, to develop a meeting protocol and train committee members. As soon as the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader of the Council, Leader of the Opposition and Monitoring Officer is satisfied that remote meetings or meetings with appropriate social distancing can work efficiently with appropriate public participation, the Chief Executive shall be delegated authority to agree to commence remote meetings, or meetings with appropriate social distancing, and the proposals set out in paragraph 29-36 shall cease to operate and the normal constitutional rules in relation to Development Management Committee shall recommence subject to allowing participation by councillors and members of the public by remote access and subject to any other procedural rules agreed by the Monitoring Officer.”

Councillor Tindall thanked The Leader of the Council for the discussions today and for resolving the concerns of his group by coming to an arrangement that he felt satisfied with. He believed it achieves the purpose of maintaining the administration of the council whilst giving as much democracy as we can in these difficult circumstances.

Councillor Guest felt the arrangements for Development Management Committee appear to enable the planning process to take place smoothly and efficiently whilst maintaining the

democratic role in ensuring the applications do go through the process. She said as Chairman of that committee she was happy with the proposals.

Councillor Beauchamp said he understood that site visits would no longer be made by officers and that applicants have been asked to send in photos/videos of the sites. He asked that when we come to review the applications and any photographs and plans etc. that would normally be displayed at the committee meeting would be forwarded to members.

Councillor Williams said he would take on board the comments and will ensure that members have all the information they need in order to reach a decision just as they would if they were present in the room for a normal Development Management meeting.

A vote was held:

22 for,
0 against,
The Mayor abstained

Therefore it was agreed:

1. That Council agree to the changes to the Constitution and procedures as set out in paragraphs 8-44 to the report and authorise the Monitoring Officer to make the required changes to the Constitution.
2. In the event that government guidance changes the Leader of the Council in consultation with the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Opposition shall have authority to agree to reintroduce face to face meetings and suspend either in full or in part these temporary arrangements pending formal agreement at the next available Council meeting.
3. That authority be delegated to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council and the S151 Officer, to draw down funds from reserves in order to finance expenditure that may be required in the Council's response to Covid-19. This expenditure will be reported back to Cabinet and Council at the next available meeting.
4. That the proposals for Development Management Committee as set out in paragraph 29-36 shall be for an interim period to allow officers time to test the use of remote meeting systems, to develop a meeting protocol and train committee members. As soon as the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader of the Council, Leader of the Opposition and Monitoring Officer is satisfied that remote meetings or meetings with appropriate social distancing can work efficiently with appropriate public participation, the Chief Executive shall be delegated authority to agree to commence remote meetings, or meetings with appropriate social distancing, and the proposals set out in paragraph 29-36 shall cease to operate and the normal constitutional rules in relation to Development Management Committee shall recommence subject to allowing participation by councillors and members of the public by remote access and subject to any other procedural rules agreed by the Monitoring Officer.
- 5. DACORUM BOROUGH COUNCILS PLANNING AND RESPONSE TO COVID 19**

That Council noted the Council's initial and planned response to Covid-19 as set out in the report.

6. ANNOUNCEMENTS

6.1 By the Mayor:

The Mayor thanked everyone for participating and working their way through this very different and remote meeting.

6.2 By the Chief Executive:

None.

6.3 By the Group Leaders:

None.

6.4 Council Leader and Members of the Cabinet:

Councillor Williams, Leader of the Council

Questions:

Councillor Tindall thanked all DBC staff on behalf of the Liberal Democrat Councillors for their continuous service under these extreme conditions, in particular those at Cupid Green depot for maintaining essential services. He then referred to the sad resignation of the Chief Executive and asked Councillor Williams if any decision had been made as to when she will leave. Councillor Williams advised that the Chief Executive's resignation was due to take effect at the end of July, however she had agreed to be flexible about that date. He explained that recruitment would be very difficult in the current circumstances but they had appointed recruitment consultants to assist them with the process.

Councillor Uttley referred to the forward plan in the Cabinet agenda for next week's meeting and asked if the Climate Change Strategy was still due to be published on 19 May. Councillor Williams said the report was still on course to go to Cabinet in May. He advised that some of the underlying work had fallen behind slightly due to officers being seconded to other roles. The work to engage a Climate Change officer was also continuing and they hope to interview in early May.

Councillor Symington advised she was a representative for the Berkhamsted Town Hall Trust and the trustees would like to know what the Council could do to protect this asset. Councillor Williams said we would seek to give any support we could but he couldn't commit to a firm answer at this stage as it depends on the financial support we receive from Central Government. He explained we would have to prioritise charities that are providing immediate support to residents to supply food, mental health support, etc. and we would have to look at the wider sector on a case-by-case basis. Councillor Symington thanked The Leader and said the trustees understood that there was a hierarchy of need.

Councillor Birnie asked if it would still be possible to observe Cabinet meetings if they're carried out remotely. Councillor Williams advised that all members can join the Cabinet meeting via Microsoft Teams if they wished to.

There were no further questions.

Councillor Williams, Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Contracted Services

Questions:

Councillor England asked if the Portfolio Holder could share the package details that have been agreed with Everyone Active during the lockdown situation. Councillor Williams said he didn't have any agreement details to hand but he would happily share the information subject to any commercial confidentiality. Councillor England asked if the information could also be made available to the public as it was in the public's interest. Councillor Williams said he could, but again it would be subject to commercial confidentiality.

There were no further questions.

Councillor Elliot, Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources

Questions:

Councillor Tindall asked what the actual expenditure was as of last Friday (10 April) for the Council at the fault of Covid-19 and what financial promise we had from the Government to cover that cost. Councillor Elliot said we were still to quantify any promise from the Government and our main priority is to get aid to businesses and residents and then we will tally that up later. He thanked the council staff that had stepped up and worked long hours to get funds out to residents and businesses. He advised the Council were modelling the possible budgeting pressures of lost income and increased expenditure but as we are only 15 days in to this financial year we are not yet able to quantify the impact.

Councillor Symington referred to the £1.6b that the Government had announced as support and noted that DBC have only been allocated £60k of that. She asked how it was apportioned and what the criteria was for it. Councillor Elliot advised it was based on a Government model but he would need to come back to her on the criteria.

There were no further questions.

Councillor Griffiths, Portfolio Holder for Housing

Questions:

Councillor Uttley noted the increase in homelessness due to Covid-19 for various reasons, one of which is domestic abuse. She asked if we had been able to identify additional accommodation suitable for families or individuals who were victims of domestic abuse. Councillor Griffiths advised that we had used all the stock we had and have unfortunately had to revert to B&B but we were looking at whether we could move people around and also making use of general needs properties. Also Osbourne's have started working on voids to bring them up to standard for families. She said it wasn't a quick fix but we were trying our best with what we had available to service the needs of those in a desperate situation. Councillor Uttley queried the approximate time delay we were looking at and also how many voids we had in the pipeline. Councillor Griffiths said she didn't have the figures to hand but advised that we were using a significant amount of B&B's so that no one is on the streets or in accommodation that is not suitable for them.

Councillor England asked if the Portfolio Holder was satisfied that the flexi care staff and sheltered housing wardens had adequate PPE including eye protection if required since the beginning of the reported cases of Covid-19 in the UK. Councillor Griffiths advised that flexi care staff were administered by the County Council. She said we were following guidance for our own staff and ensuring distancing measures between staff and residents to reduce risk. She said she wasn't aware of an issue with PPE and asked if he was suggesting there was a problem. Councillor England said it was just a factual question.

Councillor England asked how the Council were ensuring continuity of supplies. Councillor Griffiths said she didn't have that information to hand so she would provide a written response.

Councillor Freedman asked if we expected a major impact on the council's investment in its own housing stock or do we only expect a time delay. Councillor Griffiths replied they only expected a time delay at the moment. She advised we had stopped work on all the sites but will commence work as soon as possible as these homes are needed even more than usual.

Councillor England asked for the working definition of essential works with council homes. Councillor Griffiths explained that the majority of work happening now would be urgent works such as gas or electricity works as these are categorised as critical. We are also working on void properties and this is also classed as essential works as people need homes. Councillor England asked what the consequences were for the housing service if lockdown continued after 1st June for example. Councillor Griffiths advised it would be the same as any other business; we are having to put off works that need doing and the longer things are left the more issues we will have. She added that we had 27 bathrooms and kitchens that were already in the process before lockdown but no new kitchen or bathrooms are being undertaken at the moment.

Councillor Griffiths said she would like to thank all the council staff that were going above and beyond to help our residents.

There were no further questions.

Councillor Anderson, Portfolio Holder for Environmental Services

Councillor Anderson expressed his thanks to the staff at Cupid Green depot for doing a fantastic job under the circumstances and were being flexible and taking on additional roles.

Questions:

Councillor England echoed Councillor Anderson's gratitude to the staff in waste services. He then asked where the collected waste was going as he believed that the waste transfer station was closed to the public at the moment. Councillor Williams advised that whilst the household waste sites were closed to the public the Counties transfer station for commercial waste and council collected waste were operating as normal.

Councillor Beauchamp commended the Portfolio Holder for his radio interview this morning and felt he responded well to some very aggressive questioning. He then expressed how wonderful Gadebridge Park was looking at the moment, in particular the walled garden and asked if it was possible to open the gates and create a one-way system so that it can still be enjoyed. Councillor Anderson said he was happy to consider that but wasn't sure if it was feasible with social distancing and how we would police that.

Councillor Stevens asked if we were experiencing a higher level of fly tipping now that the household waste sites were closed. Councillor Anderson advised we had not experienced any increase in fly tipping or littering and suggested that we may have seen a decrease in littering as people are staying at home more. He explained that the Hertfordshire Waste Partnership had done a lot of work county-wide in the last 18 months to tackle the problem with fly tipping and the numbers in Dacorum and Hertfordshire were reducing.

There were no further questions.

Councillor Banks, Portfolio Holder for Community and Regulatory Services

Councillor England said he understood that the calls to customer services were being taken remotely due to lockdown and asked if there had been an increase or decrease in calls. Councillor Banks advised there had been an increase and gave an example; in January we received an average of 1,647 calls per week, as we went in to lockdown the calls increased to over 2,500.

Councillor Symington returned to the issue of maintenance of football pitches, particularly those in Berkhamsted and Tring. She asked that as there were people in the community that would be happy to help maintain public spaces, is it possible for the council to relax restrictions on football clubs using volunteers to help maintain their pitches. Councillor Banks said the issue was around liability and the health and safety of the chemicals used on the pitches. She advised there are meetings planned with the stakeholders but as they're currently furloughed they're unable to enter any discussions about the pitches. Councillor Symington said they had been assured that no council staff had been furloughed. Councillor Banks clarified that the stakeholders from the football association had been furloughed, not DBC staff.

Councillor Tindall thanked the members of staff that had been volunteering to come in to The Forum to assist with the opening and distributing of mail and were carrying out a valuable service for our residents. Councillor Banks agreed with Councillor Tindall and thanked him for his comments.

Councillor England asked if the Portfolio Holder agreed that community centres were not able to stand alone on their reserves and what level of support does she think they will need from DBC to continue to enrich the community if lockdown continues. Councillor Banks declared an interest as she was employed by both Grovehill and Woodhall Farm community centres. She explained that all community centres in Dacorum were registered charities and as part of the charitable status they need to hold reserve funds. She understood that they held at least three months of reserves so it wasn't an immediate issue. If lockdown continues the community centre network will have difficulties, however the council will be making grant payments through the small business rates scheme and Councillor Banks will be encouraging the community centres to make those applications.

Councillor Birnie referred to a previous question about football pitches and asked if the same applied to cricket fields. Councillor Banks advised it applied to any open spaces that DBC have responsibility for.

There were no further questions.

Councillor G Sutton, Portfolio Holder for Planning & Infrastructure

Councillor G Sutton thanked DBC staff for their hard work under the circumstances and he felt extremely proud of them.

Questions:

Councillor Symington noted in the report that the Council were anticipating that developers may be seeking variations on s106 monies and requirements. She asked what the indications were for that and how we will assess those requests. Councillor G Sutton advised that we will be pursuing the developers to get as much revenue as possible but we may have to be flexible. He explained that no two developments are the same so we would need to look at individual case as it comes up and find the correct solution.

Councillor Birnie recalled that as part of the South West Herts Strategic Plan there was a *South West Herts, Your Future* questionnaire circulated. He said it was scheduled for February/March and asked if we had any results. Councillor G Sutton advised it had been delayed as it wasn't a priority so it would be picked up in the future. Councillor Birnie asked if we had any idea of the scale of results. Councillor G Sutton said he didn't know but he would find out and let him know.

There were no further questions.

7. QUESTIONS

None.

8. BUSINESS FROM THE LAST COUNCIL MEETING

None.

9. CABINET REFERRALS

None.

10. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REFERRALS

None.

11. CHANGES TO COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

None.

12. CHANGES TO COMMITTEE DATES

The following changes to committee dates were agreed:

- Move Housing & Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee from 2 March 2021 to 3 March 2021.
- Move Standards Committee from 4 March 2021 to 25 March 2021.
- Cancel the additional Council meeting that was scheduled for 17 June as it was no longer required.

13. CALL-IN AND URGENCY PROCEDURE

The Council noted the following two urgent Portfolio Holder Decisions:

- PH/002/20 - Business Rates Retail and Pubs Discount 2020-21
- PH/004/20 - Covid-19 Support for Businesses

The meeting ended at 8.55 pm.