

DACORUM BOROUGH COUNCIL

MEETING OF THE COUNCIL

27th September 2023

Present -

MEMBERS:

Allen (Mayor), Anderson, Banks, Barradell, Barry-Mears, Birnie, Capozzi, Cox, Dhyani, Douris, Elliot, England, Freedman, Gale, Guest, Hannell, C Hobson, S Hobson, Johnson, B Link (Deputy Mayor), C Link, Maddern, McAreyve, Mitchell, Pesch, Pringle, Reynolds, Santamaria, Stevens, Silwal, Taylor, Timmis, Tindall, Walker, Weston, Wilkie, A Williams, B Williams, and Wyatt-Lowe

OFFICERS:

C Hamilton (Chief Executive)
M Brookes (Assistant Director Legal & Democratic Services)
C O'Neil (Democratic Services Manager)
L Fowell (Democratic Services Lead Officer)
J Gowlett (Desktop & AV Support Analyst)

The meeting began at 7.30pm

1. Minutes

Cllr Birnie commented on the change to the constitution and suggested that it should read 'appended' rather than 'amended'. The minutes of the previous meeting held on 12th July were approved as a correct record.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest from members.

3. Public Participation

There was no public participation

4. Announcements

There were no announcements from the Mayor

The Chief Executive made no announcements.

Cllr Tindall noted apologies from Cllrs Bromham, Symington, Bristow, Deacon and Patterson.

Cllr Williams noted apologies from Cllrs Adeleke, Bhinder, Pound, Riddick and Durrant.

Cllr Pesch noted no apologies.

5. Portfolio Holders Updates

Cllr Tindall – Leader

Cllr Tindall raised no items to report.

Cllr Elliot asked when the King's official portrait would be received to be put in the Council Chamber. Cllr Tindall confirmed that he would ask officers to attend to this.

ACTION: To send enquiries regarding expected receipt of King's official portrait for Council Chamber. (Cllr Tindall & Officers)

Cllr Williams referred to the car parking report submitted to the scrutiny committee on 4th July 2023 that was then deferred by Cabinet after it did not receive the expected support. Cllr Williams asked the Leader if he, the portfolio holder, or Cabinet had seen the report and approved its contents before it was published for the meeting on 4th July 2023.

Cllr Tindall suggested that the schedule of charges was prepared by officers under the direction of the previous administration, noting that the document has now been corrected and is out for consultation.

Cllr Williams confirmed that the document was not in report form prior to the May elections and that the budget requirement in February for £100,000 of additional income would equate to a tariff of around £0.20 and no further changes to charges. Cllr Williams suggested that the Liberal Democrat proposals went further than this and asked if the report was signed off by Liberal Democrat members prior to its publication on 4th July 2023.

Cllr Tindall stated that he was unaware of it being signed off and that this is why it was withdrawn

Cllr Douris asked Cllr Tindall if he shares his concerns regarding the impact of the recommendation contained in the proposal to block a significant amount of parking. Cllr Douris noted the proposal to introduce a new minimum stay of 2 hours. A point of order was raised regarding the statement and the Chair requested that all questions be succinct.

Cllr Tindall advised that the minimum stay of 2 hours suggested that this refers to the price levied and does not mean that the person paying the charge must stay for the full 2 hours.

Cllr Guest referred to the last full council and the response to the question from the relevant portfolio holder regarding what would happen to the future of the verge hardening programme. Cllr Guest asked if a clear statement could be provided on this.

Cllr Tindall asked Cllr Guest to write to him and that he would then provide a response. Cllr Barry-Mears raised a point of order stating that the verge hardening is under a different portfolio and is contained within the report.

Cllr Dhyani – Housing & Property Services

The report was taken as read and questions were invited.

Cllr Birnie referred to a new procedure for reporting damage or repairs required involving surveyors and asked the portfolio holder for further information regarding these surveyors.

Cllr Dhyani advised that this is a 5-year programme and that all properties are being reviewed for required work. All necessary work is then logged and will be recorded in the work programme for the year.

Cllr Birnie suggested that some surveyors do not leave details with the resident, making it difficult for ward councillors to follow up any delays. Cllr Birnie asked if it would be possible to have a designated controller of the surveyors to act as a point of contact.

Cllr Dhyani confirmed that she would provide the contact details of the officer who liaises with Osborne on the Council's behalf and suggested that tenants or residents write to her directly if they have any concerns.

Cllr Bromham – Neighbourhood Operations

It was noted that the portfolio holder, Cllr Bromham, was absent and that Cllr Tindall would answer any questions where possible.

Cllr Elliot advised that he has reported several fly-tipping incidents and asked if all reports are followed up with residents.

Cllr Tindall asked the member to provide details of the issues raised and that he would ensure that a full response is received.

Cllr Williams commented that, prior to the May elections, some candidates and canvassers assured residents that the £45 bin charge would be scrapped if they won the election and he asked when this would be enacted.

Cllr Tindall confirmed that he was unaware of the promise made and that this was not authorised by himself or anyone else within the campaign team. The budget is currently progressing through Council and all fees and charges will be reviewed.

Cllr Williams referred to a senior Liberal Democrat councillor responding to a resident on social media to say that their intention would be to remove the green bin charge if they won the election. Cllr Williams asked if this councillor was misleading the public to get votes.

Cllr Tindall stated that whilst a councillor can propose to remove the green bin charge, it would depend on a majority vote and that he was unaware of the post referred to or the councillor concerned.

Cllr Barradell noted the Council's success as referred to in the report regarding countering dog fouling and littering in Gadebridge Park. Cllr Barradell asked how this was achieved and if there are plans to use this knowledge to tackle incidents elsewhere, including Gaddesden.

Cllr Tindall advised that the handling of anti-social behaviour is being reviewed, noting that the previous administration restricted the activities of wardens to the centre of Hemel Hempstead. Cllr Tindall suggested that the work has been achieved by staff and that he would arrange for a portfolio holder to provide a full reply.

ACTION: Cllr Bromham to provide an answer

Cllr England – Climate Change

The report was taken as read and questions were invited.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe asked for the targets and associated baseline measurements that are necessary to prove how effective measures will be.

Cllr England advised that they have taken the list from the previous administration, which contained 225 actions, and are now turning this into a deliverable plan. Cllr England agreed that key performance indicators are required.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe asked how much urgency will be put in to provide this information and ensure that measures are effective, noting her support for the work being done.

Cllr England explained that the lead officer left the council and the role was not reappointed until June 2023. Cllr England noted the small size of the team and advised that he hopes to bring a paper to scrutiny as soon as possible once the action plan has been prepared.

Cllr Freedman agreed with the support for the work the team and portfolio holder are putting into the action list. Cllr Freedman commented on the Conservative government's abandonment of pledges to protect the environment and asked if the Council is at risk of repercussions for its Net Zero objectives and what measures could be taken to protect the resources invested into sustainability, biodiversity and waste reduction initiatives.

Cllr England suggested that the Conservative's abandonment of pledges to protect the environment does put the Council at risk regarding its objectives. The Chair asked for comments to be kept at a local level. Cllr England stated that the Local Government Association has stated that local authorities can decarbonise, though this requires investment and certainty.

Cllr Pringle commented on the movement for the infrastructure for electrical vehicle charging in the borough, noting that residents are keen to see the introduction of roadside charging. Cllr Pringle asked how residents can best propose sites for electrical vehicle charging.

Cllr England noted that the strategy produced by HCC invites residents to come to councils and suggest where they would like to see charging points. Cllr England confirmed that this will be worked into communications so this can be made clearer to residents and recommended that residents sign up as individuals or organisations to Dacorum Climate Action Network to help with a bottom-up approach.

Cllr Douris referred to Cllr England and the team visiting Portsmouth City Council and asked for further details on the meeting, who attended and how they travelled there.

Cllr England confirmed that the meeting was attended by Dacorum officers, himself and Portsmouth City Council officers via Microsoft Teams.

Cllr Pesch welcomed the ideas proposed for residents to walk, cycle and use buses more. Cllr Pesch asked if the portfolio holder would take into account the poor service currently provided by Arriva.

Cllr England confirmed that he has been working on improving the bus service and that he will be attending a meeting on 3rd November 2023 with Cllr Wilkie and officers with HCC to discuss improving the service. Cllr England asked residents to contact them ahead of the meeting for any suggestions on how to improve the service.

Cllr Wilkie - Place

The report was taken as read and questions were invited.

Cllr Pringle referred to the frustration faced by Northchurch residents regarding the poor bus service and asked what the Council can do to assist with this. Cllr Pringle referred to Cllr England's comments regarding the meeting with HCC on 3rd November 2023.

Cllr Wilkie advised that the meeting with HCC to discuss bus routes will also interlink with a number of other projects, including the local cycling and walking infrastructure plan, Hemel Gardens Community plan and the bus infrastructure. Cllr Wilkie stated that if the Council is serious about climate change and neighbourhoods then residents require a reliable and affordable service and that this will be a priority.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe commented on the Nicky Line and asked when a by-law would be passed for cyclists and those on scooters to provide due warning to pedestrians.

Cllr Wilkie advised that the majority of comments from residents are to request more cycling routes and pathways and that she would provide a response to the member in writing.

Cllr Tindall suggested that Cllr Wilkie check with officers when a by-law to control cyclists was last questioned by the administration.

Cllr Weston – People and Transformation

The paper was taken as read and questions were invited.

Cllr Douris referred to the third paragraph of the report and the comment that technology will result in greater productivity and a better service for residents. Cllr Douris asked how this improvement would be measured.

Cllr Weston confirmed that a new IT system is being set-up and a presentation will be shortly provided to Cabinet. A paper will then be circulated to members.

Cllr Douris asked how the Council will understand from residents that the service has improved.

Cllr Weston explained that the new IT system will allow residents to call customer services personnel regarding any issues and this will be monitored regularly to ensure all residents are heard and can report any problems.

Cllr Symington – Corporate & Commercial

The paper was taken as read and questions were invited. It was noted that Cllr Tindall would respond to any questions in Cllr Symington's absence.

Cllr Guest referred to the consultation regarding parking charges and asked if Gadebridge Park will remain free.

Cllr Tindall stated that there is currently no intention to charge for parking at Gadebridge Park, though if a charge is suggested via the consultation then it will be considered.

Cllr Guest asked if residents would want the Council to charge for parking at Gadebridge Park given the popular petitions against this that were raised over summer.

Cllr Tindall advised that he does not monitor social media and that he would await the responses received from the consultation.

Cllr Elliot asked if the Council Leader would agree that the green bin charge has been a success given that it has doubled the initial income target.

Cllr Tindall commented that he was pleased that the Council had followed the examples of other Liberal Democrat councils in introducing the green bin charge and he accepted its success.

Cllr Hannell thanked the administration for addressing long overdue structural works and window repairs at Bennetts End Community Centre.

Cllr Tindall shared concerns about infrastructure and noted that this is being gradually identified, noting that if full details of concerns are provided then a full response will be given.

Cllr Williams referred to the recommendation in the report submitted to the scrutiny committee in September that states the Committee notes that the Council intends to retain the free parking policy in Gadebridge Park, Canal Fields and the existing Kings Langley car park. Cllr Williams stated that the recommendation disappeared before it went to Cabinet and asked the Council Leader if he knows the policy of his administration.

Cllr Tindall advised that the policy of the administration is to ensure that the parking charges applied across the borough are fair, equal and are accepted by residents.

Cllr Mitchell asked the Council Leader if he was aware of structural issues at Rossgate shopping centre and the concrete that struck one of the shop managers.

Cllr Tindall stated that he was unaware of the incident and asked the member to contact both him and the Chief Executive regarding this matter so it can be investigated.

Cllr Timmis asked if electrical vehicle charging points will also be rolled out to villages.

Cllr Tindall suggested that they would ensure there is a wide range of charging points for residents and that the portfolio holder could provide a further response.

Cllr Timmis asked if the electrical vehicle charging points will be limited in time or if cars can charge overnight.

Cllr Tindall stated that this will depend on the particular charging point and that the portfolio holder could provide a more detailed response.

Action: Cllr Symington to provide a full response.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe referred to a previous comment by Cllr Symington regarding the administration looking into car park charging in the interest of equality of provision and also to encourage people to reduce the use of cars.

Cllr Tindall stated that this was one aspect of the debate, noting that there were a number of concerns and that the decision was taken to reduce the consultation paper.

Cllr Douris commented on the proposal for some car parks to have a minimum charge based on a longer period of time and asked if this was correct.

Cllr Tindall stated that he would arrange for a written answer to be provided

Action: Cllr Symington to provide a full response.

6. Questions

Cllr Mitchell confirmed that the pre-submitted question had been responded to by officer K Solely and she thanked the administration for its thorough and comprehensive package of support for Wilko employees.

Cllr Mitchell read out the question as follows:

The 36 workers, now 35 workers, currently employed at the Wilko branch in Hemel Hempstead will be made redundant at the latest in early October; 32 of these workers live in the Borough and 11 of them are not entitled to any redundancy at all. For every one of these workers, losing their job will impact their lives, the lives of their families, and their community. Being put at risk of redundancy has a big emotional impact and is a major life change to come to terms with, especially when an organisation such as Wilko goes into administration. What will this administration and the Borough Council do to assist these workers in finding alternative employment?

Cllr Wilkie noted that an officer has already visited the store manager and that the store closed on 28th September 2023 with the store being cleared the following day. The manager advised that the head office suggested a site visit from Jobcentre Plus but that this hasn't been arranged and therefore support from the Council was welcomed. The store manager has suggested a job support session at the store to take place on 28th September 2023 and a written update on this will be provided to members. Officers are working with partners such as Jobcentre Plus, West Herts College and Community Action Dacorum to provide support on skills assessments, CV and job application writing and interview training as well as completing Universal Credit claims. The session in store will also include signposting to job vacancies, including those at the Council, and provide advice on where job adverts are posted. It was confirmed that the following officers would be in attendance at the in-store session:

- Economic Development Officer
- DBC HR and OD Manager
- Hemel Jobcentre Plus representative
- Jobcentre Plus representative
- Dells representative
- Step2Skills representative
- Sunnyside Rural Trust representative
- CAD representative

- West Herts College representative

Cllr Mitchell commented on the pressures on high street retail and suggested that a similar situation may arise. Cllr Mitchell asked if the Council would consider a similar support strategy policy to be rolled out should the situation occur elsewhere.

Cllr Wilkie noted that officers were aware of the process following the loss of Amazon, though workers could be placed elsewhere within Amazon. There is a system that can be introduced, though it is hoped that it won't be necessary.

Cllr Mitchell asked if the new administration would consider a new strategy for empty buildings and floor space in local precincts that are owned by the Council so they can be used for community projects.

Cllr Wilkie referred to the Hemel Place strategy and Hemel Gardens Community project that looks to reimagine the centre, including looking at the usage of space. Cllr Wilkie agreed that the use of space needs to be more agile and that she would consider the member's comments further

7. Business from the last Council Meeting

The Chair confirmed that there were no outstanding actions and all responses from the previous meeting have been circulated and published as part of the agenda.

8. Cabinet Referrals

Cllr Tindall moved CA6323 Enforcement Report. The report was seconded and approved.

Cllr Tindall moved CA7723 Financial Performance Quarter 1 2023-24. The report was seconded and approved.

The Chair confirmed that the reports were thereby agreed and implemented.

9. Overview and Scrutiny Referrals

No referrals.

10. Changes to the Health Report

Cllr Tindall commented that it was felt that the Health Committee should be expanded to cover wellbeing. It was noted that the proposal is to change the committee's name to the Health and Wellbeing Committee and to expand the terms of reference to ensure the committee can explore any matters affecting Dacorum and its residents, including assessing the impact of services provided directly by the Council as well as external partners. It is a non-statutory committee and does not change the remit of the Council's statutory scrutiny committees. The report also proposes an additional responsibilities allowance for the chairperson to be commensurate with other chairpersons.

Cllr Tindall moved the report and it was seconded. The report was agreed.

The Chair noted that Jim McManus, Director of Public Health, will be moving on and he noted the Council's gratitude for his service through Covid and the work he has engaged with in Dacorum. Cllr Tindall

confirmed that the good wishes of the Council would be passed on. Cllr Douris endorsed the comments made

13. Changes to committee membership

None.

14. Changes to committee dates

The Chair confirmed that an extraordinary council meeting will be held on 25th October 2023.

There being no further business, the meeting was formally closed.