

Council
19 July 2023

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL held on Wednesday 19 July 2023 at 7.30 pm in the Council Chamber, Campus East, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL8 6AE.

PRESENT: Councillors P.Shah (Chair)

G.Ganney, M.Birleson, J.Bond, S.Bonfante, J.Boulton, S.Boulton, J.Broach, L.Chesterman, J.Cragg, L.Crofton, H.Goldwater, S.Goldwater, R.Grewal, A.Hellyer, M.Holloway, D.Jones, S.Kasumu, T.Kingsbury, J.Lake, R.Lass, F.Marsh, S.McNamara, G.Michaelides, T.Mitchinson, G.Moore, L.Musk, A.Nix, N.Pace, D.Panter, R.Platt, J.Quinton, T.Rowse, B.Sarson, A.Scott, M.Siewniak, J.Skoczylas, P.Smith, C.Stanbury, S.Thusu, F.Thomson, K.Thorpe, R.Trigg, S.Tunstall, F.Wachuku, C.Watson, J.Weston and P.Zukowskyj

OFFICIALS

PRESENT: Chief Executive (K.Ng)
Executive Director Finance and Transformation (R.Baker)
Assistant Director (Legal and Governance) (S.Chughtai)
Governance Services Manager (C.Cade)

13. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 May 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

14. APOLOGIES

No apologies for absence were received.

15. PETITIONS

No petitions were received.

16. QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

Question to the Leader from Tim Thornton

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Does the Council support measures to grow community energy and how does this factor into council's local area energy plan?

Answer from Councillor Quiton, Executive Member, Planning

“The Council acknowledge the ongoing campaign to get a local electricity bill passed by Parliament and this council fully supports the aim of allowing local renewable energy generators to sell their electricity to local communities free of punitive connection costs. This council believes that climate change is a real threat to our lives and communities and any barrier to increasing local energy resilience should be removed as we try and reach net zero.

This council will therefore write to the Rt Hon Grant Shapps both as our MP and as the Secretary of State for the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, urging him to support amendments in clauses 272 and 273 of the Energy Bill already before Parliament or else support a separate local energy bill.

In addition, this council urges the Secretary of State to do everything in his power to accelerate the reform of the marginal-cost pricing method for electricity generation that distorts the true cost of renewable electricity to the consumer.”

17. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS BY MEMBERS

Councillors J. Bond, S. Boulton, T. Kingsbury, and P. Zukowskyj each declared non-pecuniary interests in items on the agenda as appropriate as Members of Hertfordshire County Council.

Councillor Quinton declared a non-pecuniary interest as a resident of the Lemsford area and former member of a resident's association in the Lemsford area. Councillor Quinton would abstain from the discussion and debate on this item.

Councillor J Boulton declared a non-pecuniary interest in Motion 1 and noted he would abstain from the discussion and voting.

Councillor S Boulton declared he had been involved in discussions as a County Councillor regarding the Lemsford Conservation Area and would abstain from the discussion.

18. ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Mayor made the following announcements:

The Mayor announced his charities for 2023/24 as the Hatfield Food Bank and the New Zion Christian Fellowship Foodbank.

The Mayor invited members to his first fundraising event, an afternoon tea, at Mill Green Mill and Museum on the 20th August 2023

The Leader made the following announcement:

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“Before I cover the substantive issue of this statement, I would like to welcome all councillors, new or experienced, to the first full working council meeting of the new Joint Administration. Welcome. Lynn and I and our cabinet look forward to working closely with all in this chamber to get the best we can for all members of our community.

I wanted to update the council, formally, on the dispute between contractor and union which resulted in the disruption to the waste collection services this council’s residents experienced, albeit for a limited time, between the 19th and 22nd of June this year.

I am delighted to advise council that the dispute has now been formally resolved, with the waste operatives having returned to work after just four full days of strike action.

I would like to formally and publicly thank Urbaser, Unite, ACAS and council officers for resolving this dispute so quickly and then working together to get the service back on track and on schedule. While the council was not directly involved in this dispute, actions we took to ask both sides to come and address Cabinet and senior officers of the council, and for cabinet and officers to listen to both sides of the dispute, I am sure was helpful in resolving the dispute so quickly.

I am aware some criticism has been levelled at the Joint Administration over this dispute, however I do not believe any more could have been done by staff or members of the administration to resolve the dispute any faster. Our full attention was focused on this even before the strike action started and remained on delivering a return to normal service as fast as possible once the dispute had been resolved.

Since the resolution of the dispute I am also aware some have expressed concern that the size of the settlement will adversely impact their council tax bill.

I would like to reassure all Welwyn Hatfield residents that this is NOT the case. Council Tax rises are capped by the UK Government at 3% (or £5, whichever is the greater), even when, as now, inflation is still running at above 10%, largely as a result of the actions of the UK Government.

I would also pay tribute to the previous administration for the sensible provisions they negotiated with the contractor, Urbaser, over annual cost rises in the waste contract. The annual increases are index linked, which for the current year, covering from April to next March amounts to 7.1%. I expect future rises to be similar in scale, so the concerns expressed by some are simply unfounded.

Of course, an increase in council tax of just 3% when we see an increase in contract cost of 7.1% means significant increases in budget pressures. The financial challenges this council faces after more than a decade of grant cuts from the UK government get worse and worse, not better. We are, of course, not

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alone in this, every council in the UK are seeing reductions in services, cuts to grants, being told to do more and then having much less resource to do it with. I do, however, have every confidence in all my colleagues in cabinet, that we will innovate, adapt and deliver positive change for our community, even in the face of these unprecedented financial challenges.

Our joint administration is, I believe, stronger and more united by this baptism of fire and I look forward to continue working with officers to create a bright future together, for our administration and, more importantly, our citizens.”

The Cabinet Member for Environment made the following announcement:

“I would like to take this opportunity to update you regarding concerns regarding the frequency and quality of the grass cutting across the borough. I have received concerns from current, former, and most likely future Councillors. As well as directly from many residents.

Grass cutting, hedge cutting and bedding is contracted out to Continental Landscapes Limited who deliver these services for the Council. This contract was signed by the Conservative administration in 2020 to last until 2029.

When I was appointed as Executive Portfolio Member for Environment in May, the state of grass cutting immediately became a major concern to me. Therefore, some of my first acts of office included writing a statement to the Welwyn Hatfield Times as well as calling a meeting with officers and the senior management team at Continental Landscapes Limited to raise and resolve these concerns.

Continental Landscapes Limited explained that it had been a challenging period for them with regards to unplanned staff absences coinciding with peak grass growth season. They acknowledged that they had not met our required standards and were eager to address this. They agreed to undertaking several corrective actions to ensure that not only was the grass cutting brought back up to schedule but the quality of the cut and strimming was addressed. The actions included:

- Undertaking the current grass cut within a shorter timescale
- Bringing in additional staff, equipment and extended working hours.
- The work will also be subject to increased levels of supervision and monitoring by the contractor, and the council.
- I hasten to add that these improvements are at the contractor’s expense and not the Council’s.

I am pleased to say that the grass cutting schedule and quality is getting back on track. Of course, with the equivalent of 11,000 tennis courts to deal with for each grass cut there will be some instances where Councillors or residents believe that the grass or bedding is unsatisfactory. I would therefore encourage Councillors and residents to report these issues via our website under the ‘report it’ buttons.

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The Council have areas designated as grasslands and rural verges that are cut less often to increase biodiversity. The Joint administration will be exploring further areas where this might be suitable. Over the coming months, I would like to encourage all Councillors to nominate areas within their own wards that they would like to qualify for this designation. The environmental team will examine these areas to see if they are appropriate for this change but let me be clear that in the end it would be my decision.”

19. QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS

Question to the Leader from Councillor Bernard Sarson

“Could the Leader of the Council please explain what the other party in the administration meant in their election leaflet promising “Free parking on small business SATURDAYS to help the high street “. Can we have an update when this due to commence and how many Saturdays this would entail in a year?”

Answer from Councillor L Chesterman, Deputy Leader:

Thank you for your question. Since taking control of the Council, the joint administration has already begun working with Officers on a number of joint priority areas, which reflect what is important to residents in our Borough and the mandate that we have been elected on. This has and will require compromises, given that the two parties had separate election campaigns but are now working together. Through the steps we have taken so far we have already started to show residents that we are willing to work together to give them the best possible Council we can, despite some of predictions to the contrary from other parts of this chamber before the election. With regards to parking and town centres, our work will include initiatives to support the vitality of our town centres including recent events in Hatfield Town Centre and our continuous support to Welwyn Garden City BID. We are exploring how some of our parking regimes could be better aligned with the events that are taking place in our town centres. I would be happy to update my fellow Councillor on specific proposals once they are at a suitable stage.

Councillor Sarson asked the following supplementary question:

“As the Leader said, “budgets are under pressure” how will you fund this?”

Councillor Chesterman responded with the below:

“We are looking to start with two Saturdays - one in Hatfield and one in Welwyn Garden City, and I’m quite interested you’ve picked it up now and haven’t asked about funding before because it’s actually been in our manifesto for the last few years, so I think it’s quite telling that you’ve only been reading it in the last couple of months. How it will be funded is part of the work we are looking at, we are doing everything and I’m quite surprised bid, never actually spoke about this or you worked with them to do it - seeing that it was in our manifesto for the last few years - that we expect the small businesses to benefit from the trade that’s coming in, and that would be quite negligible to the amount of car parking put, we actually want to make our two town centres much busier and much more productive.”

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Question to the Leader from Councillor Kasumu

“On 19th June of this year, when asked about recent bin strikes the Leader said on the radio “I thought 6.8% was a pretty decent offer to be honest. As I say the nurses have got 5%. How come these guys think they are getting a duff deal with 6.8%... I am very very disappointed in the attitude of the unions”. In contrast his Labour group coalition colleagues stated that “workers are striking due to unfair pay and conditions”. This paints a confusing picture for our residents in relation to the approach to dealing with future disputes when they inevitably arise considering inflationary pressures on the council, contractors, and the wider public. Can the Leader please clarify whether he still believes 6.8% was a fair offer or whether sticking to 6.8% would have left waste management workers experiencing unfair pay and conditions?”

Answer from the Leader:

“Thank you for the question.

I’m sure our residents are extremely happy that the Joint Administration worked with all key stakeholders to resolve the strike action very swiftly indeed and I am therefore struggling to understand why they would be confused by any of our actions. We were always clear that our focus was to encourage both sides to talk and resolve the strike quickly, which thankfully was the outcome.

Your question might of course cause rather more confusion for residents about your Party’s position on the tsunami of strikes our country faces due to the soaring inflation your party’s various governments have caused. You end your question by suggesting 6.8% might be viewed as leaving workers experiencing unfair pay and conditions, but only yesterday junior doctors completed their latest period of strike action, leaving many patients on years long waiting lists with even longer to wait, their strike having come about after your government offered them just 4% initially.

Tomorrow rail workers will cause many Welwyn Hatfield residents difficulties when they go on strike, yet again, a dispute your MP failed to resolve when, three jobs ago I believe, he oversaw the start of that disruption as Transport Secretary, offering them 4% and then refusing point blank to negotiate. Less than a week ago, the Public Sector pay award by your government offered teachers 6.5%, consultants, dentists and GP’s 6%, senior civil servants 5.5% and the current negotiations on Local Government pay suggest the ‘full and final offer’ from the Conservative dominated employers side of the NJC offering staff right here at Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council a median increase of just 6.5%.

I think residents’ confusion might be more to do with what your government is (or actually isn’t) doing to resolve the tsunami of strikes our country and our residents now face.”

Supplementary question from Councillor Kasumu:

“There are tough challenges ahead and the administration will need to not only be courteous when speaking publicly about workers but also eventually you’ll need to make tough decisions yourself, so would the Leader now apologise

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to Waste Management staff for his words on the radio in the 19th of June, and would he also confirm if he will be offering council staff similar pay increases should they request it?"

Answer from the Leader of the Council:

"Apologise well, I think my response to that was just as soon as [Rt Hon] Grant [Shapps MP] does to the rail workers, yes, absolutely.

In terms of offering council staff, as you should well know, the NJC, the council staff pay award is a nationally negotiated structure and is not something that I am in a position to influence."

20. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE CABINET

The Council considered a recommendation from the meeting of Cabinet on 11 July 2023:

21. LEMSFORD VILLAGE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT AND CONSERVATION AREA DESIGNATION

Following consideration at the Cabinet Planning and Parking Panel on 22 June 2023, and Cabinet on 11 July 2023, the Council were asked to approve the Lemsford Village Character Assessment and Conservation Designation.

Under national planning policy guidance and advice by Historic England, Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) are required to review their areas and formulate and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement of conservation areas. LPAs should also consult the public and take account of views expressed.

A review of the Lemsford area was undertaken by the Council's heritage consultant, Essex Place Services, and a Draft Character Assessment was produced. The assessment identified areas of special architectural or historic interest within the Lemsford area and included a discussion on the suitability of conservation area designation as well as a suggested conservation area boundary.

A six-week consultation was carried out on the Draft Character Assessment, seeking the views of residents, local businesses, local interest groups and statutory consultees on the content of the Draft Character Assessment and whether the recommendation to designate as a conservation area was supported.

The representations received were largely in support of designation of the Lemsford area as a conservation area. The comments received have been considered by officers in conjunction with Council's consultant Place Services, and a final version of the Character Assessment had been produced including a slightly amended conservation area boundary in response to the comments received.

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The proposal was moved and seconded by Councillors Zukowskyj and Broach.

RESOLVED:

(Unanimous)

Councillor Quinton and Councillor S Boulton abstained from the vote.

Council approved the Lemsford Character Assessment and Lemsford was designated as new conservation area.

22. CONSTITUTION REVIEW

The report of the Monitoring Officer set out the proposed amendments through tracked changes to the Council's Constitution.

The proposal was moved and seconded by Councillors Zukowskyj and Chesterman.

RESOLVED:

Council approved the amendments to the Council's Constitution expect for changes relating to the Council's Estate Management Scheme.

23. NOTICES OF MOTIONS UNDER PROCEDURE RULE 16

At this point in the meeting Councillor J Boulton left the meeting and did not vote on the motion.

The following motion was moved submitted by Councillor T Kingsbury and seconded by Councillor J Cragg:

"Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council notes that the United Kingdom is leading the way on climate change, with 90 per cent of the world's economy covered by net zero targets, a significant increase from just one third before the UK's COP 26 presidency.

WHBC is supportive of the UK Government's ambition to make this country a clean energy superpower and is proud of the UK's record on cutting greenhouse emissions.

However, WHBC is concerned by the impact of illegal protests on residents, threatening nationally important infrastructure like last year's local M25 protests and recent disruption of sport and cultural events.

WHBC understands the need to act on the environment but believes that cooperation with the UK Government and residents is the right way to pursue our objectives.

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WHBC therefore condemns all illegal protests organised by Just Stop Oil.

WHBC demands that Just Stop Oil end all illegal protest activities and work constructively alongside local and national government to achieve our net zero target."

Councillor Zukowskyj proposed amendments to the motion. Councillor Chesterman seconded the proposals. The amended motion was set out below:

"Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council notes that the United Kingdom government claims to be leading the way on the climate Emergency since the UK's COP 26 presidency.

This Council is supportive of the UK Government's ambition to cut greenhouse emissions and reach net zero by 2050, although it also recognises its own target to reach Net Zero by 2030 is rather more ambitious and therefore this council encourages the government to be more ambitious than it has been to date.

This Council notes that global efforts to deal with climate change will require more than warm words, empty promises and missed targets. This Council notes in this respect that Welwyn Hatfield is the home constituency for the Secretary of State for the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero who has nevertheless endorsed the Governments desire to develop new fossil fuel resources and whose voting record on Environmental Issues is far from exemplary.

This Council is also concerned by the impact of recent Climate Emergency protests on our residents and the disruption to the ability of emergency services to respond to emergencies.

This Council is wholly supportive of the right to legal protest and recognises the importance in a functioning democracy of allowing this fundamental right to be exercised. This Council also understands the urgency to act on the climate emergency but believes that cooperation is the right way for all to pursue that crucial objective.

This Council therefore urges protestors from Just Stop Oil and similar organisations to minimise the disruption from their protests and work constructively alongside local and national government to increase efforts to achieve our joint net zero target as soon as possible."

On being put to the meeting the amendment to the motion was voted:

FOR the motion – 26

AGAINST the motion – 25

ABSENTATIONS for the motion – 1

The amendment to the motion was agreed, and was considered by the meeting.

On being put to the meeting, the Council voted:

FOR the motion - 26

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AGAINST for the motion - 21
ABSTAINATIONS for the motion - 1

24. URGENT MATTERS

The Council agreed to appoint Councillor Musk to the County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee.

Meeting ended at 21:26.