

Council
15 November 2023

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL held on Wednesday 15 November 2023 at 7.30 pm in the Council Chamber, Campus East, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL8 6AE.

PRESENT: Councillors P.Shah (Chair)
M.Birleson, S.Bonfante, J.Boulton, J.Broach,
L.Chesterman, L.Crofton, S.Goldwater, R.Grewal,
A.Hellyer, M.Holloway, D.Jones, S.Kasumu,
T.Kingsbury, R.Lass, S.McNamara, G.Michaelides,
T.Mitchinson, G.Moore, L.Musk, A.Nix, 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, F.Wachuku,
C.Watson, J.Weston and P.Zukowskyj

OFFICIALS K.Ng, Chief Executive
PRESENT: R.Baker, Executive Director (Finance & Transformation)
C Barnes, Executive Director (Place)
S.McDaid, Service Director (Resident & Neighbourhood)
S.Saunders, Legal Services Manager
C.Cade, Governance Services Manager

37. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 October 2023 were approved as a correct record of the meeting.

38. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors S.Boulton, Bond, Cragg, Ganney, H.Goldwater, Lake, Marsh, Pace and Tunstall.

39. PETITIONS

No petitions were received.

40. QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

No questions from the public were received.

41. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS BY MEMBERS

Council
15 November 2023

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

42. ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Mayor made the following announcement:

“Just a reminder that my next charity event, will be a quiz night on Friday 1st of December at Campus West. We are requesting teams of up to six but if you would like to join a team, please contact the office who will arrange this for you. I know many of you have been in previous years. Just to let you know that we have some different food choices this year and a great variety of questions rounds, we will also have a prize draw where you can win an amazing selection of prizes, including a £25 John Lewis Voucher, a beauty hamper, some wine and chocolate... all perfect with Christmas just around the corner.”

The Chief Executive made the following announcement:

“Our staff continue to work hard to deliver many of the vital services in our community, our communications team has produced a wonderful video highlighting some of the key achievements in the recent months which we would like to share with you tonight.”

The staff video was played to Full Council.

43. QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS

Question 1 – Question from Councillor Platt to the Leader of the Council & Executive Member for Climate Change

“In July, the council brought on board it's first climate change officer; a positive and vital step in addressing the climate change emergency that this chamber declared back in 2019. When talking to residents about this recently I was asked, "What difference will having a climate change officer make?". Please can the Leader give any examples of impacts that having a climate change officer is making already; and what, if any, procedures, strategies or changes the officer is putting in place that will benefit the council and the borough moving forward?”

Answer

“Thank you for your question Cllr Platt.

Since joining the council in July, the Climate Change Officer has made significant progress in working with other officers across all service areas to ensure that we are taking a collaborative and impactful approach in delivering on a wide range of climate emergency actions. For example, the Climate Change Officer has revamped the Climate Change Officers' Group, updated the Climate Action Plan (CAP) in order to ensure that we are on track to meet our net zero targets, has contributed to the council's biodiversity duty of care and also contributed to the forthcoming air quality action plan.

Council
15 November 2023

Most recently, the Climate Change Officer has tasked all service manager leads with undertaking an adaptation risk assessment to understand the service risks of climate impacts and to consider how those risks might be mitigated.

There has also been a marked improvement in how we engage with the community on the Climate Emergency, this includes launching a survey with our community as well as attending the Business forum and the Community Inclusion Partnership. Work is also underway to develop a Climate Emergency Hub – which will be a ‘one stop shop’ for all climate related information accessible by our residents.

Our Climate Change Officer is also an active member on the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership and thereby continuing to work with our neighbouring authorities to contribute towards a better Hertfordshire. Many of the positive actions have been highlighted in the recent Climate Change Member meetings, as well as the full page in the recent One Welwyn Hatfield magazine, and I would encourage anyone who is able to, to watch the meetings and read of our recent achievements.

I am confident in the four months that our Climate Change Officer has been here, she has already made significant impacts and we look forward to continuing to work with her to deliver crucial elements of our climate agenda.”

Supplementary question

“Since I actually put this question in which was actually a month ago and I missed the deadline, I noticed that a year ago in the Hertfordshire rankings, we were 10th and we return to 8th this year Do we have a potential target that we're going to aim for in a year's time to go from 10th to eighth to maybe 6th or higher maybe?”

Answer

“Personally, my objective will be to better than that, and I think certainly one of the key things for me is looking at the adaptation risk register, I think that's really critical, because it's asking our service leads to look at their service areas and think about what issues that service area might have, so with housing, for example, looking at the urban heat island effect and what impact that might have on people's heat stress and seeing what actions we might be able to take to reduce the impact and adapt to climate change. I think that's a really key piece and that will feed into the assessment of how we're doing on climate change and climate action when that process comes round again.”

Question 2 – Question from Councillor Kingsbury to the Leader of the Council & Executive Member for Climate Change

“I note that the new administration has been actively visiting and supporting a number of excellent projects previously initiated by the Conservative administration: One Town Centre, Oak Hill Crematorium, Minster House, and the new lottery, to name just a few. While the two parties now in control did not always fully endorse these initiatives when our group championed them, I am

Council
15 November 2023

pleased to see the current support for these critical projects, which are so important to the Borough and its residents. Could the Leader please provide any details of prospective projects of comparable scale that the new administration intends to pursue?"

Answer

"Thank you for your question Cllr Kingsbury.

Whilst these projects were initiated by the previous administration, there were certainly invaluable inputs made by a number of Cross Party groups that has contributed to the success of these projects.

The new Joint Administration has only been in charge of the council for six months and this is an opportune moment for me to remind members what we have achieved with full support from officers in such a short space of time:

- *The Joint Administration had unanimously voted to adopt the Local Plan, after millions being spent by the previous Administration*
- *Successfully averted a lengthy bin strike*
- *Providing a more reasonable timescale for the public to submit questions to our meetings*
- *Launching two free parking days to support retailers in our town centres.*

As members can see from the agenda tonight, we'll be asking Full Council to adopt the new vision and priorities of the council. They reflect a lot of hard work of the Joint Administration and officers; they also set out a new direction of the council. We do have ambitious plans and you will get to hear more about our projects in the detailed business plans in the months to come.

It should however be noted that the operating environment for local government has become extremely challenging, especially after 13 years of austerity-inspired reduction in funding by the national Conservative government. The depleted reserves and unrealistic budget we inherited from the previous administration have left us with an even greater challenge, but we will continue to work constructively and collaboratively with officers to navigate the challenges we face and we will look to deliver critical projects of great benefit to our community in the coming months and years.

Local government faces a critical time, but this administration is fully united in navigating a way forward and delivering better for everyone in our Borough."

Supplementary question

"Obviously we saw the video today, we had a lot of projects we put forward and I do appreciate where the administration said the opposition, our opposition, supported some of those projects.

You raised a few issues, I think we set a very challenging but good budget last year, we've always been very aware of budgets, but on one specific point you raised, you said you got the Local Plan through recently. May ask why most of the administration in the past have not supported a Local Plan?"

Council
15 November 2023

Answer

"I think the simple answer to that is that we got to the point where the choices became very stark on the Local Plan, it was have a Local Plan or not. And we didn't have much choice as to what was in the Local Plan because the previous administration when we raised issues and challenges didn't particularly listen very well, but we'll move on from that particular issue. In terms of the projects, a lot of the other projects, Minster House and others, are challenging because we are in the situation where the level of debt of the authority causes challenges for our revenue budget going forward.

Some of the commitments of capital that have been made to deliver those projects, I would perhaps of reconsidered, but in the light of that money having been committed and with the projects having gone ahead and being delivered we have to be fully supportive of council officers who are delivering those projects even though the decisions were made long before this administration's time."

Question 3 – Question from Councillor Panter to the Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Climate Change

"As we approach the cold, wet winter months, I look around our borough and become acutely aware of our homeless brothers and sisters on our streets where I fear the figure reported is not a true figure. You don't need to be sleeping on the streets or a park bench to be homeless!

Then, when I look at the news to hear the Government wanting to evict the homeless from a tent and move them on - I despair - how unloved, un-wanted, and sad that society cannot afford to give the most basic services to humanity I find it truly heart breaking. To confiscate their only means of keeping the wind and rain at bay if they're lucky. This is totally unacceptable! on all levels.

WHBC, and indeed all councils, are having to cope with the financial cost of homelessness, and of those that have fallen on hard times due to the cost-of living crisis. This is in addition to 3300 families on our waiting list, meaning as many as 8000 plus people roughly the population of Welwyn.

The government grant for homelessness for 2023-24 is already projected to be overspent by around £600k We desperately must address our housing crisis within the borough; it cannot and will not continue on this trajectory under this joint administration without us taking some direct action to demand that Government funds be made available for social housing, to give safe, most modern, warm, zero carbon homes to those who will never be able to buy within our Borough. I therefore ask the Leader and Deputy Leader with the Chief Executive of the council to write directly to the prime minister and housing minister and the Levelling Up Minister requesting additional funding but meanwhile, will we declare a Social Housing Emergency in this borough? It is a Social Housing Emergency crisis that demands response."

Answer from the Deputy Leader

"Thank you for your question Cllr Panter.

Council
15 November 2023

I was equally as outraged as you by the recent comments made by the ex-Home Secretary and I'm glad to see that she was sacked.

I'm sure members will agree that our officers have worked tirelessly in getting people supported into accommodation and that we have an ambitious programme to build more affordable homes. We also have a close working relationship with the voluntary sector in preventing homelessness. However there are so many factors that are outside of our control, most notably funding, we need more resources and less red tapes from the government to enable our officers to do their job properly.

I will certainly be working with the Leader and the Chief Executive to write to the Government requesting more resources to support our housing services and to give us more freedom in the way we deliver them. I will also urge the Government to declare a national housing emergency, especially after sacking the 15th Housing Minister since 2010. It is about time they recognise that the current housing crisis is not caused by an individual's lifestyle choice, it is not a problem caused by local government. It is the shortfall in funding and lack of leadership in the Government that are the root cause of the problem."

Question 4 – Question from Councillor Grewal to the Leader of the Council & Executive Member for Climate Change

"In the light of the rejection of planning permission for a quarry at Ellenbrook, due to the overwhelming impacts on local roads, nature, residents amenity and health, will the leadership of this council commit to appropriately lobbying Hertfordshire County Council to remove the Ellenbrook Allocation (MAS02) from their Emerging Minerals and Waste Local Plan (2040)?

Will the leadership commit to ensuring sufficient resources, including officer time, are provided to the lobbying effort, including to cover appropriate representation at any Examination in Public? Will the leadership also commit to writing to Richard Roberts, Leader of Hertfordshire County Council, outlining these commitments and to further emphasise Welwyn Hatfield's continued opposition to quarrying on what should by now be Ellenbrook Country Park?"

Answer

"This council objected to the recent application for a quarry at Ellenbrook, expressing their concerns about the cumulative effect of new planning permissions for mineral extraction in the area. I also agree that these concerns should be further emphasised through the forthcoming Regulation 19 consultation on the Hertfordshire Minerals and Waste Local Plan due to take place in March 2024. We will therefore ensure that the planning service is appropriately supported to make those representations and if needed, to represent those views at the subsequent examination in public.

I and my cabinet colleagues will also write a letter to the leader of Hertfordshire County Council, expressing our continuing concerns with the mineral quarrying

Council
15 November 2023

at Ellenbrook and encouraging the County Council to remove this site from the plan altogether.”

Question 5 – Question from Councillor Watson to the Leader of the Council & Executive Member for Climate Change

“Humans have already caused irreversible climate change, the impacts of which are being felt in the UK, and across the world. The average global temperature has already increased by 1.2°C above pre-industrial levels and—alongside this—the natural world has reached crisis point, with 28% of plants and animals threatened with extinction. In addition, the UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world as more than one in seven of our plants and animals face extinction, and more than 40% are in decline.

Climate change remains a major concern for our residents with 66% of people in the Country (according to YouGov) expressing they are ‘worried about climate change and its effects’. Alongside this, the popularity of Sir David Attenborough’s Save Our Wild Isles initiative demonstrates public concern that UK wildlife is being destroyed at a terrifying speed.

The Climate & Ecology Bill is a private member’s bill currently before the House of Commons that’s looking to address the challenges that this situation poses by creating a whole-of-government approach to deliver a net zero and nature positive future.

Based on the latest science, the Climate & Ecology Bill aims to align current UK environmental policy with the need to halt and reverse nature loss by 2030, which was goal agreed to at COP15, via the Kunming-Montreal Framework (22 December 2022); and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in line with the UK’s fair share of the remaining global carbon budget to give the strongest chance of limiting global heating to 1.5°C, which was the goal agreed to at COP21, via the Paris Agreement (12 December 2015).

By bridging the gap between the UK Government’s current delivery, and what has been agreed at international levels, Britain has a chance to be a world leader on climate and the environment; seizing the opportunities of the clean energy transition, including green jobs and skills; reduced energy bills; and boosting the UK’s food and energy security.

Will the Leader of the Council consider supporting the Climate and Ecology Bill?”

Answer:

“This Council declared a Climate emergency back in 2019 and good progress has been made in recent months on the Climate Action plan.

Since I became Leader of this council, I have deliberately chosen to oversee the Climate Change portfolio to ensure progress is made to meet our net zero targets. I wholeheartedly support the Climate and Ecology Bill and I note that our local MP does not appear to be one of 132 MPs that are supporting the Bill, so I will be writing to him to ask for his support.

Council
15 November 2023

I'm sure members will agree that supporting the bill will coincide with the proposed new status of the Climate & Biodiversity Cabinet Panel, which will be considered later tonight. This underlines, again, our Joint Administration's commitment to deal with the effects of the climate crisis."

44. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE CABINET

Full Council considered recommendations from the meeting of Cabinet held on 7 November 2023:

45. FP1189 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT

The Council's Council Tax Support Scheme replaced council tax benefits from April 2013. The scheme was based on a broad framework agreed as part of a consultation undertaken with Hertfordshire County Council, Hertfordshire Police and Crime Commissioner and other interested parties.

Parts of the previous benefits scheme was retained within the local support scheme and the Council had continued to protect pensioners, disabled claimants, and claimants with children under five.

It was the Council's intention in 2024/25 to continue with the same council tax support scheme that Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council rolled out in 2023/24, providing support to our vulnerable residents. Consultation had taken place with Hertfordshire County Council and Hertfordshire Police and Crime Commissioner on the intention to continue with the same scheme and neither had any comments to make.

The proposal was moved and seconded by Councillors Jones and Thorpe.

**RESOLVED:
(unanimous)**

Full Council agreed that Welwyn Hatfield's localised council tax support scheme continues in 2024/25 to help people on low/no income to receive a reduction on their council tax.

46. VISION AND COUNCIL PRIORITIES

The Council reviews and re-sets its vision and priorities for the borough every three years. Each year, the Council publishes a Corporate Business Plan to support the priorities, which included major projects and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that measure the performance of a range of services throughout the year.

The 2024-25 Business Plan would be developed with officers and Executive Members over the coming months and agreed at Cabinet in January 2024.

Council
15 November 2023

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

RESOLVED:
(unanimous)

Full Council agreed the new vision and priorities for 2023-2026 “the Community Plan”.

47. NOTICES OF MOTIONS UNDER PROCEDURE RULE 16

The following motion had been submitted by Councillor Kasumu and was seconded by Councillor Hellyer

“We are all aware of the pressures on council finances. As we strive to optimise our resources, it has become evident that there is a significant opportunity to enhance efficiency, reduce costs, and streamline our operations through a transition from elections by thirds to all-out elections.

Currently, our council operates under a system where a portion of council seats are contested every year, bar one, resulting in annual election-related expenditures and administrative efforts. This approach, while providing regular opportunities for electoral participation, has proven to be costly and resource intensive.

We are all aware of low turnout at local elections. By transitioning to all-out elections, we would consolidate our electoral efforts to once every four years, aligning with the county elections in 2025 and then subsequent county elections. This strategic alignment would not only lead to substantial cost savings by reducing the frequency of elections but would also enhance voter turnout and engagement, as history has shown higher participation rates during consolidated election cycles.

This Council therefore will:

- 1. Initiate a Comprehensive Review: Conduct a thorough analysis of the potential cost savings, logistical considerations, and any legal or procedural implications associated with transitioning to all-out elections.*
- 2. Engage with the Community: Launch a robust public engagement campaign to involve and listen to residents’ views on the proposed change, gather their input, and address any concerns or questions they may have.*
- 3. Develop a Transition Plan: Based on the findings of the comprehensive review and community engagement efforts, formulate a transition plan outlining the steps, timelines, and resources required to implement all-out elections in alignment with the county elections in 2025.*
- 4. Ensure Legal and Procedural Compliance: Legal and election officers to ensure that the transition plan adheres to all applicable laws, regulations, and best practices.*

Council
15 November 2023

5. *Report Back to Council: Present the findings, community feedback, transition plan, and any recommendations to the council for further deliberation, modifications if necessary, and final approval within 6 months.*

The following amendment to the motion was submitted by Councillor Broach and was seconded by Councillor Bonfante

"We are all aware of the pressures on council finances. As we strive to optimise our resources, it has become evident that there is a significant opportunity to enhance efficiency, reduce costs, and streamline our operations through a transition from elections by thirds to all-out elections.

Currently, our council operates under a system where a portion of council seats are contested every year, bar one, resulting in annual election-related expenditures and administrative efforts. This approach, while providing regular opportunities for electoral participation, has proven to be costly and resource intensive.

We are all aware of low turnout at local elections. By transitioning to all-out elections, we would consolidate our electoral efforts to once every four years, ~~aligning with the county elections in 2025 and then subsequent county elections. This strategic alignment would not only lead to substantial cost savings by reducing the frequency of elections but would also enhance voter turnout and engagement, as history has shown higher participation rates during consolidated election cycles.~~ Should the Council decide to move to a model of all-out elections, we should also take the opportunity to review ward boundaries, to take account of the large amount of development that has taken place since our last boundary review in 2016 (such as High View in Hatfield, and Broadwater Road in WGC).

This Council therefore will:

6. *Initiate a Comprehensive Review: Conduct a thorough analysis of the potential cost savings, logistical considerations (including resource needed for potential boundary reviews), and any legal or procedural implications associated with transitioning to all-out elections.*
- ~~7. Engage with the Community: Launch a robust public engagement campaign to involve and listen to residents' views on the proposed change, gather their input, and address any concerns or questions they may have.~~ Establish how the electorate and wider community should be consulted/engaged (or are required to by law), and establish the broadest reasonable evidence base of residents views on the proposed change, gather their input, and address any concerns or questions they may have.
- ~~8. Develop a Transition Plan: Based on the findings of the comprehensive review and community engagement efforts, formulate a transition plan outlining the steps, timelines, and resources required to implement all-out elections in alignment with the county elections in 2025. Should the outcome of the engagement process be favourable, and the decision to proceed be~~

Council
15 November 2023

agreed, a cross-party working group will be set up to ensure a seamless transfer to all out elections and to gain cross-party input

9. *Ensure Legal and Procedural Compliance: Legal and election officers to ensure that the transition plan adheres to all applicable laws, regulations, and best practices.*

~~10. Report Back to Council: Present the findings, community feedback, transition plan, and any recommendations to the council for further deliberation, modifications if necessary, and final approval within 6 months.~~ *The Cross Party Working Group will report their findings, progress and recommendations back to Council for final approval”.*

Following discussion, the amendment to the motion was put to the meeting:
(For the amendment – unanimous)

The amendment to the motion was CARRIED.

The following substantive motion (as amended) was then considered:

“We are all aware of the pressures on council finances. As we strive to optimise our resources, it has become evident that there is a significant opportunity to enhance efficiency, reduce costs, and streamline our operations through a transition from elections by thirds to all-out elections.

Currently, our council operates under a system where a portion of council seats are contested every year, bar one, resulting in annual election-related expenditures and administrative efforts. This approach, while providing regular opportunities for electoral participation, has proven to be costly and resource intensive.

We are all aware of low turnout at local elections. By transitioning to all-out elections, we would consolidate our electoral efforts to once every four years. Should the Council decide to move to a model of all-out elections, we should also take the opportunity to review ward boundaries, to take account of the large amount of development that has taken place since our last boundary review in 2016 (such as High View in Hatfield, and Broadwater Road in WGC).

This Council therefore will:

- 1. Initiate a Comprehensive Review: Conduct a thorough analysis of what any cost savings could be over a four year period, logistical considerations (including resource needed for potential boundary reviews), and any legal or procedural implications associated with transitioning to all-out elections.*
- 2. Establish how the electorate and wider community should be consulted/engaged (or are required to by law), and establish the broadest reasonable evidence base of residents views on the proposed change, gather their input, and address any concerns or questions they may have.*
- 3. Should the outcome of the engagement process be favourable, and the decision to proceed be agreed, a cross-party working group will be set up to ensure a seamless transfer to all out elections and to gain cross-party input.*

Council
15 November 2023

4. *Ensure Legal and Procedural Compliance: Legal and election officers to ensure that the transition plan adheres to all applicable laws, regulations, and best practices.*
5. *The cross party working group will report their findings, progress and recommendations back to Council for final approval.”*

On being put to the meeting:

(For the motion – unanimous)

The substantive motion as amended was carried.

48. CABINET PANELS

The report set out the following proposed amendments to the Council’s Cabinet Panels following discussions at the Constitution Review Group:

- Expanding the remit of the Campus West Cabinet Panel (CWCP) to include Leisure, Youth Partnership, Mill green museum and Roman Baths; Customers, Bereavement Services; Communications; Marketing, Website and Community Outreach, and to rename this panel to Community Cabinet Panel.
- Promote the current Climate Change Member Panel to a Climate Biodiversity Cabinet Panel. That would ensure that the Council recognises the importance of Climate Change and it would also allow the public to participate at the meeting to some degree.

It was moved by Councillor Broach and seconded by Councillor Zukowskyj.

RESOLVED:

(unanimous)

Full Council agreed based on the timescales set out in the report to:

1. Expand the remit of the Campus West Cabinet Panel as set out in paragraph 1.3 and to rename this panel to Community Cabinet Panel, with the new terms of reference as shown in appendix A of the report.
2. Promote the Climate Change Member Panel to a Climate Biodiversity Cabinet Panel as set out in paragraph 1.3, with the new terms of reference as shown in appendix B of the report.

49. FAITH COVENANT

The report sought approval for the Council to sign up to a covenant with the faith communities of Welwyn Hatfield which would commit both the Council and the communities to working together in an open, respectful and collaborative manner for the benefit of the borough.

It was moved by Councillor Broach, and seconded by Councillor Siewniak.

Council
15 November 2023

During the discussions, Councillor J.Boulton declared an interest in the item due to his employer and left the meeting.

The following amendment to the Faith Covenant was moved and seconded by Councillor Zukowskyj and Chesterman:

*“Faith communities are free to practise their beliefs and religious observances, and to raise their voice in public debate and to be respected **whilst respecting others**, within the framework of UK law”.*

**RESOLVED:
(unanimous)**

Full Council agreed:

1. The proposed amendment to the Faith Covenant to include the text “whilst respecting others”;
2. To endorse the Welwyn Hatfield Faith Covenant as shown in appendix A of the report as amended; and
3. That the Leader of the Council would sign the Faith Covenant.

50. URGENT MATTERS

There were no urgent matters for discussion.

Meeting ended at 20:50