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FOLKESTONE AND HYTHE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes for the meeting of the Council held at the Council Chamber - Civic Centre Folkestone on Wednesday, 20 September 2023

Present: Councillors Abena Akuffo-Kelly, Polly Blakemore, Bridget Chapman, Tony Cooper, Laura Davison, Gary Fuller, Clive Goddard, David Godfrey, Liz Grant, Rich Holgate, Mrs Jennifer Hollingsbee, Anita Jones, Nicola Keen, Adrian Lockwood, Alan Martin, Elaine Martin, Jim Martin, Connor McConville, Jackie Meade, Tim Prater, Stephen Scoffham, Rebecca Shoob, Jeremy Speakman, Paul Thomas, Belinda Walker, David Wimble and John Wing

Apologies for Absence: Councillors Mike Blakemore, James Butcher and Liz McShane

38. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest at the meeting.

39. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 July 2023 were submitted, approved and signed by the Chair.

40. Chair's Communications

The Chair gave her communications as follows:

“I started the summer with the Folkestone Pride parade, walking through the town at the very front of the parade I was encouraged and uplifted by the many people who stopped to cheer and wave as we progressed from the Town Hall to the Leas. I have spent the earlier part of the day at New Romney Fair and both events highlighted what a vibrant and engaging District we live in.

On Saturday 12th August I had a shock to the system when I woke up very early indeed to start the Folkestone Park on the 9th anniversary. What an amazing treasure we have in the Leas and the view onto the zig zag path, coastal park, pebble beach and the sparkling sea beyond. I can think nothing better to look and encourage me whilst slogging away running a race. Perhaps soon that might entice me to join in.

I attended one of the best events of the year – the Folkestone air show. I have never seen so many people on the Leas, for a couple of hours I lost sight of the pavement and could only see endless streams of people. Thank you to all the organisers and the council for putting our district on the map with such a marvellous event.

My visit to the NCI station up on East cliff made me proud of the men of women who volunteer to watch out for people and ships in distress.

I am indebted to the mayor of Hawkinge for inviting me to two hidden gems Terlingham Vineyard and The battle of Britain Museum in aid of his charities. The view from the vineyard is the most stunning I've seen in a long while and the museum is so special because it has personal stories of the men that fought and died to preserve our freedom.

I look forward to finding more hidden gems to share with you”.

41. **Petitions**

There were no petitions.

42. **Questions from the Public**

The questions asked, including supplementary questions, and the answers given are set out in Schedule 1, appended to these minutes.

43. **Questions from Councillors**

The questions asked, including supplementary questions, and the answers given are set out in Schedule 2, appended to these minutes.

44. **Announcements of the Leader of the Council**

The Leader made the following announcements:

“I have attended many meetings regarding Otterpool Park with government agencies, developers and potential Joint Venture Partners, these discussions continue.

Princes Parade hoarding: We have now received the report from the contaminated land specialists, and we are able to move forward. Unsurprisingly there are low levels of contamination across the site. It will be necessary to fence the land. The hoardings can now come down but we have to immediately fence the land with a suitable fence, we are currently seeking permission from Historic England regarding the fence posts and quotes are being sought for the work - so while progress has been slow, we have been progressing! Once the site is refenced we will be consulting to ask local people for their views on the future of Prince's Parade

Napier Barracks update from Home Office. We understand that the Home Office is considering the inclusion of Napier Barracks as part of contingency plans to house asylum seekers. If this proposal goes ahead it could potentially double the numbers housed on at the barracks and would likely need temporary facilities such as tents to brought onto the site. This is a hugely worrying proposal as in our view there is already a lack of space at Napier and conditions are overcrowded. Clearly this is not something that we would wish to see

happen. At present there has been no formal announcement from the Home Office and we will have to wait and see what they decide. If the Home Office press forward with their idea of increasing the number of asylum seekers at Napier Barracks, I will be writing formally to voice the Council's objections and I ask both Councillor McConville and Councillor Hollingsbee to join me in voicing our objections.

I was delighted to visit Home Pine House to give a Community Champion Award to Mr. Jim Marsh, who, along with his wife have kept the gardens at Home Pine House to such an excellent standard. Jim also raises a great deal of money for Great Ormond St Hospital, organises the community bingo and plays a major role in many other community projects. I was pleased to offer him the grateful thanks of the Council and to highlight his role in our community.

Following their announcement of cuts to local bus services I convened a meeting with Stagecoach to discuss. I can report a positive response, with some routes being saved. The Stagecoach Managing Director will be considering my views on how we might save further routes. There have been meetings, email and some difficult discussions with Stagecoach but I can report, this evening, that I am very hopeful that the No.10 bus service will be reinstated to Lympne.

I was please to attend the Royal British Legion - Freedom of the Town Celebration Gala Evening and to specifically honour Mrs Ann Berry an ex Councillor who does a great deal of work for the RBL.

I have attended the Kent Leaders Forum to discuss the issues which affect the Council's in Kent. I have been in close contact with regard to the Kent Resilience team, in their management of both Dover TAP and Operation Brock and I can report that we managed to most of the summer without too many major incidents.

I attended a meeting of Go Folkestone and was delighted to hear their plans for street collection of small electrical appliances for recycling, which will be rolled out in a couple of weeks time.

I attended Brockhill School to talk to year 12 and year 13 students about Local Government and as always, came away really impressed with the school.

I attended a meeting of Cycle Shepway and will be supporting their Big Ride Out on 21st September from Folkestone West Station at 4.00pm.

With regard to the news reports of RAAC in many schools nationally I can report that only Palmash Primary School was affected. The remedial works were carried out during the summer and we are in contact with our KCC colleagues monitoring any further works to buildings.

I have held a number of meetings with officers, KCC officers and the Leader of KCC, Roger Gough regarding Grace Hill Library. I have also had meetings with Damian Collins MP who has raised the matter with Michael Gove, the Minister for Levelling Up. While there is no certainty, officers are looking at the possibility of extending our Levelling Up works to include essential repairs to the Library Building. Please note, this has yet to be agreed and any additional funding is unlikely to provide for a comprehensive restoration of the building, but it may allow for essential repairs and for the building to be made wind and weathertight”.

Councillor McConville, Leader of the Labour Group responded to the communications and stated that in terms of Napier Barracks, his group had made it clear over a long period of time they had called for closure of the barracks, as they were not fit for purpose, and the same could be said for the government policy on this matter. He added that he was happy to voice his objections to this proposal if and when needed. In terms of the buses, he stated that since the timetable changes on 3 September, major routes had already had at least one, sometimes two timetable changes. There was an unacceptable level of daily cancellations and without X (formerly known as Twitter) people would not know of the cancellations. Sadly, a number of drivers had taken redundancy in the recent restructure and bus station changes, and those staff who remained now seemed to be leaving, meaning there seemed to be no end to this substandard of service.

The Leader of the Conservative Group, Councillor Mrs Hollingsbee, also responded to the communications and stated that she was looking forward to seeing the reports relating to Otterpool Park. She raised concerns about the report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee which stated that the original funding proposal was not now considered affordable. In terms of the Princes Parade hoardings, she stated she would be interested to know the costings of taking down the existing hoardings and replacing them with fencing. She added that there was an asset of £20 million sitting there, and something needed to be done about it. In terms of Napier Barracks, she completely agreed, and in her time as Cabinet Member, she stated that she had spent hours in meetings on the matter. It was not just the number and the expansion, but the resources that were required in order to manage the facility – ie community safety, litter, and the pressure on doctors surgeries, dentists, hospitals. She asked the Leader why he would wait for the decision to be made, rather than submitting the objections now. She added that it was good news in respect of bus services, particularly the Number 10 bus to Lympe, and that she had been approached by a number of people about this who would be delighted. Anything that could be done to help was important. She stated that it was lovely to hear of the Freedom of the Town gala evening and offered congratulations to former Cllr Mrs Ann Berry who she stated had spent a long time in the council chamber and had done an awful lot of work, and asked for her thanks to be recorded. She thanked the Leader for his comprehensive report.

The Leader then responded to the comments of both opposition group leaders and added that he would take on board all comments made and would try to respond in detail with figures. He suggested a discussion about Napier Barracks in order to compose a joint objection. He concluded by advising that on Saturday at 11.30am, the Folkestone Great Beach Clean would be taking place at the beach at the bottom of Remembrance Road. He stated that everyone was welcome, equipment would be supplied and it would be a great event. He added that on Sunday, the Folkestone Half Marathon would be taking place, running from the Leas, into Hythe, and back again. He stated that if people did go and spectate, and saw a grey haired individual staggering along at the end, it was likely to be him.

Proposed by Councillor Jim Martin,
Seconded by Councillor Prater; and

RESOLVED:

That the Leaders announcements be noted.

(The recommendations were agreed by affirmation of the meeting).

45. **Portfolio Holder reports to Council**

The Portfolio Holder reports had been circulated within the agenda pack and noted by Members.

46. **Opposition Business**

Councillor Cooper, on behalf of the Labour Group, set out the opposition business which raised concerns about the system for reporting information on bathing water in the district.

Proposed by Councillor Cooper,
Seconded by Councillor Chapman; and

RESOLVED:

That Option (b) (refer the issue to the Cabinet or relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as the case may be, for their observations, before deciding whether to make a decision on the issue) be applied to the business shown below:

To make it known to full council what, if any, system is currently in place across the District to provide information about bathing water – including pollution incidents, both on the councils digital platforms and in an easily accessible place in the near vicinity of the bathing water.

If no system is currently in place, then to refer to cabinet to approve a system which delivers these outcomes.

This system should consider but not be limited to: Digital displays in the vicinity of bathing sites which access real time data from Southern Water's Beachbouy software. A system of flags which is clearly identifiable.

Before implementing this proposal, funding would need to be agreed and secured for this initiative.

To refer this to cabinet to determine a report looking at options to deliver this outcome. Either through:

- Solely council funded
- In partnership with Southern Water, the Environment Agency or a collaboration of all parties.

(The recommendations were agreed by affirmation of the meeting).

47. **Motions on Notice**

Councillor McConville outlined his motion which related to toilet twinning.

Proposed by Councillor McConville,
Seconded by Councillor Davison; and

RESOLVED:

- To twin the 3 new changing places toilets with the charity "Toilet Twinning".
- To pay £180, £60 per toilet, to achieve this.
- To display the certificates received within the changing places toilets once opened.

(Voting figures: 21 for, 6 against, 0 abstentions).

48. **Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA)**

The report set out the Council's policy on the use of directed surveillance and covert human intelligence sources under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000.

Proposed by Councillor Fuller,
Seconded by Councillor Holgate; and

RESOLVED:

- 1. That report A/23/14 be received and noted.**
- 2. That the RIPA policy and procedure in appendix 1 to the report be approved.**

(The recommendations were agreed by affirmation of the meeting).

49. Members' Allowances - Independent Remuneration Panel

The report recommended that the term of the current three Members of the Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP) be extended a further four years to November 2023, and also that recruitment be commenced to fill the vacant fourth IRP position.

Proposed by Councillor Prater,
Seconded by Councillor Mrs Hollingsbee; and

RESOLVED:

- 1. That report A/23/13 be received and noted.**
- 2. That the term of the existing IRP Members (Paul Murphy, Judy Williams and Chris Harman) be extended for a further four year term of office from the 2 December 2023.**
- 3. That the term of the Parish Remuneration Panel be extended under the regulations, the members of which shall be identical to the members of the Independent Remuneration Panel.**
- 4. That delegated authority be given to the Chief Executive to commence recruitment for a fourth member of the IRP (to fill the vacancy left by Beverley Crouch's resignation in March 2022) and to form a selection panel comprised of the Chair of the Council, the Leader of the Council, the Deputy Leader of the Council and a representative from the Conservative Group.**

(The recommendations were agreed by affirmation of the meeting).

50. Transformation - 2023-25

The report set out an approach to transformation spanning a two-year period. The transformation seeks to reduce management duplication, improve efficiency, ensure that organisation capacity is focused on the Council's priorities, and deliver financial savings by making the best use of IT, Premises, Asset & Contract Management and reducing the overall number of staff across the Council.

Proposed by Councillor Meade,
Seconded by Councillor Keen,

That the consideration of the report be deferred and a detailed plan be provided before the vote took place.

(Voting figures: 9 for, 16 against, 1 against).

The amendment was therefore LOST.

Members commented on various aspects of the report and the Chief Executive provided clarity on some of the points raised.

Proposed by Councillor Prater,
Seconded by Councillor J Martin; and

RESOLVED:

- 1. That report A/23/15 be received and noted.**
- 2. That the creation of a £1.5 million transformation fund in the budget for 2023/24 be approved, drawn from existing reserves.**

(Voting figures: 18 for, 9 against, 0 abstentions).

Council – 21 September 2023

Public Questions and answers:

1. **From Mr D Turner to Councillor Jim Martin, Leader of the Council and Portfolio holder for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy**

How will the new boundary changes effect the council in particular with regards Otterpool? Westenhanger and the old race course now fall into Ashford Parliamentary constituency.

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question.

The parliamentary boundary changes will not have any effect on the district council with regards to Otterpool Park.

Parliamentary boundaries concern constituencies and the balance of members of Parliament. District and parish boundary lines were not part of this boundary review, therefore District and Parish Councils and the work they are doing remain unchanged. This would mean there would effectively be two MPs in the district.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

None.

2. **From Mr P Gane to Councillor Jim Martin, Leader of the Council and Portfolio holder for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy**

The White Lion Public House building on Cheriton High Street has long been an iconic part of Cheriton's street scene. However, over the last 15 years it has been unused and fallen into disrepair and is now seemingly at risk of collapse. Most residents would like to see any development keep the previously impressive frontage of the building. The Cheriton Town Ward Councillors believes that any such redevelopment should retain the historic frontage if technically feasible, be of an appropriate scale, utilise the ground floor for a community or retail use and the upper parts for social housing to help the community at large.

Cheriton West Town Councillors on behalf of Local residents therefore ask will Folkestone and Hythe District Council use compulsory purchase powers, or any other powers available and appropriate, to buy the building and redevelop the site?

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question.

In answering your question, I must first pay personal tribute to the three Ward Councillors for Cheriton, who have worked tirelessly to try and get this issue resolved. I know from the work the Ward Councillors have done that this building is considered as a real and significant problem in Cheriton. The people of Cheriton want something done. I can confirm that the Council is currently in contact with the owners of the building through our Planning Enforcement team seeking to remedy the current situation.

The use of compulsory purchase powers would need careful thought. Before exploring the option of compulsory purchase it is important that the Council first exhausts other options via planning enforcement. After this it may then be appropriate to explore whether compulsory purchase is appropriate, but we are determined to have this matter resolved.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

None.

3. From Mrs M Lawes to Councillor P Blakemore, Cabinet Member for Transport, Regulatory Services and Building Control

Please can all 1 hour parking be reduced or removed in Burrow Road (none), Southbourne Road (none), Dudley Road (bottom of road), East Cliff (none) Penfold (2 spaces top and 2 spaces bottom of road) and Warren Road (none), with 1 hour to remain in other roads and enforced?

ANSWER:

Many thanks for your question, Mrs Lawes. Before answering the detail I'd like to say that I do understand the horrendous situation faced by residents of The Stade and the surrounding roads particularly on summer weekends. I am aware that Ward Councillors have been working hard to seek a solution and that meetings have been held with the Leader and Chief Executive of the Council as well as with senior officers and the police.

With regard to this particular scheme, I have been advised by officers that during the consultation, some residents and businesses had requested shared use parking, which included the free 1-hour limited waiting. As you know, this allows residents' visitors to park for short periods without having to purchase visitor permits. In Warren Road, a small section of the road has free limited waiting mainly outside the convenience store. In Southbourne Road, the shared use, free limited waiting applies to one side of the road.

I understand that not all residents are supportive of this approach and prefer 'permit holders only' restrictions. However, as a council, we have to balance competing requirements. If you can provide us with a petition, in support of removing the free 1-hour waiting, signed by a majority of residents, we will be happy to look at this element of the scheme again.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

If the one hour restriction remained, would this be enforced, and could figures be provided?

ANSWER:

I can certainly provide those figures in the next couple of days, and I will pass your comments onto the enforcement team to ask that this be done as well.

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Council – 21 September 2023 Councillor Questions and answers

1. From Councillor Cooper to Councillor Jim Martin, Leader and Cabinet Member for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy

Will you meet with me and other District Councillors from the Marsh to see if we can mutually improve Romney Marsh residents' access to council services?

ANSWER:

Thank you, Councillor Cooper, for your question, the simple answer is yes, I am always very pleased to discuss ways in which the services for our residents can be improved and I will be delighted to meet with you and other Councillors from the Marsh as quickly as possible.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

None.

2. From Councillor Cooper to Councillor Holgate, Cabinet Member for Place Plan, Heritage, Tourism and District Economy

As we are approaching the end of the Summer season, what are the District Council doing and going to do to in order to support, increase and welcome Tourism on the Romney Marsh for 2024 and beyond?

ANSWER:

Many thanks for your question. Tourism is a key element of the district economy and the council is proactively supporting tourism in the following ways:

1. The "Visit Folkestone and Hythe Micro Site" is being updated in collaboration with Visit Kent, FHDC, and the Romney Marsh Partnership. This micro-site will serve as a centralised platform to showcase the diverse attractions and experiences offered throughout the region. (This site is currently under construction and will be available in the very near future).
2. Working through the existing Folkestone and Hythe Tourism board, the Council is looking to find sustainable joint working approaches with key board members to find ways to market and promote the amazing tourism assets the district has to offer.
3. FHDC are working with Visit Kent to ensure we have a full picture of the districts tourism performance and where the weaknesses are identified to then find ways to address and improve outcomes through working with the Tourism Board.
4. Visit Kent also promotes Folkestone and Hythe through their website and extensive networks.

Romney Marsh Partnership is also a key driver for tourism in its quest to have a more diverse economy which currently is very reliant on the nuclear sector.

It must be stressed that whilst FHDC can help act as a coordinator, all key tourism stakeholders need to play their part especially when public money is being stretched further to support key council essential services.

Finally - I'd like to openly recognise the work of Linda Marsh, Romney Marsh Partnership Senior Specialist who is a dedicated resource in driving projects in the Marsh - and doing an incredible job with her efforts.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Could restrictions on shop opening hours be reviewed and lifted, giving business owners the opportunity to use their discretion as to when they opened?

ANSWER:

Thank you for your suggestion, I will look into this and feedback to you.

(After the meeting, the following update was provided:

The current process is that needs would be assessed on a case by case basis and would depend on which legislative authority had imposed the restrictions. I would suggest that if any shop owners approach you that they should be advised to seek pre-application advice from the Planning Department (if the controls have been imposed by planning conditions) or the Council's licensing team if the controls are imposed under license. I will however be speaking with relevant Officers on whether we can identify a less administrative way of supporting.

3. From Councillor Cooper to Councillor Speakman, Cabinet Member for Assets and Operations

My constituents and I were appalled to read in the Report before the Audit and Governance Committee about the standards or lack of them from Veolia in the street sweeping of this district. As you know, Veolia are being paid to deliver a Grade A service but at best, in my view, providing a Grade C or worse. They are not, among other things, seemingly mechanically brushing the streets or removing weeds and other detritus in accordance with the contract. To give but a few examples.

When can the taxpayers of this council expect this contractor to be brought into line, and also be required to do what its paid to do or failing that, be given appropriate notice for the council to bring the street sweeping service back in house?

ANSWER:

Thank you for the question.

The recent audit report highlighted several areas of underperformance by Veolia in delivering the street cleansing service. This is in marked contrast with performance of the waste collection service, which is performing well, and is acknowledged in the report.

As a joint contract much of the audit testing was in fact completed in the Dover district but we have been quick to recognise that issues like the frequency of mechanical sweeping and weed growth are also evident in our district. I would add that the resilience of the weekend cleansing operation along the coast this summer has also been a concern at times.

The audit included a series of recommendations and the Waste Team have already agreed an action plan with the auditors to address these. These will be reviewed as part of the audit process and by me in my regular portfolio meetings.

I am open to considering all options of how the service is delivered in the future, but for the moment we have a contract with an experienced contractor who now has the opportunity to show improvement.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Can Members be given a copy of the action plan and specifications of the contract, so that Members can ensure this work was being done in their wards?

ANSWER:

I will raise this with officers.

4. From Councillor Wimble to Councillor Jim Martin, Leader and Cabinet Member for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy

I would like to know the council's position on bus services to and from the Marsh. It's been brought to many of the Marsh Councillors' attention that due to these modifications, numerous residents from rural parts are now left without a feasible public transportation option to commute to work in Folkestone or Ashford. Some students who attend the Folkestone Girls School and Harvey Grammar School, find themselves without the crucial service to get to their schools. And perhaps even more important it can take up to 3 hours to get to Hospital by public transport and if you have an early appointment now not possible. Could the council explain the rationale behind this abrupt service change and what steps are being considered to ensure that the transportation needs of Romney Marsh residents are adequately met, keeping in line with the broader ethos of equal service delivery across the county?

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question. I first heard about the bus cuts in late June, when Stagecoach gave their statutory notice of withdrawal of service. I immediately called Stagecoach's managing director Joel Matthews and commercial director Matthew Arnold, to my office.

They told me not to worry, the notice of withdrawal was part of a negotiation with KCC who subsidise unprofitable bus routes. I was told that since the pandemic, students had returned to the buses, as had fare paying passengers, to pre pandemic levels. The concession card holders however are 20% down on pre pandemic numbers.

On behalf of FHDC, I offered a "use it or lose it" advertising campaign to try and get the concession card holders back on the buses.

My offer was refused.

Stagecoach did not receive all of the increased subsidies they had hoped for from KCC, and hence the cuts.

To compound their problems, Stagecoach decided to close the bus garage in Cheriton and run all services from Dover and Ashford. As part of the closure process Stagecoach had to offer their staff the option of redundancy and they were "amazed" when most of their drivers accepted the redundancy offer, rather than drive to Dover or Ashford to start work.

This meant that on the first day of term, Stagecoach had a massive driver shortage!

There is chaos in the timetable, there are not enough drivers to run the reduced service and all Stagecoach can tell me is that the service will improve! It could hardly get worse!

I have no influence over this situation, Stagecoach are licenced and subsidised by KCC. I am however in daily contact with Stagecoach.

I know that Folkestone Town Council are in advanced negotiations to provide their own community bus service. I am also aware that the Romney Marsh Partnership, with the help of Magnox, are in discussions with Flexibus for another community bus service. There is some KCC funding for Towns and Parishes to fund their own community bus services, but this is not open to District Councils.

We will have to devise as many ways as possible to reduce the impact of the Stagecoach bus cuts on the people of the District and I welcome all proposals, ideas and suggestions.

As a last minute update, I was contacted by the Managing Director of Stagecoach, Joel Matthews, who offered to reinstate the No10 bus service to Lympne. The area is effectively marooned without a bus service, and Joel has

listened to my overtures and wants to explore reestablishing this bus route. In exchange, he wants me to put the use it or lose it campaign back on the table for negotiation, and I have agreed. Nothing is confirmed, but it is something to go on.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Would the council officers look into supporting a community bus service on the Marsh?

ANSWER:

I am happy to confirm that community bus services will become a much bigger part of our day to day business.

The question below was withdrawn by Councillor Wimble:

~~5. From Councillor Wimble to Councillor Jim Martin, Leader and Cabinet Member for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy~~

~~For 14 enriching years, the Romney Marsh has had the privilege of the Romney Marsh Partnership. But since May, there's been no updates in fact complete radio silence. The officer whose singular duty is to coordinate this group and be accessible to both district councillors and those from Town and Parish Councils. Not to mention, engaging with key stakeholders such as Magnox, Lydd Airport, EDF, and the Environment Agency.~~

~~Secondly, concerning the chairman's position, which was intriguingly decided by you rather than a democratic vote by Marsh members (as has previously been the case that that the members within the Marsh actually vote for a chair), it appears this individual might be a tad swamped with all the other positions that you have given him. Will there be an opportunity this year for a gathering of district, county, town, and parish councillors?~~

~~6. From Councillor Wimble to Councillor M Blakemore, Cabinet Member for Community and Collaboration Councillor Jim Martin (The Leader gave the response in M Blakemore's absence)~~

~~In light of the challenges many residents of Folkestone and Hythe district are facing, my primary question to you is: Will the council continue to pledge its support to community hubs which play a pivotal role in catering to not just the elderly, but also to other individuals who heavily depend on these crucial services? Given the recent slashes to county budgets, the commitment of the council in this regard is paramount. Can you reassure the people of the Romney Marsh.~~

ANSWER:

Councillor Wimble, thanks for your question.

In short, yes I can assure Romney Marsh residents that this Council highly values and supports the role of the community hubs, which are an important resource for communities across the district.

Examples of recent support provided from the Council to the Hubs includes funding for them to:

- Run warm spaces and provide warm packs, fuel and food support;
- Continued support for our Ukrainians guests; and
- Provide general support in relation to the cost of living crisis, signpost to services available through the Council and partners and the distribution of household essentials to vulnerable people.

All hubs engage in a monthly check in call with the Council and partners to ensure sign posting and opportunities for additional support are promoted. Cllr Mike Blakemore has visited the Romney Marsh Community Hub and is encouraging the team there to come forward with ideas for new ways for the Hubs to provide support the local community.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

None.

7. From Councillor Wimble to Councillor Holgate, Cabinet Member for Member for Place Plan, Heritage, Tourism and District Economy

I would like to inquire about the status of the new "Visit Folkestone and Hythe" website which was anticipated to launch around the time of the new administration's inception. Additionally, it was communicated that several new applications would be introduced, offering free registration for local businesses. Considering the substantial investment that has been made towards these projects, could the council please provide an update on the current position and developments regarding the website and these applications?

ANSWER:

Thanks Councillor Wimble for your question. The Visit Folkestone & Hythe website is currently undergoing a major overhaul and is being updated in partnership with Visit Kent. This is expected to be completed in the next 2 to 3 months. Once complete, we will trial keeping this site up to date using internal Council resources. This will allow us to react swiftly to business needs and update the site as required, such as to promote local key events.

With regards to the application for businesses, the ExperienceFH app was launched last November. Since this time, marketing campaigns have taken place to raise awareness across businesses, residents and visitors. This has included visits to local businesses with promotional material and articles in locally distributed magazines. The uptake by businesses to date has not been as high as anticipated and we are working with application provider, Bubltown, to address this.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Could you try and make a bigger push down in Romney and Lydd?

ANSWER:

Yes.

8. From Councillor Chapman to Councillor Speakman, Cabinet Member for Assets and Operations

A resident who doesn't drive contacted me to explain the difficulties he has had disposing of a broken hairdryer. Veolia will not take it, the KCC website states that anyone visiting their recycling centre must visit by car and not on foot, and when he emailed this council he was told that the only option was to pay £35 for a bulk collection service. Can we look at establishing a way that residents who don't drive can dispose of broken electrical items more easily?

ANSWER:

Thank you for the question.

This is really a matter for KCC as the local household waste and recycling sites are managed by them and they will set the restrictions on how their sites are accessed.

Unfortunately, we cannot collect individual electrical items for recycling as part of the kerbside service. This service needs to operate at scale and to a collections criteria agreed with KCC as the disposal authority. We do provide a collection service for bulk waste, but this for large items and a paid for service.

I would suggest raising with KCC to see if they can show flexibility in site access.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

None.

9. From Councillor Chapman to Councillor Speakman, Cabinet Member for Assets and Operations

My ward is one of the most deprived in Kent and in the top ten percent most deprived in the country. Many residents don't have cars to take larger items to the tip and cannot afford the £35 bulk collection fee. This then leads to items such as mattresses being discarded on the street. Could we look at ways of helping those on lower incomes with this issue?

ANSWER:

Thank you for the question.

The bulky waste service is a discretionary service, and the cost of its operation is covered from the fees paid. Last year the council did look in some detail at the possibility of a free service based on eligibility criteria. It concluded that such a scheme would result in a major expansion of the bulky waste scheme to around 10,300 collections per annum at a minimum cost of £471000. Currently we are going through a budget setting exercise aimed at reducing the substantial deficit inherited by this administration with approximately 12.5% reductions across the board. For the Waste management service that is likely to be in excess of £0.5M. Therefore, with the council's difficult budget position, I do not think we are able to lower the fee or provide a subsidy for the service at this time.

However, I am full sympathy with the points you raise and I am aware that some of the larger authorities provide a free service. Speaking personally it remains an aspiration to provide such a service as you describe.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

None.

10. From Councillor Chapman to Councillor Speakman, Cabinet Member for Assets and Operations

A constituent recently reposted to me that his bin had been destroyed in an arson attack. This is a possible hate crime and is being investigated as such. When he called the council to ask for a new bin he was told he would have to pay, despite explaining the circumstances. He did so because he needed the bin. Can we look at refunding the money that he paid, and consider being a little more flexible on this matter in the future?

ANSWER:

Thank you for bringing to my attention, this needs looking into.

Please forward to me the details of the incident and I will discuss with officers about what discretion can be applied.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

None.

11. From Councillor Jones to Councillor Holgate, Cabinet Member for Member for Place Plan, Heritage, Tourism and District Economy

The Folkestone Airshow clearly bought a lot of benefits to the people and businesses in Folkestone. This was understandably put in the budget by the previous administration, but I have been asked by the public how much it cost the District Council and what provision there is in the current budget for events to promote tourism in the other towns and villages in the District?

ANSWER:

Many thanks Councillor Jones for your question.

The Folkestone Air Display, with the Red Arrows as the main draw, does generate a high level of footfall and visitors to the town which has a positive benefit for local businesses. It generates a significant level of publicity for Folkestone and the wider District.

The net cost to the Council of holding the event is circa £55k. There are currently no other budgets which support specific tourism events. However, in the current economic development budget there is circa £20k budget for tourism development which is used to host the Visit Folkestone website, and subscribe to Visit Kent services, to help promote the district as a whole.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

In the next budget, could you consider a more balanced approach in order that the rest of the district can also a boost to their tourism?

ANSWER:

In short, yes, we have a fantastic district, and we should be doing everything to promote the whole district.

12. From Councillor Cooper to Councillor Jim Martin, Leader and Cabinet Member for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy

Given the disruption of the reduced Bus services on the Marsh due to the new revised timetables being introduced by Stagecoach, residents are rightly concerned about the safety of their loved ones both young, old and infirm who are reliant on public transport, with buses being cancelled unannounced, not turning up or not even completing journeys or missing connections. Leading to increased loneliness and danger especially among our elderly and younger population. What is the council doing to ensure the residents of Romney Marsh and other areas of the district are not further inconvenienced by the cancellations, chaos and confusion caused by Stagecoach, and can we repeatedly remind Kent County Council to apply pressure on Stagecoach, following reports - that KCC was also awarded an additional £2.3m on top of the original £19.1m for bus services earlier in the year.

ANSWER:

Thank you for your excellent question, Councillor Cooper, I refer you to the answer I gave to a similar question from Councillor Wimble. If, however the point you are making is that the service provided by Stagecoach despite being in receipt of vast amounts of public subsidy, I completely agree with you.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

It's not appropriate in this day and age for people not to be able to visit loved one in hospital, and for people to be stranded at bus stops. Will the council also write to the licensing authorities regarding this because it is a concern?

ANSWER:

I couldn't agree more, the most depressing thing in this whole debacle was the first day of the school term, children waiting unaccompanied at bus stops for over two hours. There is not a day that has gone by where I haven't emailed KCC or stagecoach about this matter, we are giving it everything.

13. From Councillor Walker to Councillor Tim Prater, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Governance

As Members of Labour and Co-operative Party both Cllr Cooper and I were delighted to see this council had passed a resolution in September 2019 declaring itself to be a fair tax council. We were both disappointed, however, to note the subsequent lack of communication and promotion of it. When can the council taxpayer of this district expect this council to promote and advertise the fact that we are a Fair Tax Council on its website and other media? It would be good to see the council clearly stating that it welcomes local companies to bid for local services and that it also abhors profits from council taxpayers being diverted overseas.

ANSWER:

Councillor Walker - thank you to yourself and Councillor Cooper for your question.

As you highlight, on 25 September 2019 opposition business was raised that included discussions around fair tax. I was delighted to vote for it myself.

Full Council referred the matter to Cabinet for their observations before deciding whether to make a decision on the issue. A report was subsequently considered by Cabinet (C/19/47) on 11 December 2019. At that meeting, it was resolved that report C/19/47 be received and noted, and no further action be taken.

Although in 2019 the then Cabinet decided to take no further action, I continue to think a declaration as a Fair Tax Council is the right thing to do. As Report C/19/47 says though, although much is already in place, to do the job properly will require some officer time and consideration. I would be very happy to talk to Councillors about taking this forward. Given the demands on the Finance team at this time would ask that this is something we pursue, probably by a renewed Council resolution, after the passing of the 2024/25 budget so that there is time to do it well rather than quickly.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

None.

14. From Councillor A Martin to Councillor Speakman, Cabinet Member for Assets and Operations

There is real concern from Marsh residents that fly-tipping is getting worse both in terms of frequency and size of the load dumped. In addition, there is a growing sense that the council is not fully on the side of residents in tackling this issue.

National policy only obligates the council to be responsible for fly-tipping that is sited on our land, The concern, which I share, is that in practice this rule seems to be applied in an overly strict and often unfair way. In particular on the marsh where we have small lanes, often without fences or hedges separating fields from the road, I think this rule is being used to avoid collecting rubbish that is quite clearly on the side of the road and should be collected.

More generally, I believe the council should take responsibility for rubbish dumped close to the roadside, even if on private land. This illegal activity is not the fault of the landowners, and if the council takes the issue seriously and wants to get a real grip on the problem, it needs landowners and residents to keep reporting to enable investigation. Can you address these concerns and consider a review of our policy and approach in practice?

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question.

The council has a duty to remove fly tipping from its land. We do receive requests to remove from private land, but we must take a strict approach for reasons of cost and the legal obligations of the landowner. I accept in most cases; the landowner has had no involvement with the fly-tipping that has taken place on their land, but it is also a difficult case to make for public money to be used to clear private land.

It sounds from Cllr Martin's question that he is referring to a specific incident that I am happy to look further into if he wishes to send me the details.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

This is more than one specific issue. Would you join me for a trip around the district so I can show you the problem first hand?

ANSWER:

I would be delighted to do that, thank you.

15. From Councillor Mrs Hollingsbee to Councillor Jim Martin, Leader and Cabinet Member for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy

At the Constitutional Working Group on 31 August it was agreed that future meetings of the Working Group be held online/as hybrid meetings, and broadcast on the Internet for the public to view, but the public would not be able to attend meetings in person – this decision was against external advice. Can the Leader confirm that this decision will apply to all future working groups and informal cabinet meetings?

ANSWER:

Thank you very much for your excellent question, as ever. One of the election promises the Green Group made was for more openness and transparency, indeed more openness and transparency was also promised by our Lib Dem colleagues and our Labour colleagues. As the Constitutional Working Group is considering a new constitution for the District it would be contrary to our election promises to exclude the public and meet in private.

With regard to the public attending in person rather than watching on line, I think that has more to do with a suitable room being available.

I can confirm that this decision will not apply as a rule to all working groups, it will be for the individual working groups to decide.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Working groups are intended to consider ideas, and meeting in public makes this difficult. Will you review your decision?

ANSWER:

There was a vote on this matter at the meeting, with 3 in support and 2 against. You raise valid points, but the desire for transparency was considered more important and the decision stands.

16. From Councillor Godfrey to Councillor Jim Martin, Leader and Cabinet Member for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy

It is well known that Hythe Swimming Pool requires extensive maintenance at considerable expense as well as having a very high carbon footprint. Can you update the Council on the latest position regarding maintenance and its continued safe operation?

ANSWER:

Thank you Cllr Godfrey for your question. Hythe Pool is a well-used community asset that has served our residents well. The Council accepts that

the pool is aging, and a replacement is needed. Having said that, officers have worked hard over recent years to maintain the pool in a safe condition and keep it open for the benefit of our residents. Notable works in recent years have included the new pool roof, new liners to both pools, renewal of circulation pipework in the poolside and asbestos removal to exterior expansion joints. The council will continue to undertake maintenance at the pool to the best of its ability whilst it is still cost effective to do so.

We are considering a bid to Phase 2 of the national Swimming Pool Support Fund. This would be for capital projects for energy efficiency improvements. The fund is however expected to be oversubscribed.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

At that same meeting, you confirmed that the land available at Martello lakes was still available. Can you confirm whether any more developments have happened with the developer and if any costings have been prepared to progress this?

ANSWER:

It is a topic close to my heart. We have not instructed any feasibility or cost advice at the moment. At the moment we are in a position of looking at the planning documents and legal agreement, and the decision as to whether or not to buy the land for the princely sum of £1 has yet to be taken.

17. From Councillor Davison to Councillor Fuller, Cabinet Member for Resident Engagement and Accountability

What use is the council currently making of Artificial Intelligence both in its internal and resident facing processes?

ANSWER:

Many thanks for the question, Cllr Davison and for the chance to talk about IT outside of the office. I'm going to assume we're referring here to so-called weak AI, which pertains to services such as Chat GPT that are focussed on fulfilling a single function rather than replicating human intelligence. I think it's also worth noting that, where we currently stand, AI is best used as a tool to support the work of colleagues, rather than replace it. It currently works best when taking on simple, but time consuming, tasks that can then be sense checked by a human being.

As an example, I gather from a recent talk that EDF use AI code completion tools to write software tests, rather than the software they develop. At the same talk, it was also noted that services such as Chat GPT can very easily be made to output questionable responses, be they hallucinations or examples of discrimination or bias. When using AI, therefore, we would need to be aware of important practical and ethical questions around its use.

With the above in mind, the feasibility of using AI in Customer Services in the form of chat bots and voice bots has started to be explored to see if it can deliver any efficiencies and meetings have been held with 2 suppliers so far to get a better understanding of what is possible. A lot of work has already been done regarding digital improvements to reduce calls in the areas AI would normally have an impact. The early indicators are that there would not be any return on investment due to the types of calls answered by the Contact Centre and their complexity and the resources it would take to manage the AI skills. We will continue to monitor AI development in this area for future improvements.

We do use a company called D4S which uses AI for processing Universal Credit and Pension changes that are received from DWP and these files directly update the back office benefit system. This is a true AI system and can read pdfs and interpret the information and inputs it directly into the system.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

I'm not advocating the use of AI, but wanted to bring it into the public domain in terms of what the council might be doing. If there is work going on, can we ensure transparency and inform residents, and where appropriate, staff unions?

ANSWER:

You probably noted on 18 September that the CMA produced a report on AI, with 7 guiding principles. I would hope that we will be applying these principles as a council when considering the potential use of AI.

18. From Councillor Meade to Councillor Shoob, Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness

As summer is leaving and the weather starts changing towards cold and wet weather can the council confirm that as we move into Winter what will be the SWEP conditions this year, to ensure that no one is forced to sleep out in of the coldest and most dangerous of weather this year?

ANSWER:

Thank you Councillor Meade for your question.

I can confirm that that our Severe Weather Emergency Protocol will be implemented this coming winter period, to provide emergency accommodation for any people who are confirmed as rough sleeping at the time. The full Severe Weather Emergency Protocol, is available on the council website, but specifically, SWEP will be triggered when the temperature is predicted to be zero degrees Celsius or below on a single night, or there are extenuating circumstances, as determined by the Council's Housing Options Team.

Whatever the weather, we will also continue our work with local partners such as the Rainbow Centre and Porchlight, to support people who are rough sleeping, helping them to access accommodation and appropriate support services.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Can you advise when the next homelessness count will take place?

ANSWER:

I will find out and confirm to you.

(After the meeting, the following response was provided:
The next Street homelessness count is due to take place on the evening of 28th November. The details for the count are currently being finalised).

19. From Councillor Meade to Councillor Shoob, Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness

I was recently contacted by a local Care Home which has had to close due to increased heating bills, amongst other reasons. The owner of this care home is willing to offer District council the property for rent, to house homeless and vulnerable people. They have reached out to the council but have had no reply. I would have thought that this sort of agreement if it can be arranged would provide longer term stability, emergency housing as well as a stable base from which people can start to rebuild their lives. Would the Cabinet Member be willing to meet to discuss this further please ?

ANSWER:

Thank you for bringing this to my attention Cllr Meade. Please could you forward the details of the property and I will ensure that officers fully investigate this opportunity with the owners.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

None.

THE TIME LIMIT OF 45 MINUTES EXPIRED AT THIS POINT, THEREFORE THE QUESTIONS BELOW WERE NOT ASKED AT THE MEETING, BUT WRITTEN RESPONSES HAVE BEEN PROVIDED BELOW.

20. From Councillor Keen to Councillor P Blakemore, Cabinet Member for Transport, Regulatory Services and Building Control

Having recently experienced the dog warden procedure at FHDC and also having been contact by members of the public who have had similar

experiences. The procedure we use is not flexible and does not take into consideration the animals health or wellbeing or the trauma that this cause for the owner. I would like to know, how often are these Kennels are checked for suitability, do we carry out spot checks, and do we know what conditions the dogs are kept in? Why are dogs transported so quickly after being picked up and before the owners has had chance to retrieve their pets, before both are put through a traumatic experience.

ANSWER:

Many thanks for the questions, Councillor Keen.

Kennels are inspected and the standards are good. Each dog has its own secure kennel with access to an outdoor grassed area, so they have space and freedom to move where they are most comfortable especially during hot weather, they have access to fresh air, drinking water and food, they have heaters for the colder months and the kennels are cleaned out daily. Their health and safety is important to both the Kennels and the council. Officers visit on a regular basis to pick up and drop off dogs and are able to see the conditions the dogs are being held in. The Environmental Protection Senior Specialist also visits the Kennels to inspect standards.

All licensed kennels must meet minimum standards, as set out in the Government's Dog Kennel Boarding Licensing Guidelines. This can be found online but I'll happily share it with you after this meeting.

A risk-based approach is taken in terms of renewal and inspection and premises must of course meet the minimum standards to be licensed.

During office hours, any dogs found are held at the council's kennels while the officers make enquiries into the ownership of the dog. This is done by scanning the dog for an up-to-date chip or checking for a name tag with a contact number, taking a photo of the dog and sharing the picture on our Facebook page (during office hours) to find the owner. If the details are not up to date or the owner cannot be found, the dog will be held at our kennel while we wait for the owner to contact us. If after a few hours there is no contact, the dog will be taken to the licensed facility to be cared for whilst additional efforts are made to locate the owner. If however, the weather is extreme, the dog will be taken straight to the licensed kennels for the comfort and wellbeing of the dog.

When there is no officer in attendance at the Civic Centre to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the dog in our kennel, the Out Of Hours handyman service will arrange the collection of the dog. If the owner doesn't come forward, the dog is taken directly to the licensed kennels.

As a dog owner myself, I'd like to reassure you that I do understand the distress suffered by owners, and of course dogs, when a pet goes missing. The primary concern of the council in such a situation is the welfare of the dog.

21. From Councillor Keen to Councillor Speakman, Cabinet Member for Assets and Operations

There appears to be issues with our ground's maintenance, on social housing estates in the Harbour Ward. Residents have reported infrequent grass cutting, hedges that lead to their homes not being cut and have become impassable and also footpaths that are over grown and which are unsafe and also force pedestrians into the road. Grass is left all over the footpaths and in turn is walked into people house. Why are these areas left so long in between cuts.

ANSWER:

Many thanks for your question Councillor Keen and for bringing this to my attention. You are correct, there has been an issue with abnormal growing conditions which has slowed the maintenance operation down slightly resulting in a slightly longer frequency between cuts. The team however have said that whilst the maintenance might not be quite in spec due to the reasons above, they should not be in the condition you convey in your question. They have asked if you could kindly let them know directly the specific areas affected, so they can check if it's within their maintenance scope, as there are areas, which are maintained by the tenants within the housing sites. They will then respond accordingly.

22. From Councillor McConville to Councillor Jim Martin, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy

Noel Redding, born in Folkestone and part of the world famous Jimi Hendrix Experience, is a historical figure for many people of the town. As Folkestone is the world's first music town it would be fitting to honour one of its famous musicians. Can the council advise on its policy or process for erecting a public statue?

ANSWER:

Thank you, Cllr McConville, for your very excellent question. Noel Reading grew up in Hythe, indeed in Seabook about 200yrds from where I live! Jimi Hendrix stayed in Noel Reading's family home, which was then a bed and breakfast, several times. I sometimes think what a figure Jimi Hendrix would have cut as he walked along the Canal or across Prince's Parade to the sea in 1967. Part African American, part Native American, ex-paratrooper with crazy hair and colourful clothes, he must have turned a few heads?

I am aware that the Hythe Civic Society has an initiative to erect a blue plaque on Noel's old home in Seabrook, but this needs the consent of the current owner and planning permission.

The District Council does not have a specific policy relating to the erection of public statues. The Estates department would usually deal with any matters relating to the use of council land and would agree any licences or leases. In this

case, if the ask of the council is to provide the funding for a statue then this would need to be considered by Cabinet and then Full Council as there is currently no budget provision for statues.