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COUNCIL

Date and Time: Thursday 25 June 2020 at 7.00 pm

Place: Council Chamber

Present:

COUNCILLORS -

Kennett (Chairman)

Ambler	Delaney	Quarterman
Axam	Dorn	Radley
Bailey	Drage	Smith
Blewett	Farmer	Southern
Butler	Forster	Tomlinson
Clarke	Kinnell	Wildsmith
Cockarill	Lamb	Worlock
Crampton	Makepeace-Browne	Wright
Crookes	Neighbour	
Davies	Oliver	

Officers Present:

Daryl Phillips	Joint Chief Executive
Helen Vincent	Committee and Member Services Officer
Celia Wood	Democratic Services Officer

13 SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

It was unanimously agreed to suspend Standing Orders 9.3 (Show of Hands for voting), 22.1 (Standing to Speak) and 22.2 (Chairman Standing).

14 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of 21 May 2020 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

15 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillors Harward and Crisp.

16 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations made.

17 COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 12 - QUESTIONS BY THE PUBLIC

Questions had been received from Mr John Crossley, detailed in Appendix A.

18 COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 14 - QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS

Questions had been received from Councillors Crampton and Crookes detailed in Appendix B.

19 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed nominations for local charities from Fleet East, Fleet West and Fleet Central Wards. A decision as to which charities the Chairman will adopt this year will be announced at the next meeting of Council in July.

20 CABINET MEMBERS' ANNOUNCEMENTS

Councillor Neighbour announced how proud he is to be a member of Hart District Council and praised the efforts of Officers during the COVID-19 pandemic. He has been so impressed with staff commitment and empathy during these trying times and thanked everyone for their hard work.

Councillor Radley reiterated Councillor Neighbour's remarks and wanted to recognise the efforts made by Officers during this crisis and the efforts made by all Members across the board. He hoped Hart's resilience would continue as long as is needed.

Councillor Ambler stated that the COVID-19 situation has the effect of forcing progress on the digital strategy in respect of mobile working. He highlighted the efforts of officers, almost overnight, getting everyone set up for home working with all staff quickly adapting to this new way of working whilst many were at the same time having to cope with different work outside of their regular role. Throughout the lockdown period there has been constant and careful monitoring of the effectiveness of Hart District Council's systems and working practices which will lead to recommendations in the future helping to shape the ongoing strategy.

Councillor Bailey thanked Officers at Hart for the hard work in helping the homeless and rough sleepers in the community and praised the efforts to find permanent housing solutions. He praised the Council's work in supporting Hart's most at risk residents. The number of referrals through The Hub has reduced significantly but a plan is already in place to remobilise the service if there is a second wave.

Councillor Crookes commented on Councillor Bailey's announcement by praising the efforts of the Housing Team with their great response for a homeless case in Odiham.

Councillor Cockarill had no specific announcement but wanted to thank Officers for all their hard work.

Councillor Kinnell had no announcement but wanted to praise the work of the Council.

Councillor Oliver advised Councillors that all waste services are up and running and wanted to thank residents for being patient and showing their gratitude. He wanted to thank all Waste Operatives and Serco for their continued efforts.

Councillor Forster asked for clarification on Councillor Oliver's announcement. He asked if bulk deliveries, delivery of new bins, glass crates and new submissions for garden waste collections were also up and running? Councillor Oliver responded that the services were up and running but with respect to Green waste collections there was no capacity to take on new subscribers at this time.

Councillor Smith expressed concerns over reduced capacity of booking slots at HWRC. Councillor Oliver stated that a complaint has been logged with HCC with regard to the booking system and not releasing available slots. Councillor Quartermann had no specific announcement but praised the efforts of all the Officers at Hart and was in the process of agreeing a postponed update for the Commercialisation Strategy at the next Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting on 14 July 2020.

21 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORTS

The Joint Chief Executives had nothing substantive to report.

22 MINUTES OF COMMITTEES

No Council meetings had been held due to the Covid19 measures in place.

23 APPOINTMENT OF SECTION 151 OFFICER

It was agreed to that Ms Emma Foy be appointed as the Officer responsible for the administration of the Council's finances under Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972

24 OUTSIDE BODIES - FEEDBACK FROM MEMBERS

Councillor Dorn updated Members on the Armed Forces Covenant.

Councillor Radley asked if there will be an opportunity for discussions to be had about potential closure of access for the public to army training land. Councillor Dorn responded that there hasn't been the opportunity to discuss this at present.

Councillor Makepeace-Browne announced that the Basingstoke Canal Committee have not met yet and the July meeting will now be in November therefore she had nothing to report.

The meeting closed at 7.54 pm

COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 12

QUESTIONS BY THE PUBLIC

A question had been received from Mr John Crossley.

Mr Crossley asked:

What plans does the Council have to develop the cycle route from Central Fleet to the train station?

Councillor Oliver responded:

As part of our Covid-19 recovery plan for the High Street we are discussing with HCC better lane layout and signage, including advance stop lines at junctions. We would also like to widen the lane from the poorly surfaced and gully riddled current route.

We do not have the funding at the moment and will be working with HCC who have the executive power on the cycle lane. It is likely that this cycle way will form part of the bid to DfT from HCC in September as a key route to encourage cycling in the district.

Mr Crossley asked a supplementary question.

The Government are encouraging Councils to find more sustainable means of travel to work and to encourage cycling and walking. What are the Councils detailed plans to improve routes throughout the Hart area?

Councillor Oliver responded:

As part of the Green Grid, we will be applying for funding to pay for ways to link up towns and villages with cycle paths and walkways in the district. Detailed plans of this project will be forwarded along with our climate change objectives.

COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 14

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS

Councillor Crampton asked:

Parking Enforcement was suspended mid-March and we would like to thank all the officers and staff in the Environment and Technical department for all their hard work during this pandemic. We are aware that enforcement was redeployed to other duties such as supporting the vulnerable with food and essential medicines. Now enforcement is beginning to restart, when will parking charges be reintroduced across our Council owned car parks?

Council Oliver responded:

Thank you Cllr Crampton and I will pass on your personal thanks to the team. On parking, a paper has been published and will be debated at Cabinet next week. Its recommendation is to reintroduce charges from the 1st August. This will allow a month of trading for all retail/hospitality businesses on our high streets and hopefully encourage shoppers to return. To further increase the feeling of safety for returning visitors we have also been able to negotiate a change to our telephone parking service (Mi Permit) that removes the 20p transaction charge on all ticket purchases below £1.60. If a visitor signs up for this service, they can park without touching our ticketing machines for our standard published tariffs at no additional cost. I hope you would agree that this is a significant improvement from other authorities who have continued to charge and obliged use of their touch ticketing machines through lockdown such as Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council

Councillor Crampton asked a supplementary question:

Would it not be better to wait for the long-awaited parking review to start charging again?

Councillor Oliver responded:

We have benchmarked HDC alongside other Councils. As this is an important source of income to HDC we will be re-engaging with Parish Councils where there is 30mins free parking.

Councillor Crookes asked:

Who now owns The Swan pub in North Warnborough?

Councillor Radley to respond:

It is currently owned by a PO box in the British Virgin Islands.

Councillor Crookes asked a supplementary question:

When do we expect the process to be completed and when will we take ownership to tidy up and for the restoration? Do you have any ideas on timescale?

Councillor Radley responded:

Contractors are due on site to assess the damage and secure the building. On receipt of a favourable quote, we will engage the work. We hope to close the legal matters imminently and the way forward will be the subject of a report to Cabinet in August.

Councillor Crookes asked:

Hart Leisure Centre has been, since it first opened, a hugely successful asset for the district, especially for the health of residents. When will it re-open?

Councillor Radley responded:

Across England leisure centres (swimming pools and gyms) are awaiting the Government's announcement as to when they can reopen. It is not a decision for Hart District Council to make. However, we have already been working with Everyone Active to look at practical solutions so as to prepare the Leisure Centres for re-opening while allowing for social distancing once the government mandated restrictions are lifted.

Councillor Crookes asked:

How and why did the Council decide to use Capita to process the COVID Business Grants?

Councillor Radley responded:

The decision to have Capita process the COVID Business Grants was in effect made by the previous Conservative administration when in 2015 it awarded the outsourcing of the Revenues & Benefits service to Capita.

Previously in the 2008 contract Cllr. Stuart Bailey had made strenuous efforts to ensure that Revenue & Benefits staff remained on-site. Unfortunately, when renegotiating the contract in 2015 the previous Conservative administration did not see the benefit of keeping staff on site and so we lost both the personal contacts and more importantly the means to access the data held by Capita relating to the businesses that pay Business Rates. Without this data available to us we had no choice but to engage the only organisation which had access to this data, namely Capita.

I believe the previous administration made an error in handing over data to another organisation without ensuring the business to business APIs were available to have us harvest the data too. We could have then acted proactively to assist local businesses and lessen their stress.

Councillor Forster asked:

On the subject of Coronavirus support business grants for local Hart businesses, we're all pleased that Hart has now delivered over £12m of the first phase of £14.1m support allocated by government to Hart.

Officers worked incredibly hard, so we'd like to praise the finance team and those involved, especially after it was realised that Capita had apparently allocated insufficient resource during the initial few weeks to be able to process properly applications and queries.

A number of businesses have complained to councillors that communication from Hart and Capita was really bad. Initial automated email replies said they'd get a response to queries within 10 days, but many had to wait weeks and weeks with no reply to repeated pleas for help.

These delays caused a great deal of anxiety and hardship for some businesses, owners, and staff.

What did Hart do to address the issues?

Councillor Radley responded:

I was at a virtual meeting only yesterday, along with Cllr. Crookes, in which we and the other Council's engaged in our shared services contract, were reporting similar concerns to those expressed by all of us at Hart over the length of time many businesses were waiting for an update. In terms of lessons to learn from this particular aspect of the COVID response it is not to underestimate the importance of good communications.

Cllr. Forster will know from my previous answer that we had no direct access to the data which would have helped us to guide businesses. Hart officers, particularly in the Audit Team went above and beyond in trying to help businesses access the information they required to discover where they had stumbled in making their applications. However, they were dependent upon the availability of the Revenues & Benefits team at Capita who were themselves working flat out to pay those grants which they were in a position to pay. It would seem to be the case that Capita favoured putting effort into paying those grants which they could pay as quickly as possible over communicating with businesses who had less clear-cut applications.

Certainly, when we come to review our COVID response this will be one of the aspects which I would personally wish to see explored. Although paying as many businesses as possible as quickly as possible, versus prioritising those who had perceived issues with their application is a subjective call to make.

Councillor Dorn asked:

Why have Planning Committee meetings not been restarted when virtual meetings were quickly permitted by government and neighbouring local authorities maintained a democratic approach to the process by holding them remotely as early as 30th April (Surrey Heath)

Councillor Oliver responded:

Planning committees have not been abandoned or stopped. The next is already published to be held on the 8th July. A communication on how public speaking will be handled is to be sent out shortly.

Meetings have not been held as no planning applications that have required the committee to meet have been ready. This is in part due to the requirement of staff to visit sites and post notices. We have amended these working practices to enable as many planning applications to be determined as soon as possible.

There has been much misinformation placed in the public domain. It is true Officers drafted such COVID contingency plans in April and discussed these with Members including Councillor Southern. The Planning Committee, however, is the only body that can change the scheme of delegation but it has not yet met. So, no alternative COVID scheme of delegation is operating. Furthermore, no application that would otherwise have been considered by Planning Committee has been determined under the potential COVID19 scheme either, and the position will not change unless the Planning Committee gives its direct consent.

Councillor Dorn asked a supplementary question:

He thanked the Planning Team for all their hard work and flexibility. However, he felt it was undemocratic for the Planning Team to make an emergency decision which without keeping Members informed.

Councillor Oliver responded:

Contingency plans were in place, but nothing had been acted on. When decisions are made, they are published. Apologies were made if a member of the public felt they have been misled.