

DORSET COUNCIL

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY 11 JUNE 2020

Present: Cllrs Pauline Batstone (Chairman), Val Potheary (Vice-Chairman), Jon Andrews, Shane Bartlett, Dave Bolwell, Cherry Brooks, Andy Canning, Janet Dover, Beryl Ezzard, Spencer Flower, Les Fry, Simon Gibson, Barry Goringe, Jill Haynes, Nick Ireland, Sherry Jespersen, Paul Kimber, Nocturin Lacey-Clarke, Emma Parker, Mike Parkes, Andrew Parry, Molly Rennie, Jane Somper, Clare Sutton, Gill Taylor, David Tooke and Peter Wharf

Apologies: Cllrs Pete Barrow, Derek Beer, Richard Biggs, Graham Carr-Jones, Susan Cocking, Jean Dunseith, Mike Dyer, Tony Ferrari, David Gray, Brian Heatley, Rob Hughes, Carole Jones, Howard Legg, Robin Legg, Cathy Lugg, Jon Orrell, Byron Quayle, Mark Roberts, Maria Roe, David Shortell, Gary Suttle, David Walsh, Kate Wheller, Sarah Williams, Tim Cook, Tony Alford, Mike Barron, Alex Brenton, Piers Brown, Kelvin Clayton, Ray Bryan, Simon Christopher, Robin Cook, Belinda Ridout, Toni Coombs, Matthew Hall, Paul Harrison, Ryan Holloway, Ryan Hope, Stella Jones, Andrew Kerby, Rebecca Knox, Laura Miller, David Morgan, Louie O'Leary, Mary Penfold, Bill Pipe, Julie Robinson, Andrew Starr, Roland Tarr, David Taylor, Bill Trite, Daryl Turner and John Worth.

Officers present (for all or part of the meeting):

Matt Prosser (Chief Executive), Jonathan Mair (Corporate Director - Legal & Democratic Service Monitoring Officer), Jacqui Andrews (Service Manager for Democratic and Electoral Services), Susan Dallison (Democratic Services Manager), Kate Critchel (Senior Democratic Services Officer) and Lindsey Watson (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

APOLOGIES

Informative note: all members were entitled to attend the meeting but with the agreement of group leaders and in order to facilitate the smooth running of the first virtual meeting of the Full Council, the meeting was attended by a quorum of councillors on a politically proportionate basis. Other members who did not attend were treated as having apologised.

72. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

73. Chairman's Announcements

The Chairman spoke of the unusual times that everyone was currently living in and offered her thanks on behalf of the Council to Dorset Council staff for

the work they were doing to support the residents of Dorset. She noted that many staff had been redeployed to assist in front line services including assisting with getting food and resources out to communities. In addition, she spoke of the successful partnership working undertaken, made easier by being just one council, and she thanked workers in the NHS, care services and those in key worker roles in the community, who were doing the best job for the residents of Dorset. She concluded by referring to the recent demonstrations held which highlighted that all lives matter and that the council provided its best services regardless of race or culture.

74. Public Participation - Questions and Statements

The public question together with the response from the Leader of Council is set out in appendix 1 attached to these minutes.

75. Public participation - petitions and deputations

There were no petitions or deputations to report.

76. Questions from Councillors

There were no questions from councillors.

77. Dispensation for non-attendance at meetings

The Leader introduced the report and highlighted that this was a procedural matter, of which the proposal included in the report had received cross party support. The Leader proposed the recommendation set out in the report.

The recommendation was seconded by N Ireland who indicated that he wished to speak to the motion at the end of the debate.

During the discussion, a number of councillors spoke to express their thanks and support in respect of work undertaken by the council's staff and councillors and key workers in the community, for their response to the situation with Covid-19. A particular point of thanks was noted to the Fire and Rescue Service in respect of recent fires in the area.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:

- A point was raised that there was legitimate public concern that councillors were not attending meetings at this time and that decisions were not being scrutinised. Questions were raised as to how residents were able to raise their concerns in a public forum between now and October and how the contributions made by ward councillors could be monitored?
- In response, the Leader noted that most councillors would attend a meeting during this period and that the recommendation provided a safeguard position only if required. He noted that there would be an Annual Meeting of Council in September 2020 and that Cabinet continued to meet and take questions from the public

- Plans for the Council meeting in September were being considered, which included a possible hybrid solution for how councillors could attend the meeting
- In response to a point raised with regard to the importance of local democracy and the restoration of committee meetings, the Leader noted that many officers had been seconded into other areas of work. In the short term a number of decision making meetings had been prioritised, although in addition to these, a number of additional meetings had been scheduled
- Reference was made to recent meetings of the Resources Scrutiny Committee and the Audit and Governance Committee. In addition, proposals for hybrid meetings were being discussed
- The point was made that the recommendation in the report sought to prevent any councillor being disbarred from being a councillor through no fault of their own. In addition it was noted that councillors could continue to support their communities during this time and that this was of value to local communities.

At the conclusion of the debate, N Ireland spoke to express his support of the motion. However he made reference to a recent meeting of Full Council held at Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council where all councillors had been able to participate and he felt that Dorset Council needed to consider its arrangements for meetings, including the Full Council meeting scheduled for September 2020, which may include a hybrid solution.

Decision

That all members of Council receive a dispensation in relation to Section 85 of the Local Government Act for the period up to and including 6 May 2021 for the reason that not all members may be able to attend a virtual committee meeting during this pandemic period.

78. Urgent items

There were no urgent items.

79. Exempt Business

There was no exempt business.

APPENDIX 1 - PUBLIC PARTICIPATION - QUESTIONS AND STATEMENTS

Full Council – 11 June 2020

Questions and Statements submitted for Public Participation Period

Question - submitted by John Calvert

Dispensation for non attendance at meetings of Dorset Council

I am a resident of the Dorset Council Area and I remember instances of County Councillors not attending many meetings in the 'old days'

I do not understand why Dorset Council is being asked to introduce a blanket dispensation until May 2021.

If councillors are seriously ill throughout six months the Full Council could sort it

If councillors miss one meeting out of one then surely again the Full Council could sort it.

If councillors have difficulty with Virtual Meetings surely the Council's officers could sort that out.

If a councillor's committee doesn't meet for six months surely they can't be barred for not attending non existent meetings.

We need committed representatives particularly at this difficult time.

All in all, the question comes down to; What is the real problem, if any, that this measure is supposed to fix?

Response by the Leader of Council

I would like to thank Mr Calvert for his question, although much of what I will say in response is set out in the Agenda Report.

Full Council is being asked to approve a blanket dispensation for all councillors during the pandemic period to ensure that councillors do not fall foul of the 6 month rule during the pandemic period either due to illness or that the fact that the committees on which they serve are currently postponed. It is important to note that any councillor who does not attend a meeting in any 6 month period (regardless of a postponement of a meeting) ceases to be a councillor immediately which would result in the loss local community representation at this important time as all elections have been postponed until May 2021; Any dispensation for failure to attend a meeting in any 6 month period must be approved prior to the end of that period.

At the beginning of the lockdown period in March the Council had to put in place arrangements for the council's committees to meet on a new virtual platform in line with the new coronavirus regulations put in place by the Government; due to the resources required to achieve this, and council staff being diverted to other duties associated with Covid-19, the council prioritised a number of essential decision making committees to be held virtually, which are set out in the report. Not all members of the council serve on one of these prioritised committees and some members have not attended a meeting since February 2020 which would mean that they would automatically cease to be a councillor at a date prior to the Annual Meeting of Council on 3 September 2020. It is therefore important that to avoid a democratic deficit the Full Council approves a dispensation to cover the period up to May 2021.

Duration of meeting: 10.00 - 10.34 am

Chairman

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