

WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL

HELD REMOTELY

15TH JULY 2020 (6PM)

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**Present:**

Councillors: S Miah (Chairman), P W M Young (Vice-Chairman), G W Ballinger, C J Barnett, J F Byng, V Caulfield, S J Chambers, A Coleman, R H Coleman, B S Dawes, N J Desmond, H E Dyke, P Dyke, C Edginton-White, N Gale, S Griffiths, I Hardiman, P Harrison, M J Hart, K Henderson, L J Jones, A L L'Huillier, N Martin, F M Oborski MBE, T L Onslow, M Rayner, C Rogers, S E N Rook, D R Sheppard, J W R Thomas, A Totty and L Whitehouse.

**C.16 Prayers**

Prayers were said by Rev. Nigel Taylor, Team Rector Kidderminster Ismere.

**C.17 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor J Aston.

**C.18 Declarations of Interests by Members**

No declarations of interest were made.

**C.19 Minutes**

**Decision: The minutes of the meeting held on 13th May 2020 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.**

**C.20 Public Participation**

There was no public participation.

**C.21 Questions**

Two questions had been submitted in accordance with Standing Orders (Section 7, 1.8) by Members of the Council.

**1. Question from Councillor Anna Coleman to the Cabinet Member for Operational Services**

## Agenda Item No. 6

Could the Cabinet Member with responsibility confirm that they will undertake a full review of the Bewdley parking initiative and produce a summary of this including a survey of participating traders so that the data can be analysed and made available for all members with a view to informing future parking initiatives in Bewdley?

### **Answer from the Cabinet Member for Operational Services**

Can I thank Councillor Coleman for her question, to which the answer is yes.

### **2. Question from Councillor Lisa Jones to the Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Community Protection**

Could the Cabinet Member advise me what conversation/discussions/letter or emails have been sent to Churchill and Blakedown Parish Council or any of its members by herself, other cabinet members or officers of WFDC in the last 6 months in respect of a possible asset transfer of the WFDC owned car park in the village?

*The Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Community Protection advised that as the question was not just about Localism, it would be answered by the Leader of the Council.*

### **Answer from the Leader of the Council**

The answer is yes to all those items Councillor Jones lists. All those communications have taken place. However at the end of the day it is now down to the Parish Council to decide what they want to do with that car park, in conjunction with ourselves. We will keep all members informed of the outcome of that.

## **C.22 Chairman's Communications**

The Council received a list of functions attended by the Chairman or Vice-Chairman since the Council's last meeting.

## **C.23 Leader of the Council Announcements**

The Leader of the Council made the following announcements:

A number of items have presented themselves over the last few months, not least of which is the financial situation following the Covid-19 pandemic and the loss of income the authority has dramatically seen on a lot of its services. At the moment the authority is totally dependent on the Government supporting us through this crisis. Whilst a lot of money has come from Government, there is going to be a significant financial shortage at the end of this pandemic. We have a very diligent treasurer in Tracey Southall. Her and her team are continually working out what cash is needed where, as the funding doesn't always come through precisely as the government indicates.

## Agenda Item No. 6

The authority is currently encountering an issue over the leisure centre. The company that run the centre on behalf of the Council is claiming for costs as a result of the lockdown. The Council is also losing the fee that it gets from them every month for the use of the centre. Jane Alexander and other officers are putting a huge amount of work into resolving this. This is an issue faced by many councils across the country.

There was some good news yesterday; the Government has announced that they will be making funds available to tackle flooding along the river Severn. We are all aware of the circumstances around the devastating events that happened in Bewdley, Stourport and other surrounding areas of the river Severn. Hopefully the money will be available in readiness of any winter floods. Councillor Oborski has advised that the Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) have committed some money towards the same issue of sorting out the problem of flooding in that area; so we keep our fingers crossed and look forward to some positive news from both the LEP and the Government in the future.

There are ongoing discussions relating to the membership of LEPs. The Council is currently a member of both the Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP (GBSLEP) and Worcestershire LEP. We may not have the option of remaining in the GBSLEP as the Government are looking nationally where there is an overlap, and working towards authorities only being able to be part of their county's LEP. We have had lots of benefits of being in the GBSLEP over many years, so that is a concern.

The administration is keen to develop the Cabinet Advisory Panels (CAP) as a means of cross-party involvement on issues of interest to the district. The CAP on the Green Agenda has had its first meeting. The Panel is chaired by the Council's only Green Member, Councillor Caulfield, and it has set its programme of work for the year.

When the Progressive Alliance took over the administration of the Council last May, we had a number of priorities; the green agenda was one of them along with housing issues. Both of these will remain a priority as we move into our second year of administration.

There will not be an annual general meeting of the Council this year. We had agreed that, if we could not hold it by September, we would not have one. I am pleased to say that Councillor Shazu Miah will continue as Chairman for the remainder of this municipal year through to May 2021, when the next AGM will be held. All the positions that are currently occupied will continue to be held by the post holders. This will ensure there is some stability as we work into our second year of the administration.

It has been an exciting first year. However the excitement has been tarnished by what has happened particularly relating to Covid-19.

Throughout the district I am sure there is not a family that isn't affected by the aftermath of the pandemic and our thoughts and prayers are with all those

## **Agenda Item No. 6**

people. We hope that there can be some return to normal in the not too distant future. We have the issue at the moment about when and how Council offices may reopen. We certainly know that the pandemic has not gone away. There are many people about who could potentially develop it at the moment so we have to remain alert. We have been exceptionally cautious and the home working appears to be going well. Dealing with the issues has been led by our Head of Paid Service, Ian Miller; I believe we must carry on with the same actions for the foreseeable future. There is no sign of it easing at the moment; so let's use our common sense.

As a Council we are getting a lot of compliments on the way we operate and the way our staff are working. They have all worked non-stop, they are so flexible in what they are doing across the whole of the patch. I am not going to pick out individual departments: the whole Council staff of Wyre Forest have done what they can for the public of Wyre Forest during these very difficult circumstances.

### **C.24 Motions Submitted Under Standing Orders**

Two motions had been received in accordance with Standing Orders (Section 7, 4.1)

#### **1. Notice of Motion from Councillor V Caulfield**

Councillor Caulfield presented the motion. She explained that during lockdown 1.3m people bought a bike which caught shops off guard by the spike in demand. Purchases using the cycling to work salary sacrifice scheme increased by 120% compared to the same month last year, and with greater access to e-bikes means that people can now commute longer distances to work on a bike. She said that in May the Government announced a new era for cycling and walking in the form of the Active Travel Fund. This fund would enable County Councils to implement measures to create safer environments for both walking and cycling. The idea being that this would allow cycling in particular to replace journeys previously made by public transport and in the longer term it would also deliver significant health, environmental and congestion benefits.

Councillor Caulfield said it was disappointing that Worcestershire County Council had received only half of the funding from phase 1 as it did not match the brief.

The motion was seconded by Councillor A L'Huillier. She said cycling had been a big part of lockdown for many families and had brought about an outdoor active culture that was widely encouraged in many countries, but not to such an extent in our own. She said that the majority of bike users within the district would agree that there was huge scope to improve the infrastructure within the district; a view that was shared by the Wyre Forest Cycle Forum.

She said the district already had some excellent facilities; the trails in the Wyre Forest, Burlish Top and the new pump track in St George's park. If the

## **Agenda Item No. 6**

authority was able to maximise on this golden opportunity from Central Government and further explore the many local cycling partnerships and initiatives within the district, there was a real opportunity to create our own cycling district benefiting the health and wellbeing of our constituents; encouraging increased tourism whilst simultaneously advancing the green agenda.

On behalf of the Conservative Group, Councillor M Hart formally moved an amendment to the notice of motion which was displayed electronically for all members to read. He explained that a large part of the amended motion was the same as the substantive. However the amendments were subtle but nevertheless important.

He said that the difficulty with the substantive motion was that it asserts criticism that the County Council was not ambitious enough in its first tranche of bidding and suggests that it won't be ambitious in its second tranche. He said it could be argued that this could not be further from the position. Indeed Wyre Forest had benefited from the first tranche of funding with the active cycling route between Kidderminster and Stourport as a result of the Silverwoods housing development and strategic employment site. He added that the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph of the substantive motion made reference to maintaining social distancing and, whilst no one was decrying the need for social distancing and health issues, there was a need to be cautious about putting in permanent measures for something that is hopefully temporary.

In relation to paragraph 4 of the substantive motion, Councillor Hart said the Group had difficulty with the modal shift from driving to active travel. He said that an overwhelming majority of members of the public drive a motor car or have access to one. He added that it was great to see that there had been an increase in cycle sales, but felt it would not be maintained. We had seen so many people walking and cycling because they have had more time to do it as they had not been at work or school and time has been more available. As unacceptable it may be to the green lobby, this will not be the panacea. The authority should embrace people whether they want to walk, cycle, travel by bus or taxi, or drive a motor vehicle; not one size fits all.

He said the Conservative amendment was more appropriate and hoped that it would be supported.

The amendment was seconded by Councillor C Rogers. He said that nobody was arguing about the pursuit of getting people healthier and more active. He was well aware of the benefits of cycling. However he did not agree with the motion as worded, asking to increase the amount of space for social distancing. He added that, having spent a lot of time cycling recently, on all the routes he had used locally there was no need for any more space; people are socially distancing automatically, they are already a bike's length apart and the only time they get close to each other is when they pass each other in opposite directions and the period of time they are in close contact is momentary. He said he had a problem with telling the County Council how they should be doing things, and we should be leaving this issue to the transport experts as that is what they are employed to do.

## Agenda Item No. 6

Councillor Caulfield declined to accept the amendment.

A discussion ensued. Several members spoke in favour and against the amendment. Councillor Oborski said that it was important to embrace and encourage alternative forms of transport. Councillor Edginton-White said that the Government grants had been generated as a result of the current situation we are experiencing with Covid, plus some forward thinking as to how this can improve things into the future. She said it was appropriate that maintaining social distancing and improving residents' health and well-being was absolutely vital in the original motion if we are going to encourage the County Council to be more ambitious. She added that she did not like criticising anyone, but did not want to have missed opportunities and felt that making it more general about grants in the future would be a mistake.

Councillor S Chambers spoke in favour of the amendment. She said that, whilst she did not disagree with the sentiment of the original motion, she believed that the increase in cycling had been as a leisure activity as opposed to going to and from work as the majority of people had been working from home. She said in Wyre Forest a lot of residents had to commute outside of the district to go to work and the only way they could do that was by motor car. She said that we should try to be as green as possible by encouraging electric cars and installation of charging points, and encouraging people to use public transport. It was important not to lose sight of the fact that the car industry plays a major role in the Worcestershire economy; the car is not necessarily the big baddie, and in particular the electric car was something that we should be looking forward to as the future of motoring.

Councillor T Onslow said that it would be hypocritical for her to support the original motion as she travels all across West Mercia and would not be able to do so by cycling; therefore she could not vote for the motion and then continue to use her motor vehicle. She added that another issue is that so much of Wyre Forest's economy is based on tourism, and most of the tourists are coming in from areas a distance from Wyre Forest: they bring children with them and would not be able to do that in a more active form of travel. Therefore for reasons of not wanting to be a hypocrite and the effect of a modal shift from driving could have on the district's tourist economy she would be supporting the amendment.

The Cabinet Member for Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Community Protection said that supporting the original motion did not mean that you would no longer be able to use a motor vehicle again; the motion was a way of improving the way forward; improving where and how we live to better our health and well-being.

Upon a show of hands the vote on the amendment was defeated.

Councillor Hart said that having considered the matter as a Group; they did not want to quarrel with the sentiments of active travel, the green and cycling agenda. Therefore the Conservative Group would not be voting against the substantive motion; however they would take the unusual step of abstaining on

this occasion.

Following a roll call, the vote on the substantive motion was carried.

**Decision: The Motion from Councillor V Caulfield be agreed;**

**Council welcomes the positive impact increased cycling and walking has on residents' health and well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic.**

**Council is committed to improving air quality across the district and recognises the benefits of active travel in improving residents' health and the Council's priority of a safe, clean and green living environment.**

**Council urges Worcestershire County Council to submit a more ambitious bid for the 2nd tranche of the Emergency Active Travel Fund to create increased space for walking and cycling, in order to maintain social distancing, as well as improve residents' health and well-being in the longer term.**

**Council will implement measures to encourage residents to continue cycling and walking within existing resources and capacity, whilst working to support the County Council and other partners such as the cycle forum in facilitating a modal shift from driving to active travel.**

## **2. Notice of Motion from Councillor L Whitehouse**

Councillor L Whitehouse presented the motion as printed in the agenda. He said that as were many, he was shocked and angered by the killing of George Floyd, the last few weeks had shone a light on racism, discrimination and the injustice experienced by some of those from black minority and ethnic communities. He said it was important to carefully reflect on the injustices in our community and throughout the world. He said we need to address the reality and impact of anti-black racism which has been highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement; and now more than ever before it was vitally important to ensure this is a turning point. He said that we must stand resiliently into the face of adversity supporting our communities who are affected. He added that members must listen to residents and work cross party to deal robustly with any issues or concerns presented.

Councillor Whitehouse spoke at length about the links to the slave trade and slave ownership specifically in Wyre Forest, and explained in detail about the life and works of Ukawsaw Gronniosaw.

Councillor S Rook said she was very happy to second the motion; whilst it was important to make a stand against episodes of racist brutality such as what had been seen, to say racism was down to a few bad apples ignored the

## **Agenda Item No. 6**

systemic racism that she believes is embedded in society. She explained that the Black Lives Matter movement was more than about one incident, and had been around since 2013. She added that racism was a complex and multi layered issue that was embedded in society. She said, unless the structural inequalities were tackled, people were being complicit with it and urged members to support the motion for those very important reasons.

On behalf of the Conservative Group, Councillor M Hart read out and formally moved an amendment to the notice of motion which was displayed electronically for all members to read and consider.

He said that the Group accepted substantial parts of the original motion; no one who is decent, tolerant and humane could support any form of racism or systemic racism anywhere in our society and the Conservative Group wholeheartedly condemn it.

He said that it was admirable what the mover of the motion was trying to do. However part of it felt like a history lesson of all what had gone on in the past. History had its place, which was in the past, and we should learn from it. He added that we should not repeat the woes and evils of our forefathers, but history cannot be re-written. He said there was a need to be responsible, measured and proportionate in our response, and felt that the amendment did this.

At 7.52pm Council agreed unanimously to suspend the Council Procedure Rules (Standing Orders) 1.1 (iii) to allow the meeting to continue past 8pm.

The amendment was seconded by Councillor N Desmond. He said the spirit of the amendment was about achieving unity and moving forward on this very important issue. The abhorrent and truly disgusting death of George Floyd had resonated the issue around the globe recently, and racism in any form was abhorrent and had no place in our society.

He said he believed that everybody wanted a diverse, tolerant and free society where colour, religion and creed simply did not matter and was not a barrier to a successful and prosperous life. He added that as a nation he felt that a lot of racial barriers had been broken down over the years and felt that we had a more tolerant and inclusive society now than 30 or 40 years ago. He said people cannot become complacent as unfortunately racism had not been fully eradicated and, as community leaders, members must do all they can to continue the fight against it.

He said the amendment was helpful and engaging. He said it significantly altered paragraph d of the substantive motion, as everybody would agree that slavery in all forms is disgusting and abhorrent. However he failed to see how dredging up historic wrongs dating back well over 200 years, both locally and nationally, was helpful. He said he believed by doing this it undermined the strong message of wanting to end racism and have a more tolerant society. He urged all members to support the amendment which he felt was more inclusive, engaging and had more support with residents across the Wyre Forest community.

## Agenda Item No. 6

Councillor Whitehouse declined to accept the amendment.

Councillor F Oborski MBE urged the mover of the substantive motion to remove the reference to Bangladeshi and Filipino communities, and the mover of the amendment not to include reference to the Polish community as it completely diluted the Black Lives Matter point. She said she welcomed the amendment to include the reference to the Holocaust Memorial pledge.

A lengthy, robust debate ensued. The Chairman ensured that the debate remained respectful and all members were given the opportunity to express their view and ideas freely, without fear of interference or persecution, which is an essential part of democratic debate.

Councillor Whitehouse said it was clear from the debate that all members support the Black Lives Matters campaign. He added that he was happy to amend part of his original motion to remove the reference to specific communities, and was happy with paragraph d and g of the amended motion, but was not happy with the “all lives matter” reference as he believed that some communities were offended by that phrase as it took the shine off the Black Lives Matter movement.

A vote on the amendment was taken, and agreed.

Councillor Hart formally moved the amended motion as the substantive motion, which was seconded by Councillor Desmond.

Councillor Oborski moved a further amendment to the motion. In moving the amendment she said that it did not take away the fact that all lives matter, but it does recognise that in the current particular circumstances it sends a message to the black and ethnic minority communities that recognises that they sometimes experience things that are worse than what others experience. The amendment was seconded by the Cabinet Member for Housing, Health, Well-being and Democratic Services.

The meeting was adjourned at 8.56pm and resumed at 9.05pm.

The amendment proposed by Councillor Oborski was displayed electronically for all members to read and consider.

Councillor Hart thanked Councillor Oborski for the amendment. However he felt that it still put a division in place between Black Lives Matter and all lives matter, and favoured one cohort of society over another; he said that we should not have division, we should have unity.

Councillor Oborski explained the reason for the amendment as it was in response to the Black Lives Matter campaign within the country, and it should be acknowledged.

A vote on the amendment put forward by Councillor Oborski was taken by way of a roll call. Upon the casting vote of the Chairman, the amendment was

agreed.

Councillor Hart said that, having lost the argument on this important issue, it would be inconsistent for the Conservative Group to vote in favour of the new substantive motion, and would abstain from voting.

Councillor Oborski thanked Councillor Hart for his words and hoped that the motion would now be approved without the use of the Chairman's casting vote. She said the length of the debate showed the passion that is felt for this issue, and the division between members was very small and was an indication of where we are at this moment in time in relation to Black Lives Matter. She commended her amended motion to Council.

Upon a show of hands the vote was carried.

**Decision: The Motion from Councillor L Whitehouse, as amended by the Conservative Group and further amended by Councillor F Oborski MBE be agreed;**

**Council:**

- a Reaffirms its unequivocal condemnation of racism, xenophobia and hate crimes, in line with its resolution of 27 July 2016 (C.29);**
- b Recognises and welcomes the contribution that people from black and minority ethnic groups have made to the community in Wyre Forest.**
- c Stands fully with the 'Black Lives Matter' global campaign against violence and systemic racism towards black and minority ethnic people and stands fully against violence and systemic racism towards all people. While accepting that all lives matter regardless of background, Council recognises that at this present moment in time it is important to recognise the need to focus on 'Black Lives Matter' and that all lives matter, regardless of ethnicity or background, and we condemn anarchy and support the rule of law;**
- d Expresses its deep regret about the historic role should any individual or company based in the Wyre Forest have played a part in the slave trade;**
- e Commits itself to using its powers to achieve diversity in the public realm;**
- f Welcomes the motion passed by Kidderminster Town Council on 10 June 2020 and resolves to honour Kidderminster's connection with Ukawsaw Gronniosaw by naming an area of**

## **Agenda Item No. 6**

**public space in his memory, for example through the Future High Streets Fund project, and any such similar individuals;**

- g Endorses and supports the Holocaust Memorial Pledge read out by the Chief Executive on Holocaust Memorial Sunday and its commitment to fight the evils of genocide, anti-semitism, racism, xenophobia and discrimination and condemn the evils of prejudice, discrimination and racism, and that we value a free, respectful and democratic society.**

### **C.25 Urgent Motions Submitted Under Standing Orders**

There were no urgent motions submitted under Standing Orders.

### **C.26 Interim Report from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Consideration of the Flooding Motion from Council**

The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Councillor M Hart, presented a report which updated Council on the work of the Committee undertaken to date into the issues relating to the floods in February 2020.

Councillor Hart thanked members of the Committee for their work in considering this important matter. He said it had reminded members of the devastation and real issues many residents in Bewdley, Stourport and, to a lesser extent, Wolverley had to endure across a number of weeks in February. He added that so far the Committee had met three times to consider this item and had been diligent and forensic in their questioning of the representatives from the Environment Agency, and other key witnesses as part of their evidence gathering.

He said that, at their meeting on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, the Committee plan to hear from the flood forums, and those businesses and residents who were directly or indirectly affected. He explained that, as the Committee were part way through its investigations, he did not want to predetermine anything but suspected that there may be a call for more permanent barriers at the Beale's Corner side of the river in Bewdley. He welcomed the Government announcement of £5.2billion of flood money that will be available nationally over a 6-year period; whilst Bewdley was not specifically mentioned, following consideration of all evidence, there may be a case for resources to be made available for the Wyre Forest area.

Councillor Edginton-White said that she would like to reassure residents that all of the Council Officers, representatives from the Environment Agency, and other agencies the Committee have spoken to so far have given a very thorough account of what had happened, what they see as being lessons learned, and things that can be done in the future. She added that in her opinion the Committee would have the most important insight into the flooding issues from the residents and businesses. She said that, once the input from local people had been fed into all the data that had been collected, she was hopeful that there would be some positive outcomes.

Councillor D Sheppard said that it was important to consider how Dowles Brook had contributed to the flooding at Bewdley and what could be done to stop the brook causing problems in the future.

**Decision: The report be noted.**

Councillor C Barnett left the meeting at this point, (9.36pm)

**C.27 Policy And Budget Framework – Matters which require a decision by Council**

**a) Recommendations from Cabinet 7th July 2020**

**• COVID-19 Recovery Framework**

The Leader presented the recommendations and formally moved them for approval. The proposals were seconded by the Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration, Planning and Capital Investments.

Councillor M Hart spoke on behalf of the Conservative Group; he said that they would be supporting the recommendations as it was right and proper that the authority consulted staff and unions on home working. He said that whilst the proposal was to maximise home working at the optimum level, it was important to remember that home working for everybody was not the panacea. He added that there could be merit for possibly working one or two days a week at home if there was a need to work without interruptions. However the move to single site accommodation was to unite teams so that they could share good practice and have the opportunity to bounce ideas off each other which was much harder to do remotely. Whilst the introduction of home working over recent months has been a way of getting through the current crisis, not everybody liked this way of working.

In supporting the recommendations, Councillor Hart said the Conservative Group requested two undertakings. Firstly, that together with the Head of Paid Service, the Leader provides sufficient papers so that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee can have a good look at the proposals before they are presented to Council in December. He said it was important to involve all members, and a good forensic look at these matters would be helpful as it may shape and change the way the authority delivers its services in the future. Secondly, they would like to see some real quantitative data and evidence, in particular around productivity; and that Managers were ensuring that the work force were as, if not more, productive working from home as opposed to in the office environment.

In conclusion, he said the authority should not denounce or decry working from Wyre Forest House; lunch time activities such as the walking group and five-a-side football team were all things that were important to people's health and well being, which must be considered. Whilst it may reduce the Council's carbon footprint and road congestion as people would not have to drive to the

## **Agenda Item No. 6**

office all the time, it was important that views were sought by consulting staff, unions and members.

A discussion ensued. Councillor Onslow said that she supported the consultation. However she did not agree with the proposal to minimise face-to-face customer service. She said the Council represented the district's taxpayers and as such should not be minimising how people can get in touch with us; not everybody had access to on-line resources. Councillor R Coleman said that it was important to recognise that, whilst some people enjoy it, not everybody is able to cope with working from home.

Councillor Desmond said that he too would support the proposals but had deep reservations and concerns about significant home working on a wider scale, and welcomed the detailed report that will follow later in year.

He said that he supported the request from the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the item to go to the Committee as any significant changes to staff terms and conditions must involve members, and he would need to be persuaded by real statistical evidence and data that home working does increase productivity. He asked how the Chief Executive proposed to monitor productivity and ensure that his managers are carrying out due diligence with their staff to make sure that productivity is being maximised and increased.

Councillor Desmond acknowledged that the authority had a financial black hole that will worsen following the Covid pandemic. He said that the authority should be doing home working for the right reasons. If it was about minimising building space to sell off or rent to private companies in order to generate income, in his opinion that was not the right thing to do. Once teams have moved out of the building it would be very difficult to bring them back in house when other companies are renting office space. He added that this was a massive strategic issue for the Council and all members must be fully engaged.

The Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration, Planning and Capital Investments said that it was not just the District and County Councils looking at more people working from home. There is going to be wholesale change in all sorts of employments. However there was no reason to assume that, just because an organisation decides that it doesn't need the whole of its building all of the time, there is a guarantee that anybody else will want to lease it off them.

She added that it was quite likely that, in all sorts of businesses, the "new normal" will mean not everybody working from home, but more people working from home some of the time. She said that people's health and wellbeing at work was not just about participating in social activities such as joining the Wyre Choir or playing football. There were things like "water cooler conversations", which give people the opportunity to meet casually with colleagues in the office space which then leads to conversations that spark off against each other, which are missing when working from home. She said that for some people working from home for some of the time is useful but she

## **Agenda Item No. 6**

did not believe there were very many people who would only want to work from home and not have the opportunity to interact with colleagues in that way.

In response the Leader advised that he had discussed the issue with the Chief Executive and the Cabinet. He said at the end of the day the authority had little or no choice at the moment with the current situation that we are all in and staff have adapted to it very well.

He added that it was the Government's decision to limit face to face contact along with everything else and it has proved effective. Staff have responded well and the public are happy with the way they are getting their service from Wyre Forest District Council. He said that this is down to the good will of the Council's staff that have adapted to something that to many was strange; not just working with computers at home but using remote meeting technology. He said the authority has very good IT professional staff that have facilitated their colleagues throughout the district to do that very well.

The Leader further explained that any optimum level would not be decided until there had been a full consultation and after proper deliberation. He agreed there was the opportunity to share good practice whilst working at Wyre Forest House, but equally that could be done from home. He said that it may be described as a crisis; however it was a crisis that was working very well at the moment. We would not want to lose that just by saying we will all go back to working as we were before. He added that there were many opportunities to be able to work as efficiently, or even more efficiently, by working from home.

He said that the Chief Executive and the administration would listen to what the staff say in the consultation and listen to what the public say in any discussions because that is the whole point of having members. He said it may cause concern about potentially not having face to face meetings. However the authority has done exceptionally well in getting payments out to everybody during the crisis and without face to face meetings. At the moment the authority does not have a choice due to the rules laid out by Government in relation to social distancing.

In relation to the parameters for home working, the Leader explained that it was not a fad: it was a national situation. Businesses across the world were coming to the same conclusion: why would Wyre Forest have to be different and go back to how it was before the pandemic? He added that the Council's financial situation was going to get a lot worse after Covid. If the authority can make any savings from the current situation, that would be most welcome but it will be about how the Council can operate most effectively.

The Chief Executive addressed Council. He said the authority had a financial gap that it had to close, and the final position was far from certain.

The authority was still waiting for the details of the additional funding for loss of income that was announced by the Government on 2<sup>nd</sup> July. He said the likelihood was that the Council's financial position will have worsened as a result of the Covid pandemic: it certainly won't have improved. Therefore the

## **Agenda Item No. 6**

need for the Council to reduce its costs and raise income is going to be even greater and that was the strategic context for the proposals.

The Chief Executive added that members may not think it was the best motivation for why the authority should look at the pattern of working and how staff are organised but that was the context we are working in and it cannot be ignored.

He added that, now many of the staff are home working, this was absolutely the right time for the Council to be consulting about the extent to which home working becomes the norm. He said it would not necessarily be for everyone but, as the Government has given no indication when the guidance on social distancing will come to an end, at least for the foreseeable future, the authority would not be able to go back to how things used to be.

In response to concerns raised about productivity, the Chief Executive advised that it would be easy to share the statistics which will be done for the Scrutiny Committee on this matter to show whether there has been any change in performance as a result of home working. He said that one thing for members to bear in mind is of course the authority already had a significant number of people working from home before the pandemic took hold; a large proportion of the revenues and benefits team have been working from home for many years and this has been very successful. He added that, given all the extra work they have achieved in the last few months, he would be confident that we have not seen any dip in productivity other than that what would have been caused by all the extra tasks the Government has asked the authority to perform in that area.

Upon a show of hands, the vote was carried unanimously.

### **Decision: Council agreed:**

- 1.1 To authorise the Head of Paid Service to initiate formal consultation with staff and unions with a view to maximising home working at the optimal level, in order to minimise the building space that the Council occupies (paragraphs 4.3 and 4.4), with a further report to Council no later than December 2020 to seek Council's approval of any changes to terms and conditions;**
- 1.2 That a survey of Councillors should be undertaken about the impact of remote working on them, with a report and any recommendations being submitted to Council in September.**

### **b) Recommendations from Cabinet 7th July 2020**

- Property Flood Grants – Amendment to Capital Programme**

The Cabinet Member for Housing, Health, Well-being and Democratic Services presented the recommendation and formally moved it for approval.

## **Agenda Item No. 6**

The Leader seconded the proposal.

Councillor Hart welcomed the Government grant and said the proposal would be fully supported by the Conservative Group.

Upon a show of hands, the vote was carried unanimously.

**Decision: Council approved an amendment to the Capital Programme to include expenditure of £650,000 to provide Property Flood Grants fully matched by DEFRA funding, noting that the exact level of expenditure will be dependent of the number of eligible applicants received.**

There being no further business, the meeting ended at 10.07pm.