

WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL

COUNCIL CHAMBER, WYRE FOREST HOUSE, FINEPOINT WAY,
KIDDERMINSTER

20TH JULY 2022 (6PM)

Present:

Councillors: P Dyke (Chairman), C Edginton-White (Vice-Chairman), J Aston, G W Ballinger, C J Barnett, B Brookes, J F Byng, V Caulfield, S J Chambers, A Coleman, R H Coleman, B S Dawes, N J Desmond, H E Dyke, N Gale, I Hardiman, P Harrison, M J Hart, K Henderson, L J Jones, N Martin, S Miah, F M Oborski MBE, T L Onslow, M Rayner, C Rogers, S E N Rook, D Ross, D R Sheppard, J W R Thomas, A Totty, L Whitehouse and P W M Young.

C.21 Prayers

Prayers were said by Rev Megan Gibbins, Vicar, The Benefice of the Parish of Ribbesford with Bewdley & Dowles and Wribbenhall Parish.

Council observed a few moments' silence for former Chairman James Dudley

C.22 Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence

C.23 Declarations of Interests by Members

No declarations of interest were made.

C.24 Minutes

Decision: The minutes of the meeting held on 11 May 2022 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

C.25 Public Participation

There was no public participation.

C.26 Chairman's Communications

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

C.27 Leader of the Council Announcements

The Leader of the Council referred members to her tabled report.

C.28 Political Balance Report

Council considered a report from the Solicitor to the Council to approve the revised table of political balance.

The Leader of the Council presented the report and formally moved the recommendation for approval. Councillor G Ballinger seconded the proposal.

Decision: Council APPROVED the revised table of political balance in Appendix 1 of the report.

C.29 Policy and Budget Framework – Matters which require a decision by Council

(a) Recommendations from Licensing & Environmental Committee - 6 June 2022

- **Amendment to constitution**

The Chairman of the Licensing and Environmental Committee, Councillor L Whitehouse, presented the recommendations and formally moved an amendment to the wording of the final sentence of bullet point 2 namely: *the Licensing Committee or Sub Committee*, to be replaced with *Members in accordance with the Council's Constitution*.

He explained that the amendment reflected the debate that took place at the Committee meeting and the general consensus from Committee members who were not in favour of Sub-Committees.

The amendment was seconded by Councillor F Oborski MBE.

Upon a vote, the proposal was unanimously agreed.

Decision: Council AGREED to amend the scheme of delegation in section 4 of the Constitution in respect of licensing and registration functions as set out below:

Amend the opening paragraph of the delegation to read (amendments are shown in bold): "To exercise authority, including approval and refusal, **amendment**, suspension and revocation, **reinstatement**, service of notices and orders or other matters requiring a decision by the Council under the Council's published policy and practice notes and the following legislation, regulations and guidance (and any re-enactment or replacement or consolidation of the statutes or regulations or guidance, or any modifications or extensions thereof):"

Replace the first two numbered paragraphs of the delegation with these three numbered paragraphs:

“Except in the following cases:

- 1. Where in accordance with the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy, the application is to be considered by, or a review is to be undertaken by, the Licensing Committee.**
- 2. Where in respect of any licence, other than one covered by the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy, the Officer considers that an application should be considered by, or a review should be undertaken by, Members in accordance with the Council’s Constitution.**
- 3. The application is for a premises licence or a personal licence under the Licensing Act 2003 and the application is recommended for refusal.**

and the existing paragraph 3 is amended by the deletion of the words in brackets and renumbered as follows:

- 4. Applications by drivers and operators of taxis and private hire vehicles, any application where a statutory or non-statutory consultee, responsible authority or interested person has responded to the application objecting to its approval and the objection has not been deemed vexatious.”**

(b) Recommendations from Cabinet – 30 June 2022

- Acquisition of Property in Kidderminster**

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Capital Portfolio presented the recommendation and formally moved it for approval. The Leader seconded the proposal.

Councillor M Hart indicated that he would be making reference to the confidential section of the report and formally moved a motion to exclude the press the public. The proposal was seconded by Councillor F Oborski MBE.

C.30 Exclusion of the Press and Public

Decision: Under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following items of business, on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of “exempt Information” as defined in paragraphs 8 and 9 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

A robust debate ensued. Several members spoke against the proposal and outlined their reasons for being unable to support the

recommendation.

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Capital Portfolio reminded members that the proposal was a key element of the bid for the Government's £17.9m Levelling Up Fund grant for Kidderminster. She spoke about the benefits to the district of the proposal and urged Council to support the recommendation.

Upon a show of hands, a vote on the motion was taken and lost.

Decision: Council DECLINED approval to amend the Capital Programme to reflect the third-party contribution towards conversion costs of the building, as set out in paragraph 5.2 of the confidential report.

Council agreed to reverse the decision to exclude the press and public and resumed the remainder of the meeting in the open session.

C.31

Questions

Eleven questions had been submitted by members of the council in accordance with standing orders.

1. Question to the Leader of the Council from Councillor F Oborski MBE

I am given to understand that WFDC was the only Worcestershire Council not to have been represented at the recent LGA Conference. Would she care to explain why?

Answer from the Leader of the Council

I was not aware that Councillor Oborski was keeping the attendance register for the LGA these days. I hope that Councillor Oborski would agree that it is more important that councillors and staff concentrate on the very important projects we have going on in Wyre Forest at the moment. I cannot see why she would have a problem with us putting that work first at this time. It has also saved the council between £2,000 - £3,000 that it costs for us to attend the conference.

Supplementary question

Given that every other Worcestershire council took part, am I to assume that it is now the policy of this administration that Wyre Forest District Council does not in fact play an active role in the wider realm of local government.

Answer

There is no policy, and the administration does play an active role in the wider realm of local government. It was not compulsory to attend the conference.

2. Question to the Leader of the Council from Councillor A Totty

The Government requirement for voter ID is due to come into effect from elections next May. I understand that Councils are to be enabled to provide

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such ID. So, my question is to the leader of the council. What steps is Wyre Forest District Council taking to ensure that all voters are made aware of this requirement and to publicise the opportunity to obtain voter ID?

Answer from the Leader of the Council

Yes, there was a lot of media attention paid to this idea originally, but all seems to have gone very quiet. We cannot take any action until the government gives us some clarity on the detail of secondary legislation and other things that affect the idea of voter ID but since the original activity, all has gone quiet from government.

Supplementary question

Will the Council also make an effort to increase postal votes?

Answer

The Association of Electoral Administrators wrote to the new Secretary of State on 11 July to voice its concerns and to make the point that in their view it would not be possible to introduce voter ID for the 2023 elections. Given the results of the recent by-election where postal voters outnumbered the number of in-person votes, as far as I am concerned, we should keep using postal votes.

3. Question to the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration, Planning and Localism from Councillor M Hart

Could the Leader tell me and this Council, given the two by-election losses in Franche and Habberley North in November 2021 and most recently in June 2022, clearly demonstrating a rejection of their policies, whether she feels the Progressive Alliance is still fit to lead to this Council?

Answer from the Leader of the Council

Yes

Supplementary question

Would the Leader agree with me that the answer to that question is out of touch with reality, out of touch with our communities and out of touch with the electorate? And would she now agree with me, it is time for the Leadership of this Council to stand aside?

Answer

No, Councillor Hart, when I woke up this morning, I had a full Cabinet in place, and nobody had resigned. It is a better record than Government have had recently. We as a Cabinet and administration remain focused on the major decisions and issues that need addressing here in Wyre Forest and will continue to do so.

4. Question to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Heath, Wellbeing and Democratic Services from Councillor T Onslow

In respect of the temporary accommodation proposal for Castle Road, could the Cabinet Member please advise all the other sites that have been considered for this accommodation and why they were rejected?

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Answer from the Cabinet Member for Housing, Health, Wellbeing and Democratic Services

There were other sites taken into consideration, some of which were dismissed immediately because they were deemed too small. We did not want dispersal over various sites as revenue costs would be much higher for that type of scheme. One that was explored thoroughly was the job centre, and again that was deemed inappropriate due to size and lack of outdoor space. Churchfields was included as part of the HIF grant bid and is dependent on a development that produces acceptable numbers of units. Radford Avenue was too small, and Crown House would not be financially viable. Castle Road car park has the greatest potential. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a detailed report on the proposed development in September 2021 and it was unanimously supported.

Supplementary question

Local representatives for the area are all concerned about traffic as the site is next to very busy roads. As the proposals for the Lionfields site are no longer going ahead, would it be more appropriate to use that site?

Answer

It would not be appropriate at this time because we are so far advanced with Castle Road.

5. Question to the Cabinet Member for Operational Services from Councillor D Ross

Could the Cabinet Member explain to me, this Council and the public, what the current street cleaning schedule is for sweeping the streets and emptying litter bins in our 3 towns?

Answer from the Cabinet Member for Operational Services

The depot team employ a number of mechanisms in order to maintain our street cleanliness across the district. This will be in the form of both programmed and reactive work and will utilise both mechanical sweeping and manual litter picking. Broadly, the three town centres will be mechanically swept daily over a 7-day period, and litter bins will also be serviced daily over that 7-day period.

Supplementary question

Could he comment to this Council and explain to the residents why the district has never looked so uncared for? Why we have overflowing bins? And could he explain to the hard-pressed council tax payers, what they are receiving for the services they pay for?

Answer

No, I do not agree that we have those problems with the litter bins. As I said in my answer to your first question, the litter bins are serviced daily over a 7-day period and, in addition to that, we provide a reactive service for any demand from the public.

6. Question to the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration, Planning and Localism from Councillor

B Brookes

Could the Leader tell me when she will be bringing forward a commercial proposal for the former Crown House site in Kidderminster and Bridge Street in Stourport?

Answer from the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration, Planning and Localism

As you can imagine we are focusing on delivery of a number of major projects within the Future High Streets and the Levelling-Up Funding including the old Crown House site. At the moment we are concentrating on the former Magistrates Court and Worcester Street / Bromsgrove Street element of the work, but never lose sight of the Government's completion date for all of these projects. Regular updates come forward to the Overview & Scrutiny meetings, chaired by Councillor Hart, and I am sure that Ostap Paparega, in his role as Head of Economic Development and Regeneration and Clayton Maponga, the Delivery Manager for Future High Streets projects, would only be too happy to meet with you to discuss the old Crown House part of the project.

Supplementary question

So would the Leader agree with me that given that the previous Conservative administration successfully agreed to the terms to demolish Crown House and given that the Progressive Alliance was so critical of the former Conservative administration on the time that it was taking to develop Bridge Street, is it clear that the Progressive Alliance over promised and talked a great deal, but in three years have delivered nothing, and don't the residents deserve better?

Answer

No, I do not agree with you Councillor Brookes.

7. Question to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Health, Wellbeing and Democratic Services from Councillor L Jones

How would the Cabinet Member rate morale at the present time amongst our staff?

Answer from the Cabinet Member for Housing, Health, Wellbeing and Democratic Services

Unfortunately, there is no one measure for morale. I have regular meetings with my portfolio managers, and the feedback that I get is positive. I am not saying that everybody who works for us is happy, there will be varying reasons why people are not happy. We have our last staff survey, 81% of those who responded are enjoying their jobs, two thirds, which amounts to 66% were proud of the work of the Council, and a high proportion were satisfied with their physical environment, and they had a good relationship with their line managers. I admit the survey was not all positive, but I do thank those who took the time to do the survey and assure them that all answers were explored and taken into consideration.

Supplementary question

Isn't the Cabinet member embarrassed and concerned that a number of our experienced and hard-working employees are leaving or considering

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leaving the Council? I would hope that measures are being taken to ensure that our employees feel valued and listened to. We do not want to lose any more of our fantastic staff.

Answer

At no point am I embarrassed. I am saddened, but I am not embarrassed. As previously explained, people leave their jobs for varying reasons, some is location, some is financial, some is promotion. We cannot accommodate everybody with all of those things. We as an administration changed the pay arrangements as soon as we came into administration to support those that we could. As a member of the administration, I can categorically tell you that the wellbeing of our staff is uppermost to me. At the majority of our Cabinet meetings and our meetings with managers I always ask how our staff are. I have regular meetings with Rachael Simpson, our HR Manager, and we are always trying to explore different things. We are coming out of a pandemic, during that time people will have reflected, their priorities will have changed and their outlook will be different. You will have a general churn of people who are leaving. The austerity over the last decade from Central Government, that has resulted in the cutting of services, does not help. I do have to say, comments in this room, such as the district is dirty and bins are not emptied do not help morale. If anybody from the depot is watching, what do you think they are feeling right now?

8. Question to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Health, Wellbeing and Democratic Services from Councillor N Desmond

Last September the Government announced that vulnerable households across the country would be able to access a £500m Household support fund via local authorities. In March this year the Household Support Fund was extended by a further £500m and would run until 30th September. Could the Cabinet Member tell me please how much WFDC has received from the Household Support Fund, how much has already been spent, how is the money used to support vulnerable families and how many families across Wyre Forest has this fund supported?

Answer from the Cabinet Member for Housing, Health, Wellbeing and Democratic Services

You have asked four questions, but I am prepared to accommodate you. For the period November 2021 to March 2022 Worcestershire was awarded £3.95 million of funding from the Household Support Fund to provide support for residents in need of help with food, fuel and other essential household costs. In Spring 2022, the Chancellor confirmed that the Household Fund would be extended. This equates to another £3.95 million for Worcestershire. The funding awarded to the county council is then disseminated across the districts. Just for the record, we would love it to come direct to us, not to Worcestershire County Council. For the period to March 2022, a minimum of 50% of the fund was for families with children, 50% was for residents experiencing, or at risk of poverty. Wyre Forest District Council were awarded £369k in the first tranche. That was disseminated by our excellent Revenue & Benefits department. We then allocated grants via the voluntary sector and the community sector organisations, such as the Citizens Advice, food banks, church-based

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groups and other charitable organisations. Of that first tranche, 1831 households were supported through the district council's allocation during this period, 1329 of these were households with children. For the period April to September 2022, again the funding was provided to support vulnerable households, however, the criteria had changed. It comes in thirds. One third again allocated to support families and children, one third to be allocated to pensioners and the last third to be allocated for vulnerable households. Of that tranche we have £207k. Due to the fact, the scheme does not end until 30th September I cannot answer your last question of how much is left.

Supplementary question

Would the Cabinet member agree with me, because it is such a big issue, that affects families in all of our wards, that once this money ceases at the end of September and we have all the facts, can a detailed paper be brought to Scrutiny please so that all members can have the chance to go through the facts and figures, because I think it is fascinating.

Answer

Yes, she will do her best, however, as she does not do the work she will ask the person who does do the work if that is possible.

9. Question to the relevant Cabinet Member from Councillor F Oborski MBE

Can the Cabinet Member tell me, for each week since the new Car Park Charges were brought in: the income from Car Parks received between the hours of 6.30pm and 9.30pm, the costs of employing Civil Enforcement Officers for those additional hours and the Fines Levied during those hours?

Answer from the Cabinet Member for Operational Services

We are talking about over 100 weeks of data here, so really I cannot give you a week by week breakdown of the revenues. I will give you a breakdown of total revenues. The best available data that we have to hand is as follows; During the period April 2021 to March 2022 revenue generated across all council carparks, during the 6pm to 9pm period, was £49,272. There were no additional staffing costs for enforcing between these hours because enforcement staff carry out random patrols as part of their normal contracted hours. In the period from 1 April 2020 to 30 June 2022 the penalty charge notices issued across the carparks between these hours generated a sum of £5073.

Supplementary question

Given the very vocal level of complaints, particularly from the people of Bewdley, about the problems that are being caused by the extended car parking hours, is the Cabinet member prepared to have another look at the evening charging?

Answer

Can I remind Councillor Oborski that we have committed to establish a cross-party advisory panel to produce a report for Cabinet, where we will look at all car parking charges throughout the district before the next

medium-term financial plan is issued later this year.

10. Question to the Cabinet Member for Operational Services from Councillor M Hart

Is the Cabinet Member happy with the manner in which Wyre Forest House is currently operated?

Answer from the Cabinet Member for Operational Services

Quite a simple answer, yes.

Supplementary question

Would the Cabinet member agree with me that was a most regrettable answer, and given the answer could he tell me why the doors to this building are still locked in the working day? And when one wanders around this building it is like the Mary Celeste?

Answer

This building is a local government institution, and we have seen what happens in some institutions where we allow the general public in without checking what is going on. So, I do not agree with him that we should have the doors open all the time. We have a responsibility to all our staff, and please bear in mind that we have tenants within this building that we also have responsibility for. So, no, I think that we are quite happy with the way things are running at the moment. We are undertaking a review of space within this building to be used by Wyre Forest staff and we should be bringing a report, probably later in the year, to see how this works out.

11. Question to the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration, Planning and Localism from Councillor M Hart

Could the Leader tell me and this Council whether or not she and the Progressive Alliance she leads are pleased that this Council adopted its Local Plan on 26th April?

Answer from the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration, Planning and Localism

It is not a question of being pleased, or not pleased, there is a legal obligation for the Council to have an up-to-date local plan. Whoever voted for, against or abstained at the meeting on April 26th we now have the Wyre Forest District Council Local Plan in place.

Supplementary question

We certainly do have the local plan in place thanks to the Progressive Alliance. Would the Leader of the Council explain to me and this Council therefore, if we do have the properly adopted local plan, why members of her Progressive Alliance for the second planning meeting in a row, seem single handily not to want to back it and support it?

Answer

I cannot speak for what goes on with every individual, we do not run a whip system. Our group looks at planning as it is supposed to be looked at, as a non-political committee.

C.32 Motions Submitted under Standing Orders

One motion had been received in accordance with standing orders.

Councillor M Hart tabled an amendment to the motion submitted by the Conservative Group. He apologised to Council for his oversight as he had submitted the incorrect version to Officers for inclusion in the agenda papers. A printed copy of the amended motion was circulated to members at this point. The amended motion was seconded by Councillor I Hardiman

Councillor Hart outlined the reasons for the motion. A lengthy and robust debate ensued. A number of members spoke in support of the motion.

Several members spoke against the motion. The Cabinet Member for Operational Services outlined the reasons why he was unable to support the motion and urged members to vote against it.

Councillor N Martin left the meeting at 8.15pm and returned at 8.17pm.
Councillor A Coleman left the meeting at 8.17pm and returned at 8.19pm.
Councillor P Young left the meeting at 8.17pm and returned at 8.24pm.
Councillors D Ross and S Rook left the meeting at 8.18pm and returned at 8.20pm.
Councillor V Caulfield left the meeting at 8.22pm and returned at 8.24pm.

Upon a show of hands, a vote on the motion as amended, was taken and agreed.

Decision: The following motion from the Conservative Group, as amended by Councillor M Hart, be agreed:

Whilst accepting the importance of ‘No Mow May and Too soon June’ to the insect life of the District and that the use of weed killers should be carefully controlled, This Council is appalled at the current state of the District. A core priority of this Council is to ‘Keep the District Safe, Clean and Looking Good’.

This Council calls upon the Leadership of this Council and the Cabinet Member with responsibility to get a grip on this fundamental issue and that core statutory functions of this Council and other non-statutory functions but of which come under this corporate theme and are a key quality of life issue for our residents.

Will the Cabinet Member assure this Council that roads will be swept, grass will be cut, parks and open spaces will be kept tidy and litter bins emptied and this Council calls upon him to formally apologise for the woefully inadequate level of service that the Progressive Alliance is giving to the council tax payers of this District?

Council further requests that in order to keep elected members and members of the public up to date, regular updates are sent to the

Overview & Scrutiny Committee on how it is meeting its KPIs in cutting the grass and sweeping the streets and emptying the litter bins.

C.33 Emergency Motions submitted under Standing Orders

There were no urgent motions.

There being no further business, the meeting ended at 8.35pm.

The open session of the meeting is available for viewing on the Council's website <https://wyreforestdc.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcasts>