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Boston Borough Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **Full Council** held in the Council Chamber - Municipal Buildings, West Street, Boston, PE21 8QR on Monday, 15th July, 2024 at 6.30 pm.

Present:

The Mayor, Councillor Helen Staples, in the Chair.

Councillors Suzanne Welberry (Deputy Mayor), Jyothi Arayambath, Alison Austin, Richard Austin BEM, John Baxter, Peter Bedford, David Brown, Dale Broughton, Callum Butler, James Cantwell, Emma Cresswell, Anton Dani, Anne Dorrian, Stuart Evans, Sandeep Ghosh, Mike Gilbert, Paul Gleeson, Andy Izzard, Patricia Marson, David Middleton, Chris Mountain, Barrie Pierpoint, Ralph Pryke, David Scoot, Sarah Sharpe and Stephen Woodliffe.

Officers:

Chief Executive, Assistant Director - Governance and Monitoring Officer, Democratic Services Manager and Democratic Services Team Leader.

13 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Neil Drayton, Lina Savickiene and Claire Rylott.

14 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

15 Minutes

The Minutes of the Annual meeting of Full Council held on 20th May 2024 were agreed and signed by the Mayor.

16 Communications

The Chief Executive confirmed there were no communications.

17 Deputations and Petitions

The Chief Executive confirmed there were no deputations or petitions received.

18 Questions from Elected Members

The Chief Executive advised that the following questions had been received

Question to Councillor Anne Dorrian from Councillor Stephen Woodliffe

In 2018, it was decided to reduce the Mayoral budget and, as a consequence, its public image and that of our Borough was diminished. Up to 2018, the Mayoral Chains of Office were collected from the Municipal Buildings by an Officer who would drive the Mayoral car to the residence of the Mayor, correctly adorn the Mayor with the Chains of Office, drive the Mayor to the Mayoral event and escort the Mayor at the event, providing both safety

and security, and then return both the Mayor and the Mayoral regalia to their respective residences. At all times, the security of the Mayor and the valuable regalia worn by the Mayor were safely preserved.

Given the fact that Boston needs to use every means it has to promote itself, and our Mayoralty is an historical asset envied by many other Councils, do you agree with me that now is the time to restore the status of the Mayoralty by reinstating full Officer support, including the provision of a Mayoral car?

Response from Councillor Anne Dorrian

I would like to thank Councillor Woodliffe for notice of his question. I wasn't a part of the council when it took the decision to make the Mayor's Officer role redundant and to remove the provision of a mayoral car.

I don't think that I would have supported such a move if I'd been given a vote. Having had the honour of serving as the Mayor myself now, I would agree with you that there were occasions where it was extremely difficult to attend functions and events on my own, or even when I was accompanied by my consort. For example, I can recall standing in a windy & rainy, outdoor public car park, trying to put the chains on early in my tenure, and I felt quite vulnerable and a tad uncomfortable.

Having said that, the world has moved on, mostly due to the huge reduction in public finances awarded to local government, and the majority of councils who have civic mayors, have also reduced the peripheral niceties such as cars and attendant officers. I am mindful too, of the lack of 'social trust' which exists amongst local residents, and I think if we were to overturn this particular decision, it would be highly unpopular with the community we serve, so on this occasion, in answer to your question I would like to point out that the Mayor is fully supported by the Civic Officer, the Mace Bearer and the wider Democratic Services Team. I do not agree that this is the time to reinstate the mayoral car and mayor's officer role.

Supplementary question from Councillor Stephen Woodliffe to Councillor Anne Dorrian

Under Boston Borough Council's unaudited financial statements 2023/24 (Appendix A, page 11) Audit and Governance Committee report dated 8th July, the full out turn delivered an under budget spend of £458,000. This budget surface has been transferred to Council reserves, so surely you agree that there is sufficient cash available both to restore the mayoralty to its former standard and still leave some cash available to add to our burgeoning reserves.

Response from Councillor Anne Dorrian

Thank you, Councillor Woodliffe. Whilst you raise a valid point around everything to do with the Mayor, the esteemed role that they have in the Borough, I stand by my answer. The finances, while they may seem flourished to you, looking down the tracks towards 25/26 and 26/27, things start to really grip and bite, and I know that my colleague Councillor Ghosh is having to think very seriously about how we manage our budget going forward. So any spare money that's been put into reserves, I can assure you will be allocated to a very good home and on this occasion, it won't be the home of the Mayor's budget.

Question to Councillor Anne Dorrian from Councillor Stephen Woodliffe

As a result of the recent General Election, Boston now has a new Member of Parliament. Have you had an opportunity to quiz our new MP on how he intends to represent the interests of both residents and businesses in our Borough, with the Local Government Association Special Interest Group - Internal Drainage Board levies particularly in mind?

Response from Councillor Anne Dorrian

I would like to thank Councillor Woodliffe for notice of his question. After the results of the general election were announced, I wrote to our new MP, Mr Richard Tice on behalf of all the residents of the Borough to congratulate him on his success. My first meeting with him is scheduled for tomorrow morning and I have prepared a thorough briefing note on what I consider to be the most important topics facing our residents and this council. I am hopeful that he will be an active, busy constituency MP and in order that he can keep himself in touch with local issues, I will offer to meet with him on a regular basis – just as I did with Matt Warman.

Supplementary question from Councillor Stephen Woodliffe to Councillor Anne Dorrian

The ongoing impact of the IDB precepts on the Borough's overall income is a major source of concern, given that the IDB's precept account for more than half of the Borough Council's tax income. In January, the previous Government awarded an additional £3 million funding for this current year to be given to the Council's most impacted by the levies. Have you received confirmation of the funding allocation for Boston Borough Council?

Response from Councillor Anne Dorrian

You will be pleased to know that the IDB levy is the first item on my briefing note with Mr Tice tomorrow. I think it's hugely important and, in fact, it's one of the most important issues that we have to deal with as a Council. I know that officers have already been in touch with all the other member councils of the Special Interest Group. They have arranged a letter to go to all the new MP's that have been elected or re-elected, and I know they are planning an event at the House of Commons to strike while the iron's hot, while all those first time MP's are still bright eyed and bushy tailed and willing to get involved in local matters such as this.

So it is top of the agenda. It's very important and we will continue lobbying until we get a satisfactory result. To the £3 million that was awarded, sadly this Council hasn't been notified of its allocation, and that goes along with a number of funding streams that the last Conservative Government announced. They got all the kudos for announcing millions of pounds here and millions of pounds over there, but actually didn't ever deliver the funds. We are particularly concerned about the levelling up partnership funding that was awarded and that is a priority for us taking that forward. So we have got a lot of work to do.

Question to Councillor Anne Dorrian from Councillor Stephen Woodliffe

Referencing the Corporate Peer Challenge Report and the Action Plan, it appears that a significant proportion of our workforce feel less-valued and informed, with fewer opportunities for development. It also notes that sickness, and mental health issues in

particular, have increased across the Partnership. The Report identifies that Boston Borough Council should agree an action plan to address organizational health performances issues. It is not clear within the Action Plan at the end of the report where these issues of organizational health performances are to be tackled.

What is that action plan?

Response from Councillor Anne Dorrian (provided as a written response at the meeting)

I would like to thank Councillor Woodliffe for notice of his question. The Staff Poll questions are posed to all staff across the Partnership. A variance in response rates is not unusual nor unexpected across the year. When the data is reviewed per Council, a variance up to 10% in results can be an outcome of a change in response rates of 20 people or less between reporting quarters. It's also not unusual for a small dip to occur in Q4 response rates owing to the reporting period being a peak annual leave period.

Sickness Absence is closely monitored and reported absence levels, particularly mental health related absence is comparable to the national picture on mental health absence. Poor mental health currently accounts for more than half of the UK's work-related illnesses, with an estimated 51% of long-term sick leave due to stress, depression, or anxiety. With 1 in 4 adults likely to experience a mental health issue, the statistics highlights the importance of addressing mental health in the workplace and creating supportive environment for employees.

Several interventions are already in place to keep colleagues informed, provide development opportunities as well as interventions to support mental health. These include fortnightly newsletters, monthly service managers meetings, staff forum, annual senior managers conference, corporate inductions, staff Facebook group, All staff Chief Executive briefings, and an Annual Review (Appraisal) process. We have a single annual training plan across the Partnership and all requested development for 24/25 was supported by the Senior Leadership Team include Corporate, Leadership & Management, Professional and Technical specific training.

We have trained Mental Health First Aiders across our workforce who work together to promote the internal support available such as Occupational Health, Employee Assistance programme, Maximus (Mental Health Support service - up to 9 months support) as well as signposting to external support such as MIND, SHINE, Steps2Change etc. A Health & Wellbeing site has been developed within our staff intranet site covering a 'whole self' approach sharing available support for Mental, Physical, Financial, Legal, and family wellbeing as well as personal development. Wellbeing Support/Mental Health First Aider posters are also displayed throughout our depots and satellite offices.

Managing Sickness Absence workshops have been delivered to managers. Additional guidance has also been developed by HR to support managers to effectively manage sickness absence. An incident support package has also been developed and piloted to ensure 'wrap around' support is provided to colleagues following a serious incident at work. Return to work interviews are an integral part of the managing sickness absence process and these are regularly reviewed by HR. HR run a daily report for early interventions of absence attributed to mental health including reaching out to the manager ensuring they have guidance on contact and available support as well as instigating an employee relations case to provide support to the manager and employee.

It should be noted that with the various interventions around mental health in place, stigmatism around mental health will be reducing, which may encourage more open sharing and reporting of such absences. In addition to the above, the Senior Leadership team recently considered a report on mental health absence and have instructed HR to progress procurement of Mental Health Therapist support as a six month trial.

Supplementary question from Councillor Stephen Woodliffe to Councillor Anne Dorrian

I detect a weariness among some of our key workers who nevertheless continue to deliver a first class service to our borough residents. There seems to be feeling that the partnership has ripped the heart out of Boston Borough Council that it works for those at the top but less so for those at the bottom. The message seems to indicate that benefits, if there are any, are not widely shared across the partnership. The report recognises the issue. Do you recognize it, and what are your solutions to resolve it? A written answer would probably be the best thing.

Response from Councillor Anne Dorrian

I will provide a written response post meeting.

[A copy of the written response is appended to the Minutes.]

Question to Councillor Sandeep Ghosh from Councillor Stephen Woodliffe

Referencing the Corporate Peer Challenge Report and the Action Plan, it appears that Boston Borough Council is facing a budget gap of £990K in this financial year, rising over the next four years to £2.1m. Given the impact of the IDB levies on budgets (and the likelihood of further increases), continuing restrictions on Council Tax, and a flat-lining economy, do you foresee that the reserves will have to be used to bridge the budgetary gap in funds?

Response from Councillor Sandeep Ghosh

I would like to thank Councillor Woodliffe for notice of his question. I can confirm there are no plans to use reserves on an ongoing basis to support the revenue position for the Council into the medium term.

I think we would agree that the use of reserves to support revenue is not a sustainable solution and we need to manage within the context of a balanced budget with savings and efficiency plans as required.

Where appropriate we will consider the use of reserves to manage timing issues for efficiencies or to support invest to save opportunities. On a positive we are seeking to replenish our reserves where possible following the significant use of reserves by the previous administration. We of course continue our extensive lobbying of the new government with regards to the financing of the significant IDB levy increases we have seen over the past few years and potentially into the future.

However, I can confirm that we are considering what a worst case position might look like if this funding is not forthcoming although I think we all accept this will be incredibly challenging.

Supplementary question from Councillor Stephen Woodliffe to Councillor Sandeep Ghosh

The report identifies that Boston Borough Council would have to accelerate its service review program. It was able to address the long term budget gap. Given that the widening funding gap, do you consider that finding alternative funding streams is the only viable alternative to a service review, which will inevitably result in reductions of staff?

Response from Councillor Sandeep Ghosh

Thank you Councillor Woodliffe for this further question. We have a variety of options available to us which we are exploring; better shared procurement, sharing of services and IT, reducing costs through insourcing and outsourcing. For example, GMLC. Providing services differently and more efficiently using IT to the best of our ability, continuing to carefully look at our fees and charges and opportunities to drive income. Service reviews do not mean reductions in staff, as in some cases we cannot recruit in specialist areas such as planning, and we need to look at how we can deliver services in more efficient ways within the constraints of what is still a very challenging recruitment environment.

19 Questions from Members of the Public

The Chief Executive confirmed that no questions had been received from members of the public.

20 Audit & Governance Committee

Councillor Barrie Pierpoint, Chairman of the Audit and Governance Committee, presented the Audit and Governance minutes from the meetings held on 29th January 2024 and 18th March 2024 which were for councillors to note.

21 Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy

The Deputy Leader presented a report by the Assistant Director – Regulatory, which sought adoption of the amended Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy.

Members noted that the Council's policy document in respect of all aspects of the taxi licensing regime had recently been reviewed. The proposed policy had been presented to the Regulatory and Appeals Committee on 12th December 2023 which had been followed by a 5-week consultation period with stakeholders. Comments from the consultation were considered by the Committee on 12th March 2024 and the policy had been appropriately amended as a result.

The Deputy Leader pointed out that previously there had been two separate policy documents, one relating to Private Hire Licensing and the other relating to Hackney Carriage Licensing. Much of the information contained within those documents was duplicated and the proposed policy had combined those documents into one robust policy covering all aspects of the taxi licensing regime. Sections had also been added to provide information on matters such as legislation, the Council's principles, the objectives which the policy seeks to promote, and the stakeholders that would be consulted with over any policy reform. New information had also been added to provide a clear structure on how the Council will determine applications.

Members noted that there were several new requirements which would have an impact, including:

- The adoption of a vehicle age restriction.
- The introduction of a penalty point scheme.
- A mandatory requirement for applicants to evidence registration on the DBS update service prior to a licence being granted or renewed.

The proposed policy set out a clear framework to aid the Council in determining applications and regulating taxi licensing. It also included clear information for applicants and licensees on how to obtain and comply with licences.

Councillor Stuart Evans referred to the Regulatory and Appeals Committee meetings, where the policy had been discussed, and queried whether or not the point system would be reviewed after 12 months in order to ensure that the offenses were neither too lenient or too severe.

Councillor Mountain gave his thanks to the Senior Licencing Officer and her Team for their work on the policy.

The Deputy Leader referred to the policy and explained that to enable license holders to familiarize with the scheme, any points awarded during the first six months from adoption would have a maximum of 12 month retention period. Any points awarded at the end of those six months would be subject to the standard retention period of 36 months. He confirmed that they would continue with that process.

The recommendations were moved by Councillor Dale Broughton and seconded by Councillor Chris Mountain.

RESOLVED

That the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy, attached at Appendix 1 within the report, be adopted.

22 Appointment to Outside Body

The Mayor requested nominations for the vacancy on the Black Sluice Drainage Board.

Councillor Stuart Evans was nominated by Councillor James Cantwell and seconded by Councillor David Brown.

Councillor Anne Dorrian was nominated by Councillor Dale Broughton and seconded by Councillor Barrie Pierpoint.

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Anne Dorrian be appointed onto the Black Sluice Drainage Board.

23 Interim Report of the Independent Remuneration Panel

The Assistant Director – Governance and Monitoring Officer presented an interim report by the Independent Remuneration Panel which contained their recommendations in respect of the Co-opted Independent Members' Allowance. He reminded members that at the previous Full Council meeting two new members had been appointed on to the Independent Remuneration Panel, and since that time the Panel had commenced their work reviewing the Members' Allowance Scheme. Members noted that a questionnaire had recently been circulated, from the Panel, which they were encouraged to complete before 31st July 2024.

The Assistant Director – Governance and Monitoring Officer advised that there were vacancies on the Audit and Governance Committees across the Partnership which were due to be advertised shortly. The allowance for Co-opted Independent Members' at Boston was slightly lower than South Holland and East Lindsey District Councils and as a result the Independent Remuneration Panel had recommended an increase to that figure.

The recommendations were moved by Councillor Barrie Pierpoint and seconded by Councillor Anne Dorrian.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the published Members' Allowance Scheme be updated to include the Co-opted Independent Members' Allowance; and**
- 2. That the allowance for the Co-opted Independent Members of the Audit and Governance Committee be increased to £650 p/a with immediate effect.**

The Meeting ended at 7.05 pm.

Supplementary Question and Written Response Full Council – 18th July 2024

Supplementary Question to Councillor Anne Dorrian from Councillor Stephen Woodliffe

I detect a weariness among some of our key workers who nevertheless continue to deliver a first class service to our borough residents. There seems to be feeling that the partnership has ripped the heart out of Boston Borough Council that it works for those at the top but less so for those at the bottom. The message seems to indicate that benefits, if there are any, are not widely shared across the partnership. The report recognises the issue. Do you recognize it, and what are your solutions to resolve it?

Written Response from Councillor Anne Dorrian

Thank you, Councillor Woodliffe. I welcome your supplementary question.

There is no doubt that we have a first-class workforce supporting this Council. There is also no doubt that the Partnership is of huge value to this Council. Our recent Peer Challenge recognises that. I don't agree with your statement that the Partnership has ripped the heart out of the Council – in fact, far from it – the Partnership has given the Council the ability to be financially more resilient in the current economic climate. We also have a greater voice which allows us to influence others, in order to address the challenges our community faces. The work of the IDB Special Interest Group is a good example of this.

Our officers are busy. We have a busy agenda for the Borough with multi-million-pound projects being taken into delivery and with front-facing services dealing with increased demand from residents. Capacity is something we watch very carefully, and our teams have the ability to bid for additional resources if required.

You will be aware that in terms of direct employment benefits, we are on a journey to align terms and conditions of employment across the Partnership. This has already seen improvements in two particular areas of Ts&Cs that were important to staff. All BBC employees are now being paid from day 1 of sickness leave; and some BBC staff can have their professional subscriptions paid by the Council where these are legally / professionally required for their role. In May, Council agreed to align wider terms and conditions and colleagues across the Partnership are currently being consulted on the proposals. The changes proposed – as per the Council report – see colleagues moving to the 'best of' from across the Partnership. That same

report to Council also updated on proposals to introduce a pay structure for officers working for two or three Councils – this work is well underway.

The Partnership has opened up many career development opportunities for our workforce. Previously we had some officers in solo roles, many now work as part of a wider team offering greater support and resilience to them as individuals and the Council.