

MEETING OF MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

At the Virtual Meeting of Middlesbrough Council, lawfully convened, and held on 29 July 2020.

PRESENT: Councillors J Hobson (Chair), L Garvey (Vice-Chair), R Arundale, A Bell, D J Branson, C Cooke, B Cooper, D P Coupe, D Davison, S Dean, C Dodds, T Furness, J Goodchild, A Hellaoui, T Higgins, A High, S Hill, C Hobson, B A Hubbard, N Hussain, D Jones, L Lewis, L Mason, T Mawston, D McCabe, C McIntyre, J McTigue, M Nugent, J Platt, E Polano, A Preston, G Purvis, J Rathmell, D Rooney, J Rostron, M Saunders, M L Smiles, M Storey, P Storey, J Thompson, Z Uddin, J A Walker, S Walker, A Waters, G Wilson and C Wright

OFFICERS: C Benjamin, S Bonner, C Breheny, B Carr, Z Farrow, R Horniman, S Lightwing, C Lunn, T Parkinson, S Reynolds, K Whitmore, I Wright

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE were submitted on behalf of Councillor R M Sands.

DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no Declarations of interest received for this meeting

1 MINUTES SILENCE - VICTIMS OF CORONAVIRUS

The Chair welcomed everyone to the Extraordinary meeting of the Council. He stated that as this was the first meeting of the Council since the lockdown, he would like everyone present to join him in a minute's silence, for all those who had lost their lives as a result of the coronavirus.

A minute's silence was held in memory of all of the victims of the coronavirus.

2 REQUEST FOR EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL MEETING - COVID 19 UPDATE/DISCUSSION/RE-INSTATEMENT OF SIX WEEKLY FULL COUNCIL MEETINGS

A letter was received from all members of the Labour Group, requesting that an Extraordinary Council meeting be arranged.

The nature of the business was as follows:

1. For the Elected Mayor of Middlesbrough to present a written report updating the Council on Covid-19 and to be questioned by members.
2. An opportunity for members to debate the current Covid-19 pandemic and its effects.
3. The Labour Group requested a vote to take place to implement a 6 weekly schedule of Full Council meetings for the remainder of 2020, to be published by 31 August 2020.

The Chair invited the Mayor to provide an update on Covid-19.

The Mayor stated that Covid-19 had affected many people's lives in terms of their finances, job security, health and their expectations for the future. It was a serious issue for the whole world. He advised that communication was important during this period, and it was vital, that he, as the Mayor, the Chief Executive, the Executive and all those connected with Middlesbrough Council, articulated, in relation to what the Council was doing, how they were doing it, and how successful it had been.

In terms of communication in relation to what the Council was doing with regard to Covid-19, the Mayor advised that the Council had delivered leaflets to the public, he had spoken to the national and local press and local radio stations and information had been shared on social media. The Mayor advised that he had communicated with many organisations, such as the police, the health service and he had also communicated with the public on a daily basis. Briefings for elected members of the Council had also been held.

The Mayor stated, that in his view, he did not believe that there was a need for a written overview of the actions taken by the Council as members had received briefings on the issue. He stated, however that he would continue to be available to speak to anyone that wished to discuss the matter with him and he would continue to liaise with all the relevant organisations. The Mayor confirmed that he did not intend to take any questions on this issue.

The Chair advised that the next item on the agenda was a discussion about Covid-19. The Monitoring Officer suggested that the Chair invite Councillor M Storey to outline the reasons for the Extraordinary Council meeting. The Chair invited Councillor Storey to address the meeting.

Councillor Storey stated that before he outlined the reasons for the Extraordinary Council meeting, he hoped that everyone was well and had been coping during the lockdown period. He stated that Covid-19 had changed many people's everyday lives, in terms of working practices, being unable to have contact with families and friends, and sadly for some people, losing family and friends to Covid-19. He stated that he was very proud of the Council staff who had worked hard to deliver critical Council services and support businesses and local people during the pandemic. He stated that Councillors should fight hard for funding and support from the government to enable staff to deliver quality services to the residents of Middlesbrough.

Councillor Storey stated that this was the first Council business meeting since January, and the reasons given for this were concerns regarding the technology around holding virtual meetings. He pointed out however that many other of the Tees Valley authorities and authorities across the country had already held a virtual Council meeting.

Councillor Storey stated that the purpose of the Extraordinary Council meeting was to secure a schedule of full Council meetings for the remainder of the year. He stated that Middlesbrough labour councillors were the only political group calling for the return of full Council meetings. He stated that full Council meetings were an opportunity for all members to challenge the Mayor and his Executive. During the lockdown period there had been a number of meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held, but the Board consisted of 13 members, whereas there were 46 members of the Council, in addition to the Mayor.

Councillor Storey stated that all members should be afforded the opportunity to scrutinise the leadership of the Council to find out why and how decisions had been taken. He stated that there was growing concern that decisions taken in Executive meetings were sometimes taken behind closed doors. Members often received information about decisions that had been taken via the press and he stated that decisions should be thoroughly scrutinised. Councillor Storey emphasised that it was for the above reasons that a schedule of full Council meetings needed to be established. Councillor Storey also indicated that the summons to the meeting requested that members debate Covid-19 and its effects and requested that the Mayor respond to questions on Covid-19, and he hoped that the Mayor would respond to any questions raised in the meeting.

The Chair invited members to debate Covid-19 and its effects.

Councillor Thompson queried whether the meeting was being live-streamed, The Chair confirmed that the meeting was being live-streamed.

Councillor Arundale stated that he would like to concur with Councillor Storey's comments about the staff, in particular the excellent work carried out by the Chief Executive. He stated that officers had gone beyond what had been expected of them.

Councillor Cooper stated that he agreed in principle that the Council did need to hold full Council meetings however he indicated that he had concerns about the technology used to host the meetings. He commented on the lack of members of the public in attendance at the meeting and he stated that the labour group along with the independent councillors should be calling for a return to meetings in the Town Hall. Councillor Cooper concluded that he did not think the current technology was suitable to hold full Council meetings.

Councillor Mason stated that at best the Council was viewed with indifference by members of the public and at worst the Council was viewed with contempt. He stated that the Council was often viewed as self-serving, incompetent and unreliable. He pointed out however that since his election in February, he had seen many examples of the good work that the Council carried out on a daily basis and this was often overlooked.

After speaking to residents, he stated that the negative way in which the Council was viewed appeared to be as a result of political partisanship. He stated that since being elected he had seen councillors ambushed in meetings, councillors scoring political points against each other and negative headlines in the press. This was leading to the Council being viewed in a negative way by the public. He stated that it was time for councillors to work together for the good of the town.

Councillor Rooney stated that she understood that members would have the opportunity to question the Mayor on Covid-19. She stated that she wished to ask a question in respect of the test, track and trace initiative. Councillor Rooney indicated that the Middlehaven site had the capacity to carry out 800 tests a day, supported by mobile sites across the town. She queried with regard to how many tests had been carried out, where was this information recorded and of those tests that had been carried out, how many had resulted in positive tests and how many people had been asked to self-isolate? Councillor Rooney also queried with regard to how a local lockdown strategy would work if the Council was required to implement such a strategy?

The Chair stated that answers to any questions raised would be provided at a later date.

Councillor Branson advised that he had serious concerns about public transport. He stated that he would like to thank all the people involved in the ongoing provision of public transport. Councillor Branson stated that before the onset of Covid-19 the number of bus routes had been reduced. Social distancing meant that the capacity for people travelling on buses had been reduced. Although car usage had increased, the number of people travelling on buses had not increased. His concern was that when the Government removed the subsidy for public transport, the number of bus routes in operation would likely be reduced or would cease. Many people relied on buses to travel to work. He stated that the Council need to look at the issue of franchising or a tendering system for bus routes or they might disappear. He referred to the Campaign for Better Transport report on Covid-19 recovery and he stated that franchising was one of their recommendations. He stated that the Council needed to move to a system of non-cash payments, where one payment would secure travel on all forms of public transport. He urged the Council to speak to the TVCA about their long term policies for transport in general.

Councillor Furness stated that in his view, the communication from the Council during the Covid-19 had been good and the Council had proceeded to maintain its contracts. In terms of the re-opening of the Neptune Centre, he queried why the issue had been allowed to appear in the press before the issue had been properly considered.

Councillor J Walker stated that she was pleased that the bulky waste collection system had been re-instated but she had concerns about the service going from a free service to a system where residents had to pay for the removal of bulky items, in some cases, at premium rates. Councillor Walker also queried why the Council had ceased the collection of mattresses. She queried if operatives could be provided with the correct PPE whether the service could recommence?

Councillor McTigue commented on the lack of information provided to members in general, as members often found out information via the local press. Councillor McTigue queried whether the press office could alert councillors before a press release was issued to the local press so that they were aware of any issues prior to their publication in the media.

Councillor Coupe stated that he echoed the sentiments regarding the work of officers of the Council. He particularly thanked the officers in Democratic Services for facilitating remote meetings. Councillor Coupe commented on the technical aspects of the system used to

facilitate remote meetings and the difficulties some members had in downloading and uploading information.

Councillor Coupe commented on the green waste collection service and he stated that the sooner it returned to two weekly collections, the better it would be for residents. In terms of the Council's response to Covid-19, he acknowledged that information was available but he indicated that there was a need to put more information on the Council's website.

Councillor Higgins referred to the announcement in June, about the availability of a pin prick test for Covid-19. Councillor Higgins queried with regard to when the test would be available and the actual cost of the test?

Councillor M Storey referred to an interview on a BBC radio programme on 6 May where it was announced that Middlesbrough parks would remain closed. The decision to re-open the parks was made on the same day. He queried with regard to what new evidence had been obtained which informed the decision to re-open the parks. If there was no new evidence, he queried with regard to the basis for taking the decision to re-open the parks?

Councillor Waters stated that he wished to thank the staff at Middlesbrough Council for all their hard work in maintaining services in Middlesbrough throughout the pandemic. In response to Councillor Branson's comments regarding franchising of buses, he stated that he was a member of the TVCA, and this was currently being discussed at a regional level. It was not feasible or viable for Middlesbrough to do it alone as many bus companies operated throughout the Tees Valley. Councillor Waters advised that it would need to be a Tees-wide initiative and he stated that he would continue to progress it through the TVCA.

Councillor Garvey stated that Council staff had been brilliant and supportive throughout the pandemic. He stated that in terms of communication, if he or Councillor Jones wanted any information, they asked officers. In terms of the Neptune Centre, they sought answers rather than waiting for the issue to be raised at a Committee. He advised that information was always available but sometimes, it was up to councillors to ask the right questions.

In response to Councillor Storey's comments about holding virtual Council meetings, the Chair stated that he originally thought that the technology for remote meetings was not capable of hosting a full Council meeting. He stated that he had been monitoring the system and of the 35 meetings that he had viewed, there had been a fault with each one of them. The Chair stated that he had been hoping to return to the Town Hall for Council meetings, but that prospect looked very unlikely in the near future.

As a consequence of the above, the Chair indicated that he had drawn up a list of potential dates for future Council meetings for the remainder of the year, for agreement by full Council. The suggested dates were as follows:

- 2 September 2020
- 14 October 2020
- 25 November 2020
- 16 December 2020
- 13 January 2021

The Chair advised that it was proposed to hold the meetings at 7.00pm, however, if there were any issues with the technology because of the demand on broadband at that time, he would consider holding some of the meetings in the afternoon.

The Chair invited the Monitoring Officer to conduct a vote on the reinstatement of six weekly Council meetings for the remainder of the Municipal Year. Following the vote, the Monitoring Officer advised that Members had voted unanimously to reinstate six weekly Council meetings.

Councillor Garvey stated that as the vote was unanimous, in his view, if there had been more communication, there would have been no requirement for an Extraordinary Council meeting.

The Chair invited Councillor Storey to sum up.

Councillor Storey stated that it was essential that the Extraordinary meeting was called because in discussions with other members of the chamber, it had been made clear that the labour group were the only party calling for the reinstatement of full Council meetings. He thanked everyone for voting in favour of the motion.

He stated that he was disappointed that the Mayor had not agreed to respond to questions. In terms of communication he stated that members had a right to receive information, it was not up to members to go searching for information. In response to Councillor Mason's comments, Councillor Storey stated that he had good relations with members from all parties. Members had a right to raise issues and concerns and had a right to disagree. He stated that the anti-politics attitude was dangerous as it damaged reputations. Members worked for the good of the residents of the town.

The Chair advised that he wished to clarify that the labour group were not the only group that had called for the return of Council meetings. He had received representations from all of the other political groups.

Councillor McTigue stated that although she did not always agree with Councillor Storey, she worked well with him. She stated that members should not have to go seeking information, they should automatically be given it.

The Chair thanked everyone for attending and formally closed the meeting.