

Public Document Pack

Council

Meeting held on Wednesday, 29 March 2023 at 6.35 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall, Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

MINUTES

- Present:** Councillor Alisa Flemming (Chair);
Councillor Sue Bennett (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Kola Agboola, Jade Appleton, Jeet Bains, Leila Ben-Hassel, Adele Benson, Margaret Bird, Mike Bonello, Simon Brew, Janet Campbell, Louis Carserides, Richard Chatterjee, Chris Clark, Sherwan Chowdhury, Stuart Collins, Mario Creatura, Jason Cummings, Patsy Cummings, Nina Degrads, Danielle Denton, Samir Dwesar, Lara Fish, Sean Fitzsimons, Clive Fraser, Amy Foster, Simon Fox, Gayle Gander, Maria Gatland, Brigitte Graham, Matt Griffiths, Lynne Hale, Maddie Henson, Christopher Herman, Yvette Hopley, Mohammed Islam, Karen Jewitt, Mark Johnson, Humayun Kabir, Stuart King, Ola Kolade, Joseph Lee, Endri Llabuti, Stella Nabukeera, Michael Neal, Tamar Barrett, Eunice O'Dame, Ian Parker, Ria Patel, Tony Pearson, Jason Perry, Ellily Ponnuthurai, Holly Ramsey, Helen Redfern, Chrishni Reshekaron, Scott Roche, Manju Shahul-Hameed, Nikhil Sherine Thampi, Luke Shortland, Appu Srinivasan, Andy Stranack, Aladair Stewart, Esther Sutton, Catherine Wilson, Robert Ward and Callton Young
- Apologies:** Councillor Claire Bonham, Rowenna Davis, Patricia Hay-Justice and Enid Mollyneaux

PART A

40/21 **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

It was noted that there was a typographical error in the spelling of Councillor Alasdair Stewart's name.

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 March 2023 were agreed as an accurate record with the above correction.

41/21 **Disclosure of Interests**

There were none.

42/21 **Urgent Business (if any)**

There were no items of urgent business.

43/21 **Announcements**

The Chair moved to suspend Council Procedure Rules to allocate 80 minutes to the item for Questions to the Executive Mayor, and to limit each of the Maiden Speeches to two minutes.

This was seconded by Councillor Mario Creatura and agreed by Council.

The Chair then announced that they would reinstituting the Council multi-faith Chaplaincy to support members with the work they do for the community, and introduced Bishop Rosemary to say a few words about the meaning of the Chaplaincy.

The Chair also announced that there would be a Beer Festival taking place to raise money for the Civic Mayoral Charities, and also that they would be celebrating Councillor Stuart Collins' thirtieth year as a councillor, and that Councillor Collins had arranged a reception to take place after the meeting to which all members were invited.

The Chair then asked Council to stand and hold a minute's silence as a mark of respect for the death of former councillor, Dick Adamson.

The Chair then invited Executive Mayor Jason Perry to make any announcements. Mayor Perry welcomed Bishop Rosemary and the Chaplaincy team and thanked them for taking up the role.

Mayor Perry then mentioned to members there had been multiple stabbings in the area and that the council was coordinating a response with the community. There had also been increased financial support from the Violence Reduction Unit to keep young people safe in the town centre.

Mayor Perry also mentioned that DLUHC had agreed to formalise arrangements with the Assurance and Improvement Panel so that there was enough assurance to allocate more funding to support Croydon Council through the current financial hardship.

Mayor Perry finally mentioned that the Penn and Kroll investigation reports would be shared with the Metropolitan Police for them to pursue an investigation into reclaiming monies paid to the former Chief Executive and other staff and members who oversaw the bankruptcy of the council.

44/21 **Croydon Question Time**

Council received two public questions. The first was from Maureen Simpson relating to the causal factors behind the Brick by Brick and Fairfield Halls management, and how the situation can be avoided in future.

Councillor Jason Cummings, Cabinet Member for Finance, responded that a full investigation into how Brick by Brick was set up and managed had been undertaken, and that the council was in the process of winding down the company and seeking to minimise costs to taxpayers. Another investigation into the situation with Fairfield Halls, the Kroll Report, had also taken place, and that dramatic changes to governance arrangements had been made as a result. Councillor Cummings assured Council that processes were being put in place to ensure that these things never happened again.

A supplementary question around the criteria for the membership of the Cabinet board was posed, to which Councillor Cummings explained the membership would be based on the positions people held within the council and would be made up of elected members and officers.

In response to a question on Council Tax from Mark Samuel, Mayor Jason Perry responded that a cross-party committee had met and voted to refer the matter of previous financial misconduct to professional authorities and the police and that the council was pursuing the exit payment made to the former Chief Executive.

45/21

Section 24 Statutory Recommendations Report from Grant Thornton

Councillor Jason Cummings presented the report to Council and introduced Paul Dossett from Grant Thornton, the council's external auditor, to answer members' questions on the Section 24 Notice that had been published on the council's website.

Councillor Stuart King, Leader of the Opposition, moved to debate the recommendations which was seconded and agreed by Council.

Opening the debate, Councillor King thanked Paul Dossett for attending, and stated that the Labour Group felt the response to the Section 24 Notice was appropriate and adequate, but that members were disappointed that the recommendations did not come before Council before the budget-setting process had been concluded.

Councillor Alasdair Stewart, speaking on behalf of the Administration, welcomed the recommendations from Grant Thornton, stating that the leadership had committed to fixing past financial mistakes.

Councillor Leila Ben-Hassell, on behalf of the Opposition, stated that members had demonstrated rigorous scrutiny on spending over the last two years and that the council had been unable to cut services as quickly as Central Government had cut its funding provision, and that she hoped there would be better engagement on the budget-setting in subsequent years.

Councillor Jason Cummings summed up the debate stating that the external auditor's recommendations had been issued in response to serious issues and that they should be accepted by Council. Councillor Cummings argued that it was a good opportunity to update Grant Thornton's advice based on additional historic issues uncovered this year.

The recommendations were then put to the vote and Council:

RESOLVED, unanimously:

1. To accept the recommendations presented by Grant Thornton in Section 24 Statutory Recommendations Report attached as Appendix A to the report; and,
2. To approve the actions in response to those recommendations as set out in Appendix B to the report.

46/21 **Recommendations of Cabinet or Committees to Council for decision**

Councillor Amy Foster, Chair of General Purposes Committee, moved the recommendations as contained in the report, noting that the changes to the Council Procedure Rules were reflected in the appendices. This was seconded by Councillor Mario Creatura, and Council:

RESOLVED, unanimously, to:

1. Agree the updated version of Part 4! (Council Procedure Rules) of the Constitution (as set out in Appendix A and Appendix B); and,
2. To authorise the Monitoring Officer to make necessary updates to the Constitution.

47/21 **Quarterly Report on the use of Special Urgency Procedures in respect of Key Decisions**

The Chair moved the recommendations as set out in the report. This was seconded by Councillor Mario Creatura and Council:

RESOLVED, unanimously, to:

1. Note the use of Special Urgency for the key decision listed at section 4.4 of the report during the period January to March 2023; and,
2. To note the use of exception from call-in for the key decisions listed at section 5.3 of the report during the period January to March 2023.

48/21 **Mayor and Cabinet Questions**

Members asked questions of the Executive Mayor and Cabinet, and were informed by the Chair that the time dedicated to the item be reduced to 45 minutes so that all business on the agenda could be considered.

In response to questions, Mayor Jason Perry, assisted by Cabinet Members, stated that:

- The council continued to fund Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector activity in the borough;
- Community safety was a priority and that the council had responded by implementing a community safety plan, a Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy, and that the council would be delivering a youth safety plan;
- The council was working on modal shift to tackle air pollution as it opposed the expansion of the ULEZ and the Mayor believed that was a better strategy for dealing with the problem in Croydon;
- The Hardship Fund had been put in place to support residents with the rise in Council Tax and any residents who were concerned about meeting the costs of living should seek advice from the council's website;
- The Mayor recognised that access to information and digital exclusion were issues for many residents and that information was available at libraries, but that the council was investigating all avenues to improving this;
- There had been some governance failings involved in the meeting during which former and some current members resolved to grant the exit payment to the former Chief Executive, but that Mayor Perry himself had voted against the settlement agreement as he did not feel members had been given sufficient information;
- The Low Traffic Neighbourhood Schemes, the implementation of which was not completed, would be looked into when the council had more resource available for it;
- The council was looking into active travel schemes, and that the Mayor would be happy to look into the Walk for Health Scheme and liaise with members who requested information directly;
- The Assurance and Improvement Panel would make little difference to the day-to-day running of business but that its powers had been increased from advisory to statutory; and,
- The Mayor would visit the dangerous road junction referred to by Councillor Mohammed Islam and ascertain whether any LIP funding would be available to improve its safety.

49/21 **Maiden Speeches**

Council heard Maiden Speeches from:

- Councillor Holly Ramsey, Purley and Woodcote Ward;
- Councillor Chrishni Reshekaron, West Thornton Ward;

- Councillor Tony Pearson, New Addington South Ward;
- Councillor Stella Nabukeera, South Norwood Ward; and,
- Councillor Mohammed Islam, Selhurst Ward.

50/21 **Appointments**

It was moved by Councillor Mario Creatura to appoint Councillor Leila Ben-Hassell as Chair of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee for the duration of Councillor Rowenna Davis's maternity leave. This was seconded by Councillor Louis Carserides and agreed by Council.

51/21 **Council Debate Motions**

Moving the Conservative Group Debate Motion, Mayor Jason Perry stated that he shared the anger of residents and that the police would be considering whether to take action on misconduct in public office, and that legal action would be taken against the former Chief Executive.

Councillor Karen Jewitt, speaking on behalf of the Opposition, stated that the issues were collective and systematic and that lessons should be learnt, instead of seeking to blame individuals. Councillor Jewitt argued that the council did not have the time or resources to put into these investigations.

Councillor Callton Young stated that it was not clear from the council's announcement that the decisions of the former committee was cross-party, and that it was the then Monitoring Officer who informed Council that the external auditor's report would be reviewed if there were further concerns over fraud.

Councillor Lynne Hale, Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Homes, stated that the financial impact from those actions would be felt by residents for many years to come, and that it was unfair and appalling that residents were now to pay for the actions of former well-remunerated public office holders, and that it was only right those people should be held to account now.

Councillor Lynne Hale seconded the motion. The Chair put the motion to the vote and Council:

RESOLVED, to:

Hold to account those who caused Croydon Council's financial downfall, and to pursue all avenues to ensure that residents' anger and desire for accountability were recognised.

The Chair then moved to extend the meeting time for up to a maximum of thirty minutes. This was seconded by Councillor Mario Creatura and agreed by Council.

Councillor Stuart King, Leader of the Opposition, then spoke in support of the Labour Group Debate Motion, stating that they had long acknowledged the financial and governance weaknesses and their role in contributing to the situation. However, Councillor King argues that the council was not meeting its best value duty and that members needed to put their differences aside to improve.

Councillor Jason Cummings, on behalf of the Administration, argued that the recent direction from the Assurance and Improvement Panel was disappointing but reasonable given the level of support required from Central Government to set a balanced budget. Councillor J Cummings also stated that collaboration had improved on previous years and that he pledged to continue to do cross-party engagement to improve outcomes.

Councillor Richard Chatterjee expressed the need to listen to each other for the betterment and protection of the council's communities, and that Scrutiny had been achieving this by collectively adopting an independent mindset for good decision-making, as advised by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CFGs).

Councillor Chris Clark welcomed commitment to cross-party talks to ensure that together members were able to achieve the changes needed in the community now and over the next three years.

Councillor Chris Clark seconded the motion. The Chair then put the motion to the vote, and Council:

RESOLVED, to:

Call on the Mayor to set out how he intended to work more collaboratively with councillors from all political parties represented on the Council to ensure the authority continued its improvement journey at greater pace.

The meeting ended at 9.40 pm

Signed:

Date:

.....
.....

This page is intentionally left blank