

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MEETING OF THE COUNCIL

20TH JULY 2022, AT 6.00 P.M.

PRESENT: Councillors R. J. Laight (Chairman), A. J. B. Beaumont (Vice-Chairman), S. J. Baxter, S. R. Colella, R. J. Deeming, G. N. Denaro, S. P. Douglas, A. B. L. English, S. G. Hession, C.A. Hotham, R. J. Hunter, H. J. Jones, A. D. Kent, J. E. King, A. D. Kriss, L. C. R. Mallett, K.J. May, M. Middleton, P. M. McDonald, S. A. Robinson, H. D. N. Rone-Clarke, M. A. Sherrey, C. J. Spencer, P.L. Thomas, M. Thompson and S. A. Webb

Officers: Mr. K. Dicks, Mr P. Carpenter, Ms. C. Flanagan and Mrs. J. Bayley-Hill

31\22 **TO RECEIVE APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors J. Till, K. Van Der Plank and P. Whittaker.

32\22 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillors K. May and M. Sherrey declared other disclosable interests in Minute Item No. 41/22 – Minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 6th July 2022 - in their capacity as the Councillors for Belbroughton and Romsley ward. This declaration was made in relation to Cabinet's consideration of the nomination of Romsley Methodist Church as an asset of community value. They both remained present during consideration of the minutes of the Cabinet meeting.

33\22 **TO CONFIRM THE ACCURACY OF THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COUNCIL HELD ON 22ND JUNE 2022**

The minutes of the meeting of Council held on 22nd June 2022 were submitted.

During consideration of the minutes of the previous meeting of Council, the suggestion was made that the word “mitigate” should have been used rather than the word “reduce” in relation to decreasing costs by letting out space to external organisations at Parkside.

RESOLVED that, subject to the amendment detailed in the preamble above, the minutes of the meeting of Council held on 22nd June 2022 be approved as a true and correct record.

34\22 **TO RECEIVE ANY ANNOUNCEMENTS FROM THE CHAIRMAN AND/OR HEAD OF PAID SERVICE**

There were no announcements from the Chairman or Head of Paid Service on this occasion.

35\22 **TO RECEIVE ANY ANNOUNCEMENTS FROM THE LEADER**

There were no announcements from the Leader at the meeting.

36\22 **TO RECEIVE COMMENTS, QUESTIONS OR PETITIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC**

There were no comments, questions or petitions from the public for consideration at this meeting.

37\22 **URGENT DECISIONS**

The Chairman confirmed that there had been no urgent decisions taken since the previous meeting of Council.

38\22 **CHANGES TO COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP**

Members noted nominations of substitute Members from the Bromsgrove Independent and Liberal Democrat Groups to various Committees. Members were advised to note that Councillor C. Hotham was a Member, rather than a substitute Member, of the Licensing Committee.

39\22 **TO RECEIVE AND CONSIDER A REPORT FROM THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR HOUSING AND HEALTH AND WELL BEING**

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health and Well Being presented an annual report which outlined the work that had been undertaken within the remit of her portfolio over the preceding 12 months.

Council was informed that the portfolio covered a range of areas that involved the Council working closely with many partner organisations. For example, the Sports Development team had worked closely with NHS bodies in respect of the provision of new exercise classes and on social prescribing. The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health and Well Being expressed her gratitude to the Bromsgrove District Housing Trust (BDHT) for their provision of office space free of charge for initiatives, such as St Basil's Bistro, which helped young people develop healthy cooking skills. The Bromsgrove Partnership Manager had an integral role in terms of managing the Council's working relationship and joint activities with partner organisations and she was thanked for her hard work.

A Dementia Meeting service was available in the District for residents with dementia and their family members to attend. Support was made

available to people with dementia and their carers at these meetings. The example of a gentleman with dementia who had attended the service and had always enjoyed the refreshments was highlighted as a positive example of the outcomes of this work.

After the report had been presented, Members discussed the following points in detail:

- The work that was undertaken by partner organisations in the District, particularly the contributions from Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations, which helped to address issues experienced by residents in respect of their health and well being.
- The activities that had been delivered for the social prescribing model of health service delivery and the extent to which communities located outside of the Bromsgrove Primary Care Network (PCN) benefited from this work. Members commented that GP practices in locations, such as Alvechurch and Wythall, were not in the Bromsgrove PCN. The Leader advised that this issue had been raised at meetings of the Bromsgrove Partnership Board where it had been noted that 25 per cent of the population in the District were not covered by the Bromsgrove PCN.
- The supported accommodation available to Bromsgrove residents. Council was informed that BDHT provided supported accommodation to residents where needed.
- The new offer of a free Lifeline Service for six weeks and the arrangement in place should customers be unable to pay for this service at the end of that trial period. The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health and Well Being explained that discussions would be held with the customers in an attempt to provide a solution and Members were advised that further information on this subject would be provided after the meeting.
- The extent to which bed and breakfast accommodation was used to house people at risk of homelessness in the District. Council was advised that there was emergency bed and breakfast accommodation available on standby in case it needed to be used. Members were advised that further information would be provided after the meeting about the number of times this had had to be used in the preceding two-year period.
- The number of houses in large developments that needed to be social housing and the extent to which sufficient numbers of social houses were being built in the District.
- The numbers of First Homes that were in the process of being developed and whether they should be included in the figures for the numbers of affordable homes developed in the District.
- The extent to which First Homes could be classified as affordable housing if buyers were offered a 30 per cent discount on the purchase price, particularly if the average house price in the District was in excess of £300,000. Members were advised that further information would be provided about First Homes outside the meeting.

- The number of new energy efficient homes that were in the process of being developed in the District. Members were informed that there would be 61 properties developed at the Burcot Lane site. The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health and Well Being undertook to check whether any further such homes were planned for development.
- The potential for at least one of the properties developed at the Burcot Lane site to be allocated to student housing. The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health and Well Being explained that this would be discussed with representatives of Worcestershire County Council further.
- The financial costs to the Council involved in upgrading the Council's Lifeline system from an analogue to a digital system. Members were informed that further information on this subject would be provided after the meeting.
- The housing and support provided to victims of domestic abuse in the District. Council was advised that the Council had legal duties in relation to victims of domestic abuse. Safe houses were provided both locally and through Worcestershire County Council. The authority also had close working links with Women's Aid.
- The fact that both women and men could be victims of domestic abuse as could their children.
- The need for the availability of support services to victims of domestic abuse to be communicated effectively, including the Ask for Angela service.
- The potential for children and young people to be educated about healthy relationships and domestic abuse.
- The extent to which an audit had been undertaken of the number of locations in the District where victims of domestic abuse could enquire about the Ask for Angela service. Council was informed that further information on this subject would be provided after the meeting.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

40\22

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CABINET

The Chairman advised that a recommendation had been made at the meeting of the Cabinet held on 7th July 2022, which had been highlighted for Council's consideration.

Bromsgrove and Redditch Duty to Co-operate

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Regulatory Services presented a report on the subject of Bromsgrove District Council's duty to co-operate with Redditch Borough Council. Members were advised that this report had been considered at a recent meeting of the Strategic Planning Steering Group (SPSG), to which all Members had been invited.

Bromsgrove District Council and Redditch Borough Council had both commissioned Housing and Economic Development Needs

Assessments (HEDNAs) to review housing needs moving forward. This had identified that housing needs for Redditch Borough had changed since a previous assessment was undertaken and there was no longer a need for so many houses to be developed in the Borough. For this reason, houses that had been due to be developed in Bromsgrove District to meet housing needs in the Borough were no longer required by Redditch and Redditch Borough Council had agreed to return these housing figures to Bromsgrove. In this context, Bromsgrove District Council could determine how these houses should be allocated.

Bromsgrove District Council did not have a shared Local Plan with Redditch Borough Council and the two authorities' Local Plans were being developed separately. However, there was a need for the two Councils to continue to work closely together to ensure that there was a shared understanding about local housing needs. The two Councils could also work together on a shared approach in response to the housing needs of the wider Greater Birmingham and Black Country Housing Market Areas (GBBCHMA). The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) helped to clarify the Councils' shared understanding on these points.

Members subsequently discussed the content of the report in detail and in doing so questioned the number of houses that had originally been due to be developed in Bromsgrove District to meet the previous housing needs in Redditch Borough. Council was advised that this had involved the development of 2,241 houses in Bromsgrove District.

Reference was made to the MOU and the extent to which, by co-operating with Redditch Borough Council, there was a risk that Bromsgrove District Council would be expected to meet requirements for Redditch Borough Council to provide housing for the GBBCHMA. The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Regulatory Services clarified that the MOU simply required the two authorities to co-operate. There was a legal requirement on Councils, in terms of a duty to co-operate and the MOU enabled the Council to meet this legal obligation.

Concerns were raised about the Council's shared service arrangements with Redditch Borough Council and the implications that this might have in respect of meeting the needs of Bromsgrove residents. In addition, concerns were raised about the speed with which the Council was progressing with work on a strategic transport assessment and the extent to which this would inform work on the Local Plan. Members were informed that two separate groups of officers had worked on the Local Plans for Bromsgrove District Council and Redditch Borough Council respectively. Furthermore, work remained ongoing in respect of the strategic transport assessment and this would inform the content of the next version of the Local Plan.

Members discussed the need for more social and affordable housing to be developed in Bromsgrove District. Concerns were raised about the locations in which many new housing developments were occurring and

the suggestion was made that further consideration needed to be given to the location and mix of housing in larger developments moving forward.

Council was advised that a lot of work continued to take place in respect of preparing the Council's new Local Plan. Members would have an opportunity to contribute to this process, as the various elements of the plan would be discussed at meetings of the SPSG, to which all Members were invited. Members were therefore urged to attend future meetings of the SPSG.

The recommendation was proposed by Councillor P. Thomas and seconded by Councillor M. Thompson.

RESOLVED that the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Bromsgrove District Council and Redditch Borough Council be agreed.

41\22

TO NOTE THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CABINET HELD ON 6TH JULY 2022

The minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held on Wednesday 6th July 2022 were noted.

(Prior to consideration of this item, Councillors K. May and M. Sherrey declared other disclosable interests in their capacity as the Councillors for Belbroughton and Romsley ward. This declaration was made in relation to Cabinet's consideration of the nomination of Romsley Methodist Church as an asset of community value. They both remained present during consideration of the minutes of the Cabinet meeting.)

42\22

QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

The Chairman explained that seven Questions on Notice had been received for the meeting and would be considered in the order in which they had been submitted. A maximum of 15 minutes was allocated to consideration of these questions and the answers provided and there were no supplementary questions.

Question submitted by Councillor A. English

"Many millions of pounds have been spent on the new Bromsgrove railway station. However, there has been a significant reduction in service running south since its construction and now recent timetable changes mean delays for those wanting to travel from Worcester to Barnt Green, Alvechurch and Redditch. Does the Leader share my disappointment at the apparent downgrading of Bromsgrove station and what actions has the leader taken to improve services going south and to instigate a return of the timely Barnt Green and Alvechurch connection?"

The Leader responded by commenting that it was disappointing that the services mentioned had suffered reductions in recent timetable changes. This was a matter for the West Midlands Rail Executive and the Train Operating Companies to address.

Council was asked to note that through the County Council, the matter of the timetable changes had been raised with the West Midlands Rail Executive. This included the matter of the connectivity with the services from Worcester through Bromsgrove onto the Redditch branch of the Cross City Line. It had also been raised by the Rail User Groups. Furthermore, the Leader was aware that Worcestershire County Council was actively engaged with promoting improved services in Worcestershire through various channels including the rail industry bodies on which they were represented.

Members could raise concerns regarding services directly with the Train Operating Companies and, where appropriate, the West Midlands Rail Executive.

Question submitted by Councillor H. Rone-Clarke

“Many residents are concerned about the number of cases reported to the RSPCA each year of pets being given as prizes via fairgrounds, social media and other channels in England. This issue, we know, predominantly concerns goldfish. Further, many cases of pets being given as prizes may go unreported each year.

Will the leader commit to banning outright, the giving of live animals as prizes, in any form, on Bromsgrove District Council land and write to the UK Government, urging an outright ban on the giving of live animals as prizes on both public and private land?”

The Portfolio Holder for Leisure, Cultural Services and Climate Change responded by explaining that he had raised a similar issue in a Motion considered at a Council meeting in 2016. This Motion, which had proposed that pets should be banned as prizes, had been agreed by Council. This approach had subsequently been enshrined in the Council’s Animal Welfare Policy. At paragraph 4.0 of this policy, it was stated that the Council prohibited circuses or events who hired Council land or used the authority’s premises as a venue, to use animals, birds or fish as prizes.

Question submitted by Councillor P. McDonald

"Will this Council abide by the Equalities Act making sure the less able can gain access to Council Meetings? In light of the fact the entrance to the building have large steps."

The Leader explained that Parkside was a listed building. When it was converted from a school to an office, provisions were added to satisfy

accessibility under Approved Document Part M. The Building Control Officer had assessed the provision at Parkside and confirmed that:

- The main entrance to Parkside was via the library / customer service entrance. Once past the customer service area there was a lift for the change of levels which enabled people to access the offices and meeting rooms on the ground floor. There was also a lift to the first floor.
- There was disabled ramp access to the side of the Parkside Hall and this afforded access to the Council Chamber.
- The caretakers' entrance was not a public entrance. However, those using this entrance for the ceremony room with walking aids would be directed to the main entrance, or the next door along (towards the car park entrance on Stourbridge Road), which had a level approach. Anyone attending the ceremony room could access this from the rear elevation where the ceremony garden and the accessible car park spaces were located.
- The caretakers' entrance was not allowed a permanent ramp access due to the listed building status. Although a moveable ramp could be installed, this was deemed not to be necessary as the main access and the other two doors on the front and rear elevation provided a level access approach. The caretakers' door was for staff and deliveries only.
- The remaining doors with steps on the elevations were fire escapes or doors to offices, which the public could not access.

Question submitted by Councillor R. Hunter

“As the local authority with responsibility for the provision of leisure services, will Bromsgrove District Council do everything in its power to ensure leisure facilities are maintained continuously at the Ryland Centre?”

The Portfolio Holder for Leisure, Cultural Services and Climate Change advised that this was an important issue that needed to be resolved to the benefit of the local community. However, Members were asked to note that the Council did not have any power in this regard.

Question submitted by Councillor J. King

“Will you consider the feasibility of demanding Passivhaus or zero carbon homes on all major new developments?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Regulatory Services advised that the Local Plan Review would include a strategic policy on addressing Climate Change through new developments in the District. This would require residential developments to be built to higher environmental standards than the current Local Plan. This policy would be presented to the SPSG in due course.

The Government's Future Homes Standard would require all new build homes to be future proofed with low carbon heating and increased levels of energy efficiency, including higher standards of insulation. The Government also proposed an interim uplift to Building Regulations to make sure homes emitted less carbon, protected against over-heating and improved ventilation. This came into force in June 2022.

It was important to note that the draft policy requirements would need to be subject to viability assessments to ensure that they were deliverable. The aim of viability assessments was to test all of the plan's policy requirements, such as renewables and energy efficiency; affordable housing; and physical and social infrastructure. This testing ensured that new developments would remain viable and therefore deliver the plan's proposals. Because of the need to balance policy requirements with viability and deliverability considerations as well as the Government's proposals for the mandatory Future Homes Standards, the Council was not looking to test the specific criteria of Passivhaus. However, Officers were testing significantly higher environmental standards than those which were currently required and many of these standards featured in Passivhaus developments.

Question submitted by Councillor S. Robinson

"What steps is this council taking to phase out the use of harmful weedkillers containing Glyphosate?"

The Portfolio Holder for Environmental Services and Community Safety explained that in the UK, Glyphosate was fully licenced for use and the Council utilised it in accordance with the relevant recommendations and guidance. The authority also ensured that all operatives were trained in its application and that there were sufficient processes in place to ensure that the Council did not contravene the manufacturer's instructions.

There was a considerable amount of debate and claim/counter claim regarding the chemical properties of glyphosate, notably in the USA, where the legal system and litigation process was different to that which operated in the UK. The current UK licence was due to be reviewed at the end of 2022, and the Council was waiting to see if that licence would be reissued, amended or revoked. The Council would work in accordance with any decision that was made.

As an authority, the Council had to adapt to change as information or new products became available and the authority would always look at what was appropriate in terms of managing the environment. This might lead to a review of future maintenance regimes and to consideration of the use of different chemicals or methodologies for vegetative management should they be appropriate, given the extensive green landscape that the Council maintained each year.

To enable this, officers were in the process of drafting a herbicide policy that would aim to set out what the Council would do, what different methodologies the Council could utilise, and would ensure that the

authority could adapt to any changes in legislation and the need to protect and enhance biodiversity. There was a need to set out what customers could expect as a reasonable and cost-effective vegetative management approach in accordance with the financial and physical resources that the Council had available.

Councillors were informed that Bromsgrove District Council only applied herbicides to land that was in its ownership and had used a very small amount so far in 2022. The application of herbicides along the road/footpath system was carried out by Worcestershire County Council (via their contractor) as the highways authority.

Question submitted by Councillor C. Hotham

“Please could this council be updated on the progress being made on one of the most significant potential green projects; the district wide geothermal heating scheme?”

The Portfolio Holder for Leisure, Cultural Services and Climate Change responded by commenting that he was delighted that the Council took the initiative to pursue a Heat Network for the District, particularly in light of the ever-increasing fuel costs.

Following approval by the Council to seek funding from the Department of Business Energy and Industrial Strategy's (BEIS) Heat Network Delivery Unit (HNDU), the Council had secured £227,500. This funding was towards the Detailed Project Development (DPD) phase of the project from BEIS HNDU. It was matched with £112,500 from the Council that included contributions from Bromsgrove School and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust.

(During consideration of this item a point of order was raised that Councillor M. Thompson worked for Bromsgrove School. In this context, no further response was provided at the meeting to this question and Councillor Hotham was advised that he would receive a more detailed response after the meeting.)

43\22

MOTIONS ON NOTICE

The Chairman explained that three Motions on Notice had been received for consideration at the meeting. However, prior to the meeting, Councillor H. Rone-Clarke had confirmed that he was withdrawing his Motion. Therefore, only two Motions were due to be debated at the meeting.

Parkside Running Costs

Council considered the following Motion on Notice that was submitted by Councillor P. McDonald:

"Forking out £240,000 running costs for Parkside that rattles plus £138,000 to Redditch Council, to many is seen as financial incompetence and a cavalier approach to spending the hard-earned money of its residents at a time of a cost-of-living crisis.

We therefore call upon the Council to form a cross-party task group to carry out a full investigation into financial arrangements with Redditch Council: which it would seem to have left Bromsgrove Council with running costs of a £240,000; for what is a mainly an unused building while at the same time paying out £138,000 for use of Redditch Council's premises."

The Motion was proposed by Councillor McDonald and seconded by Councillor Rone-Clarke.

In proposing the Motion, Councillor McDonald raised concerns that Parkside cost the Council £240,000 per annum to maintain, particularly at a time when many staff were working from home. Concerns were raised that the Council was providing a financial contribution to Redditch Borough Council to cover the costs of accommodating staff working in shared services and based at Redditch Town Hall when space remained available to accommodate staff at Parkside. Councillor McDonald also raised concerns about the Council meeting these costs at a time of a cost of living crisis, when many residents would benefit from financial assistance and other support. Residents paid Council Tax and fees for many Council services and it was important to ensure that there was transparency in respect of how this funding was spent and that value for money (vfm) was achieved. Councillor McDonald expressed concerns about the implications of shared service arrangements for the potential for staff to meet the needs of Bromsgrove residents and he suggested that there was the possibility that Redditch Borough would benefit from these arrangements at the expense of Bromsgrove District. A cross party working group could investigate this situation further and determine whether best value was being achieved for the Council.

In seconding the Motion, Councillor Rone-Clarke expressed concerns about the use of public funds on the maintenance of Parkside and in shared service arrangements with Redditch Borough Council. Members were advised that there was a need for due diligence and a cross party review would be able to ensure transparency of management of the Council's finances. Councillor Rone-Clarke also suggested that this review would provide the public with reassurance about the work of the Council. Members were asked to note that the Motion was not calling for an end to shared services but, rather, for these arrangements to be reviewed.

In response to the Motion, the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Governance commented that he refuted claims that the Council was financially incompetent and had a cavalier attitude to spending residents' monies. The Council took any spending seriously. In respect of financial

competence, he commented that the shared services costs were included in the Council's net budget position.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Governance then explained that he could not support the motion as it was considered unnecessary. All organisations, both public and private, had been affected by the global pandemic in ways that could never have been imagined. One of the many consequences was the way in which people worked had changed and the fact that office accommodation, with the requirement for people to be physically in attendance, had changed irrevocably. The Council was transitioning to an agile working policy for the workforce and a review of the authority's accommodation had been ongoing to see to what extent it could be better used for the benefit of residents. In addition, there had been an increase in utility and operational costs of running buildings and there was a requirement for everyone to think very carefully about the pledges made by the Council on the environment.

In this context, the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Governance explained that action was already being taken by the Council. This included leasing arrangement with Seetec at Parkside, which had been a success. They had built links with partner organisations co-located at Parkside, such as the Job Centre Plus and the Council's Housing and Benefit teams, which had resulted in a huge increase in the numbers of residents being supported back into the workplace or into training that would give them the skills they needed to move on. In addition, these arrangements also allowed the Council to drastically reduce the operating costs from the previous financial year, as detailed in the wording of the proposed Motion. Net costs were about £240,000, including £178,000 for Business Rates, £100,000 for utilities, £112,000 for maintenance costs and £138,000 towards Shared Services. Against these costs, there was income of £280,000 at present, but once Seetec income was taken into account, there would be £60,000 additional funds.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Governance explained that Officers had been collaborating with partners at Redditch to review the space that was being used for Bromsgrove District Council as well as a review of the Town Hall. Redditch Borough Council was working with public and VCS partner organisations to let space that would enable their building to become a public sector hub. Arrangements had progressed and the running costs for the Town Hall would decrease significantly, by up to 50 per cent, in the medium term, with a similar reduction following to shared services costs for Bromsgrove District Council. This represented a further saving of at least £70,000.

In conclusion, the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Governance explained that the net costs to Bromsgrove would therefore reduce in 2022/23 and future years both at Parkside and in the space occupied in Redditch by at least 50 per cent on current figures. Under these circumstances, he expressed the view that he did not believe a working party could achieve more than had been achieved to date. However, the

Portfolio Holder for Finance and Governance offered to bring details of progress to the Finance and Budget Working Group for consideration on a six-month rota.

Members subsequently discussed the Motion in detail and in doing so referred to the need for heritage buildings in the District, including Parkside, to be maintained. It was noted that there were specific requirements for the maintenance of listed buildings and this needed to be taken into account when considering the costs involved in maintaining Parkside.

Reference was made to the potential for the review of the financial costs involved in maintaining Parkside and in relation to shared services to have been referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Board for consideration. Members commented that the Board had a legitimate role to play in reviewing the Council's finances and could refer subjects for the consideration of the Finance and Budget Working Group or to a Task Group. In addition, Members commented that, given the significant sums involved, this subject would potentially be suitable for further scrutiny.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 18.3 a recorded vote was taken on this Motion and the voting was as follows:

Members voting FOR the Motion:

Councillors S. Baxter, S. Colella, S. Douglas, A. English, C. Hotham, R. Hunter, J. King, L. Mallett, P. McDonald, S. Robinson and H. Rone-Clarke (11).

Members voting AGAINST the Motion:

Councillors A. Beaumont, R. Deeming, G. Denaro, S. Hession, H. Jones, A. Kriss, K. May, M. Middleton, M. Sherrey, C. Spencer, P. Thomas, M. Thompson and S. Webb (13).

Members ABSTAINING in the vote on the Motion:

No Councillors (0).

On being put to the vote the Motion was therefore lost.

Grass Verges

Council considered the following Motion on Notice that was submitted by Councillor S. Colella:

“This Council changes its grass verge grass cutting and mowing regime to allow wildflowers to remain in bloom during the height of the season when bees, butterflies and general small wildlife rely on the pollen from wildflowers to flourish.”

The Motion was proposed by Councillor Colella and seconded by Councillor C. Hotham.

In proposing the Motion, Councillor Colella explained that it was calling for the Council to agree a grass cutting policy for the District. There were benefits for local wildlife arising from leaving grass and wildflowers to grow on grass verges, as this helped to generate pollen for the bees and grass seed that could be consumed by birds. The Council had a moral responsibility to support the local environment. There were some residents who preferred for grass verges to be mown on a more regular basis and the Council's grass cutting policy would need to make allowances for this. Adoption of the Motion would help to demonstrate that Bromsgrove District Council recognised the importance of local habitats and management of the environment. Some residents might need to be educated about the benefits of not regularly mowing grass verges and the Council would need to issue effective communications on this subject, including through social media.

In seconding the Motion, Councillor Hotham commented that the proposed policy would be a positive development for the Council. The authority could invest in new machinery to cut wildflowers and long grass after a longer period of time than usual had passed. Many residents welcomed the sight of wildflowers on the grass verges and this helped to make places more visually attractive.

During consideration of this Motion, Councillor R. Hunter proposed an amendment. The amended Motion was recorded in the following manner:

"This Council changes its grass verge grass cutting and mowing regime to allow wildflowers to remain in bloom during the height of the season when bees, butterflies and general small wildlife rely on the pollen from wildflowers to flourish. This will not be a one size fits all approach. Council will work with local residents and Councillors to find an approach that works for each community."

Councillor Colella, as the proposer of the original Motion, confirmed that he was happy to adopt the amended wording.

In response to the proposed Motion, the Portfolio Holder for Environmental Services and Community Safety commented that grass verges were the responsibility of Worcestershire County Council and managed in relation to highway safety considerations. However, within speed restricted settlements, Bromsgrove District Council carried this out on behalf of the County Council in order to support a higher aesthetic standard. The Place Team had identified a number of areas of highway verges and public open spaces across the District in the last few years for naturalising so as to support local habitat as well as biodiversity, and this had been carried out without impacting on highway safety. Unfortunately, this could not be done on all grass areas, and where it

had been deemed that this could be done safely, there had been mixed responses from the public who lived by these areas. Many residents were supportive of the idea in principle, but some referenced the rural nature of the District and the proximity of open countryside to most residential areas that could support wildlife, and some wanted a more aesthetic maintenance of grass areas where they lived.

The Portfolio Holder for Environmental Services and Community Safety explained that the Council aimed to continue identifying areas that could be naturalised to support the growth of common flowers such as buttercups, yarrow, dandelion, flatweed and cow parsley to support local wildlife and give them improved habitat to live and move within as green corridors. However, further discussions were needed with residents to help educate people on the importance of this and balance public expectations against the environmental benefit. The majority of the Council's grass areas did not have any aesthetic wildflower displays currently, and this would require more proactive establishment to develop and maintain colourful wildflower areas. The Council had created a couple of small areas like this but would require additional resources and a change in equipment to facilitate this on a larger scale, which was not currently accounted for in the authority's financial planning. In addition, a number of the Council's parks had had a range of measures implemented in recent years to support biodiversity across the site, with wildflower planting, habitat management and naturalisation work. These initiatives had been supported through specific habitat management plans for Sanders Park and Lickey End Recreation Ground, which were being incorporated into new management plans that would also incorporate St Chad's Park and King George V Play Fields as part of the development of the new Leisure and Culture Strategy.

The Motion was discussed by Members in detail and during the discussions, Members commented on the need for local communities to be engaged in consideration of whether to adopt this approach to the management of particular grass verges and open spaces. Examples were provided of attempts being made in the past to rewild some green spaces in wards where there were few other open spaces that could be used for recreation and in these instances, Members suggested that it would be more appropriate for the grass to be cut regularly.

Concerns were raised that, whilst the proposed approach might benefit the local environment, there could be significant financial implications which needed to be clarified. In this context, the suggestion was made that the subject of the Motion should be referred to the Finance and Budget Working Group for further consideration. A business case would subsequently need to be submitted to the Cabinet for further consideration. Members commented that the financial costs might not be significant, as it was likely that this approach would result in a reduction in the number of hours staff were required to work on maintaining grass verges. However, it was also noted that, because the grass and wildflowers would have grown longer than usual, it could potentially be more difficult to cut and therefore the Council might need

to invest in new equipment or take longer on the task, resulting in financial costs.

Reference was made to the beneficial impact that this approach to grass cutting could have on local wildlife and habitats. Concerns were raised about the decline in numbers of birds and animals in various species in recent years, particularly in relation to bee varieties and Members commented that this would have a detrimental impact on plant pollination unless action was taken. Climate change was resulting in changing and more extreme weather patterns and pollution was having a negative impact on the natural world. When grass verges were mown regularly this could result in plants being cut before seeds were ready, to the detriment of the local environment. Residents would still have an opportunity to request that their grass verges were cut regularly if this was felt to be necessary.

On being put to the vote the Motion was carried.

RESOLVED that

This Council changes its grass verge grass cutting and mowing regime to allow wildflowers to remain in bloom during the height of the season when bees, butterflies and general small wildlife rely on the pollen from wildflowers to flourish. This will not be a one size fits all approach. Council will work with local residents and Councillors to find an approach that works for each community.

The meeting closed at 7.55 p.m.

Chairman