

**COUNCIL – ADVISORY MEETING  
12 JANUARY 2022  
7.30 - 8.45 PM**



**Present:**

Councillors Ms Merry (Mayor), Gbadebo (Deputy Mayor), Allen, Angell, Atkinson, Dr Barnard, Bettison OBE, Bhandari, Bidwell, D Birch, Mrs Birch, Brossard, Brown, Brunel-Walker, Dudley, Finch, Ms Gaw, Mrs L Gibson, MJ Gibson, Green, Mrs Hamilton, Harrison, Mrs Hayes MBE, Ms Hayes, Heydon, Mrs Ingham, Kennedy, Kirke, Leake, Mrs Mattick, Mrs McKenzie-Boyle, McLean, Mossom, Neil, Parker, Porter, Skinner, Temperton, Turrell, Virgo and Wade

**Apologies for absence were received from:**

Councillors Mrs McKenzie

**37. Minutes of Previous Meeting**

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Advisory Council meeting held on 24 November 2021 be approved, and signed by the Mayor as a correct record.

**38. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

**39. Mayor's Announcements**

Support over the festive period

The Mayor opened her announcements by recognising and saying 'thank you' to everyone who worked over the festive period to look after others and provide vital services including the Emergency Services, Armed Forces, the NHS, the voluntary sector and staff in the retail sector as well as those in local churches and many other residents who continue to help families, friends and neighbours. She concluded with a special mention to the Council's own social care and health staff providing crucial support services around the clock and each and every day of the year to residents.

Christmas Card Competition

The winner of the Mayor's Christmas Card Competition was 6-year-old Alana Perez Fischer. The theme for Christmas 2021 was Plant a Tree for the Queen's Jubilee to resonate with her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee in 2022. The Mayor thanked everyone who took part.

Tree planting at Westmorland Park

The Mayor had joined Councillors Dr Barnard and Ms Ingham to plant 15 saplings at Westmorland Park as part of the Plant a Tree scheme for the Queen's Jubilee.

Christmas Lights at The Lexicon

The Mayor thanked everyone involved in the festive display at the Lexicon with its biggest tree to date. She had joined Councillor Brunel-Walker at the event turning on the lights.

#### Opening of Information Centre at Buckler's Lodge

The Mayor was pleased to report the opening of Buckler's Lodge which is an 80-bed care home in Crowthorne run by Greensleeves Care. The facility will not only provide residential and dementia care but would also be a new local employer.

#### Art Exhibition

The Mayor had met with the Mayor of High Wycombe and the South Hill Park team to view an art exhibition by Jan Gaska at South Hill Park.

#### Opening of Gail's Bakery

The Mayor celebrated the opening of Gail's Bakery in the Lexicon and highlighted Gail's commitment to helping combat food waste and provide good food to those who need it the most with unsold food being donated to worthy causes.

#### Crowthorne Late Night Shopping and Lights On

The Mayor attended the late-night shopping event with carols being sung in Finnie Square. The event which was organised by Churches Together, the local Crowthorne Traders and Crowthorne Parish Council was well supported and enjoyed by the community.

#### Commandant's Parade, Sandhurst

The Mayor had celebrated her birthday by attending the Commandant's Parade at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. The event is the final rehearsal before the Sovereign's Parade where the successful military cadets become army officers after 44 weeks of intensive training. Congratulations to all the new Officers with 35 of the 200 candidates coming from 26 different countries.

#### Christmas Star Extravaganza, Princess Square

Princess Square was lit up to host a Christmas Star Extravaganza hosted by Artemis College, Thames Valley Police DJ, Thames Valley vibes and Bracknell Town Council. The Mayor reported the event successfully raised funds for a number of charities, MS Trust Duchenne UK and the Alzheimer's Society. The Mayor particularly mentioned Police Community Support Officer Iain Gregory for his performance and considerable contribution to community engagement.

#### Pilgrim's Heart Christmas Lunch

The Mayor and Mayoress attended the Pilgrim Heart's Trust Christmas Lunch which continues to support the homeless and makes a huge difference to some of the most vulnerable over the winter months. The mayor expressed her thanks to the Pilgrim Hearts volunteers for their time and commitment to others.

#### Citizenship Ceremonies

The Mayor advised the meeting that she had attended six virtual citizenship ceremonies since the last Council meeting.

### Thanks to Deputy Mayor

The Mayor concluded her announcements by thanking the Deputy Mayor, Councillor Gbadebo for attending the Power of Parenting Children's Charity Ball, the Pantomime production of Cinderella at South Hill Park and Bracknell Choral Society celebration of Mozart events.

### School improvement in the borough

Councillor Dr Barnard, Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning was proud to report to the meeting that 94.4% of all schools were either Good or Outstanding. The inspection of schools by Ofsted had restarted last summer. The positive outcomes were a reflection of the focus on the needs of pupils during the pandemic and the hard work of the leadership teams, teaching staff, governing bodies and the school improvement team. He congratulated everyone involved.

#### 40. **Executive Report**

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Bettison OBE, presented his report on the work of the Executive since that reported at the Council meeting on 24 November 2021. The Executive had met once on 14 December 2021.

The Leader highlighted the following matters that had been considered:

- Draft Revenue Budget & Capital Programme 2022/23 proposals were published for six week consultation including Overview & Scrutiny Commission. Detailed consideration at quorate "in person" Council meeting on 23 February. £140K had been added to the Time Square community hub budget for hybrid meeting technology.
- The Equalities Working Group recommendations were supported including the Mayor's Charter which was being considered as a separate motion on the agenda.
- An updated Housing Assistance Policy was agreed with a focus on enabling independent living by supporting at risk people.
- Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy 2021 – 2024 agreed as a legal requirement under Domestic Abuse Act 2021. There were four broad priority areas:
  - Raise awareness and information about available options
  - Improve access pathways to safe accommodation
  - Effective multi-agency working and specialist support
  - Improved support and providing an effective voice for survivors
- A strategic procurement plan was agreed for the Sensory Needs Service to support people with visual and/or hearing loss.
- All seven Overview & Scrutiny review of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) recommendations were agreed. The review looked to maximise effective use of CIL and increase close coordination between Bracknell Forest Council and Town & Parish Councils.

The report contained recommendations that the Council was asked to resolve in respect of the following matter:

- Equalities Working Group recommendations

On the proposition of Councillor Bettison OBE, Leader of the Council, seconded by Councillor Kirke it was

**RECOMMENDED TO THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE** that the recommendations of the Members' Equalities Working Group at Annex A of the report be adopted.

#### 41. **Proportionality and membership**

Council considered the report setting out the position regarding the overall allocation of seats on committees as a result of the by-election held on 9 December 2021.

Appendix A to the report set out the changes to committees affected:

- Councillor Bidwell to be added as a member of the Licensing & Safety and Planning Committees as well as being added as a substitute Labour Group member wherever applicable
- Councillor Parker to move from the Planning Committee to the Governance and Audit Committee
- No further changes were tabled

On the proposition of Councillor Bettison OBE, Leader of the Council, seconded by Councillor Birch it was

**RECOMMENDED TO THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE** that

- i) the revised proportionality calculations be agreed; and
- ii) changes to the membership of overview and scrutiny, committees and other groups be agreed.

#### 42. **Questions Submitted Under Council Procedure Rule 10**

1. Councillor Temperton asked Councillor Bettison OBE, Leader of the Council the following published question:

Can we have an update on what the Council is doing to welcome and support our refugees to Bracknell Forest?

In response Councillor Bettison reflected that local authorities across the United Kingdom had played a vital role in the success of the resettlement efforts following the events in Afghanistan. The Locally Employed Staff Relocation Scheme supports people who had served the United Kingdom in Afghanistan to relocate and rebuild their lives safely. He advised that Bracknell Forest Council had welcomed three such Afghan refugee families to Bracknell over recent months. The Council had worked to secure three privately rented properties which were affordable for the families. The homes were fully furnished and equipped by the Council, ready for occupation, including white goods and soft furnishings.

He added that the Council had used Government allocated funding to employ an additional officer in the Early Help service to be able to offer dedicated support to these families. Support workers were making daily contact with the families to help them to get to know the area, adjust to their new location and settle in safely.

He advised that Education, Health, Early Help services, Housing, engagement and equalities teams had all worked together with charitable/faith organisations to ensure that the refugee families have been able to quickly settle into their new homes. This support had included helping them to register with a GP surgery; finding school and early years places for their children; accessing English language courses if needed; setting up bank accounts and direct debits for utilities; help with registering for benefits initially and then support in accessing the Job Centre and finding work.

He concluded that he had been humbled by the local response and kind offers of help and donations by local organisations and residents. Involve community services had worked with the Council and other charitable organisations to bring together a community support offer for Afghan refugees who had recently been welcomed to Bracknell Forest - this has included providing toys for the children and televisions for the families. Bracknell Islamic Cultural Society had offered to greet families and offer cultural support and information as required.

Councillor Temperton was pleased to hear about the range of support on offer and enquired whether this extended into the schools welcoming the children due to any language or mental health issues which may arise.

Councillor Dr Barnard was invited to respond. He responded that support was given to schools from before the places were allocated starting with ensuring that the schools were fully briefed on the needs of the children. He understood that the children were doing well, were making friends and were supporting their families with developing English language both formally and informally.

As with other children requiring additional support their progress was being tracked by the relevant teams. He concluded that there would be a proactive approach to following their progress and he would be happy to report at future Council meetings to keep colleagues informed.

2. Councillor Bidwell asked Councillor Heydon, Executive Member for Transformation and Finance the following published question:

Energy prices are increasing adding to a steady increase in inflation, currently 5.1%. Commentators suggest that family costs are going to increase by £1200 per annum and that the lowest income families will once again suffer:

What is the Strategy for supporting those that are most vulnerable? Is there sufficient money in any existing hardship fund to support those in need and if not, can more be added to this year's budget?

In response Councillor Heydon advised the meeting that although there was a strategy it was not fixed and instead adapted to respond to changing pressures such as covid. He stated that the administration recognised that there were ongoing significant financial pressures for many households in the borough due to multiple factors. He reflected that the Council had provided a broad range of support during the current financial year to those most affected and would continue to do so in the coming year. He described the Local Welfare Scheme (<https://www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/benefits/bracknell-forest-council-local-welfare-scheme>), which had a budget of £20,000 per year for emergency crisis support. This was when family, friends, charities, or insurance could not help with the essentials needed to keep safe and well such as fuel costs, food supplies and essential furniture. He explained that the Government had also provided a range of additional grants since the Covid pandemic started and these had been used to support a wide range of targeted

initiatives which were aimed specifically at the lowest income households for example:

- £82,000 funding from DEFRA was used to increase the provision available within the Council's local welfare scheme including specialist agencies like Foodbank and the Citizens Advice Bureau, to provide help directly to local people most in need.
- £575,000 funding from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had been distributed to low-income households in the borough through schemes such as school holiday supermarket vouchers for children who receive free school meals. He added that this funding would continue for the next three years supporting the Holiday Activities and Food Programme, totalling £248,000 for next year.

He continued that the Local Council Tax Support Grant of £0.8m announced in the Finance Settlement for 2021/22 helped fund the one-off Covid-recovery package included in the 2021/22 budget. £300,000 was used to fund initiatives to address financial hardship such as additional funding to children's social care for emergency support for families, the Imagination Library scheme targeted at vulnerable households with young children and to top up the value of school holiday supermarket vouchers last Summer. He explained the remaining funding would be carried forward to continue to target instances of financial hardship, offering financial support where it was most needed as well as helping households to develop plans to achieve longer term financial resilience. Granting a £150 reduction in council tax bills for a second year for 3,000 low-income households was already receiving support through the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, at an overall cost of around £0.5m.

He continued that the administration proposed to maintain their local welfare scheme at its current level, recognising that there were a range of other funding sources also available to support vulnerable households. He advised that they were also intending to propose to offer a further reduction in council tax bills to help low-income households, following on from the £300 in reductions they had received in the past two years. He added that officers had been asked to undertake a needs analysis to provide the Council with a more comprehensive understanding of the extent of current and potential financial hardship across the Borough and had invested in additional staffing resource and specialist software to progress this.

He concluded that the exercise would map the full range of existing support available to individuals and households from the Council and its statutory and voluntary sector partners by the end of the current financial year. An action plan would then be developed to include short-term and longer-term preventative work to address immediate needs and to help residents and communities become increasingly financially resilient in the years ahead.

Councillor Dr Barnard was invited to respond to a supplementary question regarding how residents were able to tap into these initiatives. He advised that throughout the pandemic there had been a Members' Welfare Steering Group that looked at how to use the grants provided in a targeted way to support families. He stated that the Council had looked beyond the categories set out to maximise the amount of payments which could be made by broadening out the definitions as far as possible to try to catch all families in significant financial hardship. He concluded that one of the challenges was that in addition to signposting residents to local provision it was about finding ways to connect with hard to reach families who were in need.

#### **43. Motions Submitted Under Council Procedure Rule 11**

Motion 06/2021 was moved and seconded by Councillors Merry and Temperton respectively as follows:

This Council adopts a Mayor's Charter as set out below:

#### BFC Mayor's Charter

Statement of minimum standards of behaviour expected from all Councillors at all times.

The Seven Principles of Public Life (the Nolan Principles) -selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership -have long been the basis for ensuring high standards in public life. These are the basis for the behaviours this Council and all its Councillors will adopt.

Our Councillors will:

- encourage and foster constructive democratic debate and tolerance of other points of view
- promote and defend the dignity of others, treating all with courtesy and respect
- not engage in bullying, harassment, or victimisation, nor unlawfully discriminate against another member or group
- challenge unacceptable behaviour whenever it occurs.

Any behaviour that falls short of that included in the above statement will be dealt with under the Council's Standards and Code of Conduct processes. If any breach appears to break the criminal law, it will be referred to the police.

A recorded vote was requested and taken on the motion and the voting was as follows:

FOR (41): Councillors Allen, Angell, Atkinson, Dr Barnard, Bettison OBE, Bhandari, Bidwell, Birch, Mrs Birch, Brossard, Brown, Brunel-Walker, Dudley, Finch, Ms Gaw, Gbadebo, L Gibson, M J Gibson, Green, Mrs Hamilton, Harrison, Mrs Hayes MBE, Ms Hayes, Heydon, Mrs Ingham, Mrs Kennedy, Kirke, Leake, Mrs Mattick, Mrs McKenzie-Boyle, McLean, Ms Merry, Mossom, Neil, Parker, Porter, Skinner, Temperton, Turrell, Virgo and Wade

The motion was therefore carried.

**CHAIR**