
Council

MINUTES of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, ME10 3HT on Wednesday, 10 December 2025 from 7.00 pm - 9.10 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Mike Baldock, Andy Booth, Lloyd Bowen, Hayden Brawn, Ann Cavanagh, Lloyd Chapman, Shelley Cheesman, Tim Gibson, Alastair Gould, Angela Harrison, James Hunt, Mark Last, Peter MacDonald, Peter Marchington, Ben J Martin, Charlie Miller, Kieran Mishchuk, Lee-Anne Moore, Pete Neal, Tara Noe, Chris Palmer, Richard Palmer, Hannah Perkin, Carrie Pollard, Reed, Julien Speed, Paul Stephen, Sarah Stephen, Terry Thompson, Karen Watson (Mayor), Mike Whiting, Tony Winckless, Ashley Wise and Dolley Wooster.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Robin Harris, Jo Millard and Larissa Reed.

OFFICERS PRESENT (VIRTUALLY): Lisa Fillery, Phil Sutcliffe and Emma Wiggins.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE (VIRTUALLY): Councillors Bonney, Golding, Jayes, Shiel and Tucker.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Monique Bonney, Derek Carnell, Roger Clark, Simon Clark, Alex Eyre, Charles Gibson, Kieran Golding, Carole Jackson, Elliott Jayes, Rich Lehmann, Claire Martin, Tom Nundy, Ashley Shiel and Mark Tucker.

556 **Emergency Evacuation Procedure**

The Mayor outlined the emergency evacuation procedure.

557 **Minutes**

The Mayor announced that as the minutes from the Council meeting held on 19 November 2025 had not yet been published, these would be considered at a future Council meeting.

558 **Declarations of Interest**

No interests were declared.

559 **Mayor's Announcements**

The Mayor announced that herself and the Deputy Mayor had carried out over 100 engagements between them. Recent engagements included the Swale Youth Democracy event which included six schools from across the Borough, and a celebration of Romania Day. The Mayor said she had attended 'Lights of Love' at Highsted School, Sittingbourne and at Minster Abbey, Minster, as well as the Salvation Army Carol Concert. She highlighted two further events with a shared theme of community involvement: the Sittingbourne and Milton Scouts concert and the opening of the Sheppey Hospital shop. Both organisations were seeking adult volunteers. She particularly emphasised the urgent need for volunteers to support the Scouts, who currently had a waiting list of around 300 young people.

Referring to '16 days of action' with the White Ribbon campaign, the Mayor thanked all for getting involved and encouraged Members to become a White Ribbon ambassador

or champion.

The Mayor explained that whilst the meeting was held in public, it was not a public meeting and only those invited to speak would be able to do so. She set out her expectations for a respectful meeting. Finally, the Mayor announced a change to the order on the Agenda and said she would bring forward Item 9 – the Motion on the District of Sanctuary Initiative.

560 **Motion - District of Sanctuary initiative**

Councillor Hannah Perkin proposed the motion as set out on the Agenda and explained its purpose. She clarified that the motion was not related to national borders, changes in law, or Government plans, but focused on local action and how vulnerable people were treated within the borough.

Councillor Perkin stated that becoming a District of Sanctuary represented a commitment to how the Council interacted with some of the most vulnerable members of the community, ensuring they were welcomed into everyday life in Swale, including in schools, at GP surgeries, libraries, housing offices, and community centres. She emphasised that those seeking safety should be supported to belong.

The District of Sanctuary initiative was described as being built on the principle that every place should be a place of safety. Councillor Perkin outlined the various groups this could include and stressed that the motion sought Swale's inclusion in humanity and support for those who often had no voice. She spoke of the fear, trauma, and loss experienced by vulnerable people leaving unsafe homes, and their hope that the UK would provide safety. Councillor Perkin referred to the wording of the motion, which stated that people should be met with dignity, kindness, and support, building on the work already undertaken by volunteers in the community.

Councillor Perkin concluded by stating that agreeing the motion would reassure families living in fear and support volunteers, sending a clear message that in Swale, people seeking sanctuary were welcome, valued, and not alone. She expressed criticism of those who sought to trade in fear and division or use political intimidation.

In seconding the motion, Councillor Alastair Gould reserved his right to speak.

Members were invited to make comments and these included:

- The country was under significant pressure from those born in the UK and from those from the wider community who chose to come to the UK;
- referred to people entering the country illegally and the process for those entering the country legally;
- could not support the motion as it stood;
- the intentions behind the motion were admirable as safety, dignity and inclusion should be the rights of all people;
- the proposal created more problems than it solved;
- the community was deeply divided on asylum and refugee issues;
- appointing lead officers, reviewing policies, running awareness campaigns and coordinating with multiple agencies was resource intensive;
- other agencies and partners may be pulled into the politically charged initiative

- and may be unable to take on more work;
- the motion tied Swale to the national asylum policy;
 - whilst the values were positive, the practical, financial and political realities made the motion the wrong approach;
 - the Council should be supporting all vulnerable residents;
 - the motion was politically motivated and had already increased community tensions;
 - local Councils had no authority over border control or asylum quotas;
 - Swale faced a housing shortage, NHS pressures, lack of GP's and social care, and becoming a District of Sanctuary signalled a willingness to absorb more asylum seekers;
 - the commitment to the motion required too much additional resource, particularly financial;
 - the motion encouraged chaos and division;
 - the motion did not balance compassion with control;
 - any funding for a District of Sanctuary was funding not spent on local priorities for residents;
 - spoke of the offensive comments directed at Members on social media in the lead up to the debate, particularly towards female Councillors;
 - gave examples of refugees who had contributed to society;
 - the motion did not explain the significant work required if it was passed;
 - the process to join the scheme typically took two years or more by which time the changes from the current Local Government Review (LGR) would have been implemented and SBC would not exist in its current form;
 - LGR was already challenging enough without adding new work streams, government structures and reporting obligations;
 - should not promise outcomes that sat out of the authority's control;
 - gave an example of an authority that agreed the motion, then abandoned due to misunderstanding and politicisation;
 - the Council could support vulnerable people through practical targeted measures and through existing statutory duties;
 - the motion was divisive;
 - the UK had always been a home for genuine refugees and asylum seekers but that did not mean economic migrants should be fast-tracked and welcomed en masse;
 - people had different ideas about what a genuine refugee was and the motion did not define a refugee;
 - it was an insult to SBC's staff who were already working with genuine refugees and asylum seekers;
 - referred to the impact on the current budget consultation and said that there would likely have been more public responses to it if it had included resources to fund this initiative;
 - the motion did not bring cohesion and understanding;
 - Swale included four of the most deprived areas in the country and SBC's work should be supporting the residents that already lived here, who had high needs and contributed to the borough;
 - asylum seekers should be supported by the relevant organisation such as central government and KCC;
 - it was the Government's responsibility to get the process right; and
 - the motion lacked information on outcomes and was confusing.

In accordance with Procedure rule 3.1.15 (18) it was proposed and seconded that the debate be moved to the vote. The mayor invited the seconder of the motion, who had reserved his right, to speak first, followed by the proposer.

The seconder of the motion, Councillor Alastair Gould, said it was not about the immigration system, it was about how the people in Swale who were refugees and asylum seekers, were supported. He said the District of Sanctuary was about promoting the values of a borough and welcoming those who found themselves here after experiencing a very traumatic and difficult time. Councillor Gould said it was not resource intensive or a quick fix, but the proposal was asking for it to be discussed at another Committee on how to proceed.

In summing up the debate, Councillor Perkin thanked Members for their comments and said it was helpful to hear different viewpoints. She was disappointed that Councillors had not spoken to her about their opinions prior to the meeting. Councillor Perkin acknowledged it was a divisive issue but said the attitude of some public towards vulnerable immigrants and refugees who lived in the UK needed addressing. She said that whilst different people had differing opinions, it was important to discuss the topic in a free and open debate. Councillor Perkin said it was unacceptable that Councillors had been intimidated, shouted at, or been threatened in order that only one side of the argument was put across. She said there had been much misinformation debated in the chamber that evening and whilst she accepted that many did not support the motion, she was glad that she had submitted it.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 3.1.19(2), a recorded vote was taken, and voting was as follows:

For: Councillors Cavanagh, Cheeseman, Thompson, Ben J Martin, Perkin, Gould, S Stephen and Brawn. Total equals 8.

Against: Councillors Harrison, C Palmer, T Gibson, Noe, Neal, Mishchuk, Chapman, Bowen, Pollard, Booth, Moore, Speed, MacDonald, Wooster, Wise, Watson, Marchington, P Stephen, Whiting, Baldock, R Palmer, Hunt and Winckless. Total equals 23.

Abstain: Councillor Last and Miller. Total equals 2.

The Mayor announced the motion had fallen.

561 Questions submitted by the Public

There were no questions submitted by public.

562 Questions submitted by Members

There were no questions submitted by Members.

563 Leader's Statement

Before reading his statement, the Leader condemned the behaviour of some public earlier in the meeting.

The Leader then said:

"I want to begin with an important update on Barton's Point Coastal Park. The year-long ecological survey carried out by Bakerwell has confirmed that the park's brackish lake and surrounding grasslands form an exceptionally rare and sensitive environment. The natural mix of salt and fresh water has created a habitat of national significance, one that would not withstand increased footfall. In response, the Environmental Services and Climate Change Committee has agreed that our earlier leisure proposals will not proceed. Instead, we will focus on preserving, enhancing and educating people about this remarkable ecosystem. A Members' Working Group will now explore the implications and long-term stewardship, including ecological futures such as education led approaches or the creation of a habitat bank. This is the right decision for Barton's Point and the right decision for our borough.

Staying with community wellbeing, our One Swale roadshows continue to offer vital support for residents facing the pressures of the cost of living. The latest event in Sittingbourne brought together charities, health partners, support organisations and advice services under one roof providing everything from food and fuel vouchers to wellbeing support, debt advice and safety guidance. These events have helped thousands of people across Swale, and I want to thank all of our officers and partners for their continued commitment.

Continuing with the well being theme, I am pleased to share that Councillor Harrison and I have been invited to the official opening of the new Community Diagnostic Centre on the Isle of Sheppey on Friday. This centre will greatly improve local access to diagnostic services, reduce travel times and support early intervention for residents on the island and beyond. We both look forward to representing the borough at its opening and strengthening our partnership with local health providers.

I also want to recognise two exceptional achievements in our schools. At the Kent Green School Awards, The Sittingbourne School and Iwade Community Primary School were both named award winners with Iwade going on to win the overall Environment Award. These achievements show the passion and leadership of young people in Swale who are championing climate action and environmental protection.

That sense of youth leadership was equally abundant during our recent Youth Engagement Day here in the chamber. From the beginning, students were encouraged not just to learn about democracy but to experiment with it, to question, challenge and imagine new ways local government could work for them. They heard from me, the Mayor and Councillor Tom Nundy about the machinery of the Council, they ran a mock election, they debated real policy priorities with the Community Safety Partnership and they worked through practical policing scenarios with Kent Police's Child Centred Policing Team. The morning ended with honest, confident feedback from the young participants and a clear sense that this was only the beginning of a stronger, ongoing conversation ensuring that younger voices are heard as today's youngsters will become tomorrow's adults.

Moving on as we approach a time which may be joyful for some but equally very difficult for others, the Council has actively participated in this year's White Ribbon Day and 16 days of action which ends today. I want to commend the work and collaboration of our staff and external partners for their unerring commitment to the campaign. I would add

that while the 16 days of action ends today our everyday commitment certainly does not. At this point I do want to highlight a violence against women and girls event that took place at Borden Grammar School. The event demonstrated amazing levels of commitment from young people which was incredibly inspiring. It was a privilege to be invited to represent our council at the event and I had the honour of speaking alongside our Mayor Karen Watson and Cllr Nundy, who spoke with passion and sincerity about the importance of the white ribbon campaign and why we stand firmly behind it.

Furthermore, I am proud to announce that Swale Borough Council has achieved the national 'Gold Standard' accreditation from the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA). This is the highest level of recognition for domestic abuse response within housing services. With domestic abuse present in 22% of all homelessness cases that we manage, our officers deal with this reality every single day. The accreditation confirms that we have strong procedures, excellent partnerships and a robust, survivor-focused approach. I want to thank every officer involved for their outstanding work.

Turning now to local democracy, Members will be aware that we are launching a major Community Governance Review (CGR). This will consider amongst other things whether Sittingbourne and Halfway should have their own town or parish councils, potential changes to existing councils, and the renaming of Warden Parish Council to Warden Bay Parish Council. Parish and town councils can strengthen representation, improve services and give residents a direct voice. But this must be shaped by the will of local people through the public consultation that will begin shortly.

Finally, as we approach the festive season, we have published the Christmas and New Year service changes, including the 2025 bin collection schedule, so that residents have clear and timely information.

And so, Madam Mayor, as this is our final Full Council meeting of the year, I want to wish all Members, staff, and residents across Swale a safe, peaceful and very happy Christmas and healthy and prosperous new year."

In response, the Leader of the Conservative Group thanked the Leader for his comments on the aggressive and violent activity that had occurred by some members of the public in the building earlier that evening. He acknowledged that Members may hold differing views but said constructive debate on those differences fostered resilience and strength and he was critical of the threatening behaviour that had taken place. The Leader of the Conservative Group welcomed the news on schools and encouraged engagement with younger residents. He thanked the Sittingbourne Christmas Lights association and all those who worked on providing Christmas lights across the borough

As the Leader of the SIA Group had left the meeting, Councillor Paul Stephen spoke on the group's behalf. He thanked the Leader for the good news contained within his statement. Councillor Stephen expressed his concern at the earlier public behaviour. He referenced the motion debated earlier saying that everyone deserved to live in safety, free from fear and discrimination and he praised the Mayor's chairing of the meeting to which Members applauded.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group welcomed the condemnation of earlier public behaviour and noted Faversham residents were already familiar with and actively challenging such conduct. Turning to the Leader's Statement, she highlighted the

success of the One Swale roadshows in supporting residents with cost-of-living challenges and thanked staff and partners for their efforts. She welcomed the White Ribbon campaign accreditation and commended staff in domestic abuse and housing services for achieving gold standard. She noted the divisive climate in the community, shared concerns from residents of colour feeling afraid, and urged everyone to reflect the values of the Christmas story in their lives.

The Leader of the Reform UK group said acts of violence and intimidation had no place in a modern functioning democracy. He highlighted the positives in the Leader's Statement and said the Council worked well, when it worked together. The Leader of the Reform UK Group wished everyone a relaxing Christmas and said he looked forward to the new year of open debate.

The Leader of the Green Group welcomed the opening of the Community Diagnostic Hub, noting benefits of shorter travel and earlier treatment. He supported green initiatives in schools but urged further action to address future challenges. He also congratulated the housing team for their work on supporting victims of domestic violence.

Other Members were invited to speak and they made comments including:

- Welcomed the comments from the Leader on the behaviour of some public earlier in the meeting;
- congratulated Iwade Community Primary School and the Sittingbourne School for their awards, and noted the positive engagement of a pre-school entrant, showing that under-fours were embracing the initiative;
- drew attention that Mid-Kent College had invested £15million across their campuses to become carbon neutral;
- congratulated the staff for achieving the gold standard for DAHA and explained the complex process to achieve it;
- thanked all staff, in all departments, across the organisation for their hard work this year;
- referred to the Youth Engagement Day and spoke of the need to engage young people;
- highlighted the thriving Eco Council at Kemsley Primary School;
- every Member was welcome to bring ideas to be discussed freely and respectfully at meetings and that should not be forgotten;
- noted that SBC had demonstrated the effectiveness of cross-party collaboration, despite the national climate of hostility often amplified by social media;
- all Members should encourage younger residents to engage;
- welcomed the news of the Community Diagnostic Hub, and said the Isle of Sheppey would also benefit from a mental health haven as Medway Maritime Hospital had, and highlighted its benefits;
- spoke of SBC's history of encouraging green initiatives in young people in the borough; and
- had used, and praised the service at the Community Diagnostic Hub.

In response, the Leader thanked residents for their efforts with Christmas lights and acknowledged Members' work supporting their wards. He noted that many initiatives were ongoing, appreciated Members' contributions, and extended seasonal greetings, reminding all to keep those facing difficulties in mind.

564 Statement of Licensing Policy

In proposing the recommendation, the Vice-Chair of the Licensing Committee, Councillor Winckless, advised Members that the Licensing Policy must be reviewed every five years and then agreed by Full Council. He said that officers prepared a draft policy which was debated by the Licensing Committee prior to consultation and then discussed at the Policy and Resources Committee before being brought to Full Council.

The Leader seconded the recommendation.

Resolved:

(1) That following a recent consultation and consideration by the Licensing Committee and the Policy and Resources Committee, the revised Statement of Licensing Policy under the Licensing Act 2003 be adopted and published, and take effect from 12 December 2025.

565 Local Plan Review - Regulation 18 Consultation Launch

The Vice-Chair of the Planning Policy and Transportation Working Group (PTPWG), Councillor Brawn, introduced the report and proposed the recommendations.

The Leader seconded the recommendations.

A Member clarified that access would be given to the whole document to make comments, during the consultation.

Resolved:

(1) That the draft Local Plan Regulation 18 document in Appendix 1 and the draft Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report Update in Appendix III be approved.

(2) That it be delegated to the Head of Planning in consultation with the Planning and Transportation Policy Working Group chair to make any minor amendments and corrections to the Local Plan Regulation 18 document prior to the start of the consultation period.

566 Local Plan Review - Statement of Community Involvement

The Vice-Chair PTPWG, Councillor Brawn, introduced the report and proposed the recommendation.

The Leader seconded the recommendation.

Resolved:

(1) That the Statement of Community Involvement, as set out in Appendix IV, be adopted.

567 Allocation of Committee Seats

The Mayor confirmed with Members they had read the tabled Appendix III.

The Leader introduced the report and proposed the recommendations.

The Leader of the Conservative Group seconded the recommendations.

The Leader of the Reform UK Group advised that he had a minor amendment to Appendix III, replacing Councillor Chris Palmer with Councillor Kieran Mishchuk on the Environment and Climate Change Committee.

Resolved:

(1) That the political balance calculation as set out in Appendix II be agreed.

(2) That the allocated seats to Committees and the appointment of Members to those Committees in accordance with Group Leaders wishes, and as set out in Appendix III, be agreed, subject to the minor amendment set out in the minutes.

568 **Adjournment**

The meeting was adjourned from 7.12pm until 7.25pm and from 8.05pm until 8.25pm.

Mayor

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All minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel