

AT AN EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE BOROUGH COUNCIL held in the Council Chamber - Town Hall on Monday, 5th November, 2018

PRESENT: The Mayor (Councillor Paul Lion), The Deputy Mayor (Councillor Colin Rayner)

Councillors M. Airey, N Airey, Alexander, Bateson, Beer, Bicknell, Brimacombe, Clark, Coppinger, Cox, Dudley, Dr L. Evans, Gilmore, Hill, Hilton, Hunt, Ilyas, Jones, Kellaway, Love, McWilliams, Majeed, Mills, Quick, Saunders, Sharp, Sharpe, Stretton, Walters, Werner, D. Wilson and E. Wilson.

Officers: Mary Severin, Andy Jeffs, Karen Shepherd and Louisa Dean

61. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bhatti, Burbage, Carroll, Da Costa, Diment, Hollingsworth, Lenton, Luxton, Pryer, Rankin, S Rayner, Richards, Sharma, Shelim, Smith, Story, Targowska and Yong.

62. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None received.

63. APPOINTMENT OF ACTING STATUTORY OFFICERS

Members considered approval to appoint to the statutory role of Head of Paid Service on an interim basis pending recruitment and appointment of a permanent Managing Director, and the statutory posts of Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer.

Councillor Dudley introduced the report, which was necessary as it was not possible to make the appointments other than by approval at Full Council. The report related to the roles of Head of Paid Service, Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer following the former Managing Director stepping back from day to day operations. Councillor Dudley placed on record his thanks on behalf of all Members, to Alison Alexander for all her work in the approximately six years she was at the borough. She had done an excellent job and in particular she had been instrumental in the transformation programme at the council. However the baton had now been passed in an acting capacity to Russell O'Keefe, who would receive an acting up allowance of £12,000 per annum. Members noted that Mr O'Keefe was not present at the meeting as he would have had a pecuniary interest and therefore the Executive Director – Communities was the senior officer present at the meeting.

Councillor Dudley explained that David Scott was proposed as the Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer, both roles he had previously undertaken very professionally. His first outing in the new role would be the Datchet by-election on 22 November 2018. Members noted that the process for the recruitment of a new permanent Managing Director was well underway. Solace, the consultants appointed, had confirmed that half a dozen high-quality candidates had already come forward. Adverts would be placed in the MJ and Sunday Times later in the week. A thorough exercise would take place including a series of interviews. Councillor Dudley stated

that he would ensure Members, in particular the Leader of the Opposition, would be kept informed of progress.

Councillor Brimacombe commented that he had been privileged to be on the interview panel when Alison Alexander applied for the post of Managing Director. She had promised to work diligently, using all her considerable skills to implement the policies of the Administration. He had doubts about the wisdom and benefits of some of those policies and the method of their implementation but there was certainly no doubt in his mind that the Managing Director had been a faithful servant of the Cabinet. She had done what had been asked of her by those who had the authority to instruct her.

He had therefore been surprised a few months previously when he had been informed, just prior to an Employment Panel meeting, that the Cabinet no longer considered Alison Alexander to be the best person to continue as Managing Director in the coming years. No explanation was given at that Panel meeting and no alternative style of preferred management was offered. However it was made clear that there was no crisis and that the plan was for Alison to provide continuity until May 2019.

He realised that a person with the skill-set and track record of accomplishment that the Managing Director undoubtedly had would be an attractive prospect for other employers and so he would not have been surprised to hear that she was leaving, on good terms and with notice, to work elsewhere. What he had been very surprised about was that neither of the two options had come to pass. He had been told that the Managing Director had been on 'extended leave'. He questioned what had happened so quickly, to land the council in a situation where it only had one Executive Director remaining. He was also surprised that the turn of events had not followed due process; not being discussed at either a hastily convened Employment Panel or at the scheduled one on the 13 November. Councillor Brimacombe suggested this smacked of a 'quick-fix, desperate deals behind closed doors' type of politics rather than the open and accountable politics that RBWM professed.

He was being asked to approve a remedial action plan for a situation that should never have occurred. The responsibility for this debacle was with those who had been given the authority to lead the council and who, rather than keeping it safe on the open seas had navigated it much too close to shore, pushing the council on to the rocks and now at the very last minute was shouting 'all hands on deck'. It was the outcome of incompetence and he would not condone it or serve to cover up mistakes, by agreeing to it.

Councillor Hilton commented that Councillor Brimacombe was looking backwards instead of forwards. The council looked forward to protect its position. What had gone had gone; there was knowledge of what had happened but he would not go into this further. He believed that both Russell O'Keefe and David Scott would perform admirably in the roles proposed.

Councillor Hill stated that he fully endorsed the observations made by Councillor Brimacombe. Alison Alexander was certainly hardworking and capable; the loss of her expertise was regrettable. She appeared to have joined an expanding list of departing officers who the council could ill-afford to lose. Councillor Hill asked why had she left so quickly? Members were told only a few weeks ago that she would be part of an orderly hand-over running through to the end of May 2019. He asked what were the cost implications for the borough both for her and other officers? Councillor Hill commented that the council now found itself in the unenviable position

of having a dangerously depleted top team in terms of numbers and lost experience, which must surely be a risk to the council. The blame for the sorry state of affairs was laid on the political leadership of the borough, who had failed in their duty of care to borough residents and stakeholders.

Councillor Hill stated that he was left with a number of questions such as:

Was the untimely departure of the Managing Director a result of another impetuous action by the leadership, or perhaps a sad outcome of the ever-increasing concentration of power? Was this evidence of a pattern of removing or discouraging dissent? The only thing that was probable was that it was not what it seemed.

Councillor Jones echoed the comments in relation to how hard working Alison Alexander had been as a Managing Director; she had had the council at the heart of everything she did. She was concerned that she was being asked to make a decision without the necessary evidence. She had seen that David Scott would be able to undertake what he was being asked to do as he had done so very well in the past. She was also being asked to make a decision when she had not seen the evidence that this was the right course of action. She did not know if other ways forward had been considered as this was not detailed in the report. There may have been discussions but she had not been party to any of them. This was not to say it was the wrong decision but she was unable to make the decision because she had not been given the evidence.

Councillor Werner commented that he was perplexed as he had expected to come to the meeting to find out answers. Apart from Councillor Hilton's view that the council should only look to the future and not look at the past to try to improve the way the council performed or learn from mistakes, he still remained perplexed. He had understood the rationale for an orderly retreat by Alison Alexander from the council in May 2019 so that a proper recruitment process could take place. However suddenly there were panic measures with an Extraordinary Council meeting that half the councillors could not attend. Members had been presented with three pages of information, none of which described why the decision had been made or what the explanation was for the sudden change of heart. He gathered that the proposals had not been through Employment Panel beforehand. Unless some real reasons were given he did not see how anyone could support the proposals.

Councillor Dudley thanked the Opposition for their comments. A press release had been issued on 25 October 2018 that outlined the facts. He suggested that Members should move to the vote. Councillor Bicknell commented that Alison Alexander had indeed done a fantastic job and supported the proposal to move to the vote.

It was proposed by Councillor Dudley, seconded by Councillor Bicknell, and:

RESOLVED: That Council notes the report and appoints:

- i) Russell O'Keefe, Executive Director Place, as Acting Managing Director and Head of Paid Service.**
- ii) David Scott, Head of Communities, Enforcement and Partnerships as Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer.**

COUNCIL - 05.11.18

(26 councillors voted for the motion: Councillors M. Airey, N Airey, Alexander, Bateson, Bicknell, Clark, Coppinger, Cox, Dudley, Gilmore, Hilton, Hunt, Ilyas, Kellaway, Lion, Love, McWilliams, Mills, Quick, C Rayner, Saunders, Sharp, Sharpe, Walters, D. Wilson and E. Wilson). 5 Councillors voted against the motion: Councillors Beer, Brimacombe, Hill, Majeed and Werner. 3 Councillors Abstained: Councillors Dr L. Evans, Jones and Stretton.)