

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the COUNCIL held in the SPORTS HALL, ONE LEISURE, WESTWOOD ROAD, ST IVES PE27 6WU on Wednesday, 14 January 2026.

PRESENT: Councillor D B Dew – Chair.

Councillors T Alban, B S Banks, M L Beuttell, A Blackwell, M J Burke, E R Butler, S Bywater, J R Catmur, S Cawley, B S Chapman, J Clarke, S J Conboy, S J Corney, S J Criswell, L Davenport-Ray, S W Ferguson, I D Gardener, C M Gleadow, J A Gray, K P Gulson, J E Harvey, M A Hassall, S A Howell, N J Hunt, A R Jennings, M Kadewere, P Kadewere, D N Keane, J E Kerr, C Lowe, R Martin, S R McAdam, B A Mickelburgh, D L Mickelburgh, J Neish, Dr M Pickering, B M Pitt, T D Sanderson, D J Shaw, R A Slade, D Terry, C H Tevlin and S Wakeford.

APOLOGIES: R J Brereton, A E Costello, P A Jordan, S Mokbul, S L Taylor, I P Taylor and N Wells.

IN ATTENDANCE: P Hodgson-Jones (virtual)

63. MEMBERS INTERESTS'

No declarations were received.

64. LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION AND LOCAL ELECTIONS 2026

In presenting the report, the Executive Leader Councillor S Conboy drew attention to the point for debate being whether to request to postpone Local Elections 2026 to allow for Officer focus and resource to be directed to Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) or whether to proceed with the planned Local Elections. It was further noted that the Electoral Commission were minded to advise Councils to continue with Local Elections in 2026.

The Leader of the Opposition, Councillor R Martin, opened the debate by thanking Officers and the Executive Leader for calling the Special Meeting and allowing the item to be debated. He expressed his belief that the fundamentally moral thing to do would be to continue with Local Elections in 2026, noting that the convenience of bureaucracy was not worth more than the voice of the people. Referring to the content of the report, he observed that Officer advice that the risks were manageable and that there was sufficient resource to run the

Local Elections as planned. He concluded that it was a matter of principle and that Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC) were stewards of the district up until the implementation of LGR.

Councillor N Hunt thanked Officers for the report and expressed his opinion that the Local Elections should proceed in 2026. He felt that the report highlighted key risks but that they would not be mitigated should Local Elections be postponed. It was argued that LGR was foreseen and planned and therefore not an extraordinary circumstance, he was therefore of the belief that democracy delayed was democracy denied. He concluded by observing that what the district needed more than anything at this time was certainty and not moving goalposts and this would be achieved through holding the Local Elections in 2026.

In addressing the Chamber, Councillor J Gray expressed his opinion that the residents of the district should be able to express their views on the matter. It was his opinion that in order to maintain a democracy, it was only right that the Councillors of the District Council should surrender their power back to voters and allow them the gift of voting to elect the Councillors they chose at the polls in the Local Elections 2026.

Councillor S Bywater stated that he felt a cancellation of Local Elections would be a betrayal of public trust and that democracy belongs to the people of the district. He reflected that he had served the Country in the Armed Forces so that democracy at home could flourish. He expressed his belief that the question being put to Councils by the Government was not a necessity and was in fact political fear dressed up as accountability. He was of the firm belief that cancelling elections is wrong and that democracy was not optional, therefore he was in support of proceeding with the Local Elections 2026.

Councillor M Hassall made reference to his risk management background and stated that he could understand the spirit of what the Government and Secretary of State intended by posing the question to Councils. Furthermore he observed that the greatest risk wasn't LGR but changing the operation halfway through, and questioned whether the unknown of who would be the elected members of HDC in May and what their priorities would be the right risk to take. He was of the opinion that the option with the lowest risk would give the best outcome to residents in the long term therefore was minded to abstain during the voting.

In drawing reference to Churchill, Councillor D Keane observed that power was temporary and conditional and that democracy would erode without a voice to award that power. He reflected that the residents of Huntingdonshire awarded that power to the 52 members of HDC in 2022 with the condition that it was for four years, it was therefore in the best interests of residents that they have an opportunity to review that decision in the Local Elections for 2026. Councillor Keane concluded that without an election there would be an administration at HDC but not a democracy.

The Deputy Leader, Councillor T Sanderson, expressed his support for the Local Elections in 2026 and allied his opinions with Councillor

Conboy's introductory remarks. He also reflected on many previous elections and felt that the continuation of Local Elections in 2026 would avoid blocking democracy.

Councillor J Kerr observed that Councillors represented residents when elected but that did not extend to whether or not they could have a future say or vote. She thanked the Executive Leader and Officers for allowing the debate to be held.

It was observed by Councillor T Alban that in the Local Elections 119 candidates stood for elections, 52 of which became Councillors for an agreed term of four years. He thanked Officers for the report which demonstrated that HDC was able to remain democratic and therefore there was no reason to not proceed with the Local Elections 2026.

Councillor S Cawley expressed his opinion that local democracy was not a luxury nor an inconvenience but that Elections were the core mechanism of democracy. He further noted that to not hold elections would weaken the legitimacy of any administration and would deny democracy. He expressed concern that if Local Elections in 2026 were cancelled, could further opportunities for democracy also be delayed or denied. He concluded that for reasons of principle, accountability and trust, his opinion was the Local Elections in 2026 should be held.

Councillor B Chapman reflected on the comments and opinions of Councillor Hassall as well as his experience of LGR in the 1970s. He expressed concern that the Elections may result in many different HDC Councillors post May 2026 and that this could affect the progress and focus of LGR. He was mindful that if LGR were to be delivered on time, the lack of an election in 2026 would not be felt, however he was concerned about the deliverability of LGR in the timescales prescribed therefore it would be most prudent to proceed with the Local Elections in 2026.

Councillor S Wakeford noted the measured comments of opposition colleagues and noted that the grand principles of democracy had been evoked by the debate. He was mindful of the importance of democracy but also prudent of being wasteful with resources prior to the implementation of LGR given the costs involved with the impending significant reform. He concluded that he welcomed the opportunity from Government to make a balanced decision on the matter and was comfortable with the Officers assurances that the Local Elections 2026 would proceed.

The Chamber was addressed by Councillor P Hodgson-Jones who conveyed his concerns about the uncertainty of the LGR timetable. He was of the opinion that it would be prudent to continue with the Local Elections 2026 to ensure fairness and democracy continued regardless of LGR.

Councillor S Corney stated that he was in agreement with the majority of his colleagues who had spoken during the debate. He also observed that should District Council elections not proceed, the entire cost of the remaining Town and Parish elections would be borne by the Town and Parish Councils which could be prohibitive. He concluded by observing that HDC's preferred LGR option was to be a

stand alone Unitary Authority, therefore to proceed with Local Elections in 2026 would reinforce HDC's autonomy and ability.

In addressing the Chamber and agreeing with her colleagues opinions, Councillor M Beuttell stated that it would be a complete travesty to cancel Local Elections for 2026 and would be a case of the few denying the many.

Councillor A Jennings acknowledge the operational risk identified by Councillor Hassall however he noted that with the exception of the green waste collection subscription, the topic had generated great debate amongst residents. He was of the belief that the elections should proceed and noted that five members had changed their party allegiance since election. He concluded that Officers were clear that there was no issue with capacity and no reason to postpone.

Councillor C Gleadow echoed her colleagues eloquent comments during the debate and stated that she was in favour of Local Elections in 2026.

Councillor Lowe observed that it was easy to overlook the importance of Local Government, however Local Government makes decisions which affect local residents. In order to make decisions which shape and characterise the future of Huntingdonshire, the Council must have the current consent of its residents. She reiterated that residents should have the right to choose who represents them and that a HDC that believes in accountability must ask for public confidence. She concluded that the Local Elections in 2026 should be a moment of renewal and not retreat.

Councillor S Ferguson stated that the decision should be based on principles and not convenience, the Officers were clear within the report that there was no reason not to proceed with Local Elections 2026. He observed that LGR would happen regardless of the outcome of the decision but that democracy would only happen if the Local Elections were held in 2026. He concluded that it was not up to the current Members to decide who runs HDC and that the democratic thing to do would be to proceed with the 2026 Local Elections.

Councillor Conboy concluded the debate observing that colleagues had spoken with great clarity, commitment and consideration. She stated that it was important to discuss the matter and that it showed the accountability and commitment of HDC to democracy.

Following this debate in accordance with the Local Authorities (Standing Orders) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2014 the following Members voted for, against or abstained from the decision to proceed with Recommendation A – to recommend to Government that HDC agrees to maintain current plans to deliver District Council elections in May 2026 alongside work to progress LGR –

For (43) – Councillors Alban, Banks, Beuttell, Blackwell, Burke, Butler, Bywater, Catmur, Cawley, Chapman, Clarke, Conboy, Corney, Criswell, Davenport-Ray, Dew, Ferguson, Gardener, Gleadow, Gray, Gulson, Harvey, Howell, Hunt, Jennings, Kadewere M, Kadewere P, Keane, Kerr, Lowe, Martin, McAdam, Mickelburgh B, Mickelburgh D,

Neish, Pickering, Pitt, Sanderson, Shaw, Slade, Terry, Tevlin,
Wakeford
Against (0) – None
Abstentions (1) – Councillor Hassall

Following conclusion of the recorded vote, and it being previously moved and seconded, upon being put to the vote, it was

RESOLVED

- a) that HDC recommend to Government to agree to maintain current plans to deliver District Council elections in May 2026 alongside work to progress LGR;
- c) that it be delegated to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Executive Leader - Chair of the Cabinet and Executive Councillor for Place (as the named recipient of the letter from the Minister of State for Local Government and Homelessness), to write to MHCLG to confirm the Council's view before the deadline of midnight 15th January 2026, and;
- d) that following confirmation from Government over its decision in respect of whether the 2026 District Council elections will proceed or not, the Council resolves to: i. Work proactively with Town and Parish Councils to understand and overcome any implications of the decision; and ii. In respect of resource/financial pressures, delegates to the Chief Executive (as Returning Officer) in consultation with the Corporate Director (Finance and Resources & S151 Officer) to work with Town and Parish Councils to find solutions to any specific short-term challenges they may face should they be required to deliver 2026 elections as standalone (without being combined with the District Council).

Chair