

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the COUNCIL held in CIVIC SUITE (LANCASTER / STIRLING ROOMS), PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON PE29 3TN on Tuesday, 1 September 2026.

PRESENT: Councillor S W Ferguson – Chair.

Councillors T Alban, L Ascroft, M L Beuttell, A Blackwell, A Bulat, M J Burke, S Bywater, S Cawley, S Claffey, S J Conboy, R Coogan, L Davenport-Ray, L Dewey-Beckett, S W Ferguson, J Francis, P Gammons, I D Gardener, J A Gray, J E Harvey, M A Hassall, D Henly, P J Hodgson-Jones, S Hodgson-Jones, A Hunt, J Hunt, N J Hunt, C Innes, R Ioannides, D N Keane, J E Kerr, S Lancaster, C Lowe, K Maheshwari, R Martin, D McIlwain, B A Mickelburgh, D L Mickelburgh, S Mokbul, J Neish, T D Sanderson, N Sarkies, G Seeff, L M Simpson, P Simpson, S Smith, W Smith, I Taylor, H Tobias, T Tomlinson, N Wells and A Wood.

APOLOGY: An apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor M Young.

36. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

37. NOTICE OF MOTION

Councillor R Martin moved, and it was duly seconded by Councillor M Beuttell that

Motion of No Confidence in the Executive Leader

This Council resolves that it no longer has confidence in Councillor Conboy as Leader of the Council and, in accordance with the Constitution, removes Councillor Conboy from the office of Leader with immediate effect.

In the event it is resolved to remove Councillor Conboy as Leader of the Council, this Council further resolves to proceed immediately to the election of a new Leader of the Council, for the remainder of the four-year term, in accordance with the Constitution.

In presenting the proposed motion, Councillor R Martin stated that

such a meeting had not been requested lightly but was necessary to determine whether the Council continued to have confidence in the administration. He argued that a series of events in recent months had damaged the Council's reputation, with the Capital & Centric consultation acting as the catalyst for wider concerns regarding leadership, accountability and governance. He referred to the public departure of two Members from the Joint Administration, who had expressed a loss of confidence in the administration, resulting in a change to its composition.

He expressed concern that responsibility for the consultation and its consequences had not been clearly accepted, stating that elected Members should ultimately be accountable for decisions taken by the Council. He questioned what lessons had been learned from the situation and whether sufficient scrutiny and accountability had been demonstrated. Councillor R Martin also raised concerns regarding the lack of published financial information relating to the Capital & Centric project, noting that previously requested details had not yet been provided. He questioned whether the Council had adequate oversight of project expenditure and governance arrangements. In concluding, Councillor Martin challenged explanations that pre-election restrictions had limited Members' ability to comment on the consultation and maintained that the issues raised reflected a broader failure of leadership and accountability. He therefore commended the motion to Council.

Councillor M Beuttell seconded the motion and reserved her right to speak.

Councillor T Alban spoke in support of the motion, stating that he had given the matter considerable thought before reaching his decision. Drawing on his many years of involvement in local politics, he remarked that he could not recall a District Council issue that had generated such significant public concern, anger and engagement. He welcomed the level of community involvement but expressed regret that it had arisen from what he regarded as a self-inflicted issue for the Council. Whilst acknowledging that the circumstances surrounding the Capital & Centric project should be thoroughly examined through the Council's governance and scrutiny processes, he emphasised that the purpose of the debate was to consider confidence in the Council's leadership. He stated that, whilst he held Councillor S Conboy in high personal regard and was not motivated by personal criticism, he believed the Joint Administration had failed in its handling of the matter. He cited poor decision-making, inadequate communication and a lack of accountability as key concerns. He concluded that, in his view, the Joint Administration had failed the District and that, as an opposition councillor, he considered it his responsibility to support the motion and hold the administration to account.

Councillor T Sanderson spoke against the motion, noting that whilst the debate was unprecedented during his time on the Council, it arose within the context of a closely balanced chamber. He suggested that the motion was primarily driven by concerns surrounding the Capital & Centric project and observed that the proposals had previously received cross-party consideration through the Council's scrutiny and decision-making processes. He noted that

Members, including those now critical of the project, had previously expressed support for regeneration opportunities and engagement with Capital & Centric. He emphasised that the Council had established mechanisms for holding the administration to account, including Overview and Scrutiny, and argued that disagreements over a consultation should not automatically result in a vote of no confidence. He acknowledged the strength of public feeling regarding the proposals and stated that those concerns must be carefully considered. Whilst accepting that neither the administration nor the opposition was perfect, he stressed the importance of collaborative working to achieve positive outcomes for residents. He also highlighted a number of achievements delivered under the Joint Administration, including significant investment in leisure facilities and other local improvements. Councillor T Sanderson concluded by stating that he retained confidence in Councillor S Conboy's leadership and would not support the motion.

Councillor J Kerr spoke against the motion, stating that, whilst she was a signatory to the Joint Administration Agreement, she had considered the arguments presented and remained confident in Councillor S Conboy's leadership. She highlighted Councillor Conboy's role in leading a politically diverse administration and her commitment to collaborative working across the Council. Councillor J Kerr noted that the Leader had been elected only a few months previously and questioned whether sufficient grounds existed to overturn that decision. She referred to a number of achievements delivered under the administration, including investment in leisure facilities, support for homelessness services, economic development initiatives and environmental improvements. She argued that these successes should not be overlooked because of concerns relating to the Capital & Centric project. Whilst acknowledging that legitimate questions remained regarding the project, Councillor J Kerr maintained that the facts and responsibilities had yet to be fully established. She noted that Councillor S Conboy had supported further scrutiny and investigation and argued that accountability should follow evidence rather than precede it. Councillor J Kerr concluded that concerns regarding a specific project should not be conflated with confidence in the Council Leader. Believing the motion to be premature and potentially destabilising, she stated that she would not support it and considered it more appropriate to allow the agreed scrutiny process to take place.

Councillor S Bywater spoke in support of the motion, emphasising that his position was not based on personal criticism of Councillor Conboy, for whom he expressed respect, but on concerns regarding leadership and accountability.

He argued that the handling of the car parking proposals had caused significant public concern, confusion and reputational damage to the Council, whilst suggesting that members of the administration had sought to distance themselves from decisions for which they held collective responsibility. He further stated that the issue extended beyond the car parking proposals, citing concerns regarding the introduction of garden waste charges and investment in the Council's electronic voting AV system. In his view, these matters collectively raised wider questions about leadership, judgement and accountability, particularly at a time when the Council faced significant

challenges associated with local government reorganisation. Drawing on his professional experience, Councillor S Bywater stressed the importance of leaders accepting responsibility when decisions and outcomes fell short of expectations. He expressed the view that the leadership demonstrated by the administration had not met the standards required during a period of significant change. He concluded that, whilst acknowledging Councillor S Conboy's personal qualities, he no longer believed that the Council's leadership retained the confidence necessary to lead the authority through the challenges ahead and therefore supported the motion.

Councillor A Bulat spoke in support of the motion, arguing that recent events had demonstrated a lack of leadership and accountability within the administration. She stated that, whilst concerns centred on the Capital & Centric consultation, the wider issue was the failure of the administration to take responsibility for decisions taken under its leadership. She commented that the decision to explore regeneration opportunities with Capital & Centric had been approved through the Council's governance processes and questioned why concerns had not been raised earlier by members of the administration if they disagreed with the direction of the project. She further argued that opportunities had existed to halt or amend the consultation before it became publicly contentious. She criticised what she characterised as a pattern of blame being attributed to former members, coalition partners, Officers, consultants and external factors, rather than being accepted by those currently holding leadership positions. In her view, explanations relating to pre-election restrictions and local government reorganisation demonstrated a reluctance to accept responsibility for the outcomes of the consultation. Councillor A Bulat stated that effective leadership required both the courage to make difficult decisions and the willingness to accept responsibility when those decisions proved unpopular. Whilst acknowledging Councillor Conboy's commitment and personal dedication to the District, she maintained that this was insufficient to retain her confidence in the administration's leadership. She concluded by urging Members to support the motion, stating that the administration had failed to demonstrate the accountability and leadership required by residents.

Councillor P Gammons spoke in support of the motion and argued that responsibility for the Capital & Centric project extended beyond any single individual or political group. He contended that Members from across the Council, including those who had approved the project or failed to scrutinise it effectively, shared responsibility for the outcome. He referred to reports indicating that more than £333,000 of public funds had been spent on the project and questioned the value achieved from that expenditure. He expressed concern that proposals involving the redevelopment of key town-centre car parks had caused significant public opposition and represented poor use of taxpayers' money. He stated that the situation had damaged public confidence in the Council and reflected shortcomings in both decision-making and scrutiny processes. Councillor P Gammons concluded that those who had approved or failed to adequately challenge the project should accept responsibility and consider their positions within the Council's leadership and Cabinet structures.

Councillor G Seeff spoke against the motion, acknowledging the significant public concern surrounding the Capital & Centric project

and the need for a full investigation into the circumstances surrounding its appointment and remit. He noted that Councillor S Conboy had already called for such an inquiry and argued that Members should await its findings before reaching conclusions on leadership or accountability. He considered the motion premature and suggested that it risked prejudging the outcome of the investigation. He also noted that previous governance reports had identified weaknesses within the Council's control environment and stated that the current administration had been working to address those issues. Drawing on his professional experience in regeneration projects, Councillor G Seeff questioned the judgement of Capital & Centric in bringing forward proposals involving the redevelopment of car parks, arguing that the likely public opposition should have been foreseeable.

He concluded that accountability should be determined only once all the facts were known and urged Members to allow the investigation to proceed before making decisions on responsibility.

Councillor S Hodgson-Jones spoke in support of the motion. She commented that, having been elected earlier in the year, she was unable to comment on decisions taken during the previous municipal period. However, she stated that since taking office she had made it a priority to understand her responsibilities and the issues affecting her ward and committee work. She raised the point that the Portfolio Holder responsible for the Capital & Centric project had stated that he was unaware of the contractual arrangements and current financial position relating to the project. Given the significance of the matter, she considered it reasonable to expect that such information would have been known to the relevant Portfolio Holder and shared with Cabinet as part of its collective responsibility. She further stated that it was the responsibility of the Council Leader to ensure Cabinet Members were fully informed and effectively managing their portfolios. In her view, the issues highlighted during the debate reflected a failure of leadership within the Joint Administration. Councillor S Hodgson-Jones concluded that, for these reasons, she supported the motion.

Councillor R Ioannides spoke during the debate, stating that the Council had reached the point of considering a vote of no confidence due to what he described as the administration's failure to listen to concerns and warnings raised previously. He argued that the handling of the Capital & Centric project, the associated car parking proposals and the use of delegated powers demonstrated shortcomings in leadership, scrutiny and financial oversight, resulting in poor decision-making and a lack of accountability. He also suggested that responsibility extended beyond the current administration and included those who had failed to adequately scrutinise the project at an earlier stage. Despite these criticisms, Councillor R Ioannides questioned the practical consequences of supporting the motion, stating that there was no obvious alternative administration capable of commanding a majority on the Council. He suggested that a successful motion could create further instability or result in greater reliance on Officers in the absence of clear political leadership. Councillor R Ioannides concluded that he intended to abstain on the motion, stating that responsibility for the situation was shared more broadly across the Council and urging Members to focus on

improving accountability, leadership and governance.

Councillor L Davenport-Ray spoke against the motion, stating that it was premature and that its potential consequences had not been fully considered. She suggested that further information regarding the Capital & Centric project was still required before any decision on leadership should be made. She argued that the Council needed stronger scrutiny and greater transparency surrounding the issues that had arisen and referred to proposals she had made in this regard. Councillor L Davenport-Ray also stressed the importance of cross-party working to address the matter. Whilst acknowledging her respect for Councillor Conboy, she expressed disappointment with the response to recent events and urged Members to focus on resolving the issues facing the Council and its residents.

Councillor N Hunt spoke against the motion, stating that whilst recent events had not all been handled successfully, the debate was ultimately about confidence in the Leader and administration rather than a single issue. He argued that Councillor S Conboy's leadership had overseen a period of significant achievement for the Council, including investment in leisure facilities, improvements to parks and community facilities, reductions in carbon emissions, and enhanced support for residents during the cost-of-living crisis.

Councillor N Hunt stated that the administration had prioritised delivering tangible outcomes for residents through collaborative working and had made a positive difference across the District. He further suggested that supporting the motion could risk undermining those achievements and creating uncertainty at a time when the Council should remain focused on service delivery. Councillor N Hunt concluded by expressing his confidence in Councillor S Conboy's leadership and urged Members to reject the motion.

Councillor S Cawley spoke in support of the motion, stating that the debate concerned leadership and confidence rather than personalities. Whilst recognising Councillor S Conboy's commitment to the Council, he questioned whether the Leader continued to command the confidence necessary to govern effectively. He referred to the significant public opposition to the car park redevelopment proposals, highlighting the volume of correspondence received from residents and the strong attendance at public meetings. It was suggested that many residents felt the proposals had been developed without sufficient engagement. He argued that leadership should be judged by how decisions are developed, communicated and managed, and stated that confidence had been damaged both publicly and within the administration, as demonstrated by the collapse of the governing coalition. Councillor S Cawley concluded that the Council required effective leadership and renewed public trust and therefore supported the motion.

Councillor A Hunt spoke against the motion, acknowledging the frustration felt by Members and residents regarding the recent events and the desire to understand how the situation had arisen. He argued that, whilst accountability was important, the evidence available did not demonstrate that Councillor S Conboy had sought to deny responsibility, deflect blame or distance herself from the issues that had emerged. Instead, he stated that she had acknowledged the

situation and remained committed to understanding what had occurred and ensuring lessons were learned. Councillor A Hunt suggested that removing the Leader at this stage would be counterproductive, as it could hinder efforts to establish the facts, identify any failings and implement improvements. He further noted that responsibility for the circumstances should not rest solely with one individual where others had opportunities to challenge or intervene during the process. He concluded that the most effective way of securing answers and preventing similar issues in future was to retain the current leadership and allow the ongoing review process to continue. He therefore urged Members to reject the motion.

Councillor M Hassall spoke against the motion, stating that whilst the issues surrounding the Market Towns Regeneration project were serious, they represented governance and operational failures rather than a failure of political leadership. He argued that Members did not yet have sufficient information, particularly regarding project expenditure and decision-making, to reach a fair conclusion on accountability. Councillor M Hassall also referred to wider governance concerns previously identified within the Council and suggested that the project reflected broader systemic issues. He maintained that the priority should be to establish the facts through an independent forensic audit rather than remove the Leader. Councillor M Hassall concluded that a thorough investigation was required to restore public confidence and determine responsibility before any judgement on leadership should be made.

Councillor J Frances moved for the Motion to go to a vote which was seconded by Councillor K Maheshwari and rejected by the Chair as he considered it would be unfair to conclude the debate before Executive Leader, Councillor S Conboy had spoken and therefore declined to accept the procedural motion, opting instead to continue with the listed speakers.

Councillor J Neish raised a point of order, reminding Members that Officers were unable to respond to comments made during the debate and should not therefore be subjected to criticism or blame in their inability to respond. He requested that Members bear this in mind during their contributions. The Chair agreed with the point of order and thanked Councillor Neish for raising the matter.

Councillor D Keane stated that his objective was to secure the best outcomes for residents, the market towns and the Council, but that he believed a change in leadership was now necessary to achieve this. He said that key questions about project governance, budgets, expenditure, authorisation and community engagement remained unanswered. Whilst acknowledging that operational decisions were not made by the Executive Leader personally, he argued that political leadership remained accountable for ensuring effective oversight, appropriate controls and meaningful engagement. He expressed support for regeneration but stated that public confidence had been undermined by the process followed and the level of public concern generated by the proposals.

Councillor Keane said that confidence in the current Executive Leader had broken down and that new leadership was needed to restore

trust, provide accountability and ensure future regeneration work was delivered transparently and with proper governance. He therefore supported the motion.

Meeting adjourned at 8:03pm

Councillor R Coogan left the meeting at 8:03pm.

Meeting resumed at 8:14pm

Councillor J Harvey spoke in support of the Joint Administration and the leadership of the Executive Leader, stating that the administration had remained focused on delivering for residents. She highlighted achievements including maintaining balanced budgets and protecting frontline services despite financial pressures, introducing 100% Council Tax Support, reducing housing benefit processing times, and improving support for vulnerable residents. She also referred to award-winning refuse and street cleansing services, investment in environmental initiatives to reduce carbon emissions, the retention of Green Flag status at several parks, support for community groups through grant funding, efforts to tackle fraud, and investment in leisure facilities and market towns. She argued that these achievements demonstrated the administration's positive record and effective leadership. Councillor J Harvey described the motion as a distraction from the Council's work and argued that it risked undermining the progress already made. She urged members to consider the administration's record, reject the motion and continue to support Councillor S Conboy as Leader of the Council.

Councillor L Dewey-Beckett expressed support for Executive Leader, Councillor S Conboy, praising her leadership, diligence and willingness to accept responsibility. He acknowledged that communication regarding the Capital & Centric proposals should have taken place sooner but stated that responsibility for decisions was shared across the Joint Administration. He argued that the administration learns from mistakes, adapts and improves, and that its willingness to acknowledge shortcomings demonstrated effective leadership. For these reasons, she opposed the motion and supported Councillor S Conboy remaining as Leader.

Councillor L Ascroft argued that the motion was politically motivated and that a more constructive approach would have been to seek an independent review of recent events. She noted that Councillor S Conboy had already requested a review to examine procedures, actions and decisions objectively. She praised Councillor S Conboy's leadership record, highlighting her experience, financial stewardship and commitment to collaborative working. She also referred to her support for economic development initiatives and argued that her leadership was particularly important as the Council prepared for local government reorganisation. Councillor L Ascroft stated that the motion risked creating unnecessary instability at a critical time and expressed her full confidence in the Executive Leader, urging members to reject the motion.

Councillor S Lancaster stated that, based on his experience in the private sector, he found the events concerning and believed greater accountability was required. He expressed concern at attempts to

justify what had occurred and rejected suggestions that responsibility rested solely with Officers. Councillor S Lancaster said it was important for the Council to learn lessons from the situation and that this required accepting responsibility where appropriate. He added that the Council owed residents and taxpayers a commitment to fully understand what had gone wrong and to ensure similar issues did not arise in future.

Councillor P Hodgson-Jones stated that the debate was about leadership and accountability rather than solely the Capital & Centric proposals. He argued that members of the administration had sought to distance themselves from decisions relating to the project and questioned the effectiveness of Cabinet oversight. He stated that he had already called for an internal audit review in his role as Chair of Corporate Governance Committee but maintained that an investigation did not remove the need for leadership accountability. He argued that responsibility ultimately rested with the Leader of the Council and concluded that the motion was necessary due to concerns over governance and leadership. He therefore urged Members to support the motion.

Councillor R Tomlinson stated that the motion was not a personal criticism of Councillor S Conboy or a reflection on her commitment to Huntingdonshire, but a judgment on leadership. He argued that the issues extended beyond the Capital & Centric proposals and reflected wider concerns regarding communication, transparency, member involvement and political judgement.

Referring to comments made by former members of the Joint Administration, he noted that confidence in the administration had been publicly questioned. He acknowledged that mistakes could occur in any administration but stated that accountability and scrutiny were essential. Councillor R Tomlinson concluded that the key issue was whether Councillor S Conboy still commanded the confidence of the Council. Having considered the matter, he stated that he did not believe she did and therefore supported the motion.

Councillor J Gray stated that the issues surrounding the Capital & Centric proposals represented the most significant crisis of confidence he had witnessed during his time on the Council. He argued that the matter reflected wider governance concerns, including weaknesses in internal audit, procurement and oversight arrangements. Drawing on his experience as a former Cabinet member, Councillor J Gray stressed the importance of effective Cabinet leadership, scrutiny and informal governance processes. He suggested that there had been a failure to adequately oversee the project and that Cabinet collectively shared responsibility for the situation. He thought that senior political leadership had not responded quickly enough to public concerns and argued that accountability ultimately rested with the Leader of the Council. He concluded that the response had been "too little, too late" and indicated his support for the motion.

Councillor J Neish stated that Cabinet should operate on the principle of collective responsibility but argued that this had not been evident in the handling of the Capital & Centric proposals. He referred to the significant volume of correspondence received from residents, which

he said reflected the strength of public concern. Drawing comparisons with previous administrations, Councillor Neish said that Cabinet members should accept responsibility for their decisions and not seek to shift accountability elsewhere. Whilst acknowledging that mistakes can occur, he argued that residents expected prompt acknowledgement and accountability when problems arose. Councillor J Neish concluded that ultimate responsibility rested with the Leader of the Council and stated that, for this reason, he supported the motion of no confidence.

Councillor N Sarkies argued that the priority should be to establish what had gone wrong rather than focus on attributing blame to individuals. He said that an investigation into the issues was needed and, for that reason, he would not support the motion.

Executive Leader, Councillor S Conboy acknowledged that the debate and the motion of no confidence were serious matters and accepted that, as Leader, she was accountable. She stated that the handling of the Capital & Centric proposals had been wrong and expressed regret for the concern caused to residents and the damage to public confidence. Councillor S Conboy said that she had acted promptly by requesting information to understand what had occurred and by seeking independent scrutiny and a review of wider governance arrangements. She emphasised that she had listened to residents' concerns and accepted the need to reflect on lessons learned. She argued that leadership involved listening, following due process, making difficult decisions and accepting accountability without seeking to blame Officers, former colleagues or contractors. Whilst acknowledging shortcomings, she maintained that responsible leadership required addressing the issues through proper processes and learning from them rather than seeking scapegoats.

Councillor M Beuttell passed on her right to speak as seconder of the motion.

In exercising his right of reply, Councillor R Martin welcomed the full and open debate, acknowledging that the issues raised had damaged public confidence in the Council as a whole. He argued that responsibility for the Capital & Centric proposals rested with the Joint Administration and Cabinet, rather than consultants or Officers, as the Council had retained control of the process. He stated that Officers should not be blamed for the situation and highlighted what he considered to be a stronger governance record under previous Conservative administrations. While supporting town centre regeneration in principle, he argued that the proposals which emerged had focused on Council-owned assets and represented poor value for money. Councillor R Martin concluded that the administration had failed to deliver the change it had promised and that the response to the controversy had been characterised by finger-pointing rather than accountability. He therefore urged members to support the motion.

A Motion for a recorded vote having succeeded, following this debate the following Members voted for, against or abstained from a vote on the Motion.

For (18) Councillors T Alban, M Beuttell, A Bulat, S Bywater, S

Cawley, L Davenport-Ray, S Ferguson, I Gardener, J Gray, P Hodgson-Jones, S Hodgson-Jones, D Keane, C Lowe, R Martin, D McIlwain, J Neish, P Simpson and R Tomlinson.

Against (24) Councillors L Ascroft, A Blackwell, M Burke, S Claffey, S Conboy, L Dewey-Beckett, J Harvey, M Hassall, A Hunt, J Hunt, N Hunt, C Innes, J Kerr, B Mickelburgh, D Mickelburgh, S Mokbul, T Sanderson, N Sarkies, G Seeff, S Smith, W Smith, I Taylor, N Wells and A Wood.

Abstain (8) Councillors J Francis, P Gammons, D Henly, R Ioannides, S Lancaster, K Maheshwari, M Simpson and H Tobias.

Having been put to the vote, the Motion was declared to be DEFEATED.

The meeting ended at 8.57pm.

Chair