

Minutes of the Meeting of Personnel held in Doggetts Barn on 7 November 2025 at 11:30 am

Present: Cllrs. Angela Baker, Michael Gemmell Smith, Alan Layland, Margot McArthur (*Chair*)
In attendance: Town Clerk.
11:36 am Meeting opened.

1 To receive apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received, noted and accepted from Cllrs McGregor, Stockdale, and Todd.

2 Declarations of interest or predetermination

None.

3 To receive, approve and sign the minutes of the Personnel Meeting held on 13 June 2025 (pages 2023-098/1-4).

Resolved: that the minutes of the Personnel Committee meeting held 13 June 2025 be duly signed as a true and accurate record of the meeting (pages 2023-098/01-4).

4 Matters arising not covered elsewhere

Cllrs noted:

- Updated contracts of employment had been issued as per last year's resolution.
- Staff appraisals will take place in January.
- Worknest portals: HR portal had been wiped ready to reset-up but time was not allowing so records remained manual and Excel spreadsheets. H&S portal was working sufficiently until during an audit some forms were deleted by Worknest. This has caused some disruption, with some forms (mainly office) needing to be reuploading. H&S recording and checks are carried out.
- Polices: Recommendation for new polices (and also expected as part of the Quality Council status), which the Clerk will be working on and will present to Council to approve; these included: Harassment at work; Menopause; Training and Personal Development.
- The annual external services contract for HR and H&S with Worknest was in year 3 of the agreement, annual total £2765.53; and insurance £308.75. (Total £3074.28). May 2026, fees would be increasing by 6%. Another company had approached Council to quote but as we are in a 3-year agreement, this will be followed-up next year when we consider the HR and H&S agreement.

Council meeting papers: Confidential papers can be viewed by all councillors on the new meeting agendas, papers and minutes 'Council papers' software. Previously, committee and council had agreed that 'only' personnel committee would have access to 'confidential' papers due the sensitivities of staffing matters. For the now, this was not possible. It is difficult to prepare papers without identify personnel either by name or position. Therefore, sensitivities would be reported verbally at meetings or papers presented at those meetings.

There were not questions.

4.1 Kent Pension Fund - Pooling of Town & Parish Council - Formal Consultation: Update from last meeting

Members received an update on the Kent Pension Fund consultation to pool parish and town council contributions, which at its last meeting had referred to Council.

Council September meeting minutes: Personnel Committee and Council had considered the Kent Pension Fund recent consultation on the pooling of town and parish councils contributions. KALC had responded that this was not something they were able to advise on. The Council's response following its July meeting had been submitted. Having circulated to some other clerks, it would seem there was mixed views as all councils pay different contributions, with one paying

a secondary contribution. Some will benefit from the pooling with its contributions being reduced and others will increase. One clerk explained, as they understood it, those paying a lesser amount will see an increase in contributions. Those paying more will see a reduction. Overall, an average will be worked out and we will all pay that amount.

Kent Pensions were prompt in responding to the Council's concerns - details were reported in the meeting papers. In short, they clarified that:

- This proposal is not in respect of pooling pension Funds. It is in respect of pooling certain groups of employers together in the Kent Pension Fund. Specifically, town and parish councils. We currently have two other successful pools in the Kent Pension Fund, namely Academies and Colleges. The theory is that pooling a certain category of employers, controls volatility of contributions and funding positions which is what the Fund aims to do overall.
- It is likely that employer contribution rates will change from 1 April 2026 if pooling is agreed by the Pension Fund Committee, however as advised we are currently conducting the Funds Triennial Valuation and even if the pooling arrangement does not proceed, individual employer rates are likely to change regardless, as it does every 3 years when we carry out the triennial valuation.
- Local Government Pension Scheme is a Career Average defined benefits scheme, meaning the pension amount is based on salary and the number of years in the scheme. It's a statutory scheme meaning all benefits are guaranteed. Increases or decreases on employer contributions does not impact the level of benefits the member received on retirement.

Members had no questions, though asked if the pension investment update reports could be circulated to committee members in future.

5 Budget 2025-26 update

Members received a summary of the staffing budgets 2024-25 forecasted end-of-year view. This included salaries, employers NI, pension contributions, medical insurance and P11 costs. Total budget was £516.563. Actual year-end forecast £500,217. Surplus of £16k - this was due to the NJC pay award (3.2%) lower than the budgeted allowance at 4.04%; and small salary savings in Open Spaces and Community Warden.

Members had no questions, and

Resolved: to make recommendation to Finance Committee and Council to move some of the end-of-year surplus into staffing earmarked reserves to bring up to £45k, and to release into General Reserves the balance.

6 To discuss Personnel matters

6.1 To receive update on staff attendance/absence for 2025/26

Members received an update on staff attendance and absences, noting total sickness and other April to 31 October was 150 days. One member was on long-term absence, one was three-week medical reason, and four days compassionate leave. It was noted that another member was due to be off for six-weeks due to medical treatment.

Members discussed and noted staff shortages in the grounds team, and concerns of work loads building up or potential increase on hours time owed. Members unanimously,

Resolved: to grant overtime payment for any additional hours worked between November to January for the groundstaff, and for this to be managed by the Head Groundsman.

7 To receive an update on other staff matters

7.1 Community Warden

The Community Warden had been on long-term leave since 31 March, and a return date was not

immanent. Committee and Council had supported funding for an Occupational Health Assessment (OHA), the Clerk said that consideration could be given engaging an OHA even though a return date was not known. However, a recent meeting had shed uncertainty of any return.

The new temporary Community Warden, Lin Larmer had started on 14 October. The position was advertised in September, Cllr Layland and the Town Clerk carried out the interviews with three applicants and appointed Lin Larmer. Council ratified the appointment at its October meeting. Lin was settling in well and has some objectives set, mainly around working with volunteers and speedwatch.

Members **agreed** a review of the job role and hours and to report back to its next meeting.

7.2 Grounds Apprenticeship

The grounds apprentice was at the end of his course. He had passed his portfolio assessment, but unfortunately, learning the Latin name for 25 plants was challenging - this was needed to complete the level 2 qualification. Additional plant learning session and material had been provided by the college. Members asked if the college could provide further support.

Members were asked to confirm a budget to support resist of the exams as this now fell outside the apprenticeship funding, and it would be a shame for him to not to complete the qualification. Members agreed that they should facilitate and help the grounds apprentice and unanimously,

Resolved: the expenditure of £400 for exam resits to help ensure the grounds apprentice can complete the qualification.

In March Committee and Council (May meeting) resolved to move the grounds apprentice from a fixed-term contract to a permanent contract following completion of his apprenticeship, and recognising the qualification. Members were asked how they wanted to proceed in view that the qualification was uncompleted due to the exams. Members noted he fits in with the grounds team well, the college training and practical learning had enabled him to develop skills and become a valued member of the team. The Head Groundsman was happy with his work ethic, skills and to keep in the team. Members unanimously,

Resolved: to extend the fixed-term contract, and once the Level 2 Horticulture qualification was completed, to move to a permanent contract (as previously resolved).

7.3 Market Officer

Background: The Market Officer post was established in 2022 on a one-year fixed-term contract to provide dedicated management for the Thursday Market. The contract was extended to May 2024, and in September 2024 the Personnel Committee and Council approved a further two-year extension to 31 May 2026, with a review scheduled for October 2025 to align with the budget setting process. Committee is asked to consider the financial, legal, and personnel implications of the market officer position.

The Council assumed direct management of the market in 2021 following the end of the agreement with Brays and an unsuccessful tender for a new operator. Initially, Town Council staff managed the market alongside their normal duties, including early morning set-up, rent collection, safety checks, and trader administration. As the market grew, this workload became unsustainable, prompting the appointment of a dedicated Market Officer.

Current Position: Since his appointment, the Market Officer had provided continuity and operational support, including:

- Maintaining positive relationships with traders and the public.
- Attracting new traders and supporting existing ones.
- Ensuring health, safety, and presentation standards.
- Managing rent collection, insurance documentation, and trader agreements.
- Promoting the market through social media and town notices.

While the market generally operated at a small financial loss, it contributed to increased footfall on market days, supports local businesses, and enhances the vitality of the High Street.

Feedback from traders has been positive, with one long-standing trader noting that “the market is the best it has been in 25 years.”

Financial Information

- Current pay scale: LC1 SCP 11 (budget allowance region of £9,000 per annum for 11 hours/week).
- Pension auto-enrolment threshold: £10,000 per annum.
- The market currently operated at a marginal net loss; however, the indirect economic benefits to the High Street are positive and well-recognised.

Any change to the Market Officer’s hours or termination of the post would have implications for the staffing budget and office and groundstaff operational capacity. Should members recommend a permanent post, the cost will need to be reflected in the 2026–27 and future budgets (agenda item 10).

Legal Implications

- The Council must comply with employment legislation, including provisions under the Employment Rights Act 1996 and associated regulations governing fixed-term contracts.
- Under the Fixed-term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2002, employees who have been continuously employed on successive fixed-term contracts for four years or more are normally deemed to be permanent, unless the employer can objectively justify continued fixed-term status. The Market Officer will reach this four-year threshold in May 2026; therefore, if the role is to continue beyond this date, it should be converted to a permanent post
- Any termination of contract should be managed in line with the Council’s HR policies and relevant notice requirements.

Members considered the value of the Market Officer position (and impact on the office if there was not this position), and unanimously,

Resolved: to recommend to Finance Committee and full Council to continue with Market Officer position and offer a permanent contract at the end the fixed-term contract (31 May 2026), on the same terms (11 hours per week, LC1 levels) and a standard contract. It was noted that the current pension auto-enrolment regulations would apply when the salary exceeded £10,000.

Resolved: a written agreement should also be in place noting his personal outside trading interests which should not interfere or obstruct his role as Market Officer; and that he should meet the same trading standards that is expected of market traders including providing copies of relevant compliance and insurance certificates.

7.4 Pension Contributions during period of absence

The Town Clerk had noticed a recent discrepancy with employer pension contributions when a person was on sick leave. Whilst the employee was on full pay, there was no issue or change to contributions however, where pay dropped to half pay, or just SSP, or no pay, the payroll software had calculated contributions based on 'actual gross pay'. Under the Kent Pensions sickness guidance on the portal, it says:

"Both employee and employer pension contributions continue to be deducted throughout a period of sickness. The **contributions paid by the scheme member are based on the pay that they are actually receiving**. If the member runs out of sick pay or does not receive sick pay, no contributions will be deducted from them.

The **employer will pay contributions on the pay that an employee receives until they either reduce their pay or do not receive sick pay. When a member receives reduced or no pay the employer pays contributions on the value of the Assumed Pensionable Pay (APP)**".

The Community Warden's contributions should have been based on the AAP. The shortfall of employer contributions was an estimated shortfall of £1,003.09, plus any future contributions.

Members noted the regulations for employer contributions and additional payments.

7.5 Employers Assist Programme (EAP)

For information: Personnel Committee and Council 2021 had agreed to an 'employers assist programme' (EAP) with Health Assured. This was renewed May 2024 for 3-years. In November 2024 this was extended for 5-years to benefit from a discounted price of £672pa - reported to committee June - this allows for all staff and employees to benefit from a range of services including:

- New starter occupational health assessments.
- Wellbeing App with financial, bereavement, health advice.
- Increase of counselling sessions if needed - 12 sessions per issue.
- Training for mental health first aiders training.
- Discounts for shopping and travel and entertainment.

SAGE (Council's payroll software) also offer a service. They were promoting a free 3-month trail - no commitment and no financial implication for the first 3-months. Its service includes:

- On demand GP online service (for up to 6-people in the employee's family).
- Counselling - 6 sessions per person (and for up to 6 people in the family).
- Health portal.
- Discounts on 100s of retailers including supermarkets, main high street stores through e-vouchers.

Costs would be £6.95 per person per month up to 20 people, £5.80 pp pcm up to 30 people. For the same cover as above for staff and councillors the annual cost would be £1,948.50. Whilst SAGE offers some slightly different benefits to Health Assured, Members **agreed** the Council maintained best value for its EAP with Health Assured. Members also considered if to allow staff the opportunity to benefit from the free 3-month trail, but concluded and

Resolved: not to change its EAP and to remain with Health Assured as per contract, and provided best value for Council. It was agreed not to pilot a free 3-month trial with SAGE.

8 To receive an update on office hours, visitors to office and staffing hours

Members received an update on visitor numbers which was down on average from to the office April - July which were averaging 15 to 18, now an average of 12.

Staffing hours overall had seen improvement on ensuring staff worked closer to contract hours, monthly additional hours averaging between 2-4 hours. However, the Town Clerk's hours remained excessive - monthly additional hours September 35 hours; October 20 hours.

9 Staff salaries

9.1 NJC Pay scales

Members noted in July, the National Joint Council for Local Government Services (NJC) agreed the rates of pay applicable from 1 April 2025 (covering the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026). The new pay rates, each increased by 3.20 per cent per annum. In addition, the outer London fringe area payment increased from £706 to £729pa.

9.2 To consider additional pay scale increments in view of additional committee

In 2023, following the retirement of the Buildings Manager, it was agreed to expand the Head Groundsman role to include oversight of the Council's buildings. During that transition, it became apparent that:

- Regular health and safety monitoring was required across the Council's nine buildings and outbuildings;
- General maintenance had been neglected, creating several works projects requiring oversight;
- The Pavilion presented significant issues, particularly with heating and hot water systems;
- Legionella control and maintenance had lapsed; and

- Fire safety risk assessments and follow-up actions required updating and ongoing monitoring.

Additionally, there are regular meetings with leaseholders, and lease negotiations are ongoing (the latter led by the Town Clerk).

Current Position

When the Open Spaces Officer was recruited December 2024, the role brief included assisting the Buildings Manager/Head Groundsman with obtaining quotes and preparing reports. In practice, the Open Spaces Officer had taken on a more active and hands-on role, particularly in managing maintenance projects, liaising with contractors, and helping to ensure compliance across the Council's estate.

To strengthen oversight and governance of property matters, the Council had now established a Buildings and Lease Committee (approved by Council in October 2025). This new committee would require administrative and clerking support. While responsibilities would be shared between the Town Clerk, Buildings Manager, and Open Spaces Officer, it is considered that the administration and clerking of this committee sits most appropriately with the Open Spaces Officer. This would be additional work beyond the scope of the current job description.

Proposal

In recognition of the additional duties undertaken, and the increased responsibilities arising from the formation of the Buildings and Lease Committee, the Town Clerk proposed that the Open Spaces Officer receive a pay scale increment.

Financial Implications

A pay increase could be met within the existing 2024–25 staffing budget. However, any agreed increase would have an ongoing cost implication in the 2026–27 budget, and the contractual incremental progression is applied in line with staff appraisal outcomes and NJC terms.

Legal Implications

The Council must ensure that any pay adjustment complies with NJC Green Book conditions and the employee's contract of employment. All changes to salary or scale point must be confirmed in writing and reflected in payroll records.

Members unanimously.

Resolved:

to support a two-point pay scale increment for the Open Spaces Officer, in recognition of the additional duties undertaken in respect of buildings administration work and the new Buildings and Lease Committee, and with immediate effect.

10

Budget 2026-27: Considerations for staffing budgets; and to make recommendation to the Finance Committee for the draft budget

Members received a first view of draft budget. To summarise:

- 2024-25 budget was £516,563.
- 2025-26 based on current levels and including the annual increments would increase to be £538,074.65 (with the adjustments from item 9.2).
- However, this did not allow any contingency for NJC annual pay review, usually budgeted at 4.04% across all staff costs. In 2022-23 Council was caught out estimating too low a level, but subsequent awards have been between 2.5 and 3.88%.

Members discussed the budgets, noting that staffing was the largest expense to the Council, but they are important to ensuring delivery of the Council's objectives and services, and that this Council was fortunate to have staff with high level of skills, sector and local knowledge, and had good public relations. It was also noted that the Council's staff were particularly important at this time of uncertainty with Council Reorganisation and move to unitary authorities. Council also had legal obligations with the NJC Green Book conditions and employee contracts of employments.

Members unanimously,

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Resolved: to recommend to Finance Committee and full Council a staffing budget for 2026-27 of £572,559.47.

12:49 pm Meeting closed.