

Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am Councillor Brian Dalton, the Chair of the Salisbury Area Board.

Normally it would be my pleasure in welcoming you, our Wiltshire Council Officers and my fellow Area Board Councillors here. But there is nothing normal about tonight's meeting.

It has been called early not by me or my fellow Councillors to deal with an item of business that could not wait the few weeks to our next scheduled meeting. We have also been required to meet in person despite soaring levels of Covid infections, when other Wiltshire Council meetings are being held virtually in line with the very sensible guidance issued just two weeks ago by our Legal Director to all Councillors, staff and City and Town councils to minimise the risks to public health.

All of us have a duty of care to the health and well-being of each other and particularly the most vulnerable members of our communities.

That is why these virtual meetings have continued to happen, to enable the important functions of this and all other Area Boards to be carried out. In particular, the spending wisely of public money; your money, to back important community initiatives to support our young people, promote community wellbeing, make grants to capital projects to benefit our area and help fund initiatives to enhance our roads, pavements and footpaths to improve safety.

Our Council's rules are clear, that any decisions taken at our virtual meetings can be ratified by the Leader of the Council. That has been common practice across Wiltshire for the last 18 months or so during this pandemic. It is a system that has worked well.

So there is absolutely no need for us to be here tonight, putting the health of everyone at risk by requiring us to be physically here, at a financial cost of some £500 of Council taxpayers money to hire this room, excluding officer costs and travel.

Nor is there an urgent or pressing community need for any decision to be taken tonight that could not have waited until our scheduled meeting in a few weeks' time on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, or to have been dealt with under the procedures of virtual meetings that I have just outlined.

The fact that we are here is a serious matter for many reasons.

Our Area Boards are an important part of our democracy. Their existence acknowledges the sheer scale of Wiltshire as a single tier County administration. Respect for Area Board's devolved decision making, recognises the importance of the needs of local communities like ours in Salisbury, that is different to those of our more rural neighbours. In this context, the Council has prided itself rightly on the autonomy of each Area Board to define its own priorities and ways of working, safeguarded by the Council's Constitution and the law of the land.

Requiring us to be here in person tonight flies in the face of these important principles. It is also an affront to common sense and a serious breach of the need to safeguard the health and wellbeing of all present in this very serious pandemic, that is far from over.

Common-sense would have guided this Government to have extended the rules beyond May to

allow virtual meetings to count in the attendance records of Councillors. They were foolish enough to scrap those rule changes that had applied at the start of the pandemic.

Common-sense and good governance would have allowed any Leader of any Group of Councillors, to have requested at a full Council meeting a leave of absence for any Councillor, who for good reasons of their own health, was struggling to attend physical meetings.

The granting of such a leave of absence happened twice in our last Council. It prevents the automatic removal of a Councillor who fails to attend a Council meeting for six months, usually the case is serious illness. We have just had such a full Council meeting. No such request was made. Nor was a request made at that council meeting, to add the cllr as a sub for the southern area planning cttee, which is meeting right here, tomorrow. That cllr could have then attended this meeting tomorrow, without issue. And that item, could have been added at no notice, on the agenda.

But, moving an Area Board or any other council meeting at public tax-payer expense, is not the way to deal with this. The public should not be funding this in any way. This just adds to the incompetence of the recent re-run of the police and crime commissioner election debacle, which cost the Wiltshire council taxpayer £1.5M. In all my years as a councillor, I have never known meetings to be moved, especially over the head of its Chairman, just to save a cllr being barred. It is unprecedented and must never happen again.

Many Councillors present at that recent full council meeting, were subsequently "pinged", to warn them that they had been potentially exposed to the Covid 19 infection, so underscoring the risks and dangers of such physical meetings like this one.

Frankly, I am angry that we are here this evening and without my permission to move this meeting. We should not be in this room at this time and in these circumstances and at additional cost to the local taxpayer.

Thank you.