

WITNEY TOWN COUNCIL

Wednesday 12 March 2014

At the Forty First ANNUAL TOWN MEETING held in the Langdale Hall, Witney at 7.30pm on the above date.

PRESENT

Town Mayor: Councillor P J Dorward

Councillors: Mrs J C Baker J King
 A K Beames A D Harvey
 Mrs B J Churchill C Holliday
 D S Enright B J Woodruff

Officers: Town Clerk Democratic Services Officer
 Communications Officer

Representing Thames Valley Police: Superintendent Colin Pain
 PS Lianne Phillips

26 Members of the Public/1 member of the press

1. **INTRODUCTION**

The Town Mayor welcomed all present to the meeting. He explained this was an opportunity for constituents to meet and talk to the Town Councillors and representatives of other bodies, although it was not a debating chamber. Points raised could be taken away and discussed at the appropriate committee meeting. The public were welcome to attend committee meetings.

2. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for their absence were received from Councillors N Buckle, Miss M J C Curry, R F N Curry, H B Eaglestone, T J Morris, D A Snow, S M Way and C K Woodward.

3. **MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 13 March 2013, copies of which were available at the meeting, were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4. **MATTERS ARISING**

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

5. **THAMES VALLEY POLICE**

The Town Mayor introduced the two police representatives, Area Commander Superintendent Colin Paine and PS Lianne Philips.

Superintendent Paine thanked the Council for inviting the police to attend the meeting. He explained that it had been a difficult time for the police and they had been getting a rough ride from the media. This did not represent the work that was being done. He felt that the force did a first class job of looking after the town and he was proud of the service offered despite £58 million of cuts and more to come. This police area had grown and there were now two extra police officers – this reflected on how well Thames Valley Police had managed the cuts and their estate.

Superintendent Paine explained that there were two key things about crime:

- i) crime was falling
- ii) no one believed crime was falling.

The level of crime in West Oxfordshire was 7%, and domestic burglary had fallen too. He had recently attended another council meeting in another location and had asked them to guess the level of burglary. In fact there were 1.5 burglaries a week in West Oxfordshire – which of course was still too many. He confirmed that proper villains were dealt with effectively. If there was not enough evidence against a suspect, police visited them and reminded them not to continue to offend.

Superintendent Paine said that crime mattered and anti-social behaviour needed dealing with quickly. This approach meant that violent crime had fallen dramatically over the last three years. Only 10% of policing work was visible – like the tip of an iceberg. Much of the work was not seen by the public, for example dealing with child abuse, domestic violence and gathering intelligence.

However, the visible part of the police work was very important. Superintendent Paine himself had recently dealt with youngster who had wanted to set up a rave at the Ducklington Bridge. When he spoke to them, all the young people recorded him on mobile phones and he had to be very professional in what he had said.

The police had held a “Have Your Say” event a week ago in the Langdale Hall.

Superintendent Paine highlighted a national increase in sexual assault and also in domestic violence. He was unsure whether this was concerning, or in fact positive as more people felt able to speak to the police. The number of calls to the police had gone up but the number relating to violent crime had gone down. Superintendent Paine thanked the public for their support and handed over to PS Lianne Philips.

PS Philips explained that she was the town centre sergeant and she had three officers on her team as well as PCSOs. A lot of the team’s work was crime prevention and responding to the community. The team had regular days where people could come and speak to them. This helped focus patrols and highlight problem areas. They also patrolled with “Nightsafe” to reduce violent crime at night. The team was also responsible for enforcement – e.g. children being served in pubs.

One of the main problems in the town was anti-social behaviour – especially in the form of raves. The police relied on the public to provide information – for example where things were happening and at what time.

Cycling on pavements was another big issue in Witney. The police had a zero tolerance approach to this.

The NAG had dealt with Graffiti and had been working with other partner agencies. The police were involved with Neighbourhood watch and tried to identify where there were gaps in the scheme and how to fill them.

A member of the public asked if the public was allowed to tell people not to cycle on pavements. PS Philips said that they were but she would not want anyone to put themselves in a position where they might be abused or in danger. She recommended calling the police. There was CCTV in the town and if there was a PCSO in the area they would deal with it. PS Phillips was asked if this extended to youngsters on bicycles. She said that the police's power was limited in relation to U18's, but they worked with schools and parents to educate children on how dangerous cycling on pavements was.

Another member of the public asked what telephone number they should call to report such issues. PS Philips advised to use 101 and to give the time and the place of where the offence occurred. If it was something that was reported a while after the offence then it would be better to contact her team direct – she had leaflets available with contact details if anyone wanted one.

A member of the public said that she had recently been in receipt of a letter offering her money. She had taken it to the local police station and they had been very helpful and had asked her to publicise the scam. PS Philips said that there had been a number of scams and she had booklets explaining how they worked and what to do. It was important to report such incidences.

The Mayor thanked the police for attending and Superintendent Paine left the meeting.

6. TOWN MAYOR'S REPORT

The Mayor had decided to deliver one report this year which highlighted the work of the committees and his year as Mayor.

He reported that the Planning Committee had had a busy year as consultee in the planning process. Major applications included a £10 million redevelopment of Abingdon and Witney College. The Council was continuing to actively seek developer contributions to enhance the infrastructure of the town and developments at West Witney had provided £440,000 for Town Council projects.

The Leisure and Recreation Committee had been involved in the organisation of a number of events and initiatives across the community including "In Bloom", the theme of which had been "Edible Britain". The Town Council had been awarded a joint first place. The coming

year's theme would commemorate the First World War. The Town Council also ran a schools in bloom competition, which had produced some impressive entries.

The Burwell Playing Field had been awarded QEII status as part of the Diamond Jubilee and Olympic Celebrations. Last year the Town Council held a play day which was free to all and very well attended – it was in fact shortlisted for an award for the best such event in the country.

Play equipment had been renovated thanks to grants from the SITA Trust and OCC grant funding. Additional funding had been secured for Fieldmere Close play area and the Council had a rolling programme to refresh all play areas over the coming years.

Another major project was the play area refurbishment at The Leys and the new splash park, subject to obtaining grants from OCC and WREN. The cricket pavilion and bowls clubs would also undergo refurbishment and redevelopment.

The Town Council had also increased and improved football facilities across the town.

Tree planting and the installation of bat and bird boxes had also taken place.

The Public Halls Committee had been working hard to push forward the reopening of the Corn Exchange and was applying for a Heritage Lottery Fund Grant and exploring other funding streams. Burwell Hall had had new flooring and was in the process of having a new door fitted.

The Finance and General Purposes Committee carefully managed budgets for all of the Council's work. The Council was completely dependent upon Council Tax for its funding. However, in order to offset the cost to rate payers, the Council regularly reviewed fees and charges and always sought partnership and grant funding. Prices had increased over the past year for everything from electricity to petrol and this had put pressure on Council finances. For this reason the Town Council had developed a three year financial strategy, and was hoping to be able to minimise future Council tax rises to 2%.

The Town Council faced some big projects in the next few years, particularly the reopening of the Corn Exchange and improving sports and recreational facilities. Reserves had been set aside but they were not sufficient to cover all costs. This meant that projects progressed slowly.

The Mayor also informed the public of the grants that the Town Council had awarded to community organisations and events.

The Mayor said that he had had a very enjoyable term as mayor and that it had been a privilege to serve the town. He highlighted some of the memorable events he had attended in the past year including Witney In Pink Day, the Witney Music Festival, performances by Songscope children's choir and events involving the Air Cadets, Scouts and Brownies.

The Mayor said that Witney was a great place to live, work and play and wanted to keep it that way.

7. MATTERS NOTIFIED PRIOR TO THE MEETING

Roads & Potholes

Mr Churchill had sent an e-mail in advance of the meeting asking “what representations on behalf of Witney tax payers the Town Council was making with regard to the sorry state that the roads in and around Witney were currently in due to the large amount of potholes”.

Cllr King, Chair of the Traffic Advisory Committee, responded to this question. He thanked Mr Churchill for raising the issue and said that it was a regular item on the Traffic Advisory Committee agendas. The Area Steward was given a hard time over this issue. The response from the Highways Department was the lack of funds being the problem. Cllr King had done some research ahead of the meeting and had discovered that £40 billion was received in road tax annually but less than 1.5% of this was spent on roads.

There had been an article in the Witney Gazette that week reporting that the priority was the main arterial roads such as the A40 which had recently been repaired. Corn Street, for example, was lower down the list of priorities as it was not as dangerous to drive along that road as it was to hit a pot hole at 70mph on the A40. There was more money available for repairs this year but it was not nearly enough. Most roads were not built for huge trucks carrying weighty loads. The Town Council would continue to raise the issue although it was not a Town Council responsibility.

A member of the public commented that perhaps it was time for the Town Council to put its name to a letter to represent the people of the town on the state of the roads. The Mayor thanked the public for their comments and assured them that the Town Council would continue to push the issue at the Traffic Advisory Meetings and that he would speak to the Town Clerk to see how the Town Council could move forward with this issue. However, he was sure that the County Council Highways Department would make a robust defence of any criticisms and reply that they were doing their best under the circumstances. He had seen some blue marks on road earmarked for repairs, although in his opinion roads needed strengthening and not just repairing.

Snow Plan & Grit Bins for Witney

Ms Kinchesh had sent in a request from Cogges and Newland residents for support on additional salt and grit bins for the area. She explained that residents were willing to help clear areas but they needed the facilities to do so.

The Mayor said that this was something discussed at a committee meeting earlier in the year and the Council wanted to push on with this for the next winter. The Town Council was not turning its head away from the issue and quoted the resolution made at the Finance and General Purposes Committee of 27 January 2014:-

[The Town Council would] work towards a snow plan by advertising for volunteers and that the Town Council contact all Witney County Councillors and ask them to draw up a list of where additional grit bins could be installed in their wards and to submit these to Oxfordshire County Council Highways for its approval and assurance that the bins will be kept filled with salt. The

Town Council should issue a press release asking people to contact their County Councillor if they had any suggestions for suitable sites for extra salt bins.

The Mayor asked people to get in touch with the Town Council officers if they did not see any action.

County Councillor Laura Price commented that there were deadlines for working with the County Council on grit bins and it would be good to work with the Town Council to ensure deadlines were hit.

Cllr Harvey said that he had contacted Cottsway Housing to see what plans they had in place for adverse weather and had been told that they only gritted three places – including Queen Emma’s Dyke and St. Mary’s Court. He said that it was up to the people of Witney to let the Councils know where grit bins were needed. He felt that one example of this was Ashton Close.

County Councillor Price replied that it was not enough just to have grit bins – an all-encompassing plan was needed to deal with adverse weather, including flooding. Disabled people were not going to be able to spread grit no matter how close the bin was. A comprehensive plan would be a great achievement for the town. Cllr Harvey agreed.

The Mayor thanked Ms Kinchesh and Cllr Price for their comments.

8. MATTERS RAISED BY THE GENERAL PUBLIC AT THE MEETING

Corn Exchange

A member of the public asked what was happening to the Corn Exchange, why Council meetings were closed to the public and what was being done about flooding.

With regard to the Corn Exchange, Cllr Baker explained that the plans were moving along steadily and a Heritage Lottery Fund application had been submitted, the Council had therefore to be very careful on how they had approached the project. The outcome of the grant application would not be known until 16 June. Once this was known, the Council could be more open about the processes that had been gone through. Reports in the press had nearly jeopardised the funding application last year. Meanwhile there was maintenance work in progress.

Regarding the openness of Council meetings, Cllr Baker said that she would like more open meetings – as would Cllr Enright – but closed meetings usually contained commercially sensitive information and decisions also needed to be ratified by Full Council.

Cllr Baker said that for a long period no reporters had attended Council meetings and the Council had found recent press reports very difficult. At the most recent meeting, a member of the public had been permitted to stay at a closed session because he had been an invaluable part of the process to re-open the Corn Exchange.

A member of the public commented that 2 years ago they had responded to a consultation on what the public wanted to see the building used for and they had not heard anything since. What was the building going to be?

Cllr Baker replied that it would be a heritage community arts centre. There was a lot of heritage in the Town that was worth celebrating, and they hoped to have all the support of events that had previously taken place in the building.

The member of the public said that this was great news, but the Town Council should publicise this. Cllr Baker explained that the Council had had to be mindful in respect of the Heritage Lottery Fund Application and the possibility that the funding might not be given.

Flood Prevention

The Mayor handed over to Cllr Harvey to discuss the issue of flooding in the town. The member of the public specifically wanted to know how flooding would be prevented in the town. Cllr Harvey (who was also a District Councillor and Cabinet Member with responsibility for the environment) explained that after the last major flood in 2007 the District Council had decided to take action and had instigated a team to draw up Parish Plans. These investigated looked at where flooding had happened, why it had happened and how to prevent it.

Since 2007 a lot of work had been done to persuade landowners to clear out ditches and the Environment Agency was trying to remove trees from rivers. Cllr Harvey stated that it was impossible to look at Witney in isolation. There was a project with the Environment Agency to stop flooding in West End and Riverside Court. He added that when the river floods, it puts the bridges at Crawley out of action, meaning increased traffic level in the town. This meant that on such occasions the air quality became unacceptably poor.

Cllr Harvey had attended an Oxfordshire Flood Forum. Although the country had experienced unprecedented rain, only a few properties in the area had flooded.

The member of the public thanked Cllr Harvey, although he thought that he had spoken from a District Council viewpoint and not the Town Council. Cllr Harvey explained that this was because the District Council was responsible for this.

Corn Exchange - Funding

Another member of the public asked what would happen if the funding application for the Corn Exchange was not successful. The Mayor replied that the money would have to be found, but the Council did not know from where at this point. The Council did not want to raise Council Tax.

Cllr Enright said that the Corn Exchange would re-open. Short term interim work needed to be done to get it open. There were other possible sources of money, but the work would take a lot longer without the grant. Cllr Baker said it was very exciting in the long term.

The Mayor explained that this was why the Council had closed sessions.

Another member of the public said that what people wanted was to see the cinema back in the Corn Exchange which didn't just show American blockbusters. She asked why money had been spent on the Langdale Hall when it was set for redevelopment.

The Mayor replied that Witney needed a town centre hall with a pleasant environment. The work done had been reflected in the increase in bookings. He said that both Langdale and the Corn Exchange had been under used. The Corn Exchange had had to be closed and there were

no definitive plans in relation to Langdale Hall. No firm decisions could be made yet. The Corn Exchange would be re-opened – first at the front with the rest to follow. There was also the issue of it being a listed building which came with certain constraints. The Town Council was in the process of moving forward although progress was slow. However, the Council wanted to get things right first time.

The member of the public said that this sounded good but it would be better to keep the public informed – even if they were just told that more meetings had happened. The Mayor confirmed that the message of giving people more information had struck home.

The member of the public suggested that the Council could set up a group of people who were interested in the Corn Exchange. The Mayor said he took this on board and would discuss it with senior officers and the Clerk. Cllr Baker explained that there was an Advisory Group that was dealing with the Corn Exchange. Once this stage had ended, the intention was to really involve the public and outside activities.

Post Office

A member of the public from Corn Street asked what the Town Council thought of the post office closure and would it be mindful of what might go into the building. She did not want another Costa Coffee shop. The Mayor said that Icknield had had exactly the same experience as Witney and they had also felt that the consultation was very loose. There had also been comments about small aisles and counters being at the back of the store. Icknield had raised this with their MP who said he could not intervene as it was a private business deal. However, the Mayor of Icknield had said that despite the initial unhappiness, the move had actually been a positive experience when the post office went into W H Smith. The honest answer was to wait and see.

Cllr Enright added that 120 post offices in the country had suffered the same fate. The new post office would open the following day. He understood that aisles had been widened and the space available for the post office had increased. He said that people had told him that they had not been happy with the old post office either. The new post office would also open on a Sunday.

Regarding the old building, Cllr Enright said that the Town Council had no knowledge of what might go into it, although it would be nice to see it used as something of value to the town.

A member of the public asked if the Town Council would receive an application for change of use. It was explained that the town Council was only a consultee although it would be able to make comment on any application.

Cllr Churchill said that as a disabled person she would be trying out the new post office.

A member of the public asked what influence David Cameron MP had on local issues such as the Corn Exchange. The Town Clerk advised that he had provided a letter of support for the Heritage Lottery Fund application in respect of the Corn Exchange.

The meeting closed at 9pm.
