

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING OF MUCH WENLOCK

held at The Priory Hall, Much Wenlock
at 7.00 pm on Thursday, 10th March 2022

IN ATTENDANCE:

26 electors of the parish
2 non-electors of the parish
Town Clerk
PCSO Mal Goddard (Broseley & Much Wenlock Safer Neighbourhood Team)
PCSO Mandy Leek (Bridgnorth Safer Neighbourhood Team)

1. WELCOME

The Town Mayor, Councillor Daniel Thomas, welcomed everyone to the meeting:

2. MINUTES

The minutes from the Annual Town Meeting held on 11th March 2021 were considered for approval.

It was PROPOSED, SECONDED and AGREED that the minutes of the meeting held on 11th March 2021 be APPROVED as a true record.

3. MAYOR'S REPORT

The Mayor gave the following report:

It's been a whirlwind year for this Council; last year's Council had every meeting via Zoom, but this year all meetings have been back within the beloved Guildhall. Yet we always made sure that the meetings used Zoom so people could listen in, including me when I sat outside the hospital until I was allowed in when Eric was born!

It's been a challenging year, but I'm genuinely proud of the excellent work undertaken by staff and Councillors since the May election when we had eight new Councillors come in. Whilst some were very new to the town, others had years of community service; regardless, they've all come in and got down to work. In December, we lost three Councillors who felt they could not commit sufficient time, but we're now back up to full strength following an election.

I'm delighted to announce that my Deputy, Councillor Duncan White, has been nominated as our next Mayor, taking over from me in May, in recognition of his hard work on the council and his leadership skills. Secondly, the council has nominated Cllr David Fenwick to be his Deputy as he's had a substantial impact in his time as a Councillor here. Congratulations to both of them.

Finance

The precept for 2022/23 will be £221,905. This equates to an increase of £11.21 as an annual rise for a Band D household. As Shropshire Council gets given less funding from Central Government, they look to offload more assets and costs to Town and Parish Councils. The Town Council now pays fully for the library service in the town as well as for the public toilets.

The Council expects to finish this year slightly below budget. I'm pleased to say income has bounced back well after the pandemic and visitor numbers during the summer were encouraging. The Guildhall was not able to open until May 2021 but, despite that, income for exhibition and sales was £4,214 (31.68%) over budget. Income from markets was also pleasing with the Buttermarket rental income of £7,744 (96.8%) of budget for the year. The markets at the Corn Exchange and in the Square have also fared well, showing income of £2,062 (11.45%) above budget and £671 (11 months) (268.4%) above budget respectively for the year.

Guildhall Refurbishment

This Town Council realises the importance of our historic buildings, and it's incredible to be able to meet in a unique and historic building like the Guildhall. To sit in that room with the history behind it is truly special. Unfortunately, the room and that building are now in need of extensive refurbishment due to its old age. The Town Council is committed to renovating the Guildhall and making it a more accessible building. You will have seen the repairs being undertaken to the cupola already, but much more work needs to be undertaken and we are exploring long term options for the building.

10 High Street / 2 Burgage Way

The Town Council continues to consider the future use of 10 High Street. This process was held up due to the pandemic and the change of Council, but members of our Property Working Group are currently in active discussions about options for the use of the building.

The Council is looking at selling number 2 Burgage Way, which is the flat above 10 High Street, to help fund the Guildhall refurbishment and is looking at potential grant sources.

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING OF MUCH WENLOCK

held at The Priory Hall, Much Wenlock
at 7.00 pm on Thursday, 10th March 2022

Made in Shropshire Markets

At the request of residents, the Council has partnered with 'Made in Shropshire' Markets, which will provide three markets within the High Street in April, June and August. This will include a road closure on the High Street from Back Lane to the Spar, as there will be stalls in the High Street itself. We've received some valuable comments from High Street traders, which we're taking on board for our next meeting with 'Made in Shropshire' before the April market. The Council will also consult traders after April's market to get feedback and work together ahead of June's market.

Queen's Platinum Jubilee

This Council also takes its civic role in the community very seriously. We're delighted to be planting some trees in the old part of the cemetery as part of the Queen's Green Canopy, in celebration of the Platinum Jubilee. I thank the Wenlock Tree Forum for sourcing these trees for us and look forward to seeing them on the official map, which is being given to the Queen in June. Planting takes place this month. People in the town are also invited to plant trees in their gardens.

The Council is also working with Holy Trinity Church and English Heritage to take part in the official Queen's Jubilee Beacon event, which is happening all over the UK and the Commonwealth. The date will be the 2nd of June, and the Beacon will be lit at 9:45 pm. The Beacon, which my dad built for The Battle's Over, will be coming out of retirement and will be lit across the field adjacent to the Priory ruins where members of the public will be able to watch.

Christmas Lights

Finally, it's worth mentioning that this year was the first for nearly a decade where Much Wenlock had a stand-alone Christmas lights switch-on event, which was extremely well attended and enjoyed by all. This was an event run by Councillors and volunteers and was something all traders embraced; our thanks to everyone who attended and helped with the event.

The Council has also successfully bid for Welcome Back funding and we have received nearly £6,000 to be spent on Christmas lights. We've been able to use the funds to replace some older lights that were beginning to fail, particularly in The Square, as well as replacing the planter on Sheinton Street.

Conclusion

If you allow me, on a personal note, I'd mention how it's been a real honour to be Mayor of the town I grew up in and love - situation and circumstance meant I did two years in a row, which I wouldn't ordinarily have done. I feel the need to focus on Shropshire Council matters, but I will be staying on the Town Council as, in my opinion, it's an excellent institution, filled with hardworking Councillors, and I look forward to continuing to work with them all. Serving as Mayor has been an incredible experience and one I will never forget. I've had tremendous support from a range of people, too many to mention. A special mention to my fellow Town Councillors, who've been a pleasure to work with and, of course, our staff, who have been brilliant yet again.

4. REPORT FROM THE TOWN COUNCIL'S PLANNING & ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Cllr Duncan White, Chair of the Planning & Environment Committee, gave the following report:

The Committee has continued its core role of closely examining and commenting on all local planning applications. The majority of these are straightforward but some have required close scrutiny and others have warranted objections and site visits were made to better understand the issues.

Members of the Committee have made the effort to appear before Shropshire Council's Southern Planning Committee on three occasions, twice to object to the application for over 1,000 houses on the Buildwas site at the former power station. This was on the grounds of the effect on our infrastructure, in particular, at the Gaskell corner, as well as the poor offer of affordable housing. We were grateful to receive the help of resident Paul Hanafin in respect of traffic issues, using his expertise in this field - thank you Paul. As a result of these objections an increase was made of over £100,000 towards a feasibility study and work to improve the Gaskell corner for traffic. The ultimate solution to problems here could run into millions of pounds. Other proposed new sites at Tasley and Cressage and our own town will add to the problems at this location.

A further objection was made against the planning application made for the Wenlock Edge Inn for holiday chalets on the former car park. Both of these applications were approved by Shropshire Council, despite our objections and those of others.

A consultation evening was held with 15 local community groups represented at the Methodist Hall with two other groups expressing their opinions in writing. The results of this will be used in our evidence at the Examination in Public of the Local Plan in the coming months. A survey of the local residents is also currently being conducted to further gather residents' opinions for our case and this also includes some questions about local transport issues.

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING OF MUCH WENLOCK

held at The Priory Hall, Much Wenlock
at 7.00 pm on Thursday, 10th March 2022

Two new working groups have begun to be formed: the Transport Working Group and the Strategic Flood Working Group. The Transport Group will make links with officers at Shropshire Council, and we anticipate a heavy involvement in the feasibility study of traffic movements around the town in an effort to alleviate pressure at the Gaskell corner and other trouble hot spots in our beautiful mediaeval town.

The Strategic Flood Group is also in the process of being formed with a remit to assess the whole town and surrounding area. Both these groups report back directly to the Planning & Environment Committee.

The Committee has continued to work with the volunteer Flood Group who have offered support to resolve issues such as blocked drains, so important to the town's flood defence, and have maintained a liaison with a volunteer flood warden network. They now provide written monthly reports to update the committee and we thank them for their valuable support.

We have offered support and attended meetings of the local Much Wenlock Plastics group of Surfers Against Sewage, who have actively encouraged local businesses to review their practices and reduce their single use plastic use. They have had some successes so far with several local businesses being awarded certificates for their efforts.

The council has also been involved in funding the planting of new trees at the cemetery and are encouraging more planting in our locality.

5. GASKELL RECREATION GROUND

Cllr Marcus Themans, Deputy Chair of the Gaskell Recreation Ground Charity, gave the following report:

The Gaskell field is run by a charity but when the land was donated to the town, the Town Council was charged with managing it, along with representatives of Abbey Estates, now Wenlock Estates. There is a joint management group of Councillors and members nominated by Wenlock Estates.

The Gaskell Field has become a key factor in creating a high quality of life in Much Wenlock. There have been many improvements in the last two years; the new footpath, in particular, is now offering better access and higher levels of use. The disabled parking and access from William Brookes School is now up and running, but only outside of school hours.

We intend to create a few more small paths, for example the link to the bottom of the Windmill field. This is changing the field into an important day to day social meeting point and a vital aspect of physical and mental wellbeing for many of us. Work is being undertaken to improve the field in terms of drainage, slitting, sub-soiling, and, later this year, sand dressing and grass improvements.

We still have our fingers crossed that the wildflower seeds planted last year have survived the wet winter. Thanks to everyone who contributed to the Just Giving fundraising; it didn't pay for all the work, but it was a great help!

We still have quite a long way to go in delivering the development plan for the field that was proposed nearly ten years ago. We are proposing to review the plan, to make sure we're on the right track. For example, we get increasing feedback asking for improvements to the play area, young people's sports activity and accessible toilets/baby changing facilities.

One of the key areas will be development of a new pavilion for the Gaskell Ground. What is becoming clear at an early stage is that this will need to be a community, multi-use facility and the more groups that benefit from it, the more chance we will have of support.

We are aware of several problems on the field and are committed to sorting out some remaining drainage issues this summer. We are always concerned with the safety of users of the field and, with that in mind, will be engaging professional advice on trees, their condition and maintenance.

We would like to thank the Town Council staff, in particular, Lorna Dexter, for their dedication and hard work in managing this beautiful but complex community asset.

Comment: there is now a lovely tarmac footpath on three sides of the field and a muddy track on the fourth. This could be improved by clearing the fallen leaves each year.

Response: Yes, this was done previously and will be done again when the leaves and ground are dry. Improvements to the surface will be considered when funds allow.

6. POLICE REPORT

PCSO Mal Goddard, part of the Broseley & Much Wenlock Safer Neighbourhood team, gave the following report:.

PC Jess Hindley has moved on to Shrewsbury, to work in youth engagement. Tomorrow she is being replaced by a new police constable. There is also another PCSO on the team, Steven Breese. The local team and response officers do work together, and details of incidents are passed on to the local team if there is a long term or ongoing issue.

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING OF MUCH WENLOCK

held at The Priory Hall, Much Wenlock
at 7.00 pm on Thursday, 10th March 2022

West Mercia Police has signed up to the Policing Charter. Every Parish and Town Council is approached for its top three priorities with regard to policing activity. The current priorities for Much Wenlock are theft from outbuildings, drugs and speeding. The local team try to give these issues particular attention.

With regard to theft from outbuildings, Broseley has been hit quite badly but the problem doesn't seem to have come across to Much Wenlock, where there have been only a few incidences. There have also been a couple of vehicle thefts. A dumper truck was stolen on 9th March but recovered the next day. Such vehicles are often fitted with trackers and, after the theft, are hidden for a while to see if there is a tracker. In this case the vehicle was found and recovered.

There are several areas where suspicious activity has been seen in relation to drugs and the team focus patrols in these areas. They also keep an eye on suspicious vehicles. There is an automatic number plate recognition camera on the A458 coming into Much Wenlock and the policing team is advised if a suspicious vehicle enters the town.

Speeding is an issue on the A458, Stretton Road and Farley Road. The road safety team for West Mercia have three sites for speed checks on these roads. A couple of concerned residents have discussed a community speed watch scheme. For a scheme to operate, at least six residents need to be involved and they can be supported by the police.

Question: Where is the APNR camera?

Response: It is located as you come over the hill from the Bridgnorth direction on the A458.

Question: How can people get involved with the community speed watch initiative?

Response: Residents generally approach the Town Council to say that they are concerned about speeding. The issue goes on a Council agenda and the Council issue the information to gauge support. The police will then check the area and put in a series of measures to see if there is a genuine problem before the introduction of a speed watch scheme. It is not possible to set up a scheme where there is already a police road safety scheme.

Comment: With the recent traffic lights at the Gaskell corner, several lorries came through the town where there is a weight limit and drivers should be prosecuted.

Response: The restriction only applies if the vehicle is driving through, not if it is going to a place of work. The police cannot prosecute if the vehicle is gaining access.

Question: What if the driver is cutting through?

Response: Unfortunately, there are not enough police officers to set up zones to enforce the restrictions. Recruitment of more officers and training is under way, but this takes time.

Question: Are residents legally allowed to take photos of someone breaking the law in a vehicle?

Response: It would depend on the circumstances but if the vehicle is in a public area or on your land, there is nothing to prevent you taking photos. Operation Snap is encouraging people to upload dashcam footage of offenders and there is little difference between this and photos. However, the photos should be passed on to the police, not put on Facebook or other social media. The police are able to identify offenders and engage with them.

PCSO Goddard and his colleague were thanked for attending the meeting.

7. OPEN FORUM

Electors of the parish were invited to ask questions and offer their views.

Comment: The speaker shared some information he had recently been given. An experienced road traffic engineer had advised, in his professional opinion, that the Gaskell corner was currently as good as it got. Any changes were likely to make the situation worse, unless a Penny Brookes Expressway were constructed over the corner! Some signage to encourage drivers to use common courtesy might help.

Comment: The Mayor had mentioned working on the Council's buildings. What about a stitch in time? – commit to cleaning the gutters on all of the Council's buildings at least once per year. Also, the cemetery chapel was still propped up.

Response: Councillors would take that on board.

Question: 10 High Street had been briefly mentioned and plans to sell the flat. Why, for how much, to whom?

Response: The sale would go through an estate agent and it wasn't yet known for how much and to whom. Significant funds were needed to renovate the Guildhall. The idea was to sell 2 Burgage Way to provide some funds for the Guildhall and to replenish reserves. The Council would be seeking funding for work on the Guildhall, but additional finance was needed.

Comment: It was disappointing that the Town Council was disposing of the property.

Response: It was only the flat above. The purchase of 10 High Street had been driven by the retention of the cashpoint. The Council was retaining the High Street premises.

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING OF MUCH WENLOCK

held at The Priory Hall, Much Wenlock
at 7.00 pm on Thursday, 10th March 2022

Comment: Sell the lot, not just the flat. The property was bought on the pretext of saving the cashpoint but there were other places the cashpoint could have been moved to, eg the Museum. Sell the whole building and use the money to repair the Guildhall.

Response: Previous Councillors were commended for negotiations on the purchase of the building. The Council now owned a valuable asset. However, Council reserves, that could have been used to repair the Guildhall, had been used to purchase the former bank. Repair costs had probably doubled in the last few years. 10 High Street and the flat were not essential assets for the town, but the Council did have responsibility for its special, historic buildings.

Question: What will the Council do with no. 10 if it's kept? The Council often says it wants to support the High Street but the Council owns the only empty property in the High Street!

Response: Yes, Councillors were aware of this and were sorry. A decision had not been made on what to do with 10 High Street long term. The Council was still trying to look at options such as community use, but it would cost over £6,000 a year in business rates. Use as a community venue might also affect other premises in the town which were used for meetings, etc. It was hoped that the matter would be resolved during the coming year.

Question: Could the Council look at moving the cashpoint?

Response: There was an agreement with Barclays to maintain the cashpoint in its current location for another couple of years, so not yet. It might be possible to pass on the building on condition that the cashpoint would be retained.

Question: Had the cost of the building ever been published?

Response: The figure was in the Council's accounts but there was an agreement with Barclays that the figures wouldn't be made public.

Comment: There could be legal complications with the flying freehold of the flat, etc. It might be better to let the flat on a long lease. The Council could still look at moving the cashpoint.

Response: The Council might consider taking further advice.

Comment: Thank you for the kind words from the Chair of Planning about the Flood Group. The group had engaged with Shropshire Council, Severn Trent Water, the Environment Agency, etc through the National Flood Forum. They had also prepared an update to the Flood Action Plan for Much Wenlock, which it was hoped Councillors had now had time to read. There were concerns about the Strategic Flood Working Group and its membership. The Strategic Flood Working Group had no knowledge of drains in the town and similar matters, its emphasis was only a view on Regulation 19 and the Local Plan, not on flooding issues.

Response: The Mayor had worked really well with the Flood Group as a Town Councillor and Shropshire Councillor and was very appreciative of the efforts of the Flood Group. The Strategic Flood Working Group would have a wider remit and was still being formed. Members would be looking at a range of issues and working with the Flood Group. It had been set up by the Planning & Environment Committee and would look at the catchment across Much Wenlock.

Comment: As a representative on the Gaskell Recreation Ground, the speaker invited the opinions of residents on what they would like to see on the ground and what improvements could be made. He had heard a comment about laying tarmac on the fourth side of the field but wouldn't it be preferable to bring back the old red avenue of brick dust, rather than putting down tarmac and killing the roots of the trees? It would take a bit more time and money to bring the path back to its former state with red brick dust and perhaps widen it where it narrowed. Feedback would be welcome.

Comment: The state of that footpath was poor but a thoughtful and considerate response would be preferable and consideration of a historical path in keeping with the field.

Comment: The path had been swept twice but the first time actually made it worse. There was clearly more work to be done. As long as there was a path that was serviceable to walk on that would be great – it didn't have to be tarmac.

Comment: Cutting the hedge along the Linden Walk more regularly would also help.

Comment: Several conversations had been held about extending the path to Windmill Hill and funds could be discussed.

Comment: The new path had been put in just in time for lockdown and had been a great boon.

The Mayor thanked everyone for coming to the meeting and contributing to the discussions. There being no further questions or comments from those present, the Mayor closed the meeting at 8.00 pm and invited those present to stay for light refreshments.

Signed: _____
Chairman

Date: _____