

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING OF MUCH WENLOCK

held at The Priory Hall, Much Wenlock
at 7.00 pm on Thursday, 23rd March 2023

IN ATTENDANCE:

28 electors of the parish (1 remotely)
Town Clerk

1. WELCOME

The Town Mayor, Councillor Duncan White, welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained that this was an opportunity for electors to hear a about Town Council business over the last 12 months and to raise matters about the town.

2. MINUTES

The minutes from the Annual Town Meeting held on 10th March 2022 were considered for approval.

It was PROPOSED, SECONDED and AGREED that the minutes of the meeting held on 10th March 2022 be APPROVED as a true record.

3. MAYOR'S REPORT

The Mayor gave the following report:

Finance

The precept for 2023/24 will be £249,539, an increase of £27,627 or 9.9% on the previous year. This represents an annual rise of £18.14 for a Band D household, which is approximately £1.51 a month, or 35 pence a week. We have an additional 28 new households registered in the parish since 2022/23.

The Council's expenditure so far this financial year, for 11 months to 28th February 2023, is £240,797. The Council expects to finish the year slightly above budget.

Guildhall

Repairs to the Guildhall cupola by Croft Building and Conservation Ltd were completed in April 2022 with total expenditure of £34,455, which was largely met from the Town Council's property reserves. Additionally, a rotten support beam was removed and replaced at a cost of £5,303.

Visitor numbers to Much Wenlock and the Guildhall during the summer were encouraging.

Greenwood Projects Ltd have been engaged to provide professional support to the Council to explore how the Guildhall can be sensitively repaired and adapted to a new use, which will be economically viable. Greenwood Projects have been successful in helping the Council to obtain £12,000 grant funding from the Architectural Heritage Fund, which will be used to produce a project viability report.

10 High St / 2 Burgage Way

We are hoping for a sale of the flat (2 Burgage Way) above 10 High Street very soon. We were about to start work on 10 High Street to be able to rent it out, but ran into a problem with regard to access. This situation is complicated by also having to take into account the access needed by Loomis who load the cash machine. These issues caused the contractor to pull out due to availability. We are currently obtaining further quotes from local contractors for the work needed and hope to move forward very soon. In the future the premises will be rented out to a commercial tenant by the Council.

Made in Shropshire Artisan Markets

One project of mine has been the three very successful markets held last year which brought lots of visitors to the town. By way of measurement on these days, the visitors to the Guildhall trebled what they would normally be on a Saturday. With entertainment in the Square, it was a pleasure to feel such a vibrant atmosphere in the centre of town. We have a further three markets planned for the coming year to continue to build on visitor levels to the town.

Queen's Platinum Jubilee

To celebrate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee in June we arranged for a ceremony in the grounds of the Priory with readings led by Revd Matthew Stafford and contributions from the fabulous Church choir. This was followed by the traditional lighting of the beacon and linked into other celebrations around the country.

Death Of Queen Elizabeth / Proclamation of King Charles III

In September we had the sad news of the death of Queen Elizabeth and had to follow procedures during the period of mourning. I attended the proclamation ceremony in Shrewsbury and we then had the honour of being one of the selected parishes to arrange a proclamation ceremony in the town Square. I had the historic privilege of reading out the proclamation of King Charles III to the assembled residents.

Gaskell Recreation Ground

Councillor Themans will provide a report on the Gaskell Recreation Ground later in the meeting.

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Christmas Lights and Switch-on

A grant of £5,777 was received from Shropshire Council during 2021/2022 (Welcome Back Fund) which was spent on a replacement planter at the end of Sheinton Street and new Christmas lights for The Square and The Corn Exchange. Installation of the lights was carried out by the Council's new contractor, Potters Electrical Ltd. New column lighting was also installed at the Gaskell Corner to make the annual festive display more inclusive for that end of the town.

For the second year in a row, we arranged a formal switch-on of the Christmas lights, which once again drew large crowds of visitors and residents. This created a warm, family event with the lights being switched on by my guest, Jimmy Moore, to acknowledge his fantastic fundraising events in the town previously.

Library

For some time now we have been working with Shropshire Council to increase the use of the library building when it is not being used for library purposes. We have made progress and it is hoped that in the near future local agencies and organisations will be using the building for appropriate meetings and groups. This will extend the current use of the building and will help to cement its place in the centre of our community.

Defibrillator

Over the last 12 months in my role as Chair of the Priory Hall Committee we have seen the installation of a further defibrillator for the town on the exterior wall of the Priory Hall. This provides a much closer unit for users of the hall and residents in this area.

Windmill Trust

The Council have been working with the Trust on a project to designate the Windmill Hill a Local Nature Reserve. You may have seen this in the press recently. This will help to increase use of the area by schools and assist with funding for its upkeep and maintenance. It will ensure that Windmill Hill continues to be enjoyed by residents and visitors long into the future. I have joined the committee and hope to see this project through to its conclusion. In recent days Shropshire Council has agreed to delegate the relevant power to Much Wenlock Town Council to allow this designation.

Coronation Celebrations - Picnic on the Green

We are looking forward to the Coronation of King Charles III and the Council is co-ordinating a residents' celebration on Sunday, 7th May, starting at 2pm and taking place on the Church green. So bring along your picnic blanket or table and chairs and spend some time together enjoying music, food and entertainment. We hope to see you all there. If you want to help with the organisation or entertainment then please contact the Council

Wenlock Helping Hands

We will soon be starting work using volunteers around the town doing odd jobs to clean and tidy up our already lovely town and keep it looking at its best. Jobs will range from tidying grass verges to cleaning signs. We can look forward to this commencing when the weather improves.

Flood Group

I would like to thank the Flood Group volunteers who have been working throughout the year to improve the town's resilience against flooding and have been co-ordinating nominated flood wardens. In conjunction with Shropshire Council officers, they have helped to improve the current provision at Hunters Gate and represented the town at the National Flood Forum.

In conclusion, it has been a busy year and I hope that from our reports you can see that we have been doing our best to represent your interests and the interests of the town to maintain it as a thriving and beautiful place to live. I will be handing over the Mayor's reins to Councillor David Fenwick in May and will continue to work on some of the projects that I have been able to commence.

Before I finish and we move onto the other reports, I would like to thank all of you for taking the time to attend the meeting this evening and my fellow Councillors and staff for their support during my year. I want to remind everyone that Councillors are unpaid volunteers doing the best they can for their community and, as such, they deserve recognition for this.

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

Cllr David Fenwick, Chair of the Planning & Environment Committee, gave the following report:

As the Town Council's Planning Committee our primary purpose is to examine every planning application made to Shropshire Council in the Much Wenlock area and give a local opinion as to its suitability or otherwise. The majority of these are straightforward but some have required closer scrutiny than others and have warranted objections and site visits to better understand the issues.

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Our powers are limited and we have no more powers than a Parish Council. We state whether we support, object or have no objections, and we must give valid planning reasons if we support or object. Shropshire Council planning officers or committee then hopefully take notice of what we say and make their decision based on solid planning criteria. We are lucky in Much Wenlock that we have a Neighbourhood Development Plan to refer to, which we do regularly when deciding our response to planning applications.

We are fortunate to have some very capable and knowledgeable people on our committee and I am pleased to say that few of our decisions are overruled at county level, which is encouraging. We did object to the enlargement of the Wheatland Garage, and the application has been twice withdrawn and we assume the applicant is redesigning his plans. The previous withdrawal meant a better application was submitted the second time round (or even third time round), so it was positive to see our views being strongly considered by both Shirehall and applicants.

I can also report that myself and Dan Thomas, our County Councillor, spoke at a Shropshire Council planning committee hearing in favour of two holiday let houses off the Stretton Road. The properties were to be partly sunk into the ground with turfed roofs thereby causing minimal disturbance to the rural scene. The proposed application was very climate-friendly in its build and would be powered by renewable energy hence meeting the aspirations of our Neighbourhood Plan, which was a key theme in our response. Shropshire Council's planning committee found in our favour against their own officers. This is an indication that Shropshire Council do take note of local opinion and Neighbourhood Plan policy.

In addition, proliferation of caravan parking on farmland is currently a subject giving us cause for concern, so we are monitoring the situation. We are also particularly concerned that every effort is made to preserve the character of our wonderful medieval town and to encourage sympathetic development wherever possible. This is absolutely vital.

We have a Transport Working Group, ably assisted by local resident and retired traffic planner, Paul Hanafin, who has considerable experience in the subject and, with our County Councillor, the group has secured hundreds of thousands of pounds from the Power Station and Tasley developers. This will fund extensive surveys into the effects of an increase in traffic at the Gaskell corner, which we know is a matter of great concern to residents.

We also have a Strategic Flood Working Group looking at ways to counter the effects of serious amounts of rainfall. We also appreciate the work done by the town's volunteer Flood Group, who provide help with identifying blocked drains and many other important flooding issues.

We are also supporting a proposal to have Shropshire Council implement a '20's Plenty' scheme in the town to reduce traffic speeds and help prevent dangerous driving through our streets, particularly near schools.

An important aspect of our work this year has been appearing along with other local experts, at the Examination in Public of Shropshire Council's Local Plan. This has been a lengthy and detailed matter, and the two planning inspectors are only about to start Stage 2 of the process, which could go on until the end of this year. Stage 1 has been approved.

At our last Town Council Meeting the Council took the decision to review the Neighbourhood Plan. I know there has been concern about this and some thought it should have been done sooner. We are taking advice on how best to move forward with the review and details of how this work will be undertaken will be coming out fairly soon. It will involve a lot of community engagement and we will detail how people can get involved to have their say. Please keep an eye on the Wenlock Herald, notice boards and online for details.

As a Planning Committee we work hard for our community, taking great care to visit the sites of planning applications where they are particularly contentious and to read policy documents, including local and county ones. Through our responses, we believe we have built a good reputation with Shropshire Council planning officers and a good working relationship, and long may this continue as we represent our community.

5. GASKELL RECREATION GROUND

Cllr Marcus Themans, Chair of the Management Committee for the Gaskell Recreation Ground Charity, gave the following report:

I am currently chairman of the Management Committee, Councillor White having been Chairman previously. The Gaskell Field was gifted to the town in the 1930s to be managed by the local Council and Wenlock Estates, which included the family which donated the ground in the first place. The Recreation Ground has charitable status with trustees representing both organisations. There is also a management committee comprising Councillors and representatives of Wenlock Estates as well as user groups. The user group representatives are not voting members but their input is extremely valuable and we thank them for the work that they do.

This year we are installing beautiful new gates at the end of the Linden Walk to replace the wooden ones which had come to the end of their life. Less prominent but equally important is the work that we do on the playing surfaces and we have spent considerable money in the last year on sand dressing and soil treatments such as verti-draining to improve the soil structure.

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This has a heavy clay content and we are trying to lighten the soil, encourage better plant growth and increase earthworm activity. We can already see some positive results. We are still pushing forward with improving the fertility of the soil and will be re-seeding the football pitch in the next month. Please help to minimise footfall on the pitch while the seed is establishing - we will be putting up signs to request this.

Last year we talked about the development plan for the Recreation Ground, which was started nearly 10 years ago and included aspirations for the field. We have achieved some of these: we have improved drainage and installed a new surfaced pathway. There are other projects in the plan, such as a new pavilion. We need to examine the development plan to make sure we are still on the right track.

I would like to thank all committee members, and particularly Lorna Dexter in the office, who runs the Gaskell Field on our behalf most of the time. We hope everyone enjoys the recreation ground and its facilities.

Police Report

The Mayor highlighted to the meeting that a police report was attached to the agenda. The police were unable to attend but had submitted a report. Those attending were invited to raise any questions with Councillors who would do their best to answer or refer matters to the police for a response.

6. OPEN FORUM

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

- a. *Comment:* Thanks to Councillors for all they do. The speaker had been heartened to see the defibrillator outside. The speaker raised several points:
- the public toilets in the town were a disgrace
 - there were not enough seats for the elderly, particularly in Southfield Road.
 - to the west side of Southfield Road there was a very dangerous, blind exit onto Victoria Road. Traffic came along the main road too fast. A simple remedy would be to put a convex mirror on the opposite side of the road so people could see what was coming in both directions.
 - a safe place for pedestrian crossing could be installed about 75m further down on Victoria Road.
 - the speaker offered to volunteer to help man the library for use by other groups when it was closed.
 - the speaker was planning to start a rugby team for the town and had already made some progress. He would like support from Councillors in promoting this and helping to find a pitch.

Answer: There were certainly problems with the toilets. The contractor was struggling to replace parts as the equipment was ageing and there were issues with vandalism. The Council was looking for solutions and, personally, the Mayor would like to see the automation taken out, but this would take time.

Additional seating could be looked at.

Concerning the exit from Southfield Road, the Town Council had met the Shropshire Council highways engineer to highlight the dangers and this would be reviewed as part of the survey work for the Gaskell corner. Shropshire Council were concerned that making the road one way would affect traffic on other roads in the locality. Shropshire Council had stated that they would not install a mirror as they did not support such mirrors in town centres.

- b. *Comment:* Congratulations on the new gates at the Gaskell Ground which had vastly improved the entrance to the field. The speaker had been using the bus to Bridgnorth for the past year. Most buses went through Merrywell Lane and along Barrow Street, which was a nightmare for the drivers. The speaker had never seen anyone get on in Barrow Street, so could the bus go straight down the main road, not up Merrywell Lane/Barrow Street?

Comment: Another speaker disagreed and felt that the bus stop in Barrow Street was used by many elderly people from Walton Hills.

- c. *Comment:* The new Gaskell gates were great – would the Olympian Trail notice be put back? *Answer:* Yes
The path under the linden trees needed maintenance and there were trip hazards.

Answer: Councillors had discussed how to improve the path. The path had been brushed to remove mud at least twice in the last year but this had not had much effect. It was maybe a job that volunteers could look at.

- d. *Comment:* Why was the increase in precept so high?

Answer: The Council would be slightly over budget this year and needed to balance the books. The budget needed to go up in line with inflation and provide sufficient funds to cover expected costs.

Comment: Was Shropshire Council dumping more responsibilities on the Town Council?

Answer: In recent years several responsibilities had moved from Shropshire Council to the Town Council and these were costly. For example, the Town Council contributed around £18,000 p.a towards the library and the public toilets cost around £15,000 per year.

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e. *Comment:* The speaker highlighted the contribution of the Civic Society and the Much Wenlock Neighbourhood Plan Refresh Group to representing the town at the Local Plan Examination in Public. The speaker expressed support for the review of the Neighbourhood Plan and urged prompt progress, noting the importance of an up-to-date plan in determining development in the town and the available pool of talented people in the town who could help with this.

Regarding historic buildings in the town, such as the Guildhall and Corn Exchange, it was important to have a system of regular maintenance in place to ensure any problems were identified in a timely fashion and to prevent damage. The Council should consider a maintenance contract for an annual check of building items such as gutters and roof tiles and carrying out any necessary repairs.

Answer: It was acknowledged that many competent people from the town had appeared at the Examination in Public of the Shropshire Local Plan. Those people and their knowledge would not be ignored during the review of the town's Neighbourhood Plan.

Answer: It would have been difficult to go ahead with a review of the Neighbourhood Plan without knowing in which direction the Shropshire Local Plan was going to go. Whilst there was still much work to do with the Local Plan, there was now a path forward and the policies could be incorporated in the Neighbourhood Plan. The Neighbourhood Plan had to be in conformity with the Local Plan. It was likely that the proposed housing sites, such as Hunters Gate, would remain in the Local Plan and these could not be ignored in the Neighbourhood Plan. One of the matters to be determined was how to administer the review of the Neighbourhood Plan.

f. *Question:* Would meetings of the steering group for the Neighbourhood Plan be open to the wider public and would the minutes of that group be available to the public?

Answer: These were matters to be agreed. The Council was seeking guidance on the best way to manage and administer the review. The minutes would be available to members of the public, but it was not known at this stage whether all meetings would be open with public participation.

Answer: The Council had asked Shropshire Council for advice on the structure of the steering group. It might be very unwieldy if the general public were to attend every meeting.

g. *Question:* Had Councillors read the minutes of the last steering group meeting? At that point the group was very close to completing work required for a review. Councillors could see who was on the steering group at that time.

Answer: Councillors would not ignore people on the Refresh Group as there were many capable people involved, but did not want the steering group to be too unwieldy.

Answer: The views of the people of Much Wenlock should feed into the steering group to determine what the Neighbourhood Plan should look like. The steering group would collate the views of the people of the town.

h. *Question:* The speaker wished to acknowledge the work of four members of the local Flood Group, which was over and above what would be expected from volunteers on a committee. These individuals worked tirelessly to improve matters and the speaker was upset by ongoing criticism from certain members of the community.

Three main flooding problems in Wenlock - one in Sheinton Street, one in the High Street and another by the Gaskell corner - were as a result of blocked drains created by Cadent going through the drains. Shropshire Council had dealt with these and presumably were claiming money back from Cadent. Outside the old police station a drain had been cut and sealed so there was always going to be flooding there. There was a Severn Trent pipe that was regularly cleaned out but there was no water getting into the pipe at present. The town was not getting a good service or value for money from Shropshire Council.

Sheinton Street was breaking up where the culvert was in the road, potholes had been marked since 2019 and major work was needed outside the old police station which would require the road to be closed for several days.

The speaker commented that there had previously been a rugby club in Much Wenlock and expressed support for setting up a new one.

Answer: Councillor Benbow had attended a meeting earlier in the week with other parish councils and the Shropshire Association of Local Councils to consider how best to deal with flooding matters and speak as one voice. The theme that came through was that where there was a good local Flood Group, there was also a good response from Shropshire Council. The outcome of the meeting was that other areas should try to replicate the model and good work in Much Wenlock, which was very much appreciated, rather than set up a county-wide flood group.

i. *Comment:* There had been a lot in the press about water companies discharging sewage into rivers. The River Shyte in Much Wenlock had now been designated a river and Much Wenlock was the first town in the county to be awarded a CSO (screen and holding tank) to prevent sewage going down the river. The work was due to be completed by this autumn. The work of drain wardens was also very important.

j. *Question:* What kind of committee would the Neighbourhood Plan steering group be? If it was a Council committee, meetings would need to be open to the public.

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Answer: As explained previously, this was very much at an embryonic stage. There would be Councillors on the committee, and it would be ensured that the committee was set up in the correct way.

k. Question: When Shropshire Council decided to install electric charging points in car parks, was the Town Council consulted and, if so, what was their view, as this would do away with 12 standard parking spaces?

Answer: The Town Council was informed that there would be six charging points in each car park – there wasn't a choice. Looking to the future electric charging points would be essential.

Comment: Looking forward electric cars wouldn't exist. The electric charging points wouldn't be fully used.

l. Question: Had the Town Council looked at the condition of the town clock recently? It wasn't a job for volunteers and needed professionally cleaning.

Answer: Yes, someone was going to replace the wooden door but this hadn't happened yet. It was difficult to get contractors to even quote for jobs.

Comment: This was because the Council didn't issue proper specifications for jobs when seeking quotes.

m. Question: The High Street was going to be closed for six weeks for major electrical work – was there any update on dates?

Answer: Town Councillors had persuaded Shropshire Council to carry out the work in two stages with a break in between and shorter periods of closure to reduce disruption. One team would do the initial work and install the conduit and another team would finish the job at a later date. The work had not been scheduled in yet.

Comment: If the work was not carried out as quickly as possible, the High Street could be left in the dark due to the poor condition of the cabling.

Answer: The work was urgently required to ensure that the electrics did not go off without warning and a date would be scheduled in as soon as possible.

Answer: Shropshire Council had also been asked to provide free parking in town car parks during the High Street closure.

n. Question: Some towns in Shropshire operated their own car parks. Had the Town Council thought of taking over the car parks to gain the revenue?

Answer: Shropshire Council owned the car parks in Much Wenlock. It wasn't known whether Shropshire Council would be willing to sell the car parks or what the income would be.

Comment: Perhaps Shropshire Council would consider handing over the car parks as they were a nuisance to operate.

Answer: £45,000 of income went to Shropshire Council from Much Wenlock car parks. Car parking charges had recently been increased as Shropshire Council needed the money.

o. Question: Bearing in mind the problems with the electrics in the High Street, was there the infrastructure for the new electric vehicle charging points?

Answer: The power would be coming from the street lights.

Comment: The coffee shops in Wenlock could benefit from more trade while people were waiting for their electric cars to charge.

Comment: 12 charging points might seem a lot, but it was Government policy to stop selling new diesel/petrol vehicles by 2030 so this was a good infrastructure move.

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 8.10 pm and invited those present to stay for light refreshments.

Signed: _____
Chairman

Date: _____