

Witham Town Council

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MINUTES

Meeting of: **Annual Town Meeting**

Date: **Tuesday, 25th April 2017**

Present: Councillors

P.	Horner	(Town Mayor)
P.R.	Barlow	
L.D.	Campbell	
J.C.	Goodman	
Mrs A.	Kilmartin	
M.C.M.	Lager	
Mrs S.C.	Lager	
Mrs J.M.	Money	
T.A.	Pleasance	
W.J.	Rose	
Mrs J.	Williams	
Mrs R.	Williams	
M.	Squire	(Town Clerk)
Mrs G.	Kennedy	(Committee Clerk)

And six members of the public.

The Town Mayor, Councillor Patrick Horner, welcomed everyone to the Annual Town Meeting.

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J.C. Bayford and Mrs J.A. Kempf, Mr D. Coe and Mr G. Ellis from the Witham Twinning Association; Mrs P. Franklin from St John Ambulance and Mr K. Davies, Witham Carnival Association; Priti Patel, MP and Mrs A. Northfield.

1. INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interests.

2. MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held 19th April 2016 were received.

RESOLVED That the Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting held 19th April 2016 be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

3. REPORTS

REPORT OF THE TOWN MAYOR

Councillor P. Horner, Town Mayor, gave a report. He explained that he has had an interesting year. He spoke of the highlights of his term of office including the civic services and Sheriff's Award evening at Hylands House. He was pleased to report that an Air Cadet had been appointed as a Town Mayor's cadet and spoke of the involvement with the Air Cadets at both the Battle of Britain Service and Remembrance Day. There had been a Drumhead Service in the Park on 1st July 2016 to commemorate the first day of the Battle of the Somme. He thanked the Air Cadets for providing a Guard of Honour at his recent Civic Service, there had been over two hundred guests including the Lord Lieutenant of Essex and Priti Patel, MP.

The Town Mayor spoke of the number of talented people he had met during the year and those involved in the many organisations in the town and the support they give the Town Council at such events as the Community Day and Dickensian Event. He was pleased to represent Witham at the Re-Unification Ceremony in October 2016 in Aßlar, Germany.

He said that his two charities are Chelmsford and District Cardiac Support Group and Action for Family Carers – Youth Section. He thanked the Witham Lionesses for their help at fund raising events and in particular thanked Councillor Mrs Clare Lager for organising a Bridge afternoon raising £931. He said that on Saturday there would be a sponsored walk from Maldon to Witham.

He was pleased to report that the Town Council had been awarded a silver salver as the best Town and Parish Council in Essex. He thanked his fellow councillors, particularly JoAnn Williams, his deputy, for their help and support throughout the year. He expressed his appreciation for the work of the Town Clerk and his staff, especially the Town Mayor's secretary, Mrs Dee Halliday.

In closing Councillor P. Horner, considered it a privilege to have served as Mayor and wished everyone well for the future.

COMMUNITY COMMITTEE

Councillor Rob Williams gave the report of the Community Committee explaining that they had been actively engaged in two major issues – the policing of the town and improving health facilities. They had made representations to the Police and Crime Commissioner and the community policing team for improved visual presence about the town but lack of police resources and budgetary commitments mean that the situation is unlikely to improve. A Policing Task and Finish Group has been set up tasked with improving the CCTV capability, to encourage recruitment of Special Constables and setting up of Residents' Associations throughout the town. The Community Committee is steadfast in its resolve to help combat crime, specifically the low-level and anti-social behavior issues that the Police treat as a lower priority issue.

Councillor R. Williams explained that health facilities in the town have been a long-term concern with GP facilities over-stretched with additional housing exacerbating the situation. The Healthcare Working Group has been set up which has been influential in building up support from the GPs, the NHS Mid-Essex and Braintree District Council. Unfortunately, the proposed pharmacy on the Maltings Lane estate is now in jeopardy through funding issues but a new purpose built GP facility in the town centre is being planned so that greater healthcare can be delivered locally.

The successful Puppet Festival provided free by the Town Council encourages visitors to the town from afar, has led to a Community Day event being organised for the first time in June last year. This free public event has helped in pulling the town together for a family day out. Its success has

ensured its continuation for the foreseeable future.

Councillor R. Williams spoke of the sterling work undertaken by the Christmas Events Group which ensures that the town has not only a Christmas tree but fantastic lights. They also organise the Dickensian Event and the 'Switch-on' of the Christmas lights. They provide an exceptional voluntary service to the town.

He explained that almost £30,000 in grants was given to support local charities and this year's recipients included Home-Start, Boys' Brigade, Carnival Association and the Air Training Corps. He added that a service funded exclusively by the Town Council is the Information Centre which continues to provide an excellent service for both residents and visitors alike.

The Town Mayor thanked Councillor R. Williams for his report.

ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE REPORT

Councillor John Goodman gave the report of the Environment Committee detailing some of the issues raised during the year. He said that the significant change has been the transfer of transport issues to a revised Planning Applications and Transport Sub-Committee. He referred to an issue raised by the pupils of Templars Academy who had lost their School Crossing Patrol Officer and were seeking support from the Town Council for a pedestrian controlled crossing outside their school. The request is currently with the County Council's Local Highways Panel. He was delighted that the parking issues in Guithavon Valley and Mill Lane have been solved but the Town Council has always advocated that it does not wish to see Witham's roads covered in yellow lines but continues to monitor the situation.

He then referred to the long-standing issue of HGV routing and signage throughout the town that still needs to be resolved. The Town Council is a consultee stakeholder in the ongoing considerations by Highways England with regard to the A12 widening and responded to the recent public consultation. Similarly, the Town Council gave a view concerning the A120 and it is hoped that the new road will alleviate the heavy traffic currently on the B1018.

Councillor J.C. Goodman said that over 200 planning applications were considered in the past year and whilst the Town Council is purely a consultee, recommendations are made to the District Council on every application. The Town Council continues to monitor closely the new housing developments which will be constructed over the next few years especially with regard to new infrastructure including improved health facilities, additional schools and transport links.

He said that regeneration of the town centre is proposed and negotiations remain ongoing with Braintree District Council. Improvements to the Spa Road shops and car park will commence later in the year.

He then spoke of the Integrated Waste Management Facility being developed at the former Rivenhall Airfield and explained that the Town Council is concerned not only about the visual impact of the proposed chimney stack height but the increased traffic with waste needed to be transported from a wide area; and the proposal for water abstraction and discharge into the River Brain.

Councillor J.C. Goodman spoke with pride of the green areas in the town which is a credit to the Open Spaces' Team who work tirelessly to ensure that the River Walk, Whetmead, James Cooke Wood and the Closed Churchyard are maintained at their best. He then referred to the work of the Tree Group who work closely with the Town Council. He said that the Town Council has now taken over responsibility of organising the planting and maintaining of the floral displays in the town centre.

He referred to the Essex Record Office 'Talking Bench' project and hoped that a bench would shortly be installed and the Town Trail initiated by the Witham & Countryside Society both receiving support of the Environment Committee. He was delighted that the Town Council has been a member of the Essex Wildlife Trust for the past ten years.

In closing Councillor J.C. Goodman thanked his fellow Councillors and staff, particularly the Deputy Town Clerk, who clerks the Environment Committee and Planning Applications and Transport Sub-Committee Meetings as well as the Working Groups.

The Town Mayor thanked Councillor J.C. Goodman for his report.

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Councillor Michael Lager gave the report of the Policy and Resources Committee.

He said that the Policy and Resources Committee continues to monitor the Council's income and expenditure, administration, property and staffing. Clean internal and external audits have again been achieved and work continues to gain Quality Council status. He was pleased that the Town Council was named as the best local council in Essex in 2016. He said that setting a budget for 2017/2018 had been particularly difficult in the face of ongoing cuts in the Localism Grant and a rise in the precept levy was unavoidable. Reserves are held for contingencies to even out spending on major items.

Councillor M.C.M. Lager then spoke of the two by-elections following the resignations of Corinne Thompson and Chris Bailey with Lorne Campbell and Jack Bayford being elected who have rapidly made their mark.

Mrs Jane Coleman left on her appointment as Town Clerk at Maldon Town Council and has been replaced by James Sheehy who has brought a fresh mind and new skills to the post. Eddie Hall has been appointed as the new caretaker and is already carrying out additional work such as redecorating. Gary Dyer has brought the outdoor spaces team up to strength. Ms Sue Reichert left the Information Centre after many years and has been replaced by Brent Smith. The Town Council continues to invest in staff development and are fortunate to have a skilled group, including our longer serving staff, to ensure a first class service.

The Witham's Voice is published quarterly and delivered to every household. The website will shortly be modernised further and there is potential for the use of social media technology to keep our residents in touch. A screen will be installed in the Information Centre to provide visitors with messages on keeping well and safe, and the services available.

He referred to the Improving Healthcare Working Group under the leadership of Councillor P.R. Barlow and the plans that are well advanced to provide a purpose built surgery in the town centre. The Parking Task Force researched the issues around provision, regulation and enforcement and has made recommendations to Braintree District Council for use with their own parking review.

Residents on the Maltings Lane estate have not had the promised facilities provided under the Section 106 planning agreement and a Task and Finish Group has worked with the District Council to bring clarity on what is legally due and to urge progress. Whilst some facilities are now provided the community building, local shops and local employment remain undelivered and the Town Council is urging that a project manager be appointed to ensure delivery.

He then referred to the other working groups particularly the Tree Group, which is evidence of the

partnerships that can be formed for the benefit of the town. The Council wishes to bring in local residents and business together in building a town where not only is the physical infrastructure appropriate but the social infrastructure exists to provide a high quality of life. He was concerned about the outbreaks of robberies, burglaries and anti-social behaviour in the context of sharply reduced policing and willingness to take counter-measures. Following a meeting with the Police and Crime Commissioner and his intention to double the numbers of special constables, the Town Council has the intention of encouraging people to come forward to help keep our town safe.

In concluding he thanked staff, Members and those residents who give their time to help make Witham one of the best places to live, work and visit.

The Town Mayor thanked Councillor M.C.M. Lager for his report.

PRITI PATEL, MP

In her absence, the Town Clerk read out a statement on her behalf.

She said that it is a privilege and honour to represent Witham constituency and has been pleased to assist with a number of local issues affecting the town.

She said that a new healthcare centre is essential to provide good medical provision locally and she has worked closely with the NHS. A preferred site has now been identified and she looks forward to working with the NHS, local GPs and the Town Council to get it built and operational. She has also been in regular contact with hospitals, Essex County Council and other health and social care providers to ensure improvements to services.

Priti Patel said that she wants to ensure that young people get the best start in life and access to excellent schools; and referred to her 'Get Witham Reading' campaign and the support she gives to investing in obtaining modern facilities. She also spoke about her representations regarding planning matters in relation to the significant growth in housing and that the Local Plan needs to reflect local needs. Since being elected she has campaigned for new improvements and investments in rail services and as a result all trains to be replaced with new rolling stock.

She also reported on the A12 widening scheme and A120 upgrade; and the hope that congestion will be reduced and safety improved. Jobs will be created and as a result growth in local economy. She said that she works closely with business groups and hopes that Essex will be well placed to benefit from new trade deals as Britain prepares to leave the European Union.

Priti Patel believes that homes and streets should be safe and has been working closely with the police to address crime and anti-social behaviour. She frequently makes representations to press for more police presence and expects the courts to deliver strong punishments so that serious and persistent offenders are locked up.

WITHAM CARNIVAL ASSOCIATION

In the absence of Mr Ken Davies, the Town Clerk read out the report that had been sent.

The Carnival Association thanked the Town Council for their generous donation which enables them to operate the annual carnival. The carnival is a good day's entertainment and shows how people can work together to support the community. He also thanked members of the Carnival Court and those who supported them. He also mentioned Ellie, the honorary life princess and her loyalty and dedication to duty.

WITHAM TREE GROUP

Mr Barry Fleet gave a report about the work of Witham Tree Group. Throughout the summer the Group's bowser was in regular use to ensure that the trees planted in April had the best possible start in life. He explained that they aim to water trees for the first two years after planting. He thanked the Town Council for making its budget of £2,000 available to the Tree Group which enabled them to purchase good quality trees and by buying in bulk they received a good discount. This season they had planted specimen trees mainly in open 'parkland' areas which will have an impressive impact on the tree landscape around the town. They had planted along Guithavon Valley and at the end of River Walk off Ebenezer Close; the wet conditions meant they were also able to plant willow and alder whips, provided free of charge by the Conservation Volunteers. The greensward next to ASDA was likewise planted with a selection of specimen trees but the willow and alder whips planted in this area attracted vandalism with the stakes and protective tubes being destroyed. Specimen trees have also been planted in the town park. He said that the one exception to the 'parkland' planting was two replacement trees in The Avenue. He sadly reported that they had planted a hedge along the northern boundary of the Rugby Club that was completely destroyed by vandals and this season whips have been planted inside the repaired fence. Further whips have been planted in the copse area off Spa Road. On three of the planting days, teams of volunteers from CoFunds have assisted as part of team building and support for the local community.

The Town Mayor thanked Mr Fleet for his report.

HOME-START - WITHAM, BRAINTREE AND HALSTEAD

Mrs C. Pringle gave the report. She thanked the Town Council for its generous support which has enabled a co-ordinator to make home visits in the Witham area to families with at least one child under five. Families are offered support through the Family Group or matched with a trained volunteer. Families may need support because they are new to an area, feel isolated, suffer from emotional issues or find it hard to cope with illness. The Family Group meets weekly at the Methodist Church and is run by the co-ordinator and play leader with additional support from volunteers giving parents the opportunity to socialise and support each other and the children to make new friends. Families with a volunteer receive a weekly visit and are offered friendship, support and practical help to enable them to build their confidence and ability to cope. She said that they are now part of Home-Start Essex but they are endeavouring not to lose their local identity.

The Town Mayor thanked Mrs Pringle for her report.

AIR FORCE AIR CADETS

Flight Lieutenant Sean Purcell, Commanding Officer explained that since 1st April 2017 the 295 Squadron (Witham and Rivenhall) had become part of the Air Force Cadets. They have 50 cadets between the ages of 12 – 20 years, this number had risen from 15 in 2008 and they plan growth to 60 cadets this year. He said that they had recently had a visit from the Group Captain but unfortunately was not selected as the best squadron in Essex but this was good experience for the cadets. He thanked the Town Council for its financial support in growing the bands with a corps of drums and a full marching band. He spoke of the success of Sergeant Thomas Benson representing the squadron at the Essex Regional Competition and has now proceeded to the Nationals. Last week cadet Matthew Child was nominated as Cadet of the Year for London and the South-East region. He will now attend RAF Cranwell against five others to compete for the Dacre Sword as the Best Air Cadet nationally out of 50,000 cadets. At the recent Falklands Memorial Competition a team of cadets came third in the annual event and will now progress to the tri-service event. He spoke about the charity and community work

that the cadets are involved in and how incredibly proud he is in all the cadets' achievements. He said that he is indebted to staff who give their time, with 40 weekends a year and three nights a week on activities. He said that this year as well as raising numbers to 60 cadets, he hoped that they will go further in the regional band competitions. Next year it is also the 100th anniversary of the Royal Air Force and they are planning a light blue presence at events. He said that they are aiming to have a band concert at Euro-Disney next April and to raise funds to take the cadets to the Battlefields to mark the end of World War I. He added that they are close to purchasing their second minibus. He thanked the Town Council for its support and hoped the cadets make a positive presence in the town.

The Town Mayor thanked Sean Purcell for his report.

COUNCILLOR MRS A. KILMARTIN

Councillor Mrs Angela Kilmartin wished to give a report. She said that she was trying to raise the profile of the Witham Ambulance Trust that assists people financially with transport to hospitals. She said that the History Group meets once a month. She spoke of the importance of the Luncheon Club which provides companionship and a solid meal for the elderly. She was sad to report that Home from Hospital had recently run out of money and this badly needed group would assist with shopping or chores. In addition, she is part of the Cinnamon Trust that walks dogs for the elderly and HOST whereby she has foreign students stay for the weekend. She added that the Library hosts all sorts of groups including one for those who do not speak English. She said that Braintree District Council has a grant scheme that can provide a little extra funding for groups.

The Town Mayor thanked Councillor Mrs Kilmartin for her report.

COUNCILLOR P.R. BARLOW

Councillor P.R. Barlow said that there used to be a regular police presence at these Meetings. He understood that through time pressures the Twinning Association and Citizens Advice could not be represented this evening but acknowledged the help that the Town Council gives to the Debt Advice service. He spoke about the cuts in funding which will be greater next year.

He wished to pay tribute to former Councillor Steve Goodfellow who recently died. He had been on the Town Council from 1991 to 2015 and played a major part in Council activities. He will be greatly missed.

The Town Mayor thanked Councillor Barlow for his report.

4. ACCOUNTS

The audited accounts for the year ended 31st March 2016 were received.

The Town Clerk explained that it is usual practice to produce the previous year's accounts as he is currently working on this year's. He drew attention to the reduction in the Localism Fund that will eventually drop to zero. He said that the Information Centre Sales and commission had also dropped, although with a similar reduction in expenses. The Town Council has few areas in which to earn income but with more houses being built the precept will be higher.

The Town Clerk said that a Community Officer was now employed to assist in the Information Centre and to organise both the Puppet Festival and Community Day. Pension costs continue to rise. Under the Environment Committee, two years' of maintenance costs for the public convenience are shown as the District Council was late in submitting the invoice. He pointed out that the general reserves for the year had declined from £295,461 to £285,763 Local councils are generally facing tough economic

conditions. He said that the concept of 'Localism,' does not appear to be so prevalent, as it is difficult for the Town Council to take on take on additional services, in the absence of any funding availability.

5. MATTERS RAISED BY MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

Councillor W.J. Rose took the opportunity to raise a problem that had been identified by businesses in Newland Street. When the County Council had undertaken repairs, the two hour parking signs had been removed and when they were returned they identified just one hour's parking. This was insufficient for customers of Byfords or the opticians. It was agreed that a Member would take this matter forward by requesting a Freedom of Information request to detail the Order currently in force.

As there were no further questions the Town Mayor thanked everyone for attending and closed the Meeting at 9.15 p.m.

Councillor P. Horner
Town Mayor

MS/GK/27.4.2017