



Town Hall | 61 Newland Street | Witham | CM8 2FE

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MINUTES

Meeting of: **Annual Town Meeting**

Date: **Tuesday, 19th April 2022**

Present: Councillors

A.	Kilmartin	(Town Mayor)
S.	Ager	
J.	Bayford	
P.	Barlow	
J.	Goodman	
C.	Lager	
M.	Lager	
T.	Pleasance	
S,	Rajeev	
W.	Rose	(Braintree District Council)
S.	Wilson	(Braintree District Council)
R.	Playle	(Essex County Council)
N.	Smith	(Town Clerk)
H.	Andrews	(Deputy Town Clerk)
S	Smith	(Admin to the Council)
C	Strachan	(Assistant Responsible Finance Officer)

And twenty three members of the public including representatives from – Big Sing, Citizens Advice, Mid-Essex Talking News, Royal British Legion, Templars Residents Association, Witham Allotment Association, Witham Bowls Club, Witham & Countryside Society, Witham & District U3A and Witham Lunch Club.

The Town Mayor welcomed everyone to the Meeting.

1. MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held 23rd April 2019 were received and signed by the Chairman.

2. **ESSEX POLICE**

Special Sergeant Simon Jesse introduced himself to the meeting. He confirmed that he is part of the Witham Community Special Constables and representing Witham Town Team's regular officers. It was noted that Witham Town Council were the first Council in Essex to provide the Community Special Constables Scheme providing a visible presence in the town.

S/Sgt Jesse advised that anti-social behaviour incidents in the Braintree District had reduced by 50% up to 2022 compared to the previous year but that crime in general had increased by 15%. Crime increase figures were confirmed as violence against a person up by 12.9%, sexual offences up by 41%, robbery up by 9.8% and theft up by 31.8%, including shoplifting up by 112%. Considerations to note were that most shops were closed during lockdown which would contribute towards the high increase in crime rates and more incidents of crime are being reported by the public. The meeting were advised that hate crime had also increased but it was likely to still be under reported.

S/Sgt Jesse confirmed that their focus is on the prevention of high harm offences and regular focus is also on disrupting drug activity in the town. Any potential incidents should be reported to build an intelligence on which to act.

Regular Police hubs are now held fortnightly on a Tuesday at the Town Hall and on a Saturday at the Witham Hub to provide a visible presence and the public are encouraged to visit with any policing issues. Work continues with Witham's youth with attendance at schools on a regular basis and a dedicated officer for each school.

A question was asked regarding clarity on numbers for percentages given. S/Sgt Jesse gave an example of racial harassment reports of 10 in April 2021 increased to 17 cases reported in March 2022.

The Mayor thanked S/Sgt Jesse for his report and for all the work his team carry out in Witham.

3. **REPORTS ON THE TOWN COUNCIL**

Town Mayor's report – Cllr Angela Kilmartin

The Town Mayor reported on her year in office. She recalled the various events she attended including her recent civic service and the new events run for the town by Witham Town Council in the last year – the Easter Trail on the River Walk, Dog Show, Halloween Trail and successful Christmas Market held for the first time in Newland Street. She confirmed that her chosen charities for the year were MacMillan Cancer Support and Witham Amateur Operatic Society/WOW.

The Mayor also confirmed that she is the Chairman of Witham Luncheon Club and the Witham History Group and was representing the groups at the meeting

Planning & Transport Committee – Cllr John Goodman

Cllr. Goodman gave his report covering years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 for the Planning & Transport Committee. Attention was drawn to the Gimsions development of 78 homes and that Witham Town Council had instigated a Judicial Review, fully supported by residents, to oppose the development. The Judicial Review was not upheld and the development is now in progress but the Council subsequently created the Gimsions Review Group which monitors planning conditions attached to the development. The developer had also agreed to work more closely with the Council throughout.

It was noted that Witham Town Council are a consultative party giving recommendations to the District Council but have no powers for decision making. Witham Town Council have plans to start creating a Neighbourhood Plan which, once in place, will provide greater influence on planning applications. Third party organisations and businesses in Witham will be invited as co-optees to produce a community-led Neighbourhood Plan.

Cllr Goodman provided information about the contentious plans for the fourth phase of the Rivenhall Park development which incorporated a proposal to include a cycle route through Collingwood Road. Witham Town Council supported residents' concerns regarding the unsuitability of the proposals and it was noted that the application has been refused.

The Planning and Transport Committee also recently created a Cycling Development Working Group to develop a strategy to improve existing cycleways and establish safe cycling routes linking new housing developments to the town.

Cllr Goodman confirmed that concerns had also been raised by residents regarding the Old Ivy Chimneys development in Hatfield Road regarding a mature hedge removed by developers which has resulted in Witham Town Council being in regular contact with the Planning Authority about the issue. The situation is currently ongoing which Witham Town Council are monitoring.

It was noted the Committee also dealt with applications regarding work or removal of trees and that advice was always sought from the Tree Warden of the Witham Tree Group of which Witham Town Council had an excellent relationship.

Cllr Goodman concluded his report in thanking the Town Clerk and officer at the Town Hall for their assistance and guidance and exceptional thanks to Planning Officer Mrs Geraldine Kennedy for her total support.

A question was posed querying whether any progress had been made with the railway station improvements. It was noted that there had been delays with Greater Anglia and the Planning Authority but it was confirmed that a notice at the station confirms that the development has now recommenced.

Community Committee – Cllr Susan Ager

Cllr Susan Ager confirmed that the Community Committee oversees anything that effects the community in Witham and was proud of its achievements even through the difficult lockdown periods.

During Christmas 2020, Witham Town Council worked with 'Home Alone on Christmas' run by Kim Barker. Using the Town Hall's kitchen, volunteers, donations of food, cards and presents, a hot Christmas dinner was delivered to 90 people in Witham. Cllr Ager thanked all those who donated food, cars, presents and all the volunteers that helped make the day special for so many people.

Cllr Ager also thanked the Community Special Officers who monitor community safety in Witham and give up their time to make Witham a safer place to live. She confirmed that the town now had 5 Community Special Constables helping to reduce crime and providing visible policing. This year has also seen the Town Team, part of the Witham Community Policing Team holding surgeries in the Town Hall and Witham Hub to enable residents to report concerns.

Witham Town Council have also run pop-up stalls providing a variety of information to the community at various locations in Witham.

During 2021 the Council organised and ran – an Easter trail along the River Walk, a dog show, a Halloween event along the River Walk and a Christmas market in Newland Street with turning on of the Christmas lights. All events were well attended and well received by those who took part.

Cllr Ager thanked all those who took part in helping with all events and confirmed that the big event for 2022 would be the Queen's Platinum Jubilee event.

It was also noted that the Council now deals with CCTV monitoring in-house making access easier for the police.

The Silver Cinema is supported by Witham Town Council and is now running again on the second Sunday of every month.

Cllr Ager thanked all Committee members and staff who work to make the community in Witham come together and enjoy living in the town.

Environment Committee – Cllr John Goodman

Cllr Goodman gave his report for the years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 and confirmed that the work of the Environment Committee had continued through lockdown. He confirmed that Witham Town Council secured the freehold of the River Walk in July 2021 after many years as leaseholder and negotiations with Braintree District Council. It was noted that a new River Walk Management Plan is also in place to cover the next ten years.

As part of the Environment Committee's business plan a survey has been commissioned to review the River Walk's footpath and cycleway network which are in initial stages. This will also consider the potential replacement of bridges on the River Walk. It was noted that this will be a long-term project with budgetary constraints.

Witham Town Council are also responsible for Whetmead Nature Reserve, James Cooke Wood and the Closed Churchyard in Lockram Lane. National Highways are currently in consultation with the Council regarding the proposed A12 widening and the implications this will have on Whetmead Nature Reserve. Witham Town Council's Open Spaces Team had recently carried out work at James Cooke Wood to thin the top cover on the trees to provide more sunlight and increase the biodiversity of the site. Through the Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee, which reports through Environment Committee, it is anticipated that updated Management Plans will be drafted in the future for the Closed Churchyard, James Cooke Wood and Whetmead Nature Reserve.

Cllr Goodman also reported that Witham Town Council are part of the Essex County Council's Highways Devolution scheme whereby a grant is received to carry out some devolved tasks. The Open Spaces Team have been carrying out this work but the scheme has a number of constraints restricting which areas of the town the scheme can operate. Cllr Goodman requested if residents were aware of areas requiring vegetation cutting or signage cleaning, to bring them to the attention of the Deputy Town Clerk via their Ward Councillor.

In the past two years, the Environment Committee has also overseen the conversion of Witham Town Council owned streetlights to LED for cost effectiveness, reintroduced a Commemorative Bench Scheme, and created a dog bin sponsorship scheme which have proved to be successful.

It was noted that the street furniture is also due to be reviewed in liaison with Braintree District Council through the Town Centre Regeneration Group which is overseeing the regeneration of the Town Park and, in the future, the town centre improvements.

Cllr Goodman thanked the Witham Tree Group for their efforts in providing additional trees in Witham and for all the work they do. He also thanked Town Council officers for their assistance with his role as Chairman of the Environment Committee and special thanks to the Open Spaces Manager and his small team who continue to care for our open spaces in all weathers and throughout the pandemic.

Policy & Resources Committee – Cllr Michael Lager

Cllr Lager gave his report and confirmed that the last Annual Town Meeting had been held on 23rd April 2019. Since then, a new Council has been elected, the Covid-19 pandemic had occurred, the Council had taken High Court action in an attempt to stop the Gimsons development, the Town Hall information centre had been modernised, a major tree works programme had been completed, new events had been introduced and a new Town Clerk had been appointed.

It was noted that during the pandemic business continued as usual for the Town Council, but restrictions were in place for meetings so remote meetings took place during the lockdown period.

Cllr Lager provided information about the objections to the Gimsons development, including the protest march by residents, and the Town Council's Judicial Review. The development is currently being built and highlighted the need for more protection of the town's amenities. The Neighbourhood Plan is therefore in its early stages to provide better protection with future planning applications.

The Town Council managed a project in-house to refurbish the Town Hall Information Centre to provide a modern, welcoming centre providing a range of services. The Function Room at the Town Hall is now regularly let to the NHS for a diabetic eye clinic.

Witham Town Council continue to have a unique partnership with Essex Police and campaign to recruit Special Constables. The Council are also seeking to build a better partnership with Braintree District Council and Essex County Council for greater devolution of property and services to local ownership and control. Witham's allotments are now owned and managed by the Town Council, the River Walk freehold has been transferred to the Town Council and minor works on highways land are managed by the Town Council under the Essex Highways devolution scheme.

Braintree District Council are planning improvements to the town centre, a business innovation centre on the Redrow development, and community facilities on the Maltings estate and Witham Town Council will be working with Braintree District Council on these plans. The Council are also seeking improvements to health care facilities for residents.

Cllr Lager confirmed that the majority of the Policy & Resource Committee's business is held in public meetings at which the Council's finances and policies are also audited. It was noted that the Council gained the 'Quality' standard in the Local Council Award Scheme in the last year and hope to achieve the 'Gold' standard in the near future.

4. REPORTS FROM ORGANISATIONS AND GROUPS

Witham and Countryside Society

John Palombi from Witham & Countryside Society suggested that the Town Council should be congratulated on keeping the open spaces well-maintained, particularly during the lockdown period.

It was noted that there were limitations on their work during the lockdown period. It was confirmed that the group currently had a lack of volunteers and that it was unlikely they would be able to provide many more talks in the Town Hall. John Palombi advised that he was continuing to attend the CPRE (Countryside Charity) meetings.

Helen Rollason Cancer Charity

The charity ambassador from Helen Rollason confirmed that the charity had suffered a loss of income during the pandemic but had continued to give support to those who needed by phone and virtually. The group currently helps 1,000 clients and would like to raise this to 3,000. It was

confirmed that they are available to provide talks at various events and they have a charity shop in Newland Street.

Big Sing

Big Sing's representative confirmed that the group had started in Witham in 2011 by Gemma and Howard Francis for a six week community choir workshop. Due to the initial success, the group grew quickly and continued. There are now various groups within Big Sing, ten choirs in Essex and have expanded into Kent and the Midlands.

Big Sing now have a charity group called Big Soul which was founded to provide funding enabling those that wish to join but are unable to afford to do so. Before the pandemic, Big Soul were providing funding for up to seventy schools, care homes and other clubs to participate in community choirs.

A recent achievement of the group included providing online singing packages to groups worldwide during lockdown which included to New Zealand and Zimbabwe.

Big Sing have won various awards, including BBC's Songs of Praise Gospel Choir of the Year and are open to invitations to events. It was noted that they are continuing to fundraise and will also consider any group that may benefit from the choir.

Witham & District Lions

The Town Mayor provided information about Witham & District Lions confirming that the group formed in 1980 and currently has seven members. It is part of an international community which has 1.4 million members world-wide and all funds raised are spent on charitable good causes.

It was noted that since July 2021, Witham & District Lions had carried out 107 hours voluntary service and supported 2,400 people. Information about how to join the group was available at the meeting.

It was confirmed that the ladies section is now a separate group called Witham Swans and they were also fundraising for local causes.

Citizen's Advice (Braintree, Halstead & Witham)

Cllr Sue Wilson, Braintree District Council Chairman thanked Witham Town Council for providing funding to Citizen's Advice by the previous Town Mayor, Cllr Clare Lager.

Jane Barton provided a report on behalf of Citizen's Advice. It was confirmed that the charity's volunteers provided free advice and support for all residents on a range of topics. They had continued to provide assistance during the pandemic and had seen a demand on their services increase. Current support is being provided to local people with the anticipated increases to cost of living.

Volunteers are currently being actively recruited to join the team to increase the services across the Braintree District.

6. ACCOUNTS

The audited accounts for the year ended 31st March 2021 were received.

The Town Clerk advised that the Council were currently preparing the accounts for the year ended 31st March 2022 and members of the public were always welcome to ask questions regarding the financial transactions of the Council.

7. **OPEN FORUM**

The Town Mayor invited members of public present to ask questions or make comment.

Martin Reid from Witham Allotment Association passed on his appreciation of the improvements made to Cut Throat Lane Allotments since Witham Town Council had taken over ownership and management of the site in summer 2021.

The Town Mayor thanked everyone for attending and invited those attending to remain for refreshments.

Meeting closed at 9.05pm

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Councillor Angela Kilmartin
Town Mayor

HA/21.04.2022

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