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MINUTES

Meeting of: **Annual Town Meeting**

Date: **Monday, 13th March 2023**

Place: **The Royal British Legion Memorial Hall, Newland St, Witham, CM8 2AZ.**

Present:	Councillors	J.	Bayford	(Town Mayor)
		J.	Goodman	(Deputy Town Mayor)
		K.	Atwill	
		P.	Barlow	
		P.	Heath	
		S.	Hicks	
		A.	Kilmartin	
		C.	Lager	
		M.	Lager	
		T.	Pleasance	
		S.	Rajeev	
		J.	Williams	
		R.	Williams	
			Essex County Councillor	R.
	Braintree District Councillors	W.	Rose	(Witham West)
		W.	Korsinah	(Witham South)
	Police Sergeant	A.	Christian	(Essex Police)
	Community Special Sergeant	S.	Jesse	(Essex Police)
		N.	Smith	(Town Clerk)
		G.	Kennedy	(Committee Clerk)
		S.	Smith	(PA to the Council)

And 30 members of the public including representatives from Witham Industrial Watch and students from New Rickstones Academy and Maltings Academy.

The Town Mayor welcomed everyone to the Annual Town Meeting.

1. MINUTES

RESOLVED That the Minutes of the Meeting held 19th April 2022 be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Town Mayor.

2. REPORTS ON THE TOWN COUNCIL

The Town Mayor reiterated his welcome in particular to the Witham Industrial Watch who would be giving a report, the students from New Rickstones and Maltings Academies who would be talking on their vision for Witham and Essex Police. He thanked Councillor John Goodman who had supported him as Deputy Town Mayor and his secretary who had kept his diary. He referred to events during the year in particular the celebrations for the Queen's Jubilee and the many organisations he had met during the past year. He said that it had been a privilege to serve Witham as its Mayor.

Planning and Transport Committee

Councillor John Goodman, Chairman of the Planning and Transport Committee, gave his report which included the opposition to the latest Rivenhall Park development and the start of the Witham Neighbourhood Plan. There would be a new administration in May who would be taking forward the aspirations for sustainable cycleways, sensible HGV routing through the town and parking issues particularly at schools. He added that the Town Council had been consulted by National Highways in relation to the widening of the A12. He said that he would be stepping down as a Councillor in May and said that the Town Council was proactive, with positive views and aspirations. He thanked the Town Clerk and her staff for their support and in particular the Planning Officer.

Environment Committee

Councillor Atwill, Chairman of the Environment Committee, gave his report. He said that the focus had been on maintenance and enhancement. He referred to the Climate Change Working Group with an Action Plan being agreed and 'pop-up' stalls promoting recycling and sustainable measures. Major works to the Town Centre and the Park, to be undertaken by the District Council, was currently at the tender stage. He said that the River Walk would be subject to a multi-stage project of footpath and cycleway improvements beginning with line marking. The outside team had been thinning trees in James Cooke Wood, the widening of the A12 would result in better sound reduction surface benefitting Whetmead Nature Reserve and there would be trial wild flower planting in the Closed Churchyard. He said that the Town Council worked in partnership with Greater Anglia for the planting at the railway station and referred to the success of the commemorative bench scheme and sponsored dog bins; and the introduction in Witham of the salt bin scheme.

Policy and Resources Committee

Councillor Michael Lager, Chairman of the Policy and Resources Committee, gave his report detailing the purpose of the Committee in overseeing policies, performance and finances. He said that matters had stabilised since Covid. He spoke of the protection a Neighbourhood Plan would give particularly in the town centre to make it lively and prosperous, promoting businesses and jobs. He said that Cut Throat Lane allotments were now in the ownership of the Town Council, a Safer Streets grant of £70,000 had been obtained to extend the CCTV system and money also given to make a fully accessible toilet for the Town Hall. He said that the Town Council had introduced a Shopping Voucher scheme promoting local shopping and the Information Centre offered goods and services. He referred to Witham's Voice which was delivered to every house. He thanked staff for their hard work far beyond duty, and the support given by residents, special constables, tree wardens, etc. Finally, he thanked his fellow Town Councillors for their contribution.

Community Committee

Councillor JoAnn Williams, Vice Chairman of the Community Committee, considered this to be the ‘fun’ committee dealing with people and events. She spoke about social isolation and the impetus given by the Town Council to create warm rooms in the town. She promoted the Silver Cinema and the other community events put on by the Council including the Easter Trail, Dog Show, Jubilee Celebrations, Puppet Festival, Halloween and the Christmas Fayre with over 4,000 people attending. She thanked the Events’ Organiser for her hard work. She spoke of the Information Centre and the fount of knowledge and information available as well as the sale of local merchandise and regular meet-ups with the police. She referred to pop-up stalls which had been organised and the wealth of information available through the Town Council website and social media. She said that the special community constables, supported by the Town Council, did an incredible job. She referred to the Safer Street funding and the extension of the CCTV system and the allotments now owned by the Town Council. She closed by referring to the Grant Aid funding available which this year had supported, amongst others, the Carnival Association, Citizens Advice and St John Ambulance Brigade.

The Town Mayor thanked Members for their reports.

3. ACCOUNTS

The audited Town Council accounts for the year ended 31st March 2022 were received.

It was explained that these were the most recent audited accounts available.

RESOLVED That the Town Council audited accounts for the year ended 31st March 2022 be received.

4. ESSEX POLICE

Police Sergeant Andrew Christian gave a short presentation. He referred to unsocial behaviour with on average 15 reports a month which had come down slightly as a great deal of work had been done in Witham. He considered that theft from person and business crime would increase as people struggle to pay bills. He explained that districts are ranked by numbers of crimes and was pleased to announce that Braintree was in the bottom third. Major routes would be targeted for driving offences in an attempt to bring numbers down.

The Town Mayor joined Members in thanking PS Christian for his report and praised the work of Witham’s Community Specials.

5. REPORT FROM WITHAM INDUSTRIAL WATCH

The Town Mayor welcomed Adrian Cousins, the Business Improvement District manager for the Witham Industrial Watch.

Mr Cousins gave a presentation explaining what the Witham Industrial Watch does and how it was funded through business levy payments. He explained that the biggest issue was crime which was often opportunist rather than a targeted attack. He said that there were 29 CCTV sites with 84 actual cameras and 3 ANPR (Automatic Number Plate Recognition) cameras and they also work with a local security company along with a dedicated WhatsApp group giving up-to-date messages for businesses. He then spoke about the other facilities they provide including defibrillators, ensuring gritting during the winter months, and dealing inter alia with landscaping and litter issues. In finishing, he explained that the fourth term vote would be

taking place next year and he hoped that the businesses would vote yes to allow the Industrial Watch to continue for the next five years.

The Town Mayor thanked Mr Cousins for his presentation.

6. REPORTS FROM WITHAM SECONDARY SCHOOLS

The Town Mayor was pleased to welcome students from New Rickstones and Maltings Academies on the topic “Our vision for Witham”.

New Rickstones Academy

The students were very pleased to have the opportunity for their voices to be heard. They would like more activities for young people including workshops so they could partake in practical tasks, speaking and teamwork exercises. They considered it was a privilege to live in Witham and there was an opportunity to help each other but would like more out of school activities including a youth club where interests could be shared, games played and an opportunity to socialise. They felt that litter was an issue and considered that more bins would solve the problem. They also asked for more recycling bins. They listed numbers of fast-food establishments, lack of homeless shelter and potholes as problems. They considered potholes to be a serious problem that needed to be fixed as motorists have to swerve to avoid them and accidents could be caused. One student explained that she did not feel safe when she walked home after school particularly in the winter months and needed to look over her shoulder to ensure that she was not being followed. She asked if the police could be outside the school at home time.¹

They also complained about the punctuality of trains and the number of rail replacements at the weekend. A number of students use public transport to get to school and find this to be unreliable. Train and bus fares have increased and they would expect facilities to be upgraded. The view was put that there were not sufficient facilities to further develop young people, not only giving them a chance to socialise but to occupy their minds, improve skills, resilience, communication and confidence.

Potholes were mentioned again as not only damaging vehicles but in wet weather they fill with water so the depth is unknown. Litter was a major problem which made the town less attractive and it was hoped that more bins would improve the situation. Concern was expressed about identifying places where drug taking and anti-social behaviour occur which makes a negative impact on the town. Poor quality shops were mentioned and a reduction in charity shops was mooted.

A discussion then took place regarding the students’ comments and whether they knew about the activities which had been on offer at the Witham Hangout and that Witham BB had run courses on cycle maintenance. Mr Peter Vik, the teacher from New Rickstones Academy, spoke about the importance of advertising and that social media via Instagram and TikTok should be used to inform young people. Members considered that the students had been a credit to the academy and had put forward good views. They remembered in the past that there had been a Witham Youth Council and this could be considered again.

Maltings Academy

The Maltings Academy had prepared a presentation.

¹ Essex Police attended New Rickstones Academy the following day as students were leaving.

The students thanked the Town Council for the opportunity to talk about their vision for Witham and began by telling of their experiences of living in the town. They spoke about the lack of a sense of community and few activities but welcomed the Jubilee event. They spoke about safety in the town and considered that the lack of police made them feel unsafe. They referred to the lack of transport from the outskirts of the town into the centre. The activities on offer at the football and rugby clubs were commended along with the Puppet Festival and Carnival. The rail links into London and Chelmsford were good and the comment was made that there were lots of cafes and hairdressers.

It was considered that crime rates were relatively low but anti-social behaviour and drug taking were of particular concern. They found groups of people intimidating and spoke of a lack of a sense of community. They too thought litter was a serious problem and there was a lack of facilities for both adults and children. Potholes in both the roadway and pavements were mentioned as well as problems with public transport and getting to school on time.

The students considered that more communal areas were needed in the town for people to socialise. There should be more events such as this meeting to give young people a voice. It was considered that with little investment the High Street could be regenerated. It was suggested that the community policing teams should focus locally on Witham and in finishing, they said that a more sociable community would ensure that people are safe and happy.

The students were congratulated for their presentation. They were informed that the Town Council should be the first port of call for residents as it would listen to their problems and try to help. The Town Council organises a number of events during the year for young people and the door is open for communication with the schools. The points made would be considered by the Community Committee to take forward.

The Town Mayor thanked students and staff for coming to the meeting and putting forward their views.

7. **OPEN FORUM**

The Town Mayor then opened the floor for suggestions, comments, questions or concerns about any matter affecting Witham.

The work of the community specials was commended but having no base in Witham was suggested to be detrimental. A discussion then took place about this issue but a secure storage area would be required. Police coming into the Town Hall every fortnight for a surgery was mentioned.

Lack of medical facilities in Witham was raised and the help of the Member of Parliament was suggested. It had been hoped, pre-Covid, that progress was going to be made with a new health facility in the town centre but this had been thwarted.

A King's Coronation lunch would take place on Friday, 5th May at the Public Hall and tickets would be available from the Information Centre.

Comment was made about young people feeling unsafe as they leave school and it was hoped that the local police could ensure they show a presence.

In answer to a question, the Town Clerk said that funding had been achieved through the Safer Streets initiative for an additional 11 CCTV cameras, which would include sites in Cut Throat Lane, Spa Road shops and near ASDA.

As there were no further comments made, the Town Mayor thanked everyone for attending and closed the Meeting at 8.50 p.m.

Councillor J. Bayford
Town Mayor

NS/GK/23.3.2023

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