

CHATTERIS TOWN COUNCIL
Annual Town Meeting
Minutes Dated Thursday 28th April 2022

Minutes of the Chatteris Annual Town meeting held at the King Edward Centre, King Edwards Road, Chatteris, on Thursday 28th April 2022.

Present: Cllr L Ashley (Mayor), Cllr I Benney (Deputy Mayor), Cllr J Carney, Cllr A Gowler, Cllr W Haggata, Cllr A Hay, Cllr M Petrou, Cllr F Newell, Cllr P Murphy, and Cllr J Smith.

A large number of members of the public/electors were also present and councillors introduced themselves.

1) Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence had been received from Cllrs A Charrier and I Taylor, Mrs S Spooner and Ms S Baker.

2) Financial Report

The Financial Officer presented her Financial Report (**copy attached**). The Financial Report showed a total expenditure for the year 2021/22 of £235,617.87, as at the 31st March 2022, and total income of £582,095.45 which included a full year's precept and a grant of £350,000 from the Combined Authority for the Museum and Community Rooms part of the Growing Fenland project.

The report contained details of the 2021/22 budget, a bank reconciliation statement and a summary statement of reserves and funds balances. The Financial Officer invited questions from the audience. There were none.

3) Report of the Year's Activities

The Clerk presented her Annual Report of the Council's activities for the year ending April 30th 2022 (**copy attached**).

She explained how the Council's work had been impacted by the pandemic but said it had been an exciting time for the Council as it had been invited to apply for £1million worth of funding from the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority. The bid had been successful and, as a result, the Council had been busy working on two projects – the Town Centre Renaissance Fund and the Museum and Community Space Project. The Clerk then gave a summary of all the work carried out by the Council and its officers.

4) Mayor's Report

The Mayor presented her report (**copy attached**). She admitted the past two years had been extremely quiet in the events calendar, due to Covid, but the Council had continued to meet and had been busy in the background working on the purchase of Barclays Bank and its conversion to provide a new home for the Museum. Cllr Ashley outlined the many activities she had taken part in in the past year and thanked the Clerk and the Financial Officer for their assistance.

5) Reports from Fenland District Council & Cambridgeshire County Council

Cllr Ian Benney gave the report from Fenland District Council as the Council's portfolio holder for economic growth.

Cllr Benney said recently a number of projects had come to fruition including Stainless Metalcraft's training centre which had received £3.2m worth of funding from the Combined Authority. This would not only benefit Metalcraft but would provide training facilities for the whole town. Metalcraft itself had secured contracts which meant many years of work and the centre was just the first phase of their plans which included new industrial units to ensure their supply chain was close at hand. These would provide employment for the town. When Bartlett's closed their vegetable packing plant FDC helped to find jobs for many of its employees, some with a new company in the town.

Aerotron was another jewel in the town's crown. Their high tech work with the MOD, Williams racing team and the aircraft industry provided high paid work in the town. They had also received a grant to help them relocate to Chatteris and planned further expansion.

In total £5.4million had been invested in Chatteris and FDC was now looking to attract further companies to the town. Cllr Benney expressed the importance of increasing the housing stock and the population of the town to attract further employment opportunities and services.

A member of the public asked if there were plans for more shops in the town. Cllr Benney explained how retail companies used analysis to work out if a shop would make money and said they would only come if a shop would make money and residents shopped in town. However the fact that Jacks had been converted to a Tesco's showed there was confidence in the town. Cllr Benney admitted it was difficult to attract big businesses to the town centre, not least because the shops were too small, but he was hopeful there would be more development on the retail park. He also explained why a swimming pool was not feasible with the current population.

Cllr Petrou asked how many plans which were passed resulted in houses actually being built. Cllr Benney admitted some never would be but he said there was a need for housing and high quality housing as many people who worked in the town lived outside it because the housing

was not right for them. It was a recognised fact that Chatteris had relatively poor quality housing stock. The problem was that the labour needed to build houses would rather work in Cambridge where prices were higher and developers could make higher profits elsewhere. He stressed again the need for the town to grow.

Cllr Anne Hay gave the Cambridgeshire County Council report as the town's County Councillor. She said the last 2 years had been challenging as meetings had been held virtually, officers were instructed to work from home and were seconded away to support the response to covid to ensure everything possible was being done to protect residents. This included delivering food parcels and checking individual vulnerable residents.

Cllr Hay said she was proud of the response from the County Council but it would not have been possible without the help of volunteers, the district and town councils and many other organisations.

Cllr Hay said she was pleased when face to face meetings returned but was perturbed to learn that the number of meetings of the County Council would be reduced from 11 a year to just 4. Cllr Hay pointed out a lot of important decisions were taken at the meetings (some involving extremely large sums of money) and the result of less meetings was that decisions were not being taken in a timely fashion and more and more decisions were being taken behind closed doors or being delegated to officers. In 2021/22 the Council tax was increased by 3% and Cllr Hay was disappointed when the new administration chose to increase the council tax by 5% for 2022/23 whilst also cutting back the highways budget and removing the money set aside for community grants.

Cllr Hay said she had been contacted by various residents over the year on issues such as illegal parking, anti-social behaviour, neighbour disputes, disabled parking bays, speed bumps, housing, education provision and potholes. She promised to help where she could on the issues.

On a positive note Cllr Hay said she was proud that after many years of lobbying the primary provision at Cromwell was now fully up and running with an improved road crossing outside the school. She never wanted to see a return to the situation of primary school children having to take taxis to schools outside Chatteris. She was also pleased to say the County was working hard to reduce the number of children in care.

Cllr Hay was particularly pleased to announce that the funding had been agreed for the Local Highways Initiative bid from Chatteris Town Council to reduce the speed limit in Doddington Road and Curf and Willey Terraces to 30mph along with speed reducing measures.

6) Reports from Town Groups/Clubs

Museum: The Mayor read out a report submitted by Mrs Sue Spooner, of the Management team of the Museum.

Mrs Spooner said the museum had charitable status and was run by a management team of volunteers overseen by a board of trustees. The museum temporarily closed to the public in September 2021 allowing volunteers to begin the mammoth task of preparing and packing the collection in anticipation of the move to Park Street. She explained that as an accredited museum the process of packing and moving had to be diligently planned and researched and the volunteers had to adhere to strict guidelines. However packing had given them the opportunity to assess the whole collection and begin planning how artefacts would be presented in the new museum space. There would be an emphasis on people and place, telling the story of Chatteris and its surrounding landscape.

Mrs Spooner said during closure the museum continued to offer loans boxes to local schools and to deal with requests from the public. Displays would also be put on at the library. The museum was currently applying for a National Lottery Grant for Heritage to fund a community project based on Chatteris in the 1920s. In addition a collection of tape recordings with town's people had now been professionally digitised with the help of a grant. The museum looked forward to re-engaging with local schools, groups and the community in the near future.

FLAPP: Mr Ian Mason presented a report on the work of the Friends of Little Acre Pocket Park. He said in addition to the work of tree planting and maintenance of the park to help make the place more attractive, the small group of volunteers had provided harvest hampers to the foodbank and would be working with Fascinating Fens on providing a guided tour of the park on the 18th June. Active Fenland were organising a walk at the park on the 12th May. Mr Mason said the group worked with other organisations, including the cubs, to make the park a green area and a nice place to go. Talking Together had even filmed a video for children at the park. Looking to the future the plan was for more signage and information boards and the group would be working with Chatteris In Bloom on their Britain In Bloom entry.

All Seasons Childrens Play: The Clerk read out a report from Ms Samantha Baker thanking the Town Council for funding which had helped to support her group which began during the pandemic. The idea of the group was to support young children and their families and carers, especially those who had been isolated during the pandemic. The benefits had been immeasurable and thanks to the ability to hold meetings at the King Edward Centre and financial support from the Town Council the group was working hard to create a group that was inclusive and diverse. Due to the economic state of society social settings such as the All Seasons group often had to be put aside but they were essential for the next generation to become confident, kind and community-spirited people. The grant from the Town Council had helped to buy new equipment and meant the group did not have to worry about its viability if fewer people were able to attend due to illness/Covid.

King Edward Centre: The Financial Officer, who was also employed as the Financial Manager of the Centre, reported that thanks to the pandemic it had been a tough time for the Centre. However she was pleased to report that the centre was now very busy with many groups returning, new groups joining and bookings for parties, etc. Grants from Fenland District Council and Chatteris Town Council helped to keep the centre going when numbers

were low and cleaning costs were high. It was good to see that the centre was busy and back to normal again.

7) Powerpoint Presentation on Growing Fenland Project

Cllr Carney presented a powerpoint presentation on the Growing Fenland Project (paper **copy attached**).

The presentation explained the background to the project; the four schemes which had been approved: i) The Chatteris Museum and Community Space Project; ii) The Chatteris Town Centre Renaissance Fund; iii) The Local Skills Development Project; iv) The Fenland District Civil Parking Enforcement Scheme and explained more about the first two projects including photographs of renaissance fund work which had already been completed around the town.

Cllr Benney explained that the four market towns in Fenland had each agreed to pay £100,000 from their Growing Fenland grant pots to pay for parking enforcement to be decriminalised so it was no longer the responsibility of the police. Officers employed by the District Council would be able to give out parking tickets. It was hoped this would help to solve many problems including people parking all day outside shops and parking issues near schools.

8) Questions from the Public

A member of the public was concerned about drug dealing and speeding issues in Huntingdon Road. He was angry that the drug dealers were not afraid of anybody and despite reports to the police no action appeared to be taken.

The Mayor said she had regular meetings with the police and assured the resident the police were taking notice and were doing all they could. There had been raids in town as a result of intelligence received and there had also been liaison with schools. The Mayor assured the public that she would continue to raise concerns with the police and offered to pass on any concerns reported to her. Cllr Benney urged everyone to report criminality.

The Mayor also said she was aware of young people hanging around the town and said the police were working closely with schools on this and the Town Council was funding outreach work with the youngsters.

Mr Mason asked why the Growing Fenland project had not taken account of town surveys which called for more open space. Cllr Benney explained that the money available was for capital projects not those which created revenue costs and strict criteria had to be met. Mr Mason said the project had not been voted for by the town. Cllr Gowler asked where the open space would go. He pointed out land within the boundary of the town was set aside for building as there were no brownfield sites in the town and outside the boundary was

agricultural land. He pointed out the Town Council had spent money improving the land it did own – the Pocket Park and the Old Railway Line footpath.

Ms Kirsty Patterson then indicated a wish to raise a question about Wenny “Meadow” and Cllrs Benney and Murphy, members of FDC’s planning committee, left the meeting.

The Mayor began by holding up a map which showed the site off Wenny Road which was allocated for development. The map showed the area where the developers Canon Kirk were proposing to build and the land beside it which was to be left as public open space. The Mayor pointed out this area was almost twice the size of Wenny Recreation Ground. In addition the developer was planning to retain most of the trees (with the exception of those which would be felled at the entrance points). She said nobody had been informed about the public open space which would be gained.

Cllr Haggata then read out the biodiversity report which acknowledged that there would be a biodiversity loss but pointed out ways this could be mitigated, by improving other habitats and likely inclusion in the emerging Local Plan.

Ms Kirsty Patterson began by stating the Save Wenny Meadow group was trying to save the Manor Park. She said the Local Plan review should take into account changing circumstances and claimed the current Local Plan, which was being used as an argument for the development, was out of date. She claimed the public open green space which was being left did not have the same biodiversity value while Wenny “Meadow” met all the criteria and was demonstrably beneficial to the community.

Ms Patterson called for a parish poll on the question: “Would you like Wenny Meadow to be designated as a local green space and protected from development?” The call for a poll was seconded by several members of the audience.

The Mayor and Financial Officer stated that a poll would cost thousands and the Town Council would have to put up the precept to pay the costs as there was no budget for a poll. Ms Patterson said if the poll was demanded by 10 electors there was no going back.

A member of the public asked why savings on the EVC charging points and the cycleway to Somersham could not be used to fund the poll. The Financial Officer explained that it had already been agreed that the money would be used to fund the extension of the made up surface of the Old Railway Line footpath.

Cllr Petrou said the Town Council, who were unpaid volunteers, tried to do their best for the town and he pointed out the field at Wenny was owned by private individuals. The District and County Councils and the Government dictated planning policies and the Government was demanding more housing. He claimed some councillors were not in favour of the

development (the revised plan had however been unanimously agreed by the eight councillors who were in the room at the April meeting when it was discussed).

Cllr Petrou explained the poll would not change the outcome and said whilst the Council felt the passion of everyone in the room what was being offered was a million miles away from the original plan. Cllr Gowler pointed out the town would be gaining public open space if the planning application went ahead.

Mr Weetman said more reports on biodiversity had been carried out and it had been agreed that the land had been misclassified and the biodiversity net loss was even greater. He suggested that many people in the room would rather see the area fenced off for grazing land than see an irreversible programme of house building on Wenny "Meadow". Miss Patterson suggested the neighbouring land could be developed.

The Mayor re-iterated that the Town Council was one of many consultees and the final decision on the plans would be taken by Fenland District Council. The Town Council took into account all reports when making its recommendation but was governed by planning rules. Cllr Gowler pointed out the plan was too far down the line to be affected by any change to the Local Plan and if it was rejected it would go to appeal and would be approved resulting in a charge to Fenland District Council.

Mr Alan Melton admitted he had trespassed on the land for 20 years walking his dog and was not keen to see the land built on but it was in the Local Plan as development land and originally the plan was for 800 to 1,000 homes on the whole site. He also pointed out that until about 2007 the field had been used for grazing cows and as it was private land the owners could fence it off again. He also stated that many people complaining about the development lived in homes which were built on green spaces. He suggested a parish poll could cost up to £13,500 and the result was not binding on the town/parish council.

Mr Lawrence Weetman said the section 106 payment of £28,000 was paltry and nearly £700,000 short of what should be paid. The Town Council had asked for £180,000 but the Section 106 officer had accepted £28,000. He then went on to claim there would be a shortfall of school places - a claim vigorously disputed by the Mayor who pointed out there was a new primary school and Cromwell Community College had additional school places available – and a shortfall in services. He also suggested if the homes were built they would cost the town £1million.

Ms Patterson claimed the Town Council had not supported the town for many years and she wished to show there was a mandate to support the Save Wenny Meadow campaign. Another resident was concerned it would be even more difficult to see a doctor if the homes were built but Cllr Gowler pointed out the council had regular meetings with the doctors and the problem was not space but attracting more doctors which was a problem everywhere.

Concerns were also raised about the speed of traffic along Wenny Road. Cllr Gowler said the MVAS which recorded and warned drivers about their speed had been erected in Curf Terrace to get evidence for the LHI bid. Now that bid had been successful the sign would be moved to Huntingdon Road and Wenny Road. There could be the opportunity in future to go for another LHI scheme for Wenny Road.

The Mayor asked for a show of hands to support the demand for a parish poll on the question: “Would you like Wenny Meadow to be designated as a local green space and protected from development?” 31 electors demanded the poll, three voted against and there were three abstentions.