

Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held on Wednesday 4th May 2022 in the Reid Hall, Boreham Street

1. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Eve Ashley.

2. Minutes from the last Parish Meeting

The Minutes from last Parish Meeting were noted, having been approved at last year's Full Council Meeting in July.

3. Welcome and Annual Report by the Chairman

The Chairman, Keith Stevens, welcomed the seven members of the public in attendance and read from his report which said;

'My last Chair's report was pre Covid in May 2019. It is interesting looking back at that report as I was expressing my views as to whether or not Annual Parish Meetings were still necessary in this modern world. I know the Government is looking into the need for such meetings but it seems the issue is still on the back burner.

I also spoke about grass cutting issues and pavements in Boreham Street most of which seem to have been resolved. Wartling Road was finally repaired but the result of this is that traffic seems to be going faster and volume has increased. It's much the same for Boreham Street and Boreham Lane. Although we are hoping to bring in some traffic calming measures with the help of East Sussex Highways.

SpeedWatch continues and the Police say the data they collect proves it is successful in reducing speeds even when we are not standing by the side of the roads in our highly visible coats.

The Covid situation has obviously improved but I think we have to accept that a new variant could very quickly change the position. I'm not going to dwell on Covid but once again thank everyone for all you all did.

Financially we had a good year or rather very good budgeting with income of £7501 and expenditure of £7450. In addition we received another £3580 by way of the Community Infrastructure Levy. So we currently have a total of £16412 CIL receipts.

Planning seems to be ok with WDC normally agreeing with our comments.

My main task here today is to thank people for all they do to help our community:-

The Village Hall team who run this hall...and who are of course organising the Jubilee Lunch on Sunday the 5th June.

Richard Lawrence and his SpeedWatch team...and by the way welcome to the new members....anyone else interested let Richard know. Oh yes and those kind people who provide the teams with tea/coffee.

Our County and District Councillors who have been especially busy over the past couple of years with the Covid situation and now of course with Ukraine.

And of course to my fellow Councillors and especially our Parish Clerk.

And then to you the residents for your continued support and for attending our meetings'.

4. Report from Michael David CEO, Wealden Citizen's Advice

Mr David was unable to attend this meeting.

5. Report from Daniel Brookbank, Pevensey Library

Mr Brookbank, Director of Pevensey Community Library said;

- The library is based at the corner of Richmond Road and Wallsend Road in Pevensey Bay, and it opened but as a Community Interest Company in 2018 after the County Council closed the library that was there.
- Thanks to an existing covenant it pays a peppercorn rent of £25 per year.
- Everyone is welcome but access is limited at the moment because there is no disabled access. There are plans to improve the situation.
- The County Council helped set up the library by supplying legal advice, 7000 books and furniture. More books are always welcome, even those that can't be used because they are sold to World of Books.
- The library also provides a community space.
- Royal memorabilia will be on display on the 4th June to help commemorate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee.

More details about the library can be found at <https://www.volunteersnetwork.co.uk/> or on its Facebook page.

6. Report from County and District Councillors

County Councillor B Bowdler sent a written report in which he said;

'It has been a difficult year for all of us, including every one of the team at County Hall. Officers remain working remotely, and are due to get back to their offices by mid April, at least that's the plan right now, but the virus is still an issue and is still causing problems, but the introduction of widespread virtual working has worked remarkably well, and has made an unforeseen positive contribution towards our carbon reduction target and travel budget.

Children and Families:

We have seen our budgets adversely and indirectly affected by the pandemic. In the case of my own portfolio of Children's Services the number of children within our care, our 'looked after children' has risen significantly, as has the number of families which are becoming 'intentionally homeless', increasing the burden on the council's budget. The backlog in the courts system is a contributing factor and recruitment also continues to be challenging. For your information, we currently have 620 Looked After Children in our care, which includes 60 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children under the age of 18. That is 620 children who, for no fault of their own, are unable to be with their own or extended family and for whom we become their 'Corporate Parents' and for whom we have a statutory obligation to provide a home, security, education and health care.

I have been lucky enough to meet many of our Looked After Children, and I can promise you they are amazingly resilient. Only a few weeks ago I presented 13 awards to them for their voluntary work in the community!

Highways:

The new highways contract is presently under negotiation. The £760M contract has not yet been awarded but we do have three tenders to consider. The contract is for 7 years, with an optional extension of 3 years. In addition, and due to prudent savings, we have been able to make a further £31M available, which will be spent on potholes at a rate of £3.1M a year over the next 10 years, that is in addition to the normal budget spending on pothole repairs.

Climate Change:

The Deputy Leader of the council, Cllr Nick Bennett, is leading on our carbon reduction targets, and despite what you may hear from others we continue to reduce our carbon footprint by 13% per annum, but this is becoming ever more difficult to achieve. In the last three months we have seen 300+ solar panels on our buildings in Lewes, and further installations on buildings elsewhere in the county are planned. We also continue to facilitate domestic group schemes for our residents who are able to achieve significant discounts on the installation of solar energy for their homes'.

County Councillor Bowdler also said the County Council is;

- Leading the resettlement of our guests from Ukraine. Progress might seem slow but it is important that the appropriate safe guarding measures are taken.
- Funding holiday Activities and Food Schemes in the school holidays.

It was also noted that the former County Councillor Bill Bentley has had a heart attack and is in hospital. Wartling Parish Council would like to take this opportunity to wish him a speedy recovery.

District Councillors Ray Cade and Pam Doodles sent a written report which said;

Pandemic:

As with all organisations Wealden had to put contingency plans into place to enable it to continue delivering first class services during lockdown and the aftermath. The solid working relationship between Members and Officers which exists in Wealden, built up over the years, helped enormously in ensuring the important business continued.

Meetings of the Council:

Where ever possible and when legislation allowed, meetings of the council were held virtually. At first adapting to the new method of working was tricky for some, but, thanks to the help of the IT department, friends and colleagues, everyone was able to participate. Once restrictions were changed and it became illegal to take decisions in remote meetings Wealden introduced hybrid meetings. This enabled everyone to participate although only members actually present were allowed to vote. This ensured vulnerable members and officers, and those testing positive for COVID were able to keep up to date with and contribute to discussions

Working arrangements:

Staff are now gradually returning to the office to work although, for a variety of reasons, some are still working from home. It is pleasing to find that those who do work from home are contactable on the phone and by email.

Our reception still remains closed; residents are able to make individual appointments to meet face to face. The switchboard team has been outstanding in the way they have responded to the huge increase in not only the number of calls, also the variety of questions they have to answer.

Website:

Our website has proved to be an invaluable tool, we have been congratulated on the information it contains. This now seems to be the first port of call for residents. The social media posts are also informative, giving details of future activities, meetings etc and also reporting the unavoidable service disruption such as rubbish collection as a result of the recent storm.

Customer Satisfaction:

We are pleased at the way Wealden responded to the difficulties created by the pandemic and managed to continue providing services of quality. Our customer satisfaction surveys also reflect this. However, as is the culture at Wealden, we strive for continuous improvement.

Ward visit with the Chief Executive, Trevor Scott:

We were pleased to be able to spend an afternoon, just under 4 hours, with the Chief Executive, Trevor Scott, showing him around our ward. During that time we were able to highlight those things we were proud of in our patch, share our concerns about issues that were not going so well and raise awareness of possible future problems. We were able to take him to parts of Wealden he had not seen before as a local farmer was delighted to show him his beautiful piece of Sussex. This was an extremely useful afternoon. Trevor familiarised himself with our particular part of Wealden and now understands why we are so strong in our support of it

Structure:

At Wealden we run the cabinet/committee structure. Currently there are 5 members of cabinet:

- Leader Governance and Finance
- Planning and Development and Deputy Leader
- Economic development, waste management and HR
- Community and Public Health
- Housing and Benefits

The committees of the Council are as follow:

- Licensing
- Overview and Scrutiny
- Audit Finance and Governance
- Planning South
- Planning North
- Standards committee

All members are expected to attend a variety of training courses organised by the council. Although only planning courses are mandatory the majority of Councillors attend as many courses of the courses on offer as possible

Planning Issues:

Much of our time has been dominated by planning issues. The Planning Department has been inundated with applications. The recruitment of suitable planning officers continues to be a problem for Wealden and nationwide, resulting in heavy individual workloads. Please be assured we take great care to do the very best for our residents but are not always able to obtain the results we would like.

The **Planning Cluster virtual meetings**, which bring together Officers, Wealden and Parish Councillors, are popular and informative.

Housing numbers are a concern for all local authorities, Wealden is no different. Members and residents alike are appalled at the number of properties Wealden is expected to deliver. The Leader of the Council, Cllr Bob Standley and the Planning Portfolio Holder, Cllr Ann Newton, have been in constant contact with our local members of parliament and have had face to face meetings with Government Ministers including Michael Gove and Rishi Sunak. As we write this we are awaiting a response from Michael Gove and are hopeful that he will respond favourably to our plea to be able to cut the number of houses we are expected to deliver.

Housing:

Last year saw the acceptance of Afghan refugees into the UK due to the unexpectedly quick overwhelming of the Afghan military forces by the Taliban. This created danger and very possible reprisals against those people and their families, who had assisted British forces.

The emergency was to transport those families out of Afghanistan as quickly as possible, which created a number of challenges; not least accommodating seventeen thousand refugees and then dispersing them to Local Authorities across the UK. Wealden has managed to house two families, who have quickly acclimatised themselves and, with help from local communities, successfully settled into their new surroundings.

The common challenge for all Local Authorities involved is finding suitable accommodation in the Private Rented Sector. The refugee families comprise a number of members, so they require substantial properties, which are difficult to obtain. The Wealden Housing team has considerable experience dealing with refugees as they have successfully settled Syrian refugees over the past five years.

Refuse Collection:

Refuse collection has worked efficiently, our contractor, Biffa, has proved reliable and quick to respond to difficulties. The number of missed bins is down considerably and continues to drop. The recycling records at Wealden are the best in East Sussex.

Again this year the **National Community Clean Up** initiative was supported, a number of refuse sacks and other litter picking paraphernalia were available on request from the office. Biffa collected the bags of litter promptly from prearranged positions. At the time of writing this report Wealden, Biffa and the Unions are in negotiation, attempting to avoid **a refuse collection strike**.

A strike was originally planned to commence on 25th April but the Unions agreed to delay to allow further talks.

Change at the top:

Isabel Garden, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Planning, Policy and Environmental Services is to retire after many years' service at Wealden. She will be a great loss to the organisation; we wish her well for the future.

After the usual national recruitment procedure and against stiff competition we are pleased to tell you that Chris Bending has been appointed to fill the role. The position he is vacating will be filled following a national recruitment campaign.

Tourism:

The Tourism Strategy has been reinvigorated and re-launched under the strap line of 'Naturally Inviting'. There are so many places of interest within the District we are determined to promote the area. We are fortunate to be able to promote 1066 Country, The Ashdown Forest and Winnie the Pooh, our Castles, South Downs, and not forgetting our country towns. Day trips are up and overnight stays are now slowly increasing following the fall because of the pandemic. Our tourism strategy is designed not only to advertise this beautiful part of Sussex; it also supports our small businesses and helps with employment. We work closely with Wealden based businesses who are able to inform our decisions

Partnership Working:

Traditionally Wealden has worked closely with partners, including the Police, Fire Service, The County, other local authorities and the utility providers. It is recognised that by working together we can all achieve better results. We cannot pretend that 'everything in the garden is rosy' but we can confirm we do our very best to deliver quality services for our residents.

Ward Councillors:

As ward councillors we spend a large percentage of our time responding to requests from our local residents. Much of this work is confidential so goes unseen. If we are not able to answer questions or help with a particular issue ourselves we do know, more often than not, where to obtain the answer or we are able to direct to another agency. We try always to follow up enquiries; this is a particularly rewarding part of our role.'

District Councillor Cade added that during the pandemic Wealden distributed £68m in Covid grants and work to house Afghan and Syrian refugees is ongoing.

District Councillor Doodes said staff at Wealden have started to return to the offices and thanked District Councillor Cade for keeping members updated on the Ukraine rehousing situation.

7. Reports from Clubs and Associations

Mr Willis, Chairman of the Reid Hall reported on the activities at the hall. He said the hall is in a good position financially and its hirers have returned.

He has also received a large donation of daffodils and appealed for volunteers to plant them.

There is going to be a Jubilee Lunch at The Reid Hall on the 5th June between 2pm and 5pm. Tickets are selling fast.

8. Open Forum

There were no further questions from the public.

There being no further business, the meeting closed at 7.55pm.