

Houghton Regis Annual Town's Meeting
Minutes of the meeting held
on
15th April 2024

Present: Cllr Carroll (Town Mayor)
Clare Evans (Town Clerk)
16 Parishioners

WELCOME BY THE TOWN MAYOR

Cllr Carroll welcomed all those present to the meeting.

It was explained that the Annual Town Meeting was an old institution that the Town Council was legally obliged to call and facilitate. It provided an opportunity to listen to members of the public and to advise on the activities of the Council. Three areas would be covered:

- The Town Mayor and Town Clerk would talk on behalf of the Town Council and answer questions. Any issues that could not be resolved would be presented at the appropriate committee meeting.
- Any questions for Central Bedfordshire would be put forward to councillors present or the council itself.
- Parliamentary questions would be passed to the local MP, Andrew Selous.

MINUTES

The meeting was requested to confirm the accuracy of the Minutes of the meeting held on 15th May 2023.

The Minutes of the Annual Town's meeting held on 15th May 2023 were approved as a true record and signed by the Mayor.

REVIEW OF ACTIVITIES OF THE TOWN COUNCIL'S COMMITTEES

The Town Clerk provided an update of the Town Council's activities over the previous twelve months.

Town Council elections had been held in May 2023 that saw eight previous councillors being re-elected and six new councillors welcomed.

A corporate plan had been developed outlining the projects for progress over the coming three years.

In the summer, an extensive recruitment campaign had been carried out and four new members of staff had been recruited. Three new youth workers had also been recruited and youth outreach work had been taking place in Tithe Farm and Parkside. A sailing trip had been organised for twelve young people, which had been very successful.

The Tithe Farm sports project was now in its final stages and awaiting power and the discharge of highways conditions. It was hoped this would be opening for Summer 2024.

Houghton Regis Town Council had been working towards the transfer of assets at Bidwell, including open spaces, the sports facility and play areas. This was expected to complete in the summer.

At the last Annual Town meeting a petition had been received regarding a new cemetery at Grendall Lane. The Town Council had reconsidered this as an option and were continuing to monitor the ground water levels. The results were expected in the near future.

The Town Council website had been updated and would be launched in April. Members of the public had been provided with an information sheet giving Town Council contact details, the new website address, generic email addresses and Councillors' email addresses.

Questions were then addressed to the Mayor and Town Clerk:

Was an audit trail available regarding funds directed into police operations in Houghton Regis?

The Town Clerk confirmed that there was an audit trail and that monthly verbal and written reports were submitted at the Combatting Crime Working Group. The police reports were not published as they contained confidential information.

Was the £40,000 funding value for money considering there were ongoing issues in the area that had not been resolved?

It was highlighted that this was an annual contract that was agreed by Members for additional policing beyond the usual levels.

Did the Town Council feel it was rigorous enough in protecting the lands under its remit?

The Town Clerk responded by saying that all assets were maintained to a high standard.

It was agreed that assets were satisfactorily maintained; however, issues remained with people setting up on the Village Green, precluding the use of other activities, without first applying to the Town Council for permission. It appeared there was insufficient protection of interests relating to communal and conservation areas and that byelaws were not being enforced. Other members of the public felt that if use of communal spaces was courteous, safe and caused no damage there was no cause for objection.

What should the police be doing in the town, given the additional funding? Where was it written down? How was it defined that police were doing more than they should be doing?

The Mayor explained that it made it easier to identify and tackle hot spots. Standard police funding did not allow for level of engagement Houghton Regis currently enjoyed.

Why had the precept increase been so large?

There had been no increase for a significant amount of time and that inflation, staffing and other related costs had all seen substantial rises.

The police had been advised that an event was taking place that would involve bike-related problems. Why had there been no addition policing to control this?

This did not fall under the remit of the Town Council and was something to be broached with the police service.

There had been a long history of dangerous parking on Churchfield Road. Central Bedfordshire Council had been contacted about putting double yellow lines in place. What was going to be done about this?

It was thought that a plan had been considered for double yellow lines and one-way traffic at Churchfield and this had been forwarded to Central Bedfordshire Council to progress.

There was a need for more traffic enforcement which was under the jurisdiction of Central Bedfordshire Council. CBC responded by outlining various factors that meant this was an ongoing issue and progress would be slow; however, they were aware of the situation and would be working towards a resolution.

Houghton Regis Neighbourhood Plan

David Gibbons gave an update on the Neighbourhood Plan which was coming up for referendum.

Residents and Councillors had collaborated for over 7 years to produce the plan, which recorded what was in place and what needed preserving. There was a feeling that Central Bedfordshire Council had been able to act against the wishes of the town when agreeing to development in Houghton Regis. With the Neighbourhood Plan in place, CBC would have to consult the plan prior to making any decisions. If the development ran contrary to the plan, it would be rejected. This gave Houghton Regis a voice at the start of the process; however, it was highlighted that the ability of the Town Council to object at the end of the process would remain. The policies in place provided stronger protection of assets within the town.

There were also aspirations for Houghton Regis and these were also included in the plan. It was hoped to halt the unrestricted development of housing without the necessary infrastructure put in place.

The plan would run until 2035 but would be reviewed before then. At the review it would be possible to include the green spaces at Bidwell and Linnere.

Updates from Not-for-Profit Groups operating in Houghton Regis

A member of the Heritage Society welcomed the Neighbourhood Plan as there had been massive changes within the town. A number of historical sites had been demolished and

the ability to preserve local assets, e.g. The Red House, for community use was an important step for the town.

The Friends of Windsor Drive gave an update on the events of the past year.

The group had now had in excess of six hundred and fifty people and carried out many community activities.

There had been collaboration with the Town Council, and the Town Clerk in particular, for Windsor Drive open space to become an Asset of Community Value. This status provided additional protection to the site against development.

Thanks were extended to Cllr Carroll for being a phenomenal mayor and providing support throughout.

Other activities included efforts to get a defibrillator installed in a redundant phone booth. The application for a free defibrillator had been unsuccessful but one had been offered at a discounted rate. Ways of raising the necessary funds for this purpose were being explored.

Windsor Drive was interested in all aspects of the community and its heritage.

Houghton Regis had the largest number of neolithic pits in the country and needed to be preserved.

Members of the public felt there needed to be some means of conveying the archaeological history of the area.

It was highlighted that everyone in the Parkside ward was a member of Parkside Action, irrespective of levels of involvement. Being involved could mean taking part in free play with children during the summer, collecting for Father Christmas or helping Pensioners to get their grass cut. Anyone who would like to become a part of the group would be welcome.

A community hub was an aspiration and could be put to multiple uses.

Matters raised by register electors of the parish of Houghton Regis

Residents of Whitehouse Close were experiencing continual parking problems during the day due to local staff, carers, contractors etc at All Saints View. At a meeting which took place with the Assistant Director of Housing at CBC in 2016, residents of Whitehouse Close were assured there were unlikely to be any parking issues. Residents, some of whom were elderly and/or had mobility issues, were now struggling to park outside or near to their own homes. The car park below All Saints View was practically empty most days.

A councillor from CBC said it had been a shock to discover that parking spaces would not be allocated for carers. A suggested solution to the problem had been to issue residents with parking permits; however, this was rejected by residents.

Cllr Goodchild advised that the Assistant Director referred to the fact that “the Undercroft car park remains a complex area and this risk is managed with restricted access due to the fire safety regulations. Due to the complexity, we are unable to extend use of this space to all”

Was there a way to register their email and receive updates from the Town Council?

There was a Facebook group that residents could join for this purpose.

Concerns were raised regarding sports hall provision in Houghton Regis. While the leisure centre was welcomed, CBC would fail to meet their own strategy, which promised to provide 'equal or better' sports hall facilities. The proposed SLR with Houston School would fall below current standards and would make it particularly difficult for individuals to access. How could Houghton Regis be more proactive to tackle this?

Could CBC be persuaded to reconsider the future of the sports hall. Could Houghton Regis adopt this as a town asset? Could land to the side of the leisure centre be used? The proposed plans for the leisure centre had needed to be viable to win the bid for its development. There were also deadlines in place which meant that the plans could not be amended and funds had to have been spent by a given date. Plans were also made for the day centre to close and for its services to be run from the leisure centre. Councillors had hoped the area of land to the side of the centre could be used for a health hub. It was advised to put the case before CBC in order to have all questions and concerns addressed.

Sites in Houghton Regis were becoming vacant. Could the old leisure centre be used as a community hub, the sports hall retained and used by Chiltern School?

A resident stated that accessing some services could be difficult and distributed a proposal suggesting potential technological solutions to this issue. Among the suggestions was an app which provided a wide range of information and for updates to be sent informing residents of items of interest.

The Town Mayor promised that all the matters raised would be examined and responded to. Residents were reminded that some of these issues would fall under the jurisdiction of CBC; however, Houghton Regis would be able to put these to CBC for consideration, and all responses would be fed back to the community.

The Town Mayor thanked all attendees for attending the Annual Town's meeting.

The Mayor declared the meeting closed at 8.36pm.

Date:

CHAIRMAN