

Houghton Regis Annual Town's Meeting

Minutes of the meeting held

on

14th April 2025

Present: Cllr Cooper (Town Mayor)

Clare Evans (Town Clerk)

15 Parishioners

WELCOME BY THE TOWN MAYOR

Cllr Cooper 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 Council (CBC) would be put forward to councillors present or the council itself.
- Parliamentary questions would be passed to the local MP, Alex Mayer.

MINUTES

The meeting was requested to confirm the accuracy of the Minutes of the meeting held on 15th April 2024.

The Minutes of the Annual Town's meeting held on 15th April 2024 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 as follows:

- Houghton Regis Town Council (HRTC) had taken part in a Corporate Peer Challenge Review earlier in the year to look at how the Town Council could improve its effectiveness and engage better with the community.
- The formal recreation ground, sports field and play areas at Bidwell had recently been transferred to HRTC.

- HRTC had been successful in its bid to Central Bedfordshire Council for UKSPF funding. The funding had enabled the Town Council to expand and enhance its community events and to introduce a town centre planting scheme that would take place over the spring and summer.
- The management of Houghton Hall Park had been transferred to HRTC.
- The Tithe Farm Sport Pavilion and all-weather pitch had opened.
- Outdoor gym equipment had been installed at Parkside Recreation Ground.
- The Tithe Farm play area had been remodelled and refurbished.

HRTC had continued to deliver a successful annual programme of community events (which were predominantly free) for residents to attend.

There had been continued support for young people through the Youth Pop-up Café and Youth Council. Youth Investment Funding had enabled these programmes to be extended to include detached and outreach work in Parkside and Tithe Farm and to provide open access sessions.

The investigations into Grendall Lane as a potential site for the new cemetery had been completed. The investigations had established that the site was unsuitable and options outside of the Parish would now be explored.

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

The Heritage Society had been operating for 13 years. It had a website and a free-to-view archive that was visited by people from the UK and other countries. There were 2,140 items, including pictures and documents

The Heritage Society had expressed interest in the Red House and had been in discussions with CBC to acquire the property for community use. The Heritage Society was forming a business plan with a view to obtaining a mortgage on the historic property.

Vane Cottage was a listed building within a conservation area. Following its purchase by a private buyer, trees had been removed and land cleared on the site without the requisite permission. CBC had visited the property, and the owner had been required to halt the works. English Heritage had also been apprised of the situation. Further news was awaited from CBC regarding the security of the site.

Houghton Regis Helpers was a local voluntary Good Neighbour Scheme set up in 2013. Houghton Regis was the first town to introduce one of these schemes and was the second busiest.

46 Volunteers provided help across all wards of Houghton Regis, and provided free assistance with shopping, prescription collection, DIY, gardening, befriending and form filling. Drivers transported clients to medical appointments, social events and shopping.

The following work had been undertaken by Houghton Regis Helpers over the past year:

- 4,185 jobs completed supporting 391 residents.
- Referrals received from more than 60 professionals.

- Assistance, advice and information provided to callers outside of the area
- More than 30 store vouchers distributed to residents in need of emergency food supplies, toiletries and energy top ups. This was thanks to the monthly Cost of Living Crisis donations from HRTC.
- More than 25 Packs of Support delivered in a collaboration with Jewels and the Baptist Church.
- Supported Small Acts of Kindness by packing and delivering 60 Warm in Winter bags.
- 40 Children's gift bags delivered at Christmas.
- Collection and delivery of food parcels on more than 80 occasions in collaboration with Dunstable Food Bank.

A highlight of the year had been receiving the King's Award for Voluntary Service, which was the equivalent of an MBE, in recognition of services to the community, especially during the pandemic.

Houghton Regis Helpers had attended fundraising, promotional and community events; had been interviewed by Three Counties radio and attended meetings with partners and local network groups. The group was also represented at a number of mayoral events, Cheering Volunteering and the Royal Garden Party.

HR Memorial Hall had done well financially and there were plans to make improvements to the hall, including redecorating, purchasing new outdoor benches and installing an updated PA system. The hall was run by trustees with only one paid member of staff.

The Luton and Houghton Regis Basketball Club had been running for 15 years. There was continued frustration at the lack of a satisfactory response from CBC regarding suitable sports hall provision within Houghton Regis. CBC had failed to provide a facility that was both affordable and easily accessible to all and failed to understand the impact that the deficit of a sports hall would have, most especially on young people. Residents felt that CBC's leisure strategy had been forced on the town and that a narrative persisted that failed to satisfactorily address the direct questions and concerns raised by councillors and residents.

Councillors were asked to seek a bespoke funding solution to ensure sports hall access for all.

The Friends of Windsor Drive continued to grow its membership. The group had looked to expand its involvement with other groups, areas and activities in order to operate for the benefit of the community as a whole.

The Friends of Windsor Drive had continued to participate in committees with HRTC. The group had also taken part in Houghton Regis in Bloom; raised funds for the installation of a defibrillator on Windsor Drive and acquired funding to enable fitness activities to be held.

HRTC was thanked for its continued support.

Jewels thanked HRTC for the council grant that had allowed the space at the rear of the building to be reconfigured.

Matters raised by register electors of the parish of Houghton Regis

Was HRTC aware that Houghton Regis was now defined as a super council?

The Town Clerk confirmed that Houghton Regis was a super council. This was a definition given to by the National Association of Local Councils to those town councils meeting certain criteria, e.g. budget, population etc.

If Houghton Regis were similar in size to Dunstable, would HRTC look to increase the number of councillors? Would this lead to HRTC having more representation within CBC?

CBC would be launching a Community Governance Review later in the year. This opened up possibilities for residents, councils and organisations to make representations to CBC to change the parish boundary and the number of councillors. The process was due to start at the end of June and Town Council would be holding engagement days to promote the process.

Over the last 5 years there had been an erosion of facilities and services for residents, e.g. Community Centre, Townsend Centre, Sports Hall. What could be done by residents and councillors? Would HRTC be willing to seek a judicial review of CBC's behaviour that had seen the needs of residents ignored and lack of a satisfactory response, most notably regarding sports hall provision.

The Town Clerk confirmed they would take this suggestion on board and investigate the matter further. There were stringent requirements for a judicial review, and it would need to be established whether those requirements would be met.

Could legal counsel be sought to inform the decision?

There was discussion among the residents on this matter and it was suggested that the Local Government Ombudsman could be contacted. The representative from The Friends of Windsor Drive confirmed that they were in the process of formulating a submission.

There was strong feeling among residents that CBC did not sufficiently take into consideration the wishes of Houghton Regis residents but, rather, it became a barrier to aspirations. It was additionally felt that promises had been made on too many occasions that were, ultimately, not forthcoming and that the town looked neglected as a consequence.

Would Houghton Regis have the opportunity to form its own unitary authority if it joined with other authorities?

It was confirmed that a mechanism existed to achieve this but that it required a percentage of the electorate from each town to propose the move.

If it wasn't possible to move forward with a judicial review, what other action would HRTC consider, especially in relation to the Sports Hall?

The Town Clerk confirmed that, following the failure to secure the Sports Hall via an Expression of Interest, consideration was being given to what further action could be taken. What form any future action would take was yet to be decided.

Residents strongly voiced their dissatisfaction at the disparity between what was promised by CBC, e.g. boundary walks, leisure centre creche, that then failed to be delivered. There was a consensus that Houghton Regis was being failed by CBC which was not being held to account for its decisions. There was disappointment and anger that the situation was unlikely to change and that this, in turn, engendered a degree of apathy when decisions were being made.

The Town Clerk highlighted some of the projects delivered by CBC, which included All Saints View, the leisure centre, Houghton Hall Park, the A5 / M1 Link and the Woodside Link. While residents acknowledged these investments in the area, it was thought that the end results did not always reflect the needs of Houghton Regis residents and that there were often problems at an operational level.

It was confirmed that all matters raised would be looked into and responded to in due course. Some of the areas covered came under the jurisdiction of CBC; however, HRTC would put these matters to CBC for consideration and any responses fed back to the community.

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

The Mayor declared the meeting closed at 8.06pm.

Date: 13th April 2026

CHAIRMAN