

MUCH WENLOCK TOWN COUNCIL

Minutes of the
TOWN COUNCIL MEETING
held at The Guildhall, Much Wenlock
at 7 pm on Thursday, 11th January 2024

Present: Councillors William Benbow, Susan Crooke-Williams, David Fenwick (in the chair), John O'Dowd, Marcus Themans, Daniel Thomas, Christian Toon, Chris Tyler, Linda West, Duncan White.

In attendance: Trudi Barrett – Town Clerk, one member of the public in person and one remotely.

1. Mayor's Welcome

The Mayor presented the following report:

Good evening councillors and welcome back after what I hope was a happy Christmas and New Year for you all.

Councillor Tyler and I visited Church Stretton on one of their community engagement days to see what they are doing to involve residents in the first Neighbourhood Plan for the Strettons. They are starting from scratch, unlike us where we are reviewing ours. They put on an excellent display and were asking residents their views on all of the usual subjects. A very professionally run event, and we came away with some good ideas for our community engagement event.

Regarding our Neighbourhood Plan review, the Planning Committee have met with Alison Eardley our chosen planning consultant, who came up from Kent for the meeting. More on that later in the agenda.

The public toilets in the car park at St Mary's Lane have been reconfigured and upgraded. The automatic doors have been replaced with manually operated doors and new wallgates for hand washing have been installed. A card payment facility has been added and the charge for use remains at 20p.

Work to upgrade the electrical connections in the High Street was scheduled to take place between 15th January and 7th February, with the road being closed to traffic for the duration of the work. This will cause some temporary disruption, but the essential work will ensure the future reliability of the electrical supply to residents and businesses in the town centre.

Councillors Benbow, Grainger and I met with Peter Neale, the Business Manager at William Brookes School, to discuss various school management matters, and also our concerns with regard to the condition of the swimming pool and changing facilities. He said he was aware that certain matters required attention and went on to say that improvement works were due to start early this year. Events however have overtaken us, and we now know that the pool is closed for seven weeks for urgent health and safety repairs.

2. Apologies for Absence

Councillor Grainger – work commitment.

3. Disclosure of Pecuniary Interests

Members were reminded that they are required to leave the room during the discussion and voting on matters in which they have a disclosable pecuniary interest, whether or not the interest is entered in the register of members' interests maintained by the monitoring officer.

4. Dispensations

None requested.

5. Public Session

There had been no requests to speak.

6. Policing

Members noted with thanks the written report provided by PCSO Mal Goddard. Police officers were otherwise engaged and had sent their apologies.

7. Shropshire Council Report

Shropshire Councillor, Daniel Thomas, presented the following report:

Shropshire Council's Budget Consultation: in our last meeting, I informed you all that the administration in Shropshire Council has now made £41m of the £51m savings, and a further £6M is expected by the end of this financial year, leaving a shortfall of £4m which will be met from reserves. This year's Shropshire Council budget is out for consultation now, and we face another gap of £26.5m. To help do this, there is an online budget consultation, which is currently open. I urge all of you to respond and I have sent the link out to all Councillors. The consultation closes on the 28th of January, so please do not delay.

Shropshire Council Car Park Charging Proposals: Shropshire Council's car park proposals will go to the Cabinet meeting on 17th January where they will be looking at increasing charges for the Council's car parks and on-street parking areas. The changes are being proposed to encourage people to change behaviour in the larger market towns and to raise additional income for spending on the maintenance of car parks. The report only came out late yesterday and I haven't been able to read it properly yet but I do urge all Councillors to read the report.

Drainage work on Stretton Road, Much Wenlock, to help reduce flooding: last month, I gratefully reported that the highway drainage work is to be carried out on Stretton Road, Much Wenlock, from 22nd January to mid-April 2024. However, due to the effect on businesses along that road and the short notice period we gave them, we have delayed the work until the summer. Many Much Wenlock residents will share my disappointment at this work being delayed. It is vital that work is undertaken to ease the inconvenience of flooding for residents and local businesses. A later closure allows plenty of time for our fantastic businesses along Stretton Road to make proper plans to deal with the pressure this road closure will cause; it's crucial that we support them during any disruption. The delay will give additional opportunities to optimise detours, improve signage, and implement mitigation measures to reduce traffic congestion and noise.

Road Works: a range of road works is taking place across the Much Wenlock division, which includes vital road repairs to make our town a better place to live, work and visit. A rather important one is the National Grid upgrading the electricity across the High Street from 15th January to 7th February. Originally, this was going to be before Christmas, but after meeting with the National Grid, I represented residents and traders where it was agreed to move the work to the new year to protect Christmas trade.

Shropshire named on ABTA's 10 global holiday destinations: Shropshire has been named by travel experts as one of 10 destinations to watch for holidaymakers this year - the only UK location to be featured. The "rural gem" appears on travel trade organisation ABTA's list, alongside the Spanish region of Extremadura, Saxony in Germany, Vietnam and Zambia. This means that this Council's decision to take out Silver Membership with Visit Shropshire will have an even bigger reach than perhaps originally expected and, therefore, greater benefit to tourism and trade in the town.

Surgery: my next advice surgery will be held on Saturday, 13th January, between 10.30 a.m. and 12 noon at Much Wenlock Museum. No appointment is necessary. I'll be joined by Town Mayor, Councillor Fenwick, and a representative from the Police.

Finally, I'd like to wish you all a happy and prosperous New Year.

Councillors raised the following queries with Councillor Thomas:

Q: In relation to the Stretton Road drainage work, it had also been promised that the High Street drains would be improved; when was this going to happen?

A: Councillor Thomas would keep up the pressure and find out when the work would be carried out.

Q: Shropshire Council car parking charges had increased by 30% last year and were now proposed to go up again. This would raise little revenue from small towns such as Much Wenlock but would be detrimental to the community and its economy and would impact on residents as well as visitors to the town. Much Wenlock had a limited bus service and most visitors came by car. The Town Council should object strongly to the proposals.

A: Councillor Thomas agreed. Most of the funds would be raised from Shrewsbury, followed by Ludlow and Bridgnorth. The proposals were intended to also ease congestion in Shrewsbury town centre as well as increase revenue. The cost of residents' permits was set to increase as well. However, the proposal was going to Cabinet and Councillor Thomas would not have an opportunity to vote. Ultimately, Shropshire Council needed additional income to avoid bankruptcy.

Q: Would it be possible to obtain data to see the impact on demand from the previous increase in charges and projected impact from the latest proposals, as well as how the additional revenue would be spent?

A: Councillor Thomas would request information and pass on Councillors' comments.

8. Minutes

- a. It was RESOLVED to approve and adopt the minutes of the Town Council meeting held on 7th December 2023.
- b. It was RESOLVED to adopt the minutes of the Planning & Environment Committee meeting held on 7th November 2023.

c. It was **RESOLVED** to adopt the minutes of the HR Committee meeting held on 21st November 2023.

9. Town Clerk's Report

Members noted the written and verbal report from the Town Clerk. The Clerk updated Councillors on progress with the IT upgrade for the office.

10. 2024/25 Budget

Members considered the draft 2024/25 budget and precept, as recommended by the Finance & Asset Management Committee. A commentary on the proposals had been provided by the Responsible Financial Officer.

It was RESOLVED to approve the 2024/25 budget, with expenditure of £349,488 and a precept of £275,287, representing an increase of 7.5% over the previous year.

11. The Guildhall Project

Councillors noted an update on the Guildhall project. The feasibility study had been completed and submitted to the Architectural Heritage Fund along with the grant claim. Further audience development work was still to be undertaken, with the deadline for completion of this element of the work and the National Lottery Heritage Fund claim being the end of April 2024. The surveys of the Guildhall, undertaken as part of the feasibility study, would be considered by the Finance & Asset Management Committee.

12. St Mary's Public Toilets

Members noted that the reconfiguration of the facilities at St Mary's car park had been completed. Replacement manually operated doors had been installed along with new wallgates for hand washing. A card payment option had been introduced but the cash payment option, which should have been retained, had been removed. Healthmatic had advised that the coin acceptor had been incompatible with the new card payment equipment.

It was RESOLVED to request that Healthmatic install a cash payment option at no extra cost, as this facility should have been retained as part of the work that had been commissioned.

Members noted that the Council's groundsman had removed overgrown vegetation around the building but further maintenance work was required, such as replacement of missing tiles. The railings at the front of the building had also recently been damaged and removed for safe keeping. The Clerk was asked to obtain quotations for repairs, which would be considered by the Finance & Asset Management Committee.

13. Neighbourhood Plan Review

- a. Members received an update on the Neighbourhood Plan review. A meeting had been held between members of the Planning & Environment Committee and the consultant, Alison Eardley on 4th January. The scope of the review had been discussed and what matters could and could not form part of the Neighbourhood Plan. The consultant had identified areas of the plan requiring revision. It had been agreed to meet with local stakeholder groups to clarify some matters and to explore in which areas different groups might help with the review. A meeting was to be arranged within the next month, which the consultant would also attend.

Concerns were raised about the potential cost of the review. There were sufficient funds within the Council's contingency budget for the following year to allow the review to keep moving forward should there be a delay with Locality funding.

- b. **It was RESOLVED to consider an additional matter relating to the Neighbourhood Plan in private session at the end of the meeting.**

14. Stretton Road Drainage Work

Members noted that the capital drainage works on the Stretton Road scheduled for 22nd January to 12th April 2024 had been postponed. Shropshire Council had agreed to delay the work to allow the businesses situated along the Stretton Road more time to resolve operational issues arising from the road closure and long diversion route. It was expected that the work would be rescheduled for the middle of the year.

15. Gaskell Recreation Ground Charity

Members received a report from the Gaskell Recreation Ground following the charity AGM held on 14th December 2023. Councillor David Fenwick had been elected Chairman of the Charity. The following Councillors had been elected to the Management Committee: Susan Crooke-Williams, David Fenwick, Marcus Themans and Duncan White.

16. HSBC 'Pop Up' Banking Service

Members noted that HSBC would be providing 'pop up' banking services in Holy Trinity Church on Fridays 12th January, 9th February and 8th March between 9.30am and 1.30pm and under the Corn Exchange on Friday, 12th April 2024.

