

**Minutes of the Annual Town meeting held in the Castle Hall,
West Castle Street, Bridgnorth on Wednesday 29 March 2017 at 7pm**

Present: Councillor Ms V Voysey (Town Mayor), Councillors Mrs C Baines MBE, Ms S Barlow, D Cooper, G Davies, R Gill, V Gill, J Gittins, A Hinton, E Marshall, G Mountcastle, Mrs J Onions, Mrs C Whittle and R Whittle OBE.

Ms Anne Wilson (Town Clerk), B Ince (Outdoors & Properties Manager)
Mrs R Follette and Mrs R Williams (minute secretaries)

Councillor C Lea (Shropshire Council), Inspector R Thomas (Police),
Bridgnorth Food Bank & Castle Kitchen (guest speakers), and 31 members of
the public.

Minutes transcribed by Mrs R Williams and Mrs R Follette

1. Welcome by the Town Mayor, Councillor Ms V Voysey

The Town Mayor welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained that the meeting was the Annual Town Meeting for the residents of the Parish of Bridgnorth.

No apologies were given.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the Annual Town Meeting held on 20 April 2016 were accepted as previously circulated.

3. Guest Speaker

The Town Mayor then introduced Liz Bird as the first guest speaker from Bridgnorth Food Bank.

Liz informed the meeting that two years of research had been carried out before the food bank was set up in Bridgnorth four years ago. They have found there is a great need for their services in Bridgnorth and the surrounding areas including Cressage, Shifnal, Highley, Albrighton and Alveley. The food bank is a charity; the Bridgnorth Community Trust. They assist people with a variety of needs, not just food as the name suggests but help with utility bills, transport and clothes. The charity has also purchased items for use; a cooker, mobile phone and a wheel chair. They assist a women's refuge although they do not know where this is located. Help is received from multi agencies and support workers.

A message is put out on Facebook each week informing people what is required at the food bank should they wish to donate and between 11 and 22 clients visit the food bank on a Monday morning between the hours of 10.30am and 12.30pm. If the necessary supplies are not available they are bought. A typical cost for a person of one being £34 per week, £44 for a couple and £64 for a family of four. People who are referred to the food bank need an agency referral voucher before they are interviewed to ascertain their needs. They are given food for two weeks and then their situation is reviewed.

Liz wished to thank all the volunteers and people who donate.

Lorraine Ladha was introduced as the second guest speaker from Castle Kitchen.

Lorraine informed the meeting that the soup kitchen was due to open at the Castle Hall, West Castle Street on Friday 7 April 2017. They will be providing homemade vegetarian soup and a bread roll between 11am and 1pm for those people in need. The kitchen will be operating every two weeks initially and they have had support from the food bank. Posters have been placed around town to notify people of this service.

4. Review of the work of the Town Council:

(a) The Mayor's Report from Councillor Ms V Voysey

'This year we welcomed Jean Onions to the Council after a by-election.

It has been a busy year for civic engagements as presented on the Mayor and Deputy Mayor's diary.

Promoting Bridgnorth has been a success with a win for the Town Council in the Small Speciality Market category at the NABMA (National Association of British Market Authorities) awards, for the Christmas Light-Up Event. This builds on the success of the Great British High Street win, a highlight of my year in office.

More controversial issues brought to the table this year included the plans for development on the Old Smithfield which was discussed in July. In November, the funding and running of Events was discussed to much public interest. In December, it was resolved not to continue with the Severn Valley Visitor Centre project.

Much of the content of the Full Council meeting concern housekeeping matters: ratifying minutes, closing cemetery plots, noting the level of reserves, noting the bank reconciliations, and so on. The typical Agenda does not promise an evening of entertainment, so I offer my thanks to those members of the public who have attended our Full Council meetings and shown an interest in our work.

This year the public have raised issues for discussion including speeding, markets, pensions and how we can support the food bank.

Presentations have been given by the following organisations:-

Men in Sheds – June

West Midlands and Warwickshire Police – July

WASPI (Women Against State Pension Inequality) – September

Former Bridgnorth Round Table – October

Shropshire Smile Maternity Charity – December

Bridgnorth Food Bank – December and February'

(b) Report by Councillor R Whittle OBE, Chairman of the Administration and General Purposes Committee

'I am pleased to present a brief report on the work of the Administration & General Purposes Committee over the last year. Our work incorporates the work of the previous Finance and Procurement sub-committees.

We examine every month the list of debtors and the monthly accounts. In the case of the former I am very pleased to note that the level of debtors, thanks to the work of Council staff, has reduced very considerably over the last two years, though there are just a few still giving rise to concern, which we are monitoring regularly.

In the case of the monthly accounts, due to the juxtaposition of meeting dates, Council see and adopt these before they are seen by A&GP. Therefore our examination is often a rather pointless exercise. This does give me concern, as I do not feel that the accounts are given a sufficiently rigorous consideration before approval by Council.

Other items that have been on our agenda in the last year are:-

1. We had a discussion on examination of annual accounts, but this has not been progressed.
2. We recommended various changes to financial regulations including that all expenditure over £10,000 should be budgeted in advance except in emergency. This latter item was not approved by Council.
3. We noted that expenditure of Section 106 monies relating to the Lodge Lane play area had not been subject to Council tendering procedures and confirmed that in future these must be properly applied.
4. The Deputy Mayor's allowance led to considerable discussion and reporting in the press. Although we are told that this is OK as it is part of the Mayor's allowance, personally speaking I retain doubts as to the legality of this.
5. We recommended acceptance of a tender for £13640 for the Christmas Lights erection and dismantling.
6. We recommended progress on a media installation together with disabled access and toilet for the Town Hall. I do not recall any further progress on this matter.
7. We recommended that an insurance claim for damage to the Town Hall should not be pursued due to lack of evidence.
8. We recommended installation of electric supply to the Cemetery Top Chapel at £8815 subject to agreement with a third party for a significant contribution to the cost.
9. We had an initial look at the 2017/18 budget and expressed concern that it indicated a very significant deficit and did not make any provision for a review we were undertaking.
10. We have installed a fire alarm at the football club. In addition, although it is not our responsibility, we have installed a new boiler at a cost of £2347 on the understanding that this will be refunded over time.
11. We noted that the Council employers contribution to staff pensions is to increase from 15.7% to 17.8%. We asked why the repayment period for the deficit had been reduced, but have not been given an answer.
12. We recommended a hanging basket tender of £5580.
13. Council approved, in January, a budget that would increase local tax by 4% and would still leave a budget deficit – still with no provision for the review.
14. The Employee Code of Conduct is to be updated, but we are awaiting confirmation of this.
15. We recommended acceptance of a tender for £26,400 for fitness equipment on Severn park PROVIDED that the cost is fully covered by Section 106 monies.
16. We have recommended that, other than limited sums we are required to hold separately, all earmarked reserves should be moved to General Reserves as we feel this will provide greater clarity in the accounts.'

(c) Report by G Mountcastle, Chairman of Property & Grounds Committee

'I have had the privilege of continuing as the Chairman of the Property and Grounds Committee for the last twelve months. The direct labour force has continued to maintain the high standards of work in the open spaces managed by the Town Council. Castle Grounds, the Cemetery, Severn Park, Well Meadow and Crown Meadow in particular are very attractive for the residents and visitors to the town. During this year the committee has discussed plans for the improvement and development of Severn Park and the provision of electricity to the old chapel in the cemetery. Volunteers from Oldbury Wells school and the town have planted daffodil bulbs on the By Pass verge to make this road around the south side of the town more attractive to those passing through in the spring.

Staff have been trained in tree maintenance techniques as there are many trees which need pruning and high level works on the areas managed by the town. The Committee visited all the main open areas in October to consider the priorities for spending and understand the scale of work required. Discussions continue with Shropshire Council about areas of their responsibility for ground maintenance alongside the river and other sites. We have been approached to consider taking over some of the areas Shropshire currently are not able to maintain.

The Town Council continues to successfully enter the Heart of England in Bloom competition. The Bridgnorth Rugby Club have been in discussion with the Town Council about developing the land adjacent to Bandon Lane for a Club House if the club decides to concentrate its functions on Severn Park and around the Edgar Davies ground.'

(d) Report by Councillor J Gittins, Chairman of Planning Committee

'This Committee considers in the region of 160 applications relating to the town of Bridgnorth each year varying from tree works, property extensions, new builds, Listed Building Consent, replacement windows and change of use to name but a few. We are one of the many consultees that Shropshire Council request comments from for planning applications relating to land, trees and properties within Bridgnorth town.

Any major projects, such as the retail development on the Old Smithfield site for example, would be considered by all members of Council at a Town Council meeting rather than the Planning Committee. Our role is purely advisory however; we have no planning powers; this lies with Shropshire Council.

The Town Council's Planning Committee meetings are currently held every Monday fortnight at 7.15pm in the Mayor's Parlour, College House, St. Leonard's Close and members of the public are welcome to sit in on the meetings throughout the public sessions. They may also request to speak on a particular application if they so wish either in support or to raise objections. Their views will then be taken into account when our Members consider the application. The Planning Committee is currently the only committee with delegated powers. This allows the comments of members to be submitted to Shropshire Council within the limited consultation time permitted without having to wait for ratification by full Council.

All applications can be viewed prior to the meeting on the planning portal of the Shropshire Council website and also electronically during our Planning Committee meeting. Comments can be submitted directly to Shropshire Council via their website and members of the public are strongly recommended to do this if they wish to offer their support for an application but more importantly if they wish to raise any objections. Agendas listing applications due to be considered by our Committee are uploaded to the Town Council website. Exceptionally, applications not shown on the agenda have to be considered during the meeting without prior notification if they are notified to us after dispatch of the agenda but if their response time is inadequate to delay their consideration until a subsequent meeting.”

5. Accounts from Charities

Members were asked to receive the accounts from the following Charities:

- (a) Bridgnorth Parish Charity
- (b) Reverend Francis Wheeler’s Charity
- (c) Sir Robert Lee’s Charity

The accounts from the three charities were received.

6. Questions to Divisional Surveyor’s Department, Police, Shropshire Councillors and Bridgnorth Town Councillors

- (a) Report from Graham Downes, Highways Manager for Shropshire Council (Bridgnorth Area)

The Mayor informed the meeting that Mr Downes had sent his apologies for the meeting but the Town Clerk read out the following report from Mr Downes:

‘One significant issue which needs to be raised will be the major scheme which the Town Council have been made aware and that is the A458 Bridgnorth By-Pass scheme.

The contract has only just been awarded and it is too early to have met with the contractor and have received their detailed programme. Once I have a detailed programme it will be shared amongst the stakeholders in which BTC are one.

The outline of the contract is that it is a multi-disciplined scheme encompassing major bridge works, carriageway resurfacing, street lighting and barrier replacement. The duration of the contract is approx. 20 weeks and we are anticipating a start date in summer 2017. It is envisaged that the majority of the work will be undertaken using lane closures and contra flow type traffic management although inevitably there will be a number of road closures organised to allow contractors to complete some elements of the scheme in a safe manner. The road closures will be advertised and signed in advance to inform motorists and residents.

Shropshire Council will and have been keeping the major stakeholders in the picture and will prior to the start of the work contact stakeholders regarding programme dates etc. Once the contract begins there will be a blog and web site to keep residents and visitors informed of progress and contact names and emails addresses will be made available to answer any queries.

Apologies for my non-attendance and if there any questions raised during the meeting regarding the proposals on Bridgnorth by-pass or highway related matters please let me have the details.'

(b) Report from Inspector R Thomas from West Mercia Police

Inspector R Thomas advised that the number of incidents that had been reported to police using the 101 number was 62,000. This was for the period April 2016 to March 2017. He commented, however, that the actual criminal element equated to 18% of this figure. The majority of calls related to several issues including public safety, missing persons and wildlife queries. Crime in the area continues to go down year on year.

The meeting was informed that West Mercia police are currently working to a severe threat level due to the recent terrorist incident in London and anti-terrorism paroles were taking place in the region.

The Inspector acknowledged that residents want to see a police presence and officers were working hard to be as visible as possible. He commented that lots of police work was carried in private; evidence gathering, talking to victims and court appearances.

He advised that PC Stuart Lippitt is due to retire in May 2017 after 30 years' service and he wished for his thanks to Stuart to be minuted.

He then welcomed questions.

Q. John Cannaby asked what the police position was with regard to CCTV in the town as it was missing from the police report?

Inspector Thomas advised that although CCTV is a very useful tool it does not replace policing. It complements the work done by collecting evidence if in the right place at the right time. It does not supply audio and as such it is used to collect evidence. He stated that he was grateful to the CCTV staff for their work and felt it should continue as it is but develop with the town.

Q. Ron Richards asked the Inspector if he thought that if the pubs closed earlier it would help with anti-social behaviour and crime in the town? Could the police contact Shropshire Council with regard to this?

The meeting was advised that the licensing laws have changed in 2000 and residents were urged to contact the police each time they were concerned about a particular issue. The police can take a licensee to the review board.

Q. Pam Becke raised concerns over the removal of the police radios from the CCTV suite and asked if she should call 101 or 999 if she witnessed a crime being committed while she was in the suite. She said that vital minutes were lost in contacting emergency services.

She was informed that she should contact the police using the conventional methods i.e. dial 999 or 101 depending on the type of offence that was being committed. CCTV workers/volunteers are under the Town Councils control and not the police. The Town Clerk informed Pam that Facewatch would be installed soon in the town and that she would meet with Pam to discuss this.

- Q. Cathryn Dixon asked who was responsible for the behaviour of people when they left the pubs in the early hours of the morning. If licensees themselves have a responsibility for the people who leave their pubs.

Inspector Thomas stated that different types of licence existed with differing levels of responsibility and all public houses should have them displayed in their premises. He reiterated that the police should be contacted each time a problem was encountered as they need evidence to support their case.

Cathryn went on to say that it would be nice to have a couple of police officers on site when the pubs closed their doors. Residents did not like to keep on contacting the police as they felt they were being a nuisance or did not want to get involved and so did not report the problems. She believed that the police underestimated the anti-social behaviour problem in Bridgnorth.

Inspector Thomas again reiterated that the police should be contacted.

- Q. Helen Howells asked if Facewatch could be explained.

The Town Clerk informed the meeting that Facewatch worked along the same lines as Facebook and that information and images could be shared instantly with other users in the group. There is a monthly fee to join but such a scheme helps to cut response times down.

- Q. Sarah Stevens asked if in other towns, such as Ludlow where a licensed premises had been closed down, if someone had co-ordinated that or if it was down to individuals making complaints?

Inspector Thomas explained that a local residents group had been instrumental in providing evidence over a number of years.

- Q. Julie Buckley told the meeting that she had attended on behalf of Bobbie Brown, the lady who had facilitated the campaign against the closure of the maternity unit, and asked why the Town Council had not been more involved in the group who were fighting the closure of the unit in Bridgnorth. She said that she realised it was not the mandate of the Town Council but felt strongly that the council could have done more to help including lobbying Shropshire Council and Councillors.

Councillor David Cooper put forward the following motion:

‘This meeting of the residents of Bridgnorth expresses its support for Bridgnorth maternity unit and calls on Shropshire Clinical Commissioning Group to use its best endeavours to retain the choice for mothers to give birth at a local facility.’

The motion was seconded.

- Q. Ron Richards and Adrian Tacchi asked if the police expected members of the public to put themselves in danger by taking pictures of criminal activity for Facewatch.

Inspector Thomas informed the meeting that Facewatch was for use by businesses and shops that were part of the group and not members of the public.

Christian Lea, Shropshire Councillor, advised that he had met with Philip Dunne MP and stressed to him the need to keep the maternity unit in Bridgnorth. He had also spoken to Bobbie Brown and offered his support.

Councillor Edward Marshall told Julie that no one had approached him as a Town Councillor with regard to this issue. The Mayor said that Bobbie had attended a Town Council meeting and had approached both herself and Councillor James Gittins, who both helped with the organisation of the protest march, which was well represented by Councillors.

Councillor David Cooper advised that he had attended a meeting at Shropshire Council with regard to the Smithfield development. He stated that 120 car park spaces would be lost once the new shops had been built. He put forward the following motion:

'In light of the recent granting of planning permission for development on the Smithfield car park, and the resulting loss of parking spaces, this meeting requests that Shropshire Council reviews car parking provisions and transport in Bridgnorth with a view to ensuring that accessibility issues do not constrain the Town's economy with no reduction in current parking provision.'

A vote was taken

- Q. Cathryn Dixon asked why there was such opposition to the new retail units.

People felt that they wished for Bridgnorth to remain a small market town and have independent shops and felt that the loss of so many parking spaces would have a detrimental effect on the town's economy.

- Q. Adrian Tacchi asked the Mayor why she had not consider a proposal, that had been seconded, on a 0% increase on the precept at the Town Council meeting held on 23 January 2017 following David Cooper's original proposal of a 6.2% increase and amendments of 2% and 4%.

The Mayor advised that Councillor David Cooper wanted to 'balance the books' and Councillor R Whittle wanted a 0% increase. She wished for a workable budget and a compromise. She stated that the minutes were not a good reflection of the meeting and she had taken advice that she had been given.

Adrian Tacchi asked if the resolution of that meeting was legal and commented that the Mayor had banged her gavel to stop the discussion and asked if she was presiding over a dictatorship.

A number of residents congratulated the Mayor on her time in office and commented that she had done a very good job. There was a round of applause for the Mayor.

Discussions were held with regard to the council tax rises of both Bridgnorth Town Council and Shropshire Council and Councillor Carol Whittle asked if Christian Lea could respond to peoples' concerns about cuts in services. Christian stated that Shropshire Council had been to London to speak to MPs to highlight the problems that are being encountered in Shropshire and to lobby for better funding for the County.

Richard Fox stated that Shropshire Council had failed to increase council tax year after year and he felt this was to appease their voters and that they were at fault for the present deficit that they find themselves in.

Councillor Christian Lea responded by informing the meeting that Shropshire Council had decided not to increase the council tax previously as they felt it was more important for people to have money in their pockets rather than spend it on tax increases.

The Mayor informed those present that the closing date for new Councillor positions for both Bridgnorth and Shropshire Council is Tuesday 4 April 2017 at 4pm. She commented that Bridgnorth Town Council had recently received negative press but her hope for the future is that of great spirit and co-operation with partner agencies to work together for the benefit of the town.

- Q. Brian Jones asked for clarification on recycling procedures. He stated that he always separates his recycling but had noticed that when collecting the rubbish Veolia tip all the waste into one compartment.

Councillor Christian Lea said that he would find out and respond at a later date. He stated that we no longer have residual waste being put into landfill sites in this area.

Brian Jones implored the meeting to fight the termination of the 101 bus service.

The Mayor thanked all those who had attended the meeting.

The meeting closed at 8.45pm.