

UCKFIELD TOWN COUNCIL



Minutes of the meeting of **UCKFIELD TOWN COUNCIL** held
on Wednesday 26 June 2024 at 7.00pm
in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Uckfield

PRESENT: Cllr. K. Bedwell (Town Mayor) Cllr. S. Mayhew (Deputy)
 Cllr. D. Bennett Cllr. B. Reed
 Cllr. D. French Cllr. P. Selby
 Cllr. V. Frost Cllr. A. Smith
 Cllr. J. Love Cllr. P. Ullmann
 Cllr. C. Macve
 Cllr. D. Manvell

IN ATTENDANCE:

County Councillors Chris and Claire Dowling
Holly Goring Town Clerk
Sarah D'Alessio Assistant Town Clerk & RFO
Minutes taken by Holly Goring

1.0 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members and officers were reminded to make any declarations of personal and/or prejudicial interests that they may have in relation to items on the agenda. They were advised that notice should be given at this part of the meeting of any intended declaration and that the nature of the interest should then be declared later at the commencement of the item or when the interest became apparent.

The Chair, Councillor K. Bedwell declared a personal interest in agenda item 23.1 as a result of knowing the lead of the Uckfield Guides, very well. She was advised by the Clerk that she could speak but not vote.

2.0 STATEMENTS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC ON MATTERS ON THE AGENDA AT THE MAYOR'S DISCRETION

None received.

3.0 TO RECEIVE REPORTS FROM EAST SUSSEX COUNTY COUNCIL AND WEALDEN DISTRICT COUNCIL

FC.22.06.24 It was **RESOLVED** to suspend Standing Orders to enable updates to be provided by County and District Council representatives.

Councillor Claire Dowling referred to the latest Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources report which was presented to ESCC Cabinet the previous day.

The Town Clerk sent a copy to Town Councillors, and the Assistant Town Clerk. The report highlighted that the substantial challenges they were facing in

February 2024, had unfortunately increased, and thought to further increase exponentially. The demographics were changing, with increased demand for social care and displaced people. There was already a greater proportion of over 65s in East Sussex (26%), compared with the England average (19%). The population of over 85s was almost double the national average. Since 2016, there had been a 64% increase in children being supported through plans due to their complex needs. 23% of Looked After Children were unaccompanied asylum seeking children and youth unemployment was still high. Businesses were still affected by rising costs and inflation but also the pandemic, which would take time to recover from.

At financial year end, the ESCC budget was overspent by £31.1million. This overspend was not allocated for within the budgets. The overall deficit for the organisation at year end was £14million, and this resulted in ESCC having to dip into reserves. They hadn't done this before, and once the reserves had gone, they were gone. There was uncertainty moving forward, in terms of the income from the UK Government review, and grant funding. They were looking at a predicted deficit of £26.5million for 2024-25. ESCC was managed by one overall budget divided up into budgets. First priorities were Children's Services and Adult Social Care and officers would be analysing their budgets very closely over the next few months.

ESCC has been assessed independently through a LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Review and had been considered to be a well-run organisation, with Children's Services performing well.

The dip in Bell Farm Road that had been raised by Cllr French, was being monitored closely.

Councillor Manvell questioned whether it would affect the Council's core offer (statutory level of service). Councillor Dowling explained that everything would be looked at very closely, as even statutory services, may be able to reviewed in terms of efficiencies and processes, to reduce further costs.

Councillor Reed, questioned whether there was any update on the Holy Cross Primary School site, which there wasn't at this time, and Councillor Reed referred to deprivation statistics within Uckfield.

Councillor Chris Dowling referred to two matters in Ridgewood – Red Clover Road and New Road, which he was working on with local Town Councillors and local residents.

Councillor Dan Manvell, referred to an area of parking that he and Councillor Love had been raising with Wealden DC, that was near to Manor Way, that needed attention. The car park would be resurfaced within this financial year.

Councillor Donna French, was made to feel very welcome at her first Full Council at Wealden DC. She has been busy attending training and working with residents. Attendance at the recent New Town Action Group had resulted in the installation of a new litter bin at the top of Harlands Recreation Ground, by Shelduck Avenue. A big thank you was passed to the Grounds team for doing this so quickly.

Councillor French, had also attended an in depth visit to the Sewage Treatment Works, on 20 June 2024, with a Wealden Environmental Health, Southern Water representatives, the Town Mayor, Chair of Plans, and two local residents. They were given an extensive tour of the site, and were compiling their notes from the visit, to share with members.

Councillor Bernadette Reed, wished to thank the Town Clerk and the team for organising the hustings event on Sunday, with Cornerstone Church. Councillor Reed was due to meet with an officer of Wealden DC to walk the footpath routes between Horsted Green and Boothland Wood later that week. She was also liaising with the Assets team to discuss their Conservation Management Plan.

The Woodland Trust had issued an article in the media, which related to Lake Wood, which had also been picked up by the Sussex Wildlife Trust.

FC.23.06.24 The Councillors were thanked for their input and update, and subsequently **RESOLVED** to reinstate Standing Orders.

4.0 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillors M. McClafferty and D. Ward.

5.0 MINUTES

5.1 To resolve that the minutes of the Annual Statutory meeting of the Council on 20 May 2024 be taken as read, confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

FC.24.06.24 Members **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Annual Statutory meeting of the Council be taken as read, confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

5.2 Action List

Members subsequently noted the action list.

6.0 COMMITTEE MINUTES

6.1 To note the acts and proceedings of the following committee meetings:-

(a) Plans Committee of the 3 June and 24 June 2024

FC.25.06.24 It was **RESOLVED** to note the acts and proceedings of the Plans Committee of the 3 June and 24 June 2024.

(b) Environment & Leisure Committee

This meeting was cancelled.

(c) General Purposes Committee of the 10 June 2024

FC.26.06.24 It was **RESOLVED** to note the acts and proceedings of the General Purposes Committees of the 10 June 2024.

7.0 TO RECEIVE REPORTS FROM REPRESENTATIVES TO OUTSIDE BODIES

(i) The Uckfield Town Centre Regeneration Joint Committee

Nothing to report at present.

(ii) Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group

Nothing to report at present.

(iii) Gatwick Airport Consultation Panel

Nothing to report at present.

8.0 TO RECEIVE REPORTS FROM FULL COUNCIL WORKING GROUPS

(i) Civic Centre Working Group

Nothing to report at present.

(ii) Uckfield – Events Working Group

Nothing to report at present.

(iii) Uckfield Dementia Forum

Nothing to report at present.

9.0 TO RECEIVE, CONSIDER AND NOTE THE INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT FOR THE YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2024

Members were directed to the Annual Internal Audit Report 2023/24 as contained within the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) and the contents of the detailed Internal Audit Report.

The Assistant Town Clerk referred to the recommendations within the report, which she explained, that officers would be reviewing alongside Finance Sub-Committee. One recommendation involved putting a Financial Improvement Plan together which would not only ensure the Town Council was compliant, but also streamline a number of existing processes, to create efficiencies. Another recommendation was to stop producing company style accounts, which had a heavy focus on assets, and depreciation. The Internal Auditor was keen to ensure the accounts lined up and underpinned the accounts to the structure of the AGAR more easily.

Members thought it was an excellent report, and very complimentary to the way the Town Council's finances were run. Members thanked the Assistant Town Clerk & RFO, and wider team, and received, considered and noted the Annual Internal Audit Report 2023/24 within the AGAR.

10.0 TO RECEIVE, CONSIDER AND APPROVE SECTION 1 – THE ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT FOR THE YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2024

Members reviewed the Annual Governance Statement for the period 2023/24 which formed part of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) on page four of six.

The Assistant Town Clerk referred members to the AGAR report, which had to be sent to the External Auditor to be authorised. Section 1 showed that we had put the necessary processes and controls in place to ensure good governance and finance.

FC.27.06.24 Members reviewed the contents of Section 1 (Annual Governance Statement 2023/24) and **RESOLVED** to receive, consider and approve the Annual Governance Statement for 2023/24, and authorised for the Town Mayor as Chairman of the meeting and the Town Clerk to sign and date this statement on behalf of the Town Council.

11.0 TO RECEIVE, CONSIDER AND APPROVE SECTION 2 – THE TOWN COUNCIL'S DRAFT ANNUAL GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY RETURN AND FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2024

Members reviewed a summary of the Town Council's accounting statements, as presented on page five of six, in the draft Annual Governance and Accountability Return ending 31 March 2024, and a set of financial statements prepared by the

Town Council's accountants at the end of March 2024.

The Assistant Town Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer presented the report(s) to members. Unfortunately, the Town Council showed a deficit in 2023/24. The figures were broken down within the accounting statement and showed the difference between 2022/23 and 2023/24. Officers had to produce an explanation of variances to send with the return. Income was higher than predicted in all areas, but unfortunately so was expenditure. Earmarked reserves had to be considered and utilised. The Assistant Town Clerk provided a copy of the Direct Service Costs to one member, which was shared wider, and shared a copy of her screen which showed the two areas of overspend, which included staffing costs (pay award increases and casual staff costs to cover sickness and the increase in events).

Members understood the pressure that businesses and local authorities were under, but also recognised that Uckfield Town Council provided public services, so it was rare that income covered the full cost of running these services. Rising costs in staffing, machinery, materials, fuel etc were impacting the organisation.

It was suggested that the explanation on variances be included on the Town Council's website.

It was also noted that the pension fund figures sent by the Local Government Pension Fund for East Sussex for financial year end had affected the overall position of the Town Council's financial statement, and this was outside of the Town Council's control.

On behalf of all of the Town Council, the Town Mayor wished to give a massive thanks to the Assistant Town Clerk and RFO for her hard work on this.

FC.28.06.24 Members **RESOLVED** to receive, consider and approve the draft annual governance and accountability return, and financial statements for the year ending 31 March 2024, and authorised for the Town Mayor as Chairman of the meeting to sign and date this return, on behalf of the Town Council.

12.0 TO CONSIDER A REQUEST TO REVIEW THE OPENING TIMES OF THE TOILET(S) AT VICTORIA PLEASURE GROUND

The Town Council office had received an enquiry from a local resident, which asked if the toilet(s) at Victoria Pleasure Ground could be opened longer (in the summer evenings and opened at weekends). The Town Clerk had explained within the report that despite introducing a 24/7 mechanism and tidying up the toilets, they were victim to a large amount of vandalism, which was not only costly but made the toilets unusable for others. At present the toilets were opened by the Grounds staff early on weekday mornings and closed when they left mid to late afternoon. The Town Council had a cleaner who looked after the outside buildings including Victoria Pavilion but they only worked weekdays. There was a Grounds person who worked for approx. two hours on weekend mornings who could open the toilets, but the council would be reliant on others to close the toilets each day. The Town Clerk clarified that there was CCTV around the building, but this didn't always act as a deterrent.

Members discussed different options, with potential to utilise volunteers/local

councillors or residents helping, but their main concern rested on the health and hygiene aspect, with no cleaner on duty at this time. They felt that it was possibly too late for this summer, but should be reviewed in detail during the next budget setting process to ensure this could be accommodated for 2025 onwards.

FC.29.06.24 With six votes in favour, and three members against the proposal (including Cllr Selby), members **RESOLVED** to address this matter through the Town Council's budget setting process which would begin September 2024, to ensure the correct service provision was in place.

13.0 TO CONSIDER OPTIONS TO SUPPORT RESIDENTS WITH THE DISTRIBUTION OF SANDBAGS

Members were presented with correspondence from Wealden DC, which asked parishes for initial views on how the current process for distributing sandbags to those affected by surface water flooding could be reviewed and improved.

One member asked if we could find out the lifespan of a gel sandbag, as normal sandbags had a limited life, and this could affect the location of storage. A second member agreed, stating that the current type, if left lying down, could burst if they remained damp.

Members were concerned that flooding events could happen at any time in the week/weekend, day or night, so there needed to be 24hr call out system which the Town Council currently didn't have in place. This could mean difficulties with distribution.

Members were uncertain how much space would be required for storage, and knew that Wealden DC had a storage facility by Horsted Green, but were not aware of the purpose of this unit.

Members were also keen to know that if a parish/town council took on this service, whether they would receive any funds from the District and County Council to cover costs.

FC.30.06.24 Members **RESOLVED** that without further information, they would be unable to take a decision at this stage. If Wealden DC were looking to make a saving, or devolve this activity, questioned whether Wealden DC would offer a financial contribution to the parish and town councils. Further questions also needed answering about the lifespan of the gel sandbags, approximate storage space required and whether nearby assets that Wealden DC owned were suitable to store the bags.

14.0 TO CONFIRM THE LIST OF TOWN COUNCIL SUPPLIER PAYMENTS BY DIRECT DEBIT FOR 2024-25

Members were provided with the updated list of Town Council supplier payments made by direct debit, for full transparency. It was clarified that there were no standing orders. Councillor Macve wished to see the schedule of payments made when they authorised the fortnightly supplier BACs payments. Members noted the list provided.

15.0 TO REVIEW THE UPDATE TOWN MAYOR AND DEPUTY MAYOR POLICIES

On reviewing the policies, following the recent change in Town Mayor and Deputy Mayor, the Town Clerk realised that the policies were very much due an update.

The Town Mayor, Councillor K. Bedwell, also wished for the Mayor's role to be more inclusive, and rather than just seeing that a spouse or partner, join the Town Mayor, or Deputy Mayor as a consort, enable other Town Councillors to join them at events similar to their interests or expertise.

Councillor Reed advised that the Chair of Wealden DC was able to nominate a charity for the year, and wondered if organisations such as the Conservators of Ashdown Forest could be considered. The Town Clerk subsequently explained the process and that the Ashdown Forest would need to approach the Town Council for funding during the budget setting process and community grant application period.

Councillor K. Bedwell advised that all businesses had a Corporate Social Responsibility and she wanted to focus on two themes in her year as Town Mayor (i) engage more with the business community and Chamber of Commerce, and (ii) look at succession planning for the local community and voluntary organisations, who delivered so much for the town.

One member spotted a typo, on paragraphs 14.1 and 14.2 which the Town Clerk could address. It was also suggested by another member that we removed the exact figure of the member allowance, to reduce the need to update the policies every year.

Councillor Manvell spoke of his experience as a Youth Member, when former Mayor Councillor Eastwood invited him to the ESCC Chairman's Ball, and suggested that the consort role also be expanded to youth members.

FC.31.06.24 Members **RESOLVED** to approve the revised Town Mayor and Deputy Mayor policies and support the Town Mayor's areas of focus for 2024-25.

16.0 TO CONSIDER A DRAFT SCHEME OF DELEGATION

Members considered the first draft of the Scheme of Delegation, which identified what responsibilities and activity could be authorised and undertaken by officers, in association to the Committee Terms of Reference, Standing Orders and Financial Regulations.

Members were happy with the format of the document, and welcomed a review by the Finance Sub-Committee at their meeting on 18 July, to ensure the financial limits aligned, before Full Council adopted the document at their September meeting.

17.0 TO SIGN AND SEAL A LEASE AGREEMENT FOR THE SMALL HALL, ADJACENT TO FORESTERS HALL

The Town Clerk advised that the draft lease agreement had already been presented and approved by members of General Purposes Committee.

FC.32.06.24 It was **RESOLVED** for two Councillors to sign and seal the lease agreement in the presence of the Town Clerk.

18.0 TO NOTE THE MAYOR'S ENGAGEMENTS

In addition to the civic engagements undertaken by the new Town Mayor and Deputy Mayor, Councillor Bedwell advised that she had also attended meetings with the Head of Planning & Environmental Services at Wealden DC, Brian Hart in relation to the railway, Southern Water and Environmental Health in relation to the flies, and would be meeting with Cabinet member, Wealden District Councillor Kelvin Williams later that week with the Deputy Mayor and Chairs of the standing committees to discuss infrastructure and strategic matters in Uckfield.

Councillor Bedwell advised that Councillor Smith was leading another food bank collection event at Tesco on Saturday 20 July 2024. They were looking for assistance with the afternoon slots in particular if any members or relatives were able to assist.

Members noted the report.

19.0 SIGNING OF GRAVE CERTIFICATES AND TO NOTE TRANSFERS OF DEEDS OF GRANT

Two deed of grants had been received:

Sylvia Elliott

Deborah Jones

FC.33.06.24 It was **RESOLVED** for three councillors to sign the above deeds of grant.

20.0 QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS PREVIOUSLY NOTIFIED

None received.

21.0 TOWN CLERK'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Town Clerk advised that the chairs of the standing committees and Full Council attended Code of Conduct training with Wealden DC earlier that month. A revised form to record the Member Register of Interests had been circulated since the training, and all councillors would be asked to complete the form and return by Sunday 7 July 2024.

The Town Clerk brought up the subjects of email accounts and attendance. Attendance records for members at the standing committees had been lower in the past 12-18 months and the Town Clerk was keen to see this improve. She was also aware that some councillors were experiencing issues viewing their Town Council email accounts. If this was the case, they needed to get in touch, and the Town Clerk would provide them with the details of the IT company. Members needed to remain engaged with council business, and email was the first point of contact by the Town Council office, unless otherwise agreed.

FC.34.06.24 It was **RESOLVED** to suspend Standing Orders and extend the meeting by 15 minutes.

22.0 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

None.

23.0 CONFIDENTIAL BUSINESS

FC.35.06.24 It was **RESOLVED** that pursuant to Section 1 (2) of the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, because of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted it was advisable in the public interest that the public be temporarily excluded and they were instructed to withdraw.

23.1 To consider an update on Osborn Hall

FC.36.06.24

It was **RESOLVED** for:

- (i) the Estates & Facilities Manager to explore the space and feasibility of early considerations, and;
- (ii) the Infrastructure Member Workshops to focus on strategic projects on Town Council sites and land, and how these projects are funded.

FC.37.06.24

It was **RESOLVED** to reinstate Standing Orders with the meeting closing at 9.12pm.