

UCKFIELD TOWN COUNCIL



Minutes of the **Annual Town Meeting**
held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Uckfield
Wednesday 19 March 2025 at 7.00pm

PRESENT	Cllr. K. Bedwell	Town Mayor
	Cllr. J. Love	Chair of the Plans Committee
	Cllr. D. Ward	Chair of General Purposes Committee
	Cllr. A. Smith	Chair of the Environment and Leisure Committee

In attendance:-

Town Councillors D. Bennett, C. Macve, D. Manvell, D. French, M. McClafferty, B. Reed, P. Selby
District Councillor K. Williams
County Councillors C. Dowling and C. Dowling
PCSO Sue Choppin, Sussex Police
28 members of the public
Holly Goring – Town Clerk
Sarah D'Alessio – Assistant Town Clerk & RFO
Rachel Newton – Senior Administrative Officer

Minutes taken by Rachel Newton.

1. Welcome and introductions by the Town Mayor

Town Mayor, Councillor K. Bedwell introduced herself and welcomed everyone to the meeting. This was her first year as Town Mayor and it had been an honour to see first hand the amazing work undertaken by volunteers and charitable organisations in Uckfield and the surrounding areas.

When it came to her Mayoral engagements, Councillor Bedwell's first priority was the town of Uckfield. The Mayor's Reception was due to be held shortly at the Civic Centre on 26 April 2025 to help raise funds for the Wealden Volunteering groups. This event would be open to all who wish to attend and details can be found on the Civic Centre website.

Chairs of the three standing committees, Councillor J. Love - Chair of Plans Committee, Councillor A. Smith - Chair of Environment & Leisure Committee and Councillor D. Ward - Chair of General Purposes Committee all introduced themselves to the attendees, as did the Town Clerk, Holly Goring.

2. Apologies for absence

Apologies had been received prior to the meeting from Councillor S. Mayhew, Deputy Mayor due to sickness, and Councillor V. Frost due to personal reasons.

3 Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting of the 20 March 2024

Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting held on the 20 March 2024 previously circulated were approved following a proposal by Councillor K. Bedwell and seconded for approval by Councillor J. Love.

4. Matters arising from the minutes

There were no matters arising from the minutes of the meeting by members of the public.

5. Presentation of the Town Council's Annual Report 2024-25

Councillor K. Bedwell (Town Mayor) – Chair of Full Council

The Town Mayor, Councillor K. Bedwell wished to firstly address the most important matter this coming year, which was the budget. The budget setting could be a highly emotive subject, and this year was by far the most difficult she had experienced and knew it was the same for all the Town Councillors.

A PowerPoint slide was provided to show that the Town Council had traditionally kept increases in its element of the council tax (precept), low.

Although the finances were managed well throughout the pandemic, like all businesses and residents at home, the Town Council had also been hit by increasing costs and despite reviewing supplier contracts and undertaking various works in-house.

The Town Council had seen increases in its contracts, compliance, utilities, materials, vehicle and machinery maintenance, as well as staffing with the changes proposed in National Insurance and minimum living wages.

The Town Council had responsibility for an ageing asset portfolio and a large amount of land to manage, which all required investment. The Town Council had been playing catch up over the past few years to bring those facilities up to standard by upgrading equipment and general building facilities which had reached the end of their life.

Having invested resource in the Civic Centre, Foresters Hall and Victoria Pavilion, other buildings such as the Signal Box and Osborn Hall also needed attention. Councillors were also aware that there was a great need for further community space within the town and were keen to explore options for the Hub site and West Park in the future.

The budget for the coming year now sought to invest more in the town's estates with upgrades to vehicles and equipment and undertaking maintenance works to the council's sports pavilion. The Town Council would now be slowly working around all our sports and play facilities.

However, this needed substantial investment to make those improvements and to prepare for growth in the future with the town's increasing population and demand for facilities. Members also expected to see the devolvement of services down to the parish and town council, through the reorganisation of local government.

It was disappointing that with the new housing being built at Ridgewood Farm and Harlands Park off Mallard Drive, that unfortunately as a Town Council, no funds would be received directly from these major developments. The Town Council only had in the region of £50k in its earmarked reserves from Community Infrastructure Levy mainly from small builds, despite major applications coming forward. This was

because the Ridgewood Farm site and Mallard Drive site were approved for planning prior to Community Infrastructure Levy coming in.

Most of the current planning applications were also for land just over the town's boundary, and fell into neighbouring parishes. The Town Council would therefore be liaising with its neighbouring parishes to look at projects which would jointly benefit residents in both areas.

The next couple of years would bring new challenges as we all viewed the plan for devolution unfold and residents were reassured that the Town Councillors would continue to represent all residents' views to the best of their ability.

The Town Council had tried to set a more realistic budget, with less dependence on its reserves to ensure stability.

Town Councillors had voted unanimously to adopt the budget for 2025/26. This was therefore a non-political decision, and a decision that no councillor felt comfortable with. It was unfortunately required to cover the cost of delivering services in 2025/26 and to continue upgrading facilities within the town.

Most importantly of the total £1.98 million budget that was required to run the town's facilities throughout the year, the Town Council would continue for another year to generate a third of those funds through its own income streams. The precept made up £1.32 million of this total.

The Mayor hoped that this helped to clarify the bigger picture and introduced her fellow Chairs who summarised the highlights from their committee areas over the past year.

Councillor D. Ward – Chair of General Purposes

As this was Councillor Ward's third and last year as Chair of the General Purposes Committee she was very proud and honoured to have held this position for the past three years.

General Purposes Committee was responsible for finances, buildings and personnel. As everyone was aware costs had been escalating over the year, and the Town Council was no different. The Town Council had to keep on top of those costs and remain within its budget. This could not have been possible without the Responsible Financial Officer, the Town Clerk and members of the office staff who were all thanked for their help and support.

Councillor Ward expressed how, once again, the Community Grants Scheme had helped by providing just under £23k to sixteen organisations in the past year, including Uckfield Bonfire Carnival Society, local hospices, Uckfield Theatre Guild, Uckfield Housebound Club and Uckfield Music Club to name just a few.

The Grants meeting was the longest of the year and the most difficult but also the most rewarding meeting of them all. It was invaluable listening to what the local groups did for the community and how the Town Council was able to assist them to continue to maintain those activities and services. This made Uckfield such a great community and place to live. Along with the community grants a combined total of £27k was also awarded to Wealden Citizens Advice and Wealden Volunteering under their service level agreements.

The Town Council owned a number of buildings and had completed its five-yearly Market Valuation for its Asset Portfolio.

The Town Council had completed many projects including a replacement plumbing and air source heating system at Foresters Hall, and new heating system at Foresters Chapel. The Town Council were following a programme to try to become a greener council and now only used gas at The Civic Centre and Victoria Pavilion. Victoria Pavilion also had a full overhaul with a new plumbing and heating installation. Within the Civic Centre the lift had been upgraded and all fire doors and emergency lighting were being upgraded in the three buildings.

At the Civic Centre, there was lots of activity going on. The Caretakers office had been upgraded, which created an additional room for hire. This was a small room but would be perfect for interviews or providing a small space to work away from the office.

Over the coming months, the Town Council were hosting a full entertainment schedule, including live music, afternoon teas, and themed restaurant evenings.

A new booking system was also installed to manage the hire of rooms and sports pitches, which aligned closely with the finance system and computer upgrades. This had also helped to improve efficiency.

The Civic Centre's entertainment programme and restaurant had been working well and this was under the leadership of our Hospitality Manager. The Civic Centre had the capacity to hold a variety of events from a training session within the workplace, AGMs, weddings, celebrations of life and much more. Refreshments and catering were available.

As someone who used the Luxford Restaurant on a regular basis, Councillor Ward confirmed it was a great place to go for a quick coffee, a breakfast, lunch or maybe a sweet treat.

Councillor Ward explained that this was just a snapshot of what had been going on within the Town Council under the responsibility of the General Purposes Committee and gave her thanks to her fellow councillors for their support to her over the past three years. A big thank you was also given to the Responsible Financial Officer, Hospitality Manager, Estates and Facilities Manager, Town Clerk and staff in the office, the restaurant and to the Grounds team for all that they were doing.

Councillor A. Smith – Chair of Environment & Leisure Committee

It was coming to the end of Councillor Smith's first year as Chair of the Environment and Leisure Committee, and she wished to thank the Vice-Chair, Councillor B. Reed, and all the Committee members for their support, hard work and some lively discussions.

Councillor Smith also wished to thank the committee's Clerk, whom she felt was doing a great job of driving this work forward.

The Environment and Leisure Committee dealt with important considerations relating to matters such as buildings, council equipment, leisure activities and open spaces. Therefore, decisions made by the Committee had impacted on the lives of all the residents of Uckfield.

In terms of local events, this was a special year, since the Town Council had commemorated the 80th anniversary of the D-Day landings, back in June, with local performers providing a musical accompaniment to the lighting of the beacon at Victoria Pleasure Ground.

The council saw another successful Weald on the Field delivered in August. This event was an annual fixture in the calendar, which could only happen because of the hard work of Council staff, aided by Councillors and was the eighth annual festival. This was boosted by beautiful, sunny weather and many visitors crowded around the stage, enjoying food and drink from a range of local providers. This included music from acts such as Fat Freddie and The Queens, Dynamite and The Carnaby Brothers.

Looking after the town's parks and sporting facilities was part of the Committee's role. This year, the Council replaced the cricket nets and bowler ends at Victoria Pleasure Ground and began the process of replacing the outdated play area.

The Ranger planted community orchards with the aid of local volunteers at three of the council's open space, including Ridgewood Recreation Ground, West Park and New Barn.

Climate change and biodiversity loss were an important consideration for the Committee. They worked closely with outside bodies such as the Conservators of Ashdown Forest to find green solutions where possible, the Town Council tree planting programme was supported by Council's Climate Emergency Steering Group and this year also saw the Council purchase two electric vehicles for the Grounds staff team.

In February, the Council staged their first Green Shoots upcycled fashion show, where entrants modelled outfits created from charity shop purchases. Hopefully, this would be the first of many such events.

Councillor Smith was grateful to have received the support of the Council staff, the Hospitality team at Luxford restaurant, the Town Ranger, and the Grounds staff in pursuing a green agenda.

Councillor J. Love – Chair of Plans Committee

Uckfield Town Council's Plans Committee were still working hard as a statutory consultee within the planning system to ensure that all aspects of applications were scrutinised and assessed alongside planning policy and local knowledge.

This committee would continue to include in all of these applications and responses that 'the right housing in the right place' must be considered for this area.

Unfortunately, planning policies did not cover many of the infrastructure issues that the town was experiencing. Nevertheless, the Committee would keep raising them within consultations to ensure everyone was aware of the impacts new housing brought forward.

The Committee were having to read a large amount of additional paperwork to ensure that they could fully understand the changes being made by the new UK Government, especially within the National Planning Policy Framework which had been amended to head their new proposals regarding housing targets.

After a recent meeting held by Wealden District Council, members understood that this would bring a second regulation 18 consultation forward for their draft local plan, with the amendments the UK Government had made.

So many residents had come along to the first consultation (Uckfield had the highest attendance) to give their views and were being asked again to do the same at the next consultation.

The Town Council needed residents' input with regards to the National changes that were being made to ensure a local plan worked for the town.

With planning applications and housing, the Town Council had received another planning inquiry ahead for the Bird in Eye South Site (Bird in Eye Farm) and the Committee were gathering evidence and would present a speech at the inquiry.

The committee had also seen planning consultations for the land behind Victoria Pleasure Ground (behind the football pitch) coming forward which included 100 dwellings proposed, alongside a planning application for 750 dwellings (Phase 2) of the Ridgewood Farm application.

The work for these applications continued for Uckfield Town Council, Wealden District Council and Redrow developers.

The Town Council had seen many local residents attend the consultation for the land known as Owlsbury Farm on the other side of the bypass and Councillor Love wished to thank those residents so very much for attending and giving their views.

Councillor Love asked for local residents to continue to share their views on these applications as together, they could continue to rise to challenges with passion and integrity and ensure that the town worked for us now and in the future.

Looking Forward – Town Mayor

The Town Mayor concluded by announcing that there were a number of projects staff and councillors were working on behind the scenes to ensure longer term improvements to our buildings and grounds.

These would take time, and longer term, it involved lobbying developers, partner agencies and seeking grant funding where the Council could.

In 2025/26, Uckfield Town Council intended to focus on:

- upgrading Victoria Play Area;
- replacing pieces of equipment at play areas of other sites that have been vandalised or failed, as well as saving for the upgrade of West Park Play Area;
- giving more attention to Snatts Road Cemetery, in respect for this sensitive area and consecrating a further area of the cemetery, to enable the council to continue using that cemetery for burials and ashes interments for a further five or more years;
- further tree surveying, and works to address, disease or decay;
- restocking and planting of trees where the council could;

- wildlife appraisals and surveying in the nature reserves and Boothland Wood;
- work to protect and preserve Boothland Wood in the midst of its location adjacent to development. This could see certain walkways restricted to allow flora and fauna to re-establish;
- improvements to signage and information in the nature reserves;
- full pitch renovations of the football pitches, and replacement of the artificial cricket wicket;
- working with the football clubs to improve the ground conditions and facilities for both now and in the future;
- further improvements to compliance and decoration in our buildings;
- feasibility studies for either the reconfiguration of existing community space or creating a new space;
- an event to mark VE Day, Weald on the Field, Eco EXPO and supporting the Royal British Legion with the Remembrance Parades;
- improved display of Christmas lights through a new contract;
- identifying the town's infrastructure requirements to push back to developers on what we need to see, and what this town needs to see through the plans for local government reorganisation.

6. Topics and questions raised by residents in advance

Q. Is there a possible sale of some WH Smith sites which includes the post office?

A. Uckfield WH Smith had been mentioned in some of the media as one such site, but this wasn't confirmed at this stage. Its possible loss would cause enormous difficulties for the wider Uckfield community given that all former Uckfield banks had now closed. Two building societies remained at this stage (Nationwide and Santander).

Q. If the closure of the Post Office at WH Smith at 33 High Street cannot be stopped, what steps is the Town Council able to take in using its best endeavours to secure a workable Plan B?

A. This was an incredibly important matter, and one that the Town Council had been looking into behind the scenes. The Town Council had a complaint in progress with the Lloyds Banking Group Senior Management Team for some months now, as it was felt they did not give due consideration to the guidelines published by the Financial Conduct Authority for the closure of services. More specifically, they did not meet the requirements necessary for engagement.

Along with the media announcements relating to WH Smith, the Council had also heard that day that Santander was due to close branches across the UK, and Uckfield could be at risk. As far as they were aware this would only leave one building society in Uckfield, which was Nationwide, as well as the Post Office which was currently located in WH Smith.

The Town Council office had also heard that evening from a company called Cash Access UK who had expressed their desire to bring a Banking Hub to Uckfield. The Town Council would therefore start discussions with Cash Access UK, and engage Uckfield Chamber of Commerce in these discussions to see what their intentions were.

The Town Council would also engage with WH Smith, to understand their intentions for both Sussex Stationers and WH Smith.

The Council recognised that in-person banking services were important to both residents and local businesses, and they had been supportive of the Lloyds and Halifax Community Banking Services coming to the Civic Centre during this transition period.

The Town Council had seen Hailsham create a banking hub, but the Town Council already had control of the Post Office there, so they were in a better position to do this more promptly.

Q. Following the accident this morning, what will be done to make Church Street safer for vehicles and pedestrians?

A. The Town Council was shocked to hear of the overturned vehicle that morning in Church Street, and hope all involved were safe and well.

At this early stage, they had not yet been informed of the factors that led to this particular incident, but did consider Church Street to be a key part of the town centre.

Uckfield Town Council provided East Sussex Highways with details on each of the access corridors, in terms of our issues affecting both pedestrians and vehicles, as part of a review of the main entrances into town. Now the bus station work had been finished, the Town Council had asked for this feedback to be re-examined, and for partners to look forward, on the next stage of improvements, particularly with the anticipated growth of the town.

7. Questions from the floor

Q1. One resident asked if Luxfords Restaurant had been affected as a result of the pandemic and asked for the Town Council's position, based on the figures for the financial year, showing that the council was subsidising the financial loss.

The Town Clerk explained that the restaurant, formed part of the wider hospitality offer within the Civic Centre (restaurant, room hire and catering, and events programme), and like most other hospitality and retail businesses, they had been impacted by rising food and bar stock costs as well as staffing with the changes in National Insurance, and minimum wage changes year on year.

The Finance Sub-Committee had already agreed to undertake a review of the wider hospitality services in more detail this year. This would help to see where improvements could be made.

Despite being a local authority and not being able to obtain all of the grant funding available during the pandemic, the Town Council had managed to ride that period of uncertainty.

The Town Council was regularly monitoring stock taking reports, menu costs and reviewing suppliers but it was now agreed that councillors needed to look at the bigger picture.

Q2. One resident who lived along Framfield Road mentioned that he was aware of discussions being held in relation to reducing the speed limits to twenty mile per hour zones within Uckfield. He asked if Framfield Road could be part of that consideration as this was potentially quite a dangerous road with speeding cars. He suggested an alternative option to have thirty mile an hour flashing signs like the ones near Staverton's Nursery, to slow the traffic down.

Councillor Love agreed that if the Bird in Eye development were to be approved that a request could be included as it was a very good idea.

With the last planning application it was proposed that the on-street parking be reduced in Framfield Road, but this would be encumbered by lots of issues, although with the current Bird in Eye application they were not touching Framfield Road at all. Instead, they were considering improvements to traffic light operations instead.

The Chair of Framfield Parish Council had been lobbying to get the speed limit changed for years and this feedback had been included in this application.

There was a local parish community safety group and one of the matters discussed involved the purchase of moveable speed indication devices which could be shared between parishes. There was a small amount of funds in the Town Council's earmarked reserves towards this.

Developer contributions might also benefit projects such as this. Initiatives could be set up such as community speed watch groups. One had been previously set up for Uckfield, although it was a struggle getting volunteers.

Councillor Bennett mentioned that in the past there had been a speed indicator display specifically for Framfield Road, although this could not always be used where the residents would like as specific stipulations were put in place on safe locations.

Q3. Another resident who lived on Manor Park Estate raised his concern about the rise of council tax in this area compared with other towns and parishes across East Sussex. He asked why Uckfield was the second highest rate compared to Forest Row as he thought that we were not that big a town.

Councillor Bedwell pointed out that Uckfield had one of the largest asset portfolios, including grounds, buildings, and maintenance works. A lot of towns had already put in place some of the facilities that Uckfield were now looking at whilst trying to keep those costs down. Had this increase been in smaller increments over the past few years, the impact this year may not have appeared to be as high. There were lots of improvements being made to the town's buildings and facilities to meet future demands which put up costs.

Councillor Ward also mentioned that the precept figures had to be provided at the same time as every other town, so they did not know what precept they were setting.

The Town Clerk explained that the National Association of Councils produced a report towards the end of April each year, where they reviewed the precepts for each area and in the past few years, it was becoming more notable, how many were applying substantial increases to meet service requirements. Examples included those already impacted by local government reorganisations such as in the West Country, where Bridgewater Town Council had taken on 26 play areas through the establishment of the unitary Somerset Council. These would require weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual inspections as well as repairs from vandalism, general wear and tear and ageing, and full upgrades. The Town Council did not want to be in a position of financial difficulty over the next few years, so this decision was being made now. This report would be shared on the website once available.

Q4. One resident who lived in Piltdown asked for an explanation as to why the Ridgewood housing development was not completed whilst other applications for development in and around Uckfield were still progressing, such as Owlsbury Farm and Bird in Eye developments.

Councillor Bedwell explained first and foremost that Uckfield did not want to see this level of development and explained the processes by which those applications evolved.

Although the Ridgewood development was passed in 2008, the developers had a way of holding onto the land, referred to as land banking, until it was worth building on. As such, a lot of green spaces around Uckfield had planning permission to be built on.

There was in the region of over 3,000 new homes coming to Uckfield and some things had been pushed back on in terms of environment concerns, although the developers could appeal and make additions before a decision was made.

The new UK Government were trying to change these pushback issues, with the push for more housing, whilst trying to include measures to ensure affordable housing too.

The developers of the Ridgewood site as an example had developed Phase 1 but the remainder of the site could take another ten years to complete. The Owlsbury Farm development was still in the public consultation stages.

Uckfield Town Council were consultees and had no powers over final decisions although Councillors were always providing feedback, and contributed to appeals and inquiries. Wealden District did not currently have an up to date adopted local plan.

Councillor Love pointed out that this was not just happening in Uckfield and that Planning was also a legal framework all parties had to adhere to ahead of any final decisions being made by the governing authority and inspectors.

The town needed affordable housing for the next generations, so the Town Council's Plans Committee were pushing back for this whilst those decisions were being made.

Councillor Reed asked for residents to voice their opinions and provide any feedback where it mattered. And it was recommended that residents explained in detail their concerns rather than just saying 'no' or 'lack of infrastructure.'

Q5. A question was asked in relation to the provision of schooling since the closure of Holy Cross Primary school.

Schooling, health and welfare including doctors and dentists would all be decisions made by the UK Government. The Town Clerk clarified that the Council was still awaiting an update on the school provision for the Ridgewood Farm site.

Q6. A resident who lived in Manor Park wished to raise an issue around vehicles blocking pavements with on-street parking. A few weeks ago, he offered to help a mother trying to manoeuvre a double buggy with cars parked in the layby by Regency Court. Another time, he witnessed a mobility scooter struggling for access due to contractors parking on the pavement next to Shaftesbury Court. He asked for this to be referred to East Sussex Highways as this was becoming dangerous, especially with the influx of housing and residents, this was only going to get worse.

The resident also mentioned that he had seen lots of spillages on the seats at the new local the bus station.

The Town Clerk confirmed that contractors were employed to keep the bus station shelters clean and that East Sussex Highways were planning to install two further litter bins in this vicinity.

Councillor Smith informed attendees about the planned litter campaign to try to raise awareness and help beautify the town.

Discussions then centred around the lack of parking enforcement in and around the town and the current situation between Wealden District Council and Sussex Police.

The Town Clerk highlighted that this was not just a town wide issue and one which the town might not have much say over during the local government reorganisation. She recalled coming from an area that had introduced civil parking enforcement only a few years ago which was met with other issues.

One idea mentioned was where motorists could park on the pavements up to a line, so as not to block pedestrians, which was worth looking into.

Another resident asked if the Town Council could support Sussex Police by asking for them to issue a couple of parking tickets just to move those causing an obstruction or parking dangerously.

Councillor Bennett suggested re-instating the role of a traffic warden to avoid the need for penalty charges. He recalled an historical model that worked across the sector once upon a time. Councillor Ward noted that times had changed and Uckfield was one of the very few areas in the country without civil parking enforcement, which she felt was a good thing or the residents would have to pay more in the longer run.

The Town Clerk would continue to raise any issues in relation to parking and place notices on cars seen. She would also liaise with the Police on key hotspots.

The Mayor finished by thanking everyone for their questions and commitment to the lovely town and called the meeting to an end.

Meeting closed at 8.40pm.