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MINUTES

Meeting of: **Annual Town Meeting**

Date: **Monday, 8th April 2024**

Place: **The Royal British Legion Memorial Hall, Newland St, Witham, CM8 2AZ.**

Present: Councillors

S.	Ager	(Town Mayor)
L.	Barlow	(Deputy Town Mayor)
P.	Barlow	
J.	Coleman	
L.	Headley	
P.	Heath	
T.	Hewitt	
R.	Ramage	

Police Inspector P. Jackson (Essex Police)

Community Special Sergeant S. Jesse (Essex Police)

N. Smith (Town Clerk)

H. Andrews (Deputy Town Clerk)

G. Kennedy (Committee Clerk)

S. Smith (PA to the Council)

And 20 members of the public including representatives from Action for Family Carers, Witham BB, Witham Carnival Association, The Witham Hub and the 295 (Witham & Rivenhall) Squadron ATC.

The Town Mayor welcomed everyone to the Annual Town Meeting. She explained that there would be an opportunity for reports detailing achievements and then a time at the end for questions.

1. MINUTES

RESOLVED That the Minutes of the Meeting held 13th March 2023 be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Town Mayor.

2. REPORTS ON THE TOWN COUNCIL

Planning and Transport Committee

Councillor Phil Barlow, Chairman of the Planning and Transport Committee, gave his report. He explained that the committee makes recommendations for developments and extensions and was pleased that they were mainly in accord with the District Council's decisions. He said that

they had recently commented on the Minerals Local Plan giving preferred sites for future quarries. There had also been a lot of involvement with the National Highways with regard to the A12 widening which would affect Whetmead Nature Reserve. They had supported the merger of the number 39 and 40 bus services and were now involved with the National Grid consultation for the proposed link between Norwich and Tilbury. The committee works closely with the Tree Group which advised on tree applications and in particular with the Lynfield Elm which is a veteran tree resistant to Dutch Elm disease. There was also a Cycling Development Group which had been working with the District Council. This year a budget had been put in place to reduce speeding. A petition had been started by the Town Council against the proposals to abolish the one-hour free parking in the High Street.

Environment Committee

Councillor Susan Ager, Chairman of the Environment Committee, gave her report. She said that more projects are now underway with trees being felled in James Cooke Wood to allow more light for wildlife and a boardwalk being installed to allow year-round access. A new Nature Trail had been introduced at Whetmead and line marking on the River Walk pathways with the hope of repairs in due course. Advice had been sought regarding the Closed Churchyard as it was not suitable for re-wilding. There were some new allotments at Rivenhall Park which would be allocated shortly. The Climate Change Working Group considered projects and was proactive in encouraging recycling at the Town Hall. She thanked the Tree Group for tree planting and looking after trees for two years after planting. The Environment Committee ensures that green spaces are protected and improved.

Policy and Resources Committee

Councillor Phil Barlow, Chairman of the Policy and Resources Committee, gave his report. He explained that the committee was responsible for policies and finances. The Town Council was governed by statute and policies including GDPR and Health and Safety; and Standing Orders. Every month Members have to sign off reconciliations to monitor that money was being spent wisely. He said that the flyer on the chairs gave a precis of the accounts. The committee was responsible for the development of a Corporate Strategy. The Finance Scrutiny Panel would ensure that everything had been set up correctly, legal and financially responsible.

Community Committee

Councillor Lucy Barlow, Chairman of the Community Committee, said it had been a privilege to lead the committee. There had been lots of events throughout the year, reaching out to the public and involving as many people as possible. All the events are free at source. She then listed Easter Trail, Halloween, the Street Festival, Music Festival, Teddy Bears' Picnic and Coronation event. This year the Town Council had organised an event to mark the 80th Anniversary of the D-Day landings with a parade and lighting the beacon; and in the summer holidays there would be Story Telling and book swap on the River Walk. She explained that the committee also was responsible for awarding grants to organisations such as the Citizens Advice, Carnival, The Hub and Friends of St John. Grants were available for the forthcoming year along with a new Members' Grant Scheme awarding small sums of money to those organisations which would not normally meet the criteria of the Council's scheme. She said that the committee also received an update from the police.

The Town Mayor thanked Members for their reports.

3. ESSEX POLICE

The Town Mayor welcomed Inspector Phil Jackson and S/Sergeant Simon Jesse to the Meeting.

Inspector Phil Jackson said that he had been part of the Community Policing Team for Braintree and Uttlesford for the past three months and found the role challenging. They had been undertaking a lot of work but the police are not good at promoting their successes. It was important that the public report crime to the police so they can target issues as they arise. He spoke about the Safer Streets Initiative and new CCTV cameras which give a lot of information. He praised the work of the Special Constables. He spoke about recent problems with defibrillator damage and graffiti on the River Walk mural. Local officers had recently detained two people for criminal damage and another two following a spate of burglaries. Police have a finite resource so they have to target priorities.

Special Sergeant Simon Jesse explained that special constables volunteer to spend 16 hours a month on police work. They have the same powers as police officers and provide a visible presence in the town. They have a fortnightly session outside The Hub in The Grove, which allows the public to meet them and report concerns, receive advice and have reassurance. He spoke about speeding and the challenges of undertaking speed checks as he had to wear hi-vis clothing and be visible from a long distance. He stressed the importance of reporting issues to the police. At present there was a team of three specials and two more needed to be recruited. He would promote the role of a special constable.

The Town Mayor thanked Inspector Jackson and Sergeant Jesse for their report.

4. COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS

Action for Family Carers

The representative from Action for Family Carers said that they support carers of all ages but she leads the Young Carers section for Mid-Essex supporting 101 school children. In Witham, they meet every fortnight in Parkside giving children the opportunity to have respite from their caring roles. Meeting others in similar situations makes them realise that they are not alone. They have games and activities but have to rely on funding to provide these sessions.

She then introduced one of her young carers. He said that his mother had cerebral palsy which affected not just her mobility. He said that the two hours he spent at the Young Carers Club gave him a break and he particularly liked going to Jump Street. He really appreciated all the work that the charity gave.

The representative hoped that this report gave everyone an insight into what the Young Carers Club did.

Witham BB

The Witham BB representative said that Witham's BB had been running since 1972. BB is open to both boys and girls, of all backgrounds, disabilities and challenging behaviour, from the ages of 5 to 18. Ex-members volunteer in leadership roles and they meet on three week-day evenings. He said that BB provided outreach into the community. During the school holidays they meet for four hours a day and give free hot meals providing support. BB gave a unique opportunity to its members, challenging them physically and mentally. There were opportunities for water activities, camping and other outdoor activities. He commended the dedicated staff.

The Witham Hub

The representative from The Hub, spoke about the launch of a whole programme of activities preventing crisis and isolation. They hold regular youth group activities at the weekends and Well Days. They hope to recruit more teenagers and volunteers to attend. The other activities include Tea and Tech for those needing help with mobile phones, ipads and sending emails. She had set up a yearly programme of events, during summer holidays there will be a weekly family focused, affordable event. They work with local businesses, schools and churches. In schools they concentrated on activities such as recycling, community litter picks and enjoying the local wildlife. The youth had been collecting crisp packets to make into blankets for the homeless. They go into schools and offer an opportunity to reflect after assemblies and give them the opportunity to volunteer at The Hub. They also have Lego construction events and meet ups for home-schooled children giving them an opportunity to develop social skills.

Witham Carnival Association

The Treasurer of the Witham Carnival Association said that last year had been particularly successful with more floats, bigger street collection, which was given to charities, and more visiting courts. She said that whilst carnivals in Essex were disappearing, the numbers are increasing in Kent. The association was set up 48 years ago and they now have new members. The carnival starts from the Witham Football Club to the Town Park where there are lots of activities along with singing and dance shows. There was a community feel to the carnival, old fashioned delivered in a modern way. There were seven in the court, with the selection evening being held at Easter. During the year the youngsters blossom and gain confidence. She said that they could not run the event without both the financial support of the Town Council and staff putting up road closure signs and helping with the road closure itself.

295 (Witham and Rivenhall) Squadron ATC

The representative in attendance informed attendees that the ATC squadron was part of the RAF. Their mission statement was to give training to be useful in both military and civilian life. He said that the young people undertake the Duke of Edinburgh award and volunteer work was needed for them. The squadron would be celebrating its 20th anniversary in January and was thriving with 58 cadets, 4 staff members and 6 civilians. They meet every Monday, with band practice on a Wednesday and activities at the weekend, including weapon training and an opportunity for gliding. One cadet had gained his private pilot's licence. One cadet would be going to the Air Leadership Camp with two weeks in Australia and a further week in New Zealand.

Templars Residents' Association

Phil Barlow gave a short report about the association, explaining that it was the oldest in the town celebrating forty years. Town Council Ward Members sit on the committee as well as residents. Templars was a challenging area and the association was proactive and wanted to do its best for the estate and its residents. He closed by talking about the groups that work together with the Town Council to make the town a better place.

5. OPEN FORUM

The Town Mayor then opened the floor for suggestions, comments, questions or concerns about any matter affecting Witham.

The Chairman of the Town Luncheon Club explained that they provide a hot meal on a Tuesday for 30 people for a small cost. She spoke about the disadvantages of using the RBL hall. She then said that she was also the Chairman of the History Group. She suggested that members of the ATC squadron might wish to clear the weeds from around the RBL building. She asked why the Town Council had less income in the financial year ending 2022/2023. The Town Clerk explained that in the previous year, the Town Council had received more grants and additional income such as easements. Mrs Kilmartin then asked the police about where would it be better to concentrate resources. In answer, it was explained that there had been a government grant of £60,000 to improve CCTV equipment and the cost of a street warden was likewise funded as part of the Safer Street initiative. S/Sgt Jesse explained that at holiday times there would be a spike in anti-social behaviour. He commended the work of the street warden who was a presence in the town on weekdays. He said that there were no hot spots in town, but some low-level crime was mentioned through social media. Incidents need to be reported directly to the police. He said that the Community Specials would be working more on the housing estates.

Comment was made that residents like to see a policeman on the beat. S/Sgt Jesse explained that the Community Specials were part funded by the Town Council. They were on the beat along with the regular Town Team officers and the street warden so there are more officers patrolling now. A further comment was made that when she had rung the police at 11 p.m. they had come from Braintree, a twenty minute drive. In answer it was explained that in an emergency mobile units can be called. Inspector Jackson said that the Town Team work from the Town Hall during some mornings whilst doing paperwork so can be quickly available in Witham but traffic units can be called in too. It had been necessary to cut costs but the number of officers were gradually increasing. He stressed the importance of telling the police if there was a problem.

A resident asked a number of questions relating to planning. In answer, it was explained that the verge along Hatfield Road was still an ongoing issue but a meeting with the Essex County Councillor was to be arranged for May, when parking at Holy Family school would also be discussed; the hoarding was still up at Ivy Chimneys but a close eye would be kept to ensure that the hedging was replaced. He asked too about signage to James Cooke Wood and it was explained that Essex County Council had been reminded of the need for a sign. He was delighted to hear about the D-Day Parade. He asked police about e-scooters and it was explained that some people do use them to commute to the Industrial Estates. A sensible approach was needed and the owners were at risk of seizure of the scooter if it was not registered or insured. He said that he had recently confiscated two scooters ridden by children.

The President of Witham Rotary, said that it was not just e-scooters that posed a risk for pedestrians but cyclists on pavements. Inspector Jackson explained that under Section 59, anyone riding on the pavement causing anti-social behaviour could have their bike seized and destroyed. The Rotary Club representative commented that charities do need bikes. He said that the Rotary Club had funded cooking classes for young carers. There would be a 'Day of Service' on the 18th May when residents are being urged to litter pick. He was grateful for the ATC squadron's assistance with the Christmas Santa's collection and urged people to use them if they can. He spoke about the Wilderness Foundation which helped schools, children with Special Education Needs and broken families. He was grateful for the Town Council accessing whips for him that he was nurturing before being planted at the Chatten School. He said that the Rotary Club still had some funds available for grants.

Comment was made by Councillor Ramage that he felt proud of the Witham's volunteers working in the community and the work of the police and street warden to make people feel safe.

Councillor Jack Coleman echoed this comment. He explained that he volunteered at the Witham Hang-out on a Wednesday evening. He spoke of outreach into the town so young people knew of these facilities and the need for more volunteers and suggested a quick meeting to share resources and ideas.

Councillor Heath said that he had raised with the Braintree District Council CEO and Leader about the parking issues at Holy Family School and the hedges along Hatfield Road. Once the schools are back after the Easter holidays a site visit will be carried out to look at these issues and interested parties are invited to attend.

A member of the public queried Section 106 funding from developers and whether it was coming through quickly enough. He said that Braintree District Council had had £7m for the new Community Centre on Maltings Lane since 2000. He said that it had taken 24 years to make the application although residents were consulted in 2018. He had asked Braintree District Council for Section 106 figures but this had not been forthcoming. The member of the public was concerned that Section 106 money was not getting spent in Witham.

It was explained that the Town Council had now a better working relationship with the District Council and these figures had been made available. Developers had not withheld the funding which had been banked. The Town Council could now access Section 106 funding for projects which recently included erection of the board walk in James Cooke wood and the Bee Friendly planting near River View.

Comment was made that Rivenhall Park was being built to the north of Witham where there were no doctors or medical facilities. The suggestion was made that the site in Laburnum Way would have made a perfect site for a GPs surgery.

It was explained that for the past forty years the Town Council had lobbied for better health facilities. The impact on Witham's residents of the closure of St Peter's Hospital in Maldon had been considered at the recent public consultation. The Rivenhall Park development had been allowed to be built piecemeal with a loss of Section 106 monies.

As there were no further comments made, the Town Mayor thanked everyone for attending and closed the Meeting at 8.50 p.m. to allow people the chance to chat about the issues raised.

Councillor S. Ager
Town Mayor

NS/GK/17.4.2024