

STURMINSTER NEWTON TOWN COUNCIL

MINUTES of the **ANNUAL PUBLIC TOWN MEETING** on Thursday 12th April 2018 in the Council Chamber at 7.30pm

PRESENT at the MEETING were:

Councillor A Donaldson – Town Mayor and Chairman of the Town Council
Mrs Emma Lindsay – Town Clerk

In attendance:

Councillor P Batstone	Councillor H Lacey
Councillor V Fox	Councillor G Rose
Councillor M Jones	Councillor R Taylor
Kevin Knapp (Town Crier)	
District Councillor M Roake	
Open Spaces Chairman J Read	
Mrs L Plumridge – Assistant Town Clerk	
Mrs P Naylor – Finance Officer	
11 members of the public	

Councillor Donaldson (Town Mayor and Chair of the Town Council) welcomed everyone to this Annual Town Meeting. Councillor Donaldson drew to peoples' attention that the time for questions would be under Agenda Item 6 – Open Forum.

1. OPENING OF THE MEETING BY THE TOWN CRIER

The Town Crier, Mr K Knapp, formally opened the meeting welcomed those present.

2. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES OF THE LAST ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

The Minutes of the last Annual Town Meeting held on 13th April 2017 were approved as a true and correct record of the meeting and signed by the Chairman of the meeting.

Cllr. Rose
Cllr. Jones

3. ANNUAL REPORT OF THE TOWN MAYOR

Cllr. Donaldson presented his Annual Report as Town Mayor. The report follows as Appendix 1 to these minutes. It will be published in due course in Unity.com and on the Town Council's website. Paper copies can be obtained from the Council Office.

4. REPORT ON TOWN COUNCIL FINANCE

The Town Clerk presented a report on Town Council finance. The report follows as Appendix 2 of these minutes which will be published on the Town Council website.

5. REPORT FROM CLLR. FOX ON THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESTRUCTURE

Cllr. Fox presented a brief overview of the Local Government Restructure anticipated for May 2019.

6. OPEN FORUM:

The following issues were raised:

6.1 Council Tax

One member of the public queried the 19.2% rise in the precept which she considered exorbitant. Cllr Donaldson replied that it represented 59p per week on a Band D property. The Town Council regretted the need for increase but it was necessary to maintain services. The Town Clerk advised that budgeting will start earlier next year.

6.2 Services

A member of the public felt also that some of the services had declined in Sturminster Newton and commented that Brinsley Close and Ingrams no longer seemed to benefit from street cleaning and there was no gritting in these streets in the bad weather.

The Town Clerk will look into this.

A member of the public stated that he believed that the Council Tax system is unfair and also commented that the "Tough Choices " programme was ineffective.

6.3 Litter Picking

A member of the public suggested involving young people in litter picking as a community project to encourage from an early age the importance dealing with rubbish responsibly.

6.4 Police - A member of the public raised concerns about the lack of police visibility in the town.

6.5 Banks

A member of the public commented on the lack of banks in Sturminster Newton and that the mobile banks were awkward to be in and limited in services. The subject of inviting a Building Society to come to Sturminster Newton was discussed, similar to what has happened in Glastonbury. Cllr Donaldson commented that he would talk to Cllr. Spackman, who is unwell at present, as he has been working on the lack of ATMs (automated telling machines) in the town.

6.6 Youth Club

Cllr. Batstone advised the Youth Club are fundraising to renovate the telephone box on Bath Road and install a defibrillator. A discussion followed on how more people could be trained to know what to do in an emergency. There are already courses run by Mr John Lewis who can put more courses on if there is a demand. Rotary are also holding an event in May.

6.7 Community Shop

Cllr. Jones reported the Community Shop opened two weeks ago and was making good progress but there is a need for more items to be donated. The idea is for the Community Shop to raise enough funds to cover the cost of improving the look of Sturminster Newton, i.e. flowering baskets and Christmas lights. By encouraging more to come to events in Sturminster Newton the retailers will benefit from the increased footfall.

Cllr. Donaldson finished the Open Forum session by reminded everyone there is a Surgery every month where people can meet Councillors and discuss any issues they have. Also all the Town Councillors telephone numbers were in Unity and can be contacted by phone. He urged people to make contact as the Town Council need to know the problems people are experiencing in order to try rectify or be advocates on different causes.

7. ANNUAL REPORT BY THE TOWN CRIER

The Town Crier presented an entertaining summary of his activities over the preceding year.

8. CLOSURE OF THE MEETING

The Chairman thanked everyone for their attendance and contributions and the Town Crier formally closed the meeting at 9.00 am.

Signed

Dated

Town Mayor and Chairman of the Council

Appendix 1 – Report by The Mayor Cllr Andrew Donaldson

Once again the year seems to have rushed by. It certainly does not seem 12 months since I wrote my last report and what a busy year it has been. It has been a year of change as well. In July our Town Clerk Chris Wilkins left to take up a new position at Ringwood and we welcomed Emma who has settled in well and worked tirelessly to ensure a smooth transition. At Christmas Kate Townsend left to pursue a new career interest and Louise joined us. Louise had already supported in the office between Chris finishing and Emma starting and therefore had a knowledge of the workings of the Council.

We saw changes in Ground Team Personnel. Michele left in November and we wish her a long and happy retirement and thank her for her efforts. With the team under extreme pressure all last summer and with another impending retirement Nick and David joined us. The team's efforts are to be commended; they worked tirelessly during the recent snowy weather and the reconstruction of the 1st World trench in the Railway Gardens to commemorate the centenary of the armistice signing has received many plaudits.

There have, also, been changes in the Council Chamber. In December long serving Councillor Claire Feltham and in March Councillor Nicholas Cowell resigned their seats and I thank them for their efforts and wish them well for the future. I would emphasise that both resignations were for "personal reasons" and are in no way associated with differences of opinion with other Councillors or with Council policy. As a consequence of Claire's resignation and following no request for an election the normal co-option procedures were adopted and we welcomed Robert Taylor who joined the Council in March and will remain a co-opted Councillor until the next election. A similar procedure will be used to fill the vacancy left by Nick's departure

The Council Planning and Environment Committee has had another busy year a total of 57 applications having been considered. Whilst some of these applications have tended towards controversial there have still been no major developments to consider although sooner or later there will be. I am aware that there are some that challenge the efficacy and power of the committee. Whilst it is certainly the case that the Town Council does not have the power to grant or refuse applications and is only a consultee it is still my contention that the committee can provide information based on local knowledge which would not be available to North Dorset Planning otherwise.

The Neighbourhood Plan is in its six week consultation stage before inspection.

- and we await its approval at which point the local electorate will have a chance to exercise their democratic right at a referendum.

Highway and rights of way matters fall under the banner of this committee. We remain concerned about the illegal use of the Station Road pedestrian area as a drive through/ car park. Discussions are ongoing with Dorset Highways over the practicality of installing some sort of barrier system at the eastern (car park) end of the area although this is not easy given the requirement for deliveries to the retail outlets and the presence of residential units.

I had hoped to be able to report the long awaited opening of the jubilee link path between the railway and Butts Pond. All the work on the Council side is completed and ready to go

but there appears to be a " dragging of feet " by the developers. We continue to apply pressure through Fairfields .

Many townspeople have been to me complaining of increased dog fouling especially in the entrance to the railway and Penny Street. Failure to clear up after a dog is antisocial, illegal, presents a health hazard and will not be tolerated.

We remain concerned at the almost total lack of a police presence in the town. Earlier in the year the Town Clerk contacted the Police Commissioner asking for a public meeting. Following the armed raid at One Stop I met the Commissioner, expressed my concerns and reminded him of our request for a meeting. Following the second raid at One Stop the Town Clerk again made contact with the Commissioner's office reaffirming our desire for a meeting. We continue to wait for a response.

The Amenities Committee has also been kept very active monitoring the leisure and public areas in the town and the general look of the town. It was with tremendous relief that we finally accepted the hand-over of the completed skate bowl to the Council in the late autumn. This has been a long term project which has taken far too long to reach fruition through no fault of the Council. At one stage the demand for such a facility was questioned. I think that has been clearly answered in the affirmative. It is intended to have a formal opening once the weather dries up (if it ever does!) and the grass grows.

Turning to matters financial there is not a town or parish council which is not under financial pressure. We have a duty to maintain services (we would get no thanks if we were unable to do so because of lack of funding) whilst at the same time exercising due diligence as far as economy is concerned. Any proposed expenditure by a Council Committee (including office expenditure) has to be ratified by Full Council, all payments are checked by nominated Councillors and accounts audited both internally and externally. It is a sad fact however that more and more responsibilities are being being turned over to town and parish councils with no extra funding. By way of example it has been the case for some time that towns and parishes in North Dorset have been charged for local mid term elections. North Dorset have just announced that from and including the 2019 local elections towns and parishes will be responsible for financing all their local elections with payment due in the following financial year. Whilst there is obviously no certainty as to the exact cost until after the election it looks likely that we could be liable for a sum of around £4,500-00 or more. Even if there are insufficient candidates to force an election towns and parishes will still be liable to an administration fee, probably of around £100-00. North Dorset defends its position by saying that it is simply coming into line with other Dorset District Councils but there is only one place that the funding can come from! I have heard horror stories from other town and parish councils in the country as far as rises in local precept are concerned (in one particular case a rise, reportedly, of 174% which, if true, would appear to be totally unacceptable) and whilst I regret any rise in local precept I suggest that a rise of 59p per week (less than the cost of a first class stamp) on a band D property could have been a lot worse. It is easy to forget that Town Councillors are not exempt from the payment of local precept and, therefore, have a vested interest in controlling Council spending and economy.

As usual we looked at grant applications in October and grants totalling just under £1,400-00 were awarded to local organisations. We will consider further applications at the April meeting.

So what of the future? The Unitary Authority has the green light and will come on stream in 2019. The exact implications of this move will, of course, have to be waited for but it is my belief that all North Dorset towns will have to work very hard to avoid being left with the financial "crumbs from the rich man's table"; the playing field has to be level.

As I've said before in general the town is never going to be a major retail centre (is any town given the rapid rise in on line shopping?) and we have to make the most of what we have got. We live in a beautiful part of the world with a strong literary heritage , wonderful facilities such as The Exchange and Museum, iconic buildings such as The Mill and festivals such as the Boogie Woogie Festival and the Cheese Festival. Clearly the emphasis has to be on tourism which will support the local businesses that are in the town. To facilitate this a new web-site has been launched . To be clear this is not an alternative Council web-site but a web site dedicated to the promotion of local facilities including places to stay whilst visiting the area. Whilst the Council have financed the launch of this site it is intended that the site will be self funding within 12 months. The Council will continue to develop an economic plan for the town and a business plan for the Council itself. The fight for banking and ,in particular, additional A.T.M. facilities will continue; we have our M.P. on side and Sturminster was mentioned by name in the House of Commons a few weeks ago. In conclusion it has been a privilege and a pleasure to act as Mayor this year. My thanks to all Councillors for their support, to all that have made Heather and I so welcome during the year and best wishes to my successor for the next Council year.

Andrew Donaldson

APPENDIX 2

Thank you Mr Mayor

At this time of the year we focus on the financial year just ended and what will occur in the next financial year.

The budget for last year was £373,124 with a precept of £229,674 and also included £75,000 of developer funds that were used toward the cost of the Skatepark. Expenditure has been as expected this year and we are undertaking the end of year processes and the final audited accounts will be published in due course

This Year the budget to run Council services is £321,197 which is primarily funded by the precept paid by Town residents of £277,182 – this equates to 84% of the total budget (remaining income and reserve)

I know that many of you will want to know why the Council has increased the precept this year -by £30.64 or 59p per week for a band D property

The Town Council like many other authorities has had to make some difficult decisions when considering the budget for the coming year. In doing so there is a drive to keep cost down and maintain value for money whilst balancing the reality of the true costs of providing services . eg

The District Council previously provided street cleaning services. When the service transferred to the Town Council some years ago it came with a flat fee of £9000 per annum – this service is valued in the town and is something we wish to maintain however, the real costs have risen over time but the income has not.

Service demands have changed and developed over time and that has been reflected in additional resources such as the Community resource worker post and increasing the hours of some staff to build capacity within the team.

This year we have made the additional provision for one off costs such as the replacement and maintenance of play equipment at the Rixon recreation ground

There are also additional Recurring costs (of £5788) to cover additional services from the County Rangers , vehicle replacement and to provide for additional IT resilience to allow the Council to respond to changes in the data protection act.

And finally we have allowed for an increase of 3% across all costs in line with the bank of England predictions on inflation

Looking forward the Council is refreshing its business plan to ensure that the requirements of the Town are at the heart of the services that we provide. I am also looking at ways in which we can improve our services and if possible create increased efficiencies. All this in the context of potential service changes as the District Councils along with the County Council reshape themselves into a new Unitary authority.

EMMA LINDSAY
TOWN CLERK.

