

Blackwater and Hawley Town Council
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Minutes of The Annual Town Residents' Meeting
At the Hawley Memorial Hall, Hawley Green
Monday 24th May 2021 at 7.30 pm.

In Attendance:

Cllr Collett (Outgoing Chair), Cllr Blewett, Cllr Hunt, Cllr Harward, Cllr Lister, Cllr Monks (Incoming Chair), Cllr Tarbet, Cllr Usher, Jo Shaw, Town Clerk and 5 residents.

1. Chair's Welcome
The chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.
2. Apologies for absence
There were no apologies.
3. To receive the minutes of The Annual Town Meeting and deal with matters arising
The minutes of the Annual Town Meeting held on the 2nd March 2020 were received and approved as a correct record for signature by the chair. There were no matters arising.
4. Annual Report

Outgoing Chair's Report to Annual Town Meeting

I am delighted to tell you that Trish Monks was elected as Chair of Council last week. After 14 years in the role it was time to hand over to someone else and I know that she will do a great job. I will still be here as a councillor and as the local county councillor. Tonight's report, therefore, will comprise four parts:

- I will start by talking about what has happened over the past year or so.
- The Chair of our Finance Committee, Brian Blewett, will then tell you about the council's finances.
- Then the Chair of our Planning & Payments Committee, Terry Hunt, will tell you about the planning issues we have been dealing with over the past year.
- Then we will hand over to Trish, as our new chair, to talk about plans and ideas for the future.

Covid-19

The biggest issue for the Town Council over the past year, like everyone else, has been the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of our facilities have had to be closed during

much of the year, with lots of clubs and groups unable to meet, children unable to use the play area and even the bar has had to be closed!

One impact of all this was a massive hit to the Council's income. About half of our income comes from hall hire, sports pitch and other facility charges. We were able to furlough some of our staff, for which we are grateful, but this still left a massive hole in our budget. Brian will tell you in a little while about the magnificent efforts of Jo Shaw and her staff to economise in every way they could to keep us in the black.

One victim of this was the summer floral displays in the town centre. At a cost of over £5,000 and no prospect of being able to secure business sponsorship, the hard decision had to be made to cancel them for 2020. The good news, however, is that they will be back this summer, organised by our own staff, which will save money and give us more control. It will take a year or two to build up to a full magnificent display, but it will be worth it in the long-term.

Council meetings have continued by Zoom, with the facility for members of the public to join us on Zoom if they wanted to.

Zoom meetings have proven very successful, with councillors sometimes able to attend on some occasions when they might not otherwise have been able to do so, such as if they were feeling slightly unwell, or had caring responsibilities at home. The technology also allowed us to record the meetings and post those recordings on our website during that period, although this is not possible with meetings held in the traditional way.

We are hoping that the Government will legislate to allow local councils to make their own decisions about how they hold their meetings in future, so long as they are always open to any member of the public to observe and make a contribution at the appropriate time.

Coffee Shop and Inn on The Green

Another big change was that Leonard Cheshire gave notice that they were closing the Disabled and Self-Help facility in the youth suite, known as DASH. We were very sorry to see them go, as they had provided a much-loved facility for local people. Sadly, despite dialogue to see if they could find a way of keeping DASH open, it was clear that they had made up their minds.

So, we had an empty building. We also had lots of local people taking their daily exercise during Lockdown who we felt might appreciate the opportunity to enjoy a quality coffee or other refreshment whilst out and about and it wasn't long before Jo had put together plans for the Coffee Shop on The Green, the popularity of which has far exceeded even our most optimistic hopes.

The bar, now known as the Inn on The Green, was also given a substantial makeover, and provided much needed refreshment in between the long months of Lockdown.

Many people enjoyed being able to sit out on the green and enjoy the summer weather with a welcome drink and family or friends. For those who haven't seen

it since its makeover, the bar will be open after this meeting tonight, subject, of course, to the necessary Covid-safety measures.

The Coffee Shop and the Bar are great examples of the sort of things that a Town Council can have the flexibility to do.

Halls and Sports Facilities

Our halls and indoor sports facilities have had to be closed much of the time. Trish will set out more about reopening everything and some exciting changes we plan for the future.

We were aware that our sports pitches were in dire need of some love and attention. Indeed, it got to the point where Hawley Football Club had to look elsewhere for training and match facilities. Clearly, this should be their home and we were just as keen to get them back here, as they were keen to get back.

So, we worked together with Hawley FC and I am delighted to report that FA finance was secured, and the restoration work was completed at the end of March. We look forward to Frimley Phoenix Cricket Club returning to play over the summer and then Hawley Football Club in the autumn.

Staffing and Office Move

I have already mentioned Jo Shaw, our wonderful Town Clerk, who has dealt with an astonishing range of issues since taking up this role less than two years ago. She has steered the organisation through everything during that time and I know she puts her heart and soul into serving Blackwater and Hawley.

Jo is very ably assisted in the office by Lorraine Powell, but one problem that consumed a lot of their time for little benefit was being split onto two sites. Having the office down in Blackwater whilst our facilities were all up here at Hawley Green made no sense. So, everything has now been moved onto this site and the office in Blackwater is now being let out, generating more income for the Council to help provide better facilities and keep our council tax down. The telephone number and email address remain the same.

You may also have noticed that the Council has a new logo. We are very grateful to Pauline Wells for her work in helping to design the logo, and her patience in dealing with all the changes councillors made as the new logo evolved, and all as a volunteer doing this for free. Thank you, Pauline.

One very sad move this year has been that we have had to make all our reception staff redundant. This was no reflection on any of them, and we are grateful for all the work they have done in the past, some for many years. It is just the inevitable consequence of more payments being made online or by direct debit and our plans to move to an automated booking system. With our office staff now onsite, the few transactions that still need face to face contact can be dealt with by them. Many people have commented on the improved appearance of our facilities. With litter cleared regularly, vegetation cut back, and the recycling skips kept tidy.

This is a small part of the improvements being achieved by Philip Hinsley, our Facilities Officer, assisted by Allan Harding. Together with Steve Webber, who runs the Inn on the Green, they have used the fallow time during Lockdown to redecorate many of our facilities and tidy up neglected corners. There is still much to do, but they have made impressive progress, without having to hire in expensive contractors to do this work.

So, it has been a challenging year, but a lot has been achieved and the finances have been kept under sound control. We are optimistic about what the future can now bring and are well set up to embrace those opportunities on behalf of our local community.

Incoming Chairs Report

Introduction

As Adrian introduced me, my name is Trish Monks and I am – as of last Monday – the Chair of Blackwater & Hawley Town Council. Adrian has stepped back after 14 years at the helm, and although I feel the pressure as he will be a hard act to follow, I am hoping to carry on his good work and take the Council through what I honestly believe will be a period of significant improvement and development.

Thankyou

I would like to say thank you to Adrian for the amazing work that he has done over the years – he is the reason I got involved with the council, and it has always been clear to me how much he truly cares about what he does and the energy with which he does it. So, thank you Adrian.

Adrian has spoken about all that has happened over the last two years – the highs and the lows – I get the job of telling you about what we have planned for the future.

Leisure Strategy

As part of our commitment to improving access and availability of sport and recreation facilities for the local community, we have identified several projects that we would like to undertake over the next few years. These have been documented within our new “Leisure Strategy” which includes things such as improving access to the sports pitches, decommissioning the current gym to provide an additional fitness / leisure space for small classes and groups, improving toilet and changing facilities for all users, upgrading the current play area and adding a space for younger children near to the coffee shop, installing a new more accessible and modern gym on the ground floor of the leisure centre, reducing our reliance on fossil fuels, replacing the current mpa with an all weather 3G pitch, and developing the coffee shop to include sales of food as well as quality hot drinks.

Some of these are GRAND PLANS and many are at the very early stages of consideration, but they are not unrealistic, or out of keeping with the facility that we have. Obviously they all take money, which we are hoping to raise through a combination of self-funding from trading surpluses, through grants which may be available to us, or through partnership with centre users, as we have done with the FA funding obtained by Hawley Football Club which helped hugely towards paying for the sports pitch improvements.

Talking of the football club, we are looking forward to welcoming them home when the new season starts in September, and we know they are as happy as we are that they are able to come back.

Before then, we have a new cricket team who will be using our centre as a base – the Frimley Phoenix Cricket Club – who we should see playing matches from June, we have multiple netball teams using the multi-purpose area with a new Thursday league starting imminently, our halls are reopening for group exercise classes, the squash courts – some of the only ones in the area - are open and busy already, and we continue to encourage new teams and groups to get in touch with us if they are looking for a space to hire. We can only hope this time we can stay open for good and get back to the level of activity we had before.

PEOPLE

One of our goals is to encourage more people to our site – especially those that may not know we are here, or previously had any reason to visit. This will help make us a true community resource, and will also help to broaden our revenue streams and make us more resilient.

As Adrian has said, the coffee shop – which was launched in the middle of the pandemic – has been doing tremendously well, and has definitely helped towards our aim of encouraging new people to our site. Residents who were unaware of what we had to offer now know what and where we are, and have truly appreciated the coffee shop at a time when there was little else to do but go for a walk! We think this is amazing, and hope to continue developing our offering to include food in the near future.

The bar – or Inn on the Green – has similarly flourished. During the sunny weather last year, and in the periods when outdoor socialising was the only option, it was fantastic to see so many people enjoying the facility. I have to admit, the demise of the bar was one of the reasons I joined the council, and now it's one of my favourite things, to see people enjoying a pint in the sunshine, the kids off playing in the trees, it's how it should have always been. So many people told us that they never knew the bar was there, or that they were allowed to use it, which goes to show what an under used resource it was. This is no longer the case, and we want to build on our sunny weather success, and make it a place that is well used and attended all year round.

We are also looking for different uses for our existing facilities to broaden our appeal and bring different people to the site. Tennis nets could be set up on the multi-purpose area in the summer, it could be used as a roller rink (we'd take the

tennis nets down first), we are also considering using it to host a weekly Artisan Market, a monthly car boot sale, and (I'm hoping) a Christmas ice rink and festive stalls. If anyone has any other ideas, we always love to hear them – so please feel free to get in touch and let us know.

We also have grand visions for our hospitality offering in the Memorial Hall here. We think this a lovely building and could be used more for functions, and – hopefully – as a wedding venue. As part of these plans, we are looking to upgrade and significantly improve the toilet and entrance area to make them more attractive to people looking to hire a venue for a function. We are also considering holding comedy, music and open mic nights – so if any of you would like to sign up, there will be a space for you on our stage 😊

And although – because most of what we own is here – our projects are largely centred on the Leisure Centre complex, we have not abandoned our Town Centre or the rest of our parish. We were disappointed not to have the planters last year, but obviously it was a cost that we couldn't risk incurring when times were so uncertain. This year we are going to do our own planters – which hopefully will be a success and will definitely save us some money! So far, 650 plants have been purchased and grown on, first inside the bar while it was closed, and now in our two greenhouses – which were obtained for free. We've had few plant deaths, but overall it's so far so good and we are looking forward to see the colourful results of this new enterprise soon. We are also investigating whether we can take ownership of the Monkey Woods, to prevent further encroachment on that area by householders who border it, and continue to push for improvements to the Train Station and surrounds.

Summary

In summary, we are focusing on projects that will enhance the leisure offering for local residents, and bring more people to our facilities. We want it to be a place that people want to come to, to enjoy – to spend their money – and to tell their friends about. We want a waiting list of people wanting to hire our halls, and to be run off our feet in the bar on a sunny Friday evening, after a day of serving bacon rolls, and brie and cranberry paninis in the coffee shop. We want to see people doing Zumba in the hall and looking like they are loving life, having a pint after a sweaty game of squash, or getting married in here, and having their photos taken on the Green before dancing the night away. We want our residents to feel that their council taxes are being spent on improving the facilities for everyone, to see real progress, and not just marking time. We care about this place, we want to see it improve and grow, that's why we do what we do – and I genuinely feel that we are improving, and growing, and I can't wait to see where the next year takes us.

Thank you.

Report of the Chair of the Finance Committee

Council Tax

Fourteen years ago, in 2007, the council tax levied by the Town Council for a band D house was £83.67. If that had increased by an average of 2.5% each year since then to cover inflation, it would now be £118.22. Indeed a number of parish councils around Hart already charge over £100, so that wouldn't be unusual. This year the charge is in fact just £92.36 over £25 less than it would have been.

Indeed, for 11 years there was no increase at all. This year we have to increase our tiny share of the bill by a modest £2.69, or 5p a week.

The Covid-19 affected year ended 31/3/21 has been an awful year for everyone. We have taken some steps to combat this and improve the financial well-being of Blackwater & Hawley Town Council in the future.

We have recently moved our offices from the town centre to our facilities in and near the Sports Centre to enable us to have let the Blackwater Centre premises. We need to make sure that facilities are looked after properly on your behalf and there are a number of things that will need doing over the next few years. We also plan to look at ways of further increasing our income and have, since August 2020 have added to our income streams by opening our Coffee Shop on the Green in the old DASH building after Leonard Cheshire closed their operation here. This enterprise has enjoyed an income for the year of £29,079 and made an encouraging contribution and has shown continuous improvement even when we have only been able to offer a take-away service for most of the time when we have had lock-down.

Balances

Our balances at the end of this financial year are £149,024 after allocating £25,500 to our Memorial Hall Maintenance Project. We keep our level of balances under review.

Our total income for the year was £306,277 which includes precept of £180,126, Business Restrictions Grant of £27,016 and Furlough JRS Grant of £23,697. Our expenditure was £330,204.

Report of the Chair of the Planning and Payments Committee

Given the year we've had since my report in March 2020, I was moderately surprised to see that planning applications in the parish have increased considerably. Of course, we do have to include the figures of an extra 2 1/2 months, with this meeting being later than usual.

However, in the last 14 months Blackwater & Hawley Town Council have considered a total of 74 planning applications.

Of the 74, 4 were subsequently withdrawn and 14 are currently awaiting a decision by Hart District Council.

While Hart agreed with the majority of our decisions, where there have been opposing views, they were not matters of great concern, mostly being a difference of opinion.

Where Blackwater and Hawley Town Council consider there to be no fair or justifiable reason to object to most received applications, there are sometimes concerns which we comment on as a 'condition' if you like, of our approval. An example of this, and perhaps the most frequently commented on concern, is where a property owner is wishing to extend their property and with it, increase the amount of off-road parking spaces. While we will always welcome less cars on the road, where this is at the expense of losing part of their garden, if there are no other reasons to object, we may submit something along the lines of, 'No Objection, subject to an appropriate permeable surface material being used to help disperse rainwater'.

This example is particularly relevant in parts of our Parish where flooding is a problem, however it highlights the opportunities we have to flag up such local issues, to Hart Planning.

I'm sure anyone who has recently passed the eyesore which was Hawley Farmhouse, in between Thornfield Green and Medlar Drive, will be delighted to have seen that this building of local historic interest is nearing the end of its long-anticipated restoration. After many years of neglect, the site has been a particular concern to Neighbour's who have had to tolerate a considerable amount of antisocial behavior, not to mention the dangers associated with an increasingly unstable structure.

In order to make the project financially viable, a compromise, allowing two smaller new builds at the rear of the site was agreed, while resorting the original Farmhouse to something of its former glory.

While work is yet to start on the neighboring farm buildings, plans have been approved to turn them in to single, 4-bedroom dwelling, so we are hopeful the work will begin soon.

Once completed, I'm sure both sites will prove to be attractive and welcome additions to the area, and a great relief to nearby residents.

In the last year, 2 planning applications have been received for the garage area between Rycroft Gardens and White Hart Parade.

The first application which was for a total of 11 flats, wasn't vastly different to the one refused permission in 2018, although there had been an attempt to address some of the questionable design issues.

Along with many of the local residents, Blackwater & Hawley Town Council objected to the proposal for numerous reasons, including pedestrian access, site access for building work, on-going parking issues in Rycroft Gardens itself, lack

of green space amenity, the overall layout including the bin store backing on to a resident's property and overlooking or loss of privacy for other residents. This isn't an exhaustive list, however Hart agreed with the concerns raised and turned the application down.

The 2nd application has been met with similar disapproval, very much for the same reasons, however we are still waiting for the outcome from Hart. Much as the area is undoubtedly in need of some attention, hopefully, Hart will see sense and will once again, refuse the proposals until sensible and appropriate solutions to all the concerns are met by the developers.

After a protracted period of inactivity, work has started on the Hawley Park Farm Estate. With Hart having refused an application to increase the number of houses to be built from 126 to 158, last year I reported that unfortunately, an appeal to overturn Hart's decision had been successful. What we didn't know at that time was that the Planning Inspector had also taken the appalling decision to cancel nearly £1 million of developer contributions to local highway and leisure improvements, which the developers had been perfectly willing to pay.

So now, we will get the 158 houses, but no off-site highway or leisure improvements paid for by the development, which, quite frankly, doesn't reflect at all well on the Planning Inspectorate!"

While we still firmly believe the development shouldn't have been approved in the first place, now that there is nothing to stop it going ahead, let's hope the developers get on with it as efficiently as possible, with the minimum of disruption to the local community.

One development we will be watching with close interest is that of Minley Home Farm, a model Edwardian Farmstead, set within Minley Manor. For those not familiar with it, it's a beautiful collection of tudoresque buildings which have been allowed to fall into a dangerous state of disrepair in recent years, and without a significant amount of investment, it's only matter of time before the buildings are likely to be beyond saving.

Currently owned by the Ministry of Defense, they relied on permitted development rights to propose demolition of the buildings and to replace them with what was described as a 'concrete tent' to be used for Military training purposes.

However, there was some swift action from the organisation SAVE Britain's Heritage who, on the advice of a QC, submitted a claim that permitted development rights didn't apply, or if they did, insufficient evidence was supplied. Luckily Hart Council agreed, and PRIOR approval for demolition was refused. So Home Farm has a reprieve and action is being taken to mount a 'Listing' application, and SAVE Britain's Heritage are seeking to engage the MoD in order to agree a positive means for restoring and reusing the site.

Obviously, preserving this historic site would be an exciting move not just for Blackwater, Hawley and Minley but also for British heritage. So watch this space.

My final word this evening is on the Neighborhood Plan which, for a number of reasons, has been put on ice throughout the pandemic. In the meantime, the planning bill mentioned in the Queens speech recently, is now expected to be brought before Parliament in the autumn. It's being designed to enact planning reforms trailed in last summers' Planning White Paper, so our intention is to await further details before deciding whether to resurrect the NP or not.

5. Residents Questions and Points Raised

There were no matters raised by residents.

The meeting ended at 8.40pm