

## UCKFIELD TOWN COUNCIL



Minutes of the **Annual Town Meeting**  
held in the Weald Hall, Civic Centre, Uckfield  
Wednesday 15 March 2023 at 7.00pm

<b>PRESENT</b>	Cllr. J. Love	Town Mayor
	Cllr. D. French	Deputy Mayor
	Cllr. K. Bedwell	Chair of the Plans Committee
	Cllr. S. Mayhew	Chair of the Environment and Leisure Committee
	Cllr. D. Ward	Chair of General Purposes Committee

In attendance:-

Councillors D. Bennett, J. Edwards, C. Macve, D. Manvell, A. Smith and P. Sparks.

20 members of the public

Holly Goring – Town Clerk

Sarah D'Alessio – Assistant Town Clerk & RFO

Minutes taken by Holly Goring.

**1. Welcome and introductions by the Town Mayor**

Town Mayor, Councillor J. Love introduced herself and welcomed everyone to the meeting. This was the Town Mayor's second term and she had loved the experience, and meeting people. When it came to her Mayoral engagements, her first priority was the town of Uckfield.

Chairs of the three standing committees, Councillor K. Bedwell - Chair of Plans Committee, Councillor S. Mayhew - Chair of Environment & Leisure Committee, Councillor D. French, Deputy Mayor and member of the 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 from Councillor B. Cox and County Councillors Chris and Claire Dowling.

**3 Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting of the 13 April 2022**

Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting held on the 13 April 2022 previously circulated were proposed by Councillor D. Bennett and seconded for approval by Councillor A. Smith as a true record.

**4. Matters arising from the minutes**

The Town Mayor advised that any questions would be taken from the floor later on in the meeting.

## 5. **Presentation of the Town Council's Annual Report 2022-23**

### Councillor J. Love (Town Mayor) – Chair of Full Council

The Town Mayor, Councillor J. Love applauded the town during the last year, for supporting those in the community that needed help such as the Uckfield Community Fridge, Uckfield Food Bank and the warm spaces that had been set up for people to keep warm and meet others.

Some of the questions that had been raised in advance of the meeting related to the future of the Uckfield Leisure Centre and it was announced that Councillor D. Manvell had formulated a letter on behalf of the Town Council to state the Town Council's opposition and concern. Two petitions were also underway within the town which would be discussed later. The Town Council was lobbying to keep the Leisure Centre open as a local facility.

Town Councillors had recently responded to the Transport for South East Strategic Investment Plan and responded to consultations by Wealden District Council in terms of their Wealden Economic Development Strategy and Corporate Plan. They had also provided input into the East Sussex County Council Transport Plan. Members would continue to lobby on matters important to Uckfield.

The Mayor wished to address the loss of the country's beloved monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, and for everything she did for her country. Her Majesty had historic connections with the town through the Nevill family and attended Holy Cross and Little Horsted Churches. A number of stories and personal memories came to light in the lead up to the Queen's Platinum Jubilee in 2022 that people fondly remembered. The Mayor gave her official thanks to the High Sheriff, Jane King, for her support and observation of Uckfield's proclamation of King Charles III. This was a huge honour.

The Town Council had been working on the key business planning documents over the winter months to set the council's future priorities and budget for the new financial year, and had appointed new auditors with thanks to office staff.

They were in the process of purchasing the Dene from Buxted Parish Council, had reviewed the maintenance agreement for the Town Centre CCTV, and been drafting the documentation for the Neighbourhood Plan. Town Councillors and staff were extremely busy at present and hopefully with the support of local residents, could keep the town community focused and keep continuing to make progress.

### Councillor D. Ward – Chair of General Purposes

Councillor Ward explained that General Purposes Committee looked after the Town Council's assets, finances and staffing. She thanked all those involved in dealing with the council's buildings and financial aspects of the council, and celebrated the achievement of sound internal audit reviews and an excellent year-end external audit. With particular thanks to the Assistant Town Clerk and Town Clerk for their work on this.

The Community Grant Programme had awarded over £40k of grant funding to local organisations in the past year. The annual Finance Sub-Committee meeting where the grants were considered was one of the most interesting meetings of the year, and the most rewarding. But, also one of the hardest meetings. The number of applications were increasing and there was only a certain amount of funding available.

Town Council buildings needed to conform to various standards for which she thanked the new Estates and Facilities Manager, who only recently joined but had a strong background in compliance and was managing this well.

Some of the other costly items included replacement of heating systems and lighting to ensure energy efficiency and also meet the Town Council's climate change policy. Longer term projects such as improving the drainage in Ridgewood Village Hall car park were also being investigated.

Each year the Town Council reviewed its fees and charges, and unfortunately, although the council did not increase room hire rates in the previous year, it was necessary to do so for 2023-24 due to the increase in utility and day to day running costs.

Councillor Ward wished to thank all of the officers and staff for what they do. New staff were welcomed which included the Head Caretaker and Estates and Facilities Manager. The Town Council were currently recruiting Grounds staff. She also gave thanks to her colleagues on General Purposes Committee for their involvement.

#### Councillor S. Mayhew – Chair of Environment & Leisure Committee

Councillor Mayhew explained how in the last year life was rebuilding with people coming out more since the pandemic and spending habits were improving. However the cost of living crisis was now having an impact. The Town Council was not immune to this issue and had been impacted substantially with increasing utility costs, material costs and fuel costs, which had resulted in an increase in expenditure.

The Town Council was undertaking a three-year programme of tree surveys to assess trees on Town Council owned land. There were concerns relating to ash dieback and other diseases, and this had resulted in some trees needing to be felled for safety reasons with a handful more, lost in bad weather. The Grounds team had planted over 600 trees over the past two winters, some of these were affected by the hot weather during the summer of 2022, but many had continued to grow which was positive news.

This work and our engagement with the Sussex Flow Initiative to consider natural waste to reduce flood risk had been a great help to support the delivery of our five year management plan for Hempstead Local Nature Reserve. Uckfield Town Council also continued to fund the urban grass verge cutting undertaken by East Sussex Highway contractors. The Town Council had agreed to join a trial of reduced grass cutting along the rural verges which for Uckfield only related to a couple of roadside verges on the outer boundary of the town.

The Grounds team had been busy reconfiguring the football pitches from two to three at West Park, since the boys' and girls' football teams were doing so well. We had resurfaced the cricket practice nets. The Town Council had purchased a new mower to help maintain these pitches, including some new tools, and moving to battery operated alternatives.

Town Councillors and staff spent a great deal of time reviewing the allotment agreement and rules and regulations. Tenants were advised about changes to the structure of the Allotment fees and charges in the lead up to the change from April 2023, and the new allotment agreement would be sent out to all allotment holders at the end of the month.

The Cemetery Rules and Regulations were also updated and a copy was sent out to all local funeral directors, and deed holders.

The hard work of the officers and the Civic Centre team had helped to make the Civic Centre a great place to visit, with a busy events programme. The Town Council was keen to promote the town events, so the council was looking at new notice boards to show case these activities. The Town Council had also organised for an organisation called 'Our Parks' to get people exercising for free at Harlands Playing Fields. These were free exercise classes on Saturday mornings and residents could join by logging registering on their website. Everyone in Uckfield was welcome.

#### Councillor K. Bedwell – Chair of Plans Committee

Councillor Bedwell advised that the past year had been a busy one, with some large planning applications as well as the usual day to day planning applications. The Town Council had seen applications on Eastbourne Road for ninety houses, including two hundred plus at Bird-in-Eye farm, four hundred plus were being considered at Downlands Farm and four hundred and fifty at Horsted Pond Farm.

There was potentially huge change for Uckfield. It was important to reiterate that the Town Council was a statutory consultee on all Uckfield based planning applications and the Town Council were invited to consult on all applications within the parish boundary or where they could affect the services of Uckfield. Wealden DC was the local planning authority. For instance, the recent large-scale application for the industrial site near Maresfield, was not within the parish boundary, but likely to have an impact in terms of retail and/or the utilities and services which would have to be connected.

As consultees for planning applications, it was the Town Council's role to represent the views of residents whether big or small, and to make sure that the National Planning Policy Framework and Wealden District Council's adopted planning policy framework was being adhered to. Unfortunately, local councillors did not have the power to pass or fail planning applications, the Town Council as a consultee was required to support or object to applications and consider if they met planning terms and criteria. Although the Town Council sometimes received criticism on social media for objecting to applications, the planning procedure was not always easy to understand as there was a very specific planning framework set by the UK Government which needed to be followed. It was important that the Town Council checked that applications followed the national guidance.

This year had been very challenging. Town Councillors understood that any changes would change the fabric of our community, and it was important to feed in important local knowledge. It was acknowledged that Uckfield would grow, but the homes needed to be the right size homes in the right location. East Sussex County Council were also being lobbied about the condition of the town's roads. Just recently, the RT Hon Michael Gove gave the opportunity for local communities to respond to the Levelling Up and Regeneration bill, which was a proposed reform to national housing policy. Plans Committee members worked on a detailed response to the sixty questions within this consultation.

The Town Mayor thanked her colleagues for their updates and explained that the annual report incorporated further information on allowances paid, financial summaries, attendance, community grants, annual priorities and a lot more information.

6. **Topics and questions raised by residents in advance**

**Q. What support can Uckfield Town Council give to the people of Uckfield in their quest to prevent the closure of Uckfield Leisure Centre after the ESCC Public Consultation?**

**In support of this, the Town Council added that it's a well-loved local facility where everyone's children learned to swim and continue to do so, and is a vital hub for fitness and health, both physical and mental. If it goes, it will never come back, and Uckfield residents will be forced to travel to either Crowborough or Hailsham for their leisure provision - adding to families cost of living difficulties and the traffic on our local roads, when we should be encouraging walking and cycling to our local facility. In a fast-growing town like Uckfield, it would be criminal for East Sussex County Council to abandon the wellbeing of the Uckfield population, and despite the increasing costs of running such pools and centres, UTC should be firmly behind the drive to encourage ESCC to really dig deep to keep this facility alive.**

- A. *Chair of Environment & Leisure Committee, Councillor Mayhew explained that Uckfield Town Council would do their utmost to fight to keep the facility open. Attendees were informed that there were now two separate petitions on social media and that there was also a rally being planned for people to have their voices heard the coming Saturday (18 March 2023). Very little else could be done until the consultation commenced.*

*Councillor Bedwell said from a planning point of view that all proposed applications for development, referenced the Leisure Centre as a key local sports facility in walking distance of their sites.*

*Councillor Mayhew summarised by reinforcing that every single town councillor was supporting this facility and were lobbying to retain this premises. It had been noted in the Budget that day, that £63million was being put aside by the UK Government to invest in these facilities but it was early days.*

*Weblinks were shared at the meeting, and the weblink for the consultation would be shared with residents once it had been released. The MP for Wealden had been included in the communication that the Town Council had, had with the county and district authorities. The Town Clerk read out an extract from the MP's response. Hard copies of the consultation were being kept at County Hall in Lewes, Uckfield Town Council and the library. As far as members were aware, the 3G pitch was separate and would stay put. Unfortunately, the Town Council could not afford to run the Leisure Centre. Attendees explained that the facility had been part of the town for 40 years, and partially funded by the residents of Uckfield. Crowborough and Hailsham centres had both had refits and were now due to receive new facilities. The Uckfield Leisure Centre was always packed around 5.00pm of an evening with a number of clubs using the facilities. It was agreed within the room that the Heathfield Leisure Centre which had now closed for public use, did not have the level of clubs and organisations using the facilities that Uckfield experienced.*

*Members noted that public services often did run at a loss, in order to provide these public services for the community. Members had questioned why Wealden DC were returning the centre back to East Sussex County Council as they knew that the county council did not have a leisure department or resource to run the facility. A resident clarified that regardless of cost, it was important to look at the cost/benefit to the community. What was the benefit of a child learning to swim?*

*It was suggested that one petition would have more impact. It was also important for the town to come up with a solution to this problem, rather than just refusing closure. It was acknowledged that very few people would run the business at a loss. Members explained that community infrastructure levy funding was being held by the local planning authority (Wealden DC) and it was hoped that new facilities could be provided but this would likely to happen after the developments had been built, not before.*

*Attendees were concerned that 'learning to swim was a critical part of the primary school curriculum. This would therefore place pressure on other facilities in the district and affect time within the school day whilst travelling back and forth to these facilities.*

*The Town Clerk clarified that the 10-week public consultation was due to commence imminently and residents and businesses would be encouraged to respond to the consultation. Residents were also being recommended to lobby their MP and the district and county authorities. The Town Clerk also agreed, that it was important to come up with solutions, and possible alternatives but it was important to see what options were being presented within the consultation.*

**Q. An excavation has been evident with health and safety barriers on the pedestrian pathway for over a year! This 'hole in the ground' has water/gas/electricity supplies passing through it to the old post office building. When will this utility excavation be reinstated?**

*A. The Town Clerk advised that she had approached East Sussex Highways who had responsibility for this section of the pavement near to Hartfields on the High Street. They had sent an Inspector out to investigate who would be following up with the property responsible. Since the meeting the Town Clerk had also approached the landlord of the adjacent property and received a detailed update on the reason for these delays.*

**Q. (a) Has the wooded land (currently being cleared) been sold? This is the land opposite the exit from Linnet Green. If yes can the council put a preservation order on the remaining trees in order to protect our environment?**

**(b) Has the Land at the centre of Linnet Green been sold? In order to protect bird wildlife. Can the council put a preservation order on land?**

*A. The Town Clerk explained that this matter had taken up quite a bit of her time in the period since November 2022. A resident noticed that the land title had been taken to auction by an unknown individual or organisation with an auction house in London in early December 2022. The Town Council had been maintaining the land since the 1990s and understood the land to be in their ownership. Solicitors had been instructed to act on the Town Council's behalf. The land was unfortunately sold at auction, and divided up for further sale in 2023. The Town Council's solicitors were pursuing the matter. The larger parcel of land on Mallard Drive was designated as ancient woodland and the trees on that land had a Tree Preservation Officer that had been put in place in the late 1980s. The Town Council had documentation to prove this.*

*A resident suggested local resident participation to push the issue and provide evidence of the Town Council maintaining the land. The Town Clerk confirmed that a*

*number of residents had already been of help and she would continue to liaise with them if information was required.*

**Q. Can the council ensure parking on the surrounding areas is protected from traffic overflow once the CO-OP have erected a shop on the Highlands Site? It is important as we need to park on the road opposite houses.**

*A. The Town Clerk explained that unfortunately this did not fall under the remit of the Town Council. This was public highway land, and East Sussex Highways would need to monitor this situation. The Town Council's Plans Committee had been opposed to this development due to the difficulties with the location, and close proximity to the Highlands roundabout. There were concerns that the parking spaces onsite would have to be shared between the Highlands Pub customers and the convenience store. Town Councillors would be monitoring the situation. There was an arrangement being put in place during construction for customers of the public house to use C J Thorne's car park overnight.*

*Unfortunately double yellow lines would not be enforced, as Wealden District did not have civil parking enforcement so it currently fell to Sussex Police to carry out enforcement.*

**Q. Will the council ensure that Wealden takes on board the importance of local input as advocated by Rt Hon Michael Gove?**

*A. This was felt to have been answered in the report provided by the Chair of Plans Committee, Councillor Bedwell earlier in the meeting.*

**Q. How and why did the Uckfield Festival cease this year? Could it be revived for 2024?**

*A. Councillor Mayhew explained that he had been the Town Council representative on the Festival Committee. The Festival required a great deal of organisation, but unfortunately often fell to the same committee members to organise. A decision was taken by the committee to close it down. There was potential for the Festival to be revived, with new volunteers but there would not be time to organise for July 2023. Perhaps for July 2024.*

**Q. Has purdah come into force yet? We had a visit from one of the political parties on Monday this week?**

*A. The Town Clerk explained that the elections were managed by Wealden District Council. The notice of election was due to be issued on Monday 20 March 2023. The Town Clerk explained what the purdah period meant and how it was more about local authorities and local media outlets remaining politically neutral during the pre-election period. Councillor Ward reminded attendees of the need to bring voter ID to the polling station. Councillor French clarified the documents that could be used.*

**Q. Are there any plans for the Coronation Weekend?**

*A. Councillor Bedwell explained that the Town Council were organising a celebration on the afternoon of the King's Coronation (Saturday 6 May 2023), from 3.00pm until 7.00pm. This was due to take place on Luxford Field with live entertainment and food stalls, and a pop-up bar. It was an opportunity to enable people to come together and celebrate.*

*Councillor Bedwell then explained that Monday 8 May 2023, the King had asked for the country to get involved in the Big Help Out. This was a day of volunteering.*

*Projects were just being identified and would be communicated nearer the time.*

## **7. Questions from the floor**

Two questions were asked in relation to Ridgewood Village Hall car park seeking clarification on the drainage issues in that area. Councillor Bedwell explained the difficulties experienced in this area on the field with water coming off the road into the field and into the car park from New Road. Councillor Bedwell also noted that the Plans Committee had raised their concerns with the proposals of new developments in the south of the town flowing into the tributaries of Ridgewood Stream, and River Uck thereafter.

Discussions continued with regards to planning policy and the position of the local community in line with UK Government policy. In particular attendees raised their concerns with the lack of infrastructure in Uckfield to support future growth and development.

Discussions also centred around the lack of parking enforcement with a local resident raising their particular concerns about the area around Grange Road. Councillor Ward explained the current situation between Wealden District Council and Sussex Police.

Meeting closed at 9.01pm.