

Burgess Hill

Town Council

MINUTES of the proceedings of the
BURGESS HILL ANNUAL TOWN MEETING
held on **TUESDAY 27 JULY 2021** at 19.00 hours
at Cyprus Hall, Cyprus Road.

Those present included the Town Mayor Anne Eves, Town Councillors and 18 members of the public.

1. **WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**

The Town Mayor welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. **APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from West Sussex County Councillor Kirsty Lord, Mid Sussex District Councillor Samantha Smith, Sussex Police and Crime Commissioner Katy Bourne, Trevor Leggo, Mary Smith, Dave Farmer, Jon Francies, Anthony Snape, Sarah Voce and Heather Warne.

3. **MINUTES**

The Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting held on Tuesday 9 April 2019, having been previously circulated, were signed by the Town Mayor with the agreement of those present.

4. **REPORT ON THE WORK AND ACTIVITIES OF BURGESS HILL TOWN COUNCIL IN 2020/21**

The Town Mayor presented the Annual Report (attached at Appendix 1) on the work of the Town Council for the period 2020/2021.

The mayor welcomed all attendees, and thanked the police for sending representatives to the meeting.

The Mayor noted that the meeting had not taken place in 2020 due to the Covid 19 pandemic. It had been a tough couple of years, but the town and the Town Council had risen to the occasion. The Mayor thanked the Town Council officers for continuing to deliver projects and services throughout this time.

The Rainbow Commemorative Bench had now been installed in St John's Park, and the Town Council had also donated a bench to the staff at the Princess Royal Hospital.

The Trading Spaces initiative in the Martlets square was going well, with Scrapless, Remake Fashion, LoCa Designs and the Burgess Hill Pantry in place. The Town Council Maintenance Team were thanked for their work on this unit. The Kiln was also doing well in the Martlets Square; the building was now housing a working pottery kiln, and a new sewing group had been launched. Eco2home had also set up in the former Iceland unit. These shops and initiatives were examples of the circular economy, and gave the town a unique sense of place.

The Burgess Hill Food Bank had moved to a unit in Church Walk, giving them an improved setting, and they now had frozen food available too.

Plans for the Beehive had been finalised and the public had said yes to the scheme through the consultation. The Town Council had applied for the Public Works Board loan and was awaiting a decision.

The Town Market had been set up and was running well. The Council was hoping to employ a market manager, and was looking to potentially increase the frequency of the market days.

The Repair café was now up and running from the Kiln unit, new volunteers were welcomed.

There were now 9 Wild flower verges which had received a positive response. There was a facebook page for the Lovebug project which the public could look at for information on the scheme.

The Petanque project was making progress, and the CEO was thanked for obtaining a grant from Sports England for this.

Events were now back – the first event back had been Burgess Hill is Back on 3 July, and the next big event would be a Health and Wellbeing Day on 4 September which would include activities for all ages in the Town Centre and St John's Park. The Outdoor Cinema would also return on 5 September with two films being shown. The Sandpit was also back in Church Walk, and Wowzer Wednesday activities were being held every Wednesday throughout the Summer Holidays.

The upgraded footpaths around town were now mostly open, and were a massive asset to the town.

5. REPORT ON FUTURE TOWN PLANS

Leader of the Town Council Councillor Robert Eggleston presented the report on future town plans. Residents were interested in the delayed start to the Town Centre redevelopment. The Martlets Shopping Centre was under the

control of NewRiver REIT (NRR), and there had been two approved planning applications for the retail estate, one in 2016 and one in 2019. It was clear that the redevelopment was stuck and unlikely to proceed without a significant amount of public money.

The government had a £4bn 'Levelling up Fund', to which Mid Sussex had made a bid of £14mil. Of this, around £10mil would go towards the redevelopment of the Martlets. It would be conditional on £40mil of private sector funds coming from NRR. The success of the bid would likely be announced late September. If the bid was successful and the private investment came forward, Councillor Eggleston's best guess was that the redevelopment may begin in Spring 2022. For the bid to be successful the scheme needed to be 'shovel-ready', so the development would be based on the existing 2019 planning consent.

The project was likely to be rephased; in the original plan the first phase included the building of the residential properties, the building of the cinema, building of the Travelodge, and demolition of the Martlets Heights and former Iceland area. It was likely that instead the first phase would be the residential development, followed by refurbishment of the units which were not being demolished, giving the private sector the opportunity for the retail economy to recover.

The 2019 scheme had included a number of large brand retailers; since then many of these had gone out of business. The retail sector was in a bad position, as was Cineworld, so those elements of the scheme are vulnerable.

Looking at what BHTC had done with Trading Spaces, this could be an opportunity as a town to try and revive the independent sector. Trading Spaces housed three new independent businesses owned by Burgess Hill residents – there were start-up businesses in Burgess Hill looking for space at affordable rates. Councillor Eggleston hoped that going forward sufficient space would be made available for thriving independent retail. In today's space Burgess Hill was not likely to get big brands, but this was an opportunity to do something different.

6. OPEN FORUM

A member of the public spoke regarding accessibility for Wivelsfield Station, which had been referred to in the minutes of the 2019 meeting. In the 2 years since then nothing had progressed. The government had allocated £1mil for accessibility, which was planned to be used for a lift. There had been rumours recently that it would be too difficult. The member of the public asked that the Town Council would press the organisation responsible for the work to get the project moving, and hoped that the funds would not be withdrawn. A member of the Worlds End Association had commented to them that the newly redone footpaths came very close to the levels of the London-bound platform, and wondered if level access could be made to the platform from these paths. This would improve the accessibility and would be cheaper than a lift. There had also been a rumour that network rail planned to put a ramped bridge over the platform from the Gordon Road entrance across the platforms. The majority of

users accessed the platform from the Northern side, so this would mean anyone with additional accessibility would have to walk all the way round to the other side of the station. This was not a suitable solution for those with accessibility requirements.

Councillor Eves responded, saying that the plan was to install a lift, however there were concerns that a lift would need to be manned 24 hours a day for safety reasons which was not practical. There had also been an idea for an access point from the top near the St Wilfrid's railway bridge but this has been ruled out. Councillor Eggleston would pick this up with the Place and Connectivity team and get back to the member of the public.

A second member of the public asked for further explanation of the £10mil from the Levelling Up Fund potentially coming from the government to kick-start the Town Centre redevelopment. How would this be spent? Would the town/local council have control over this, or the developer? If it was going to be within the developer's control that would basically be giving taxpayer money to the private company.

Councillor Eggleston answered that control over it was really with the government. The government would tie the landlord to a contract, it wasn't a case of just writing a cheque to a private business. The Town Council did not have the details of how this would be deployed. The money was likely to be used in preparatory work. It was not a unique scheme, there were public/private partnerships around the country to deliver developments. The reality was that if the bid was unsuccessful, there was not a Plan B, so the town should hope for the bid to be successful.

A third member of the public thanked the Councillors and Council staff for their work done during this period. They picked up on the idea from Councillor Eggleston's presentation of encouraging small businesses, and felt this was the future of a town like Burgess Hill. The town should start discussing what we would want as a Plan B. MSDC had not consulted us on this. NRR and MSDC were stuck because of the economy. They felt we shouldn't wait to be asked, and should start engaging finding what residents want from the town centre. Maybe if the town had a fantastic plan this could be presented to NRR and the plans could be changed.

Councillor Eves responded, confirming that the Town Council was not aware of the bid to the Levelling Up Fund until shortly before the Press Release was sent out, so had not had a chance to have any input.

A fourth member of the public asked what were the latest developments on the Beehive? The meeting had covered the Town Centre so far, but the Beehive could be a great achievement to be proud of in the future.

Councillor Eggleston responded that the consultation had been completed in April, and residents who had taken part had backed the plan for the Beehive to be delivered in 3 phases, and for the Town Council to apply for a loan of £4.8mil. The loan application had been submitted to the Public Works Loan Board (PWLb), who had come back with 6 or 7 questions, which the Town

Council had answered. They were satisfied with the consultation and affordability assessments. They had asked governance questions, and about the reserves. The information was back with the PWLB, and there wasn't a set timeline for the decision to be made. This was the largest loan that any Town Council had applied for, so would need significant consideration, but given the questions they had asked and our answers we could be reasonably encouraged with the progress.

The Bat survey had been completed on the RBL building, and there were no bats. The architects were working with MSDC on non-material amendments to the designs. The Town Council was also talking to MSDC about land transfer and about space needed to house plant and other supplies for demolition and construction works. The ideal timeline would be looking at a decision on the loan towards the end of August, after which the Council would go out to tender for demolition. A contractor would be on site in the autumn, around late October, demolishing the RBL building, then on site starting construction in spring 2022 with a soft launch opening late 2023. This would be dependent on everything going to plan.

The Town Council did not want to borrow the full £4.8mil if it could be avoided. The problem was that if we approached likely donors or grant making bodies and asked for contributions they would ask where the rest of the money was coming from. Once the loan was secured, the Town Council could approach these donors and bodies and show that we could cover phase one, and they would be more likely to support. This would also be the case with Section 106 and infrastructure money.

Councillor Eggleston then returned to the question from the third member of the public regarding a Plan B for the town centre. Firstly, the town centre shouldn't just be looked at through the lens of the Martlets, there were lots of great shops in Burgess Hill which we should support. Secondly, NRR was not a developer, it was a landlord, and had a long lease on their units. This needed to be considered when talking about what the town wanted. The majority of their units were in a state of decay, there were probably only one or two more currently that were in a condition to be let, the others would need a huge amount of input to bring them up to scratch, and this was not economically viable. NRR was a real estate investment trust, and currently this was a pretty dead estate for them. There was no incentive for them not to do anything with the estate, but they would need to invest in it. In terms of a Plan B, if the Levelling Up Fund bid didn't succeed then it was likely that the Plan B for NRR would be to convert some units to residential. This was a national problem for shopping centres. They may also take their existing buildings and refurbish them, and then the Town Council may have the opportunity to bring in local businesses similarly to Trading Spaces. This tackled business rates and high rent which were an issue for small businesses by breaking up larger units.

If the bid was unsuccessful we should be making approaches to MSDC and NRR as the landlords.

Councillor Eves invited West Sussex County Councillor Richard Cherry to

speak on the issue of potholes and road surface damage. Councillor Cherry felt that West Sussex Highways should put public service higher on their list of priorities, as it was a problem in Burgess Hill. Highways said that Burgess Hill gets its fair share of road repairs within the County. A few years ago BHTC had responsibility for small potholes and temporary repairs, and acting quickly on these often stopped larger repairs being necessary, however this was removed from BHTC's remit as part of the move to one contract with Balfour Beatty. This contract was in place for another 4 years. The contract did not specify that repairs had to conform to a certain standard, instead this was left in the hands of the contractors. Burgess Hill had high levels of development, leading to heavy weightloads on the roads and causing damage.

There were priorities for repair, one being Royal George Road, however this depended on whether the budget was available for resurfacing this year, if not it would need to wait until next year. Councillor Cherry did pick up complaints from residents and pass these on to officers, and encouraged everyone to report problems immediately.

A resident had asked earlier about connecting the footpaths to the Wivelsfield Station platform to improve accessibility – Councillor Cherry advised them that there was a process for community highways proposals which could be accessed through the West Sussex County Council website. Any citizen could use this to make a suggestion for improving the highways process.

Councillor Cherry was looking to put forward a community highways proposal for traffic lights on either side of the railway bridge on Rocky Lane, which was an area frequently subject to road traffic accidents. Councillor Cherry asked the audience to raise their hands if they would support this, and around 80% of the room was in favour.

Councillor Eves noted that Councillor Henwood had suggested a red stripe be added to the road at the rear of the Iceland building opposite Cyprus Road car park, and this had been put to Highways.

A fifth member of the public commented that the campaign for rewilding verges was fantastic, and was a way in which Highways could save money, as well as making the town more attractive. They asked what more Burgess Hill could do to increase the amount of trees and green space? Burgess Hill did benefit from a lot of green space, could this be enhanced further? Planting of more trees could also help with flooding issues.

Councillor Eves responded that the Town Council were trying to get more trees planted, and had applied to the 'Plant a Tree in the Jubilee' project. Trees were a great way of preventing flooding, which could be increased by developments.

A sixth member of the public addressed the meeting regarding Woodlands Meed. The works on the school were supposed to start this month (July), but appeared to have stalled again. They were aware that this was not the responsibility of the Town Council, but asked if the Town Council could put pressure on West Sussex County Council. There had been £20mil allocated to

this project and the resident wanted to see the work start. They also commented that at their recent meeting West Sussex County Council would not take any questions on the topic.

West Sussex County Councillor Richard Cherry responded that he had been present at that meeting and had wanted to ask questions, however these hadn't been taken. Since the meeting he had put forward questions which had still been unanswered, so he would be making a Freedom of Information (FOI) request. He encouraged residents to file FOI requests with WSCC to ask these questions.

The meeting ended at 19.52 hours.