

Burgess Hill Town Council

MINUTES of the proceedings of the
BURGESS HILL ANNUAL TOWN MEETING
held on **MONDAY 22 MAY 2023** at 19.00 hours
at Burgess Hill Academy, Station Road, Burgess Hill.

Those present included the Town Mayor Janice Henwood, Town Councillors and approximately 59 members of the public.

1. **WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**

The Town Mayor welcomed everyone to the meeting, and introduced the panel members. All attending Councillors stood and introduced themselves and which wards they represented.

2. **APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Mims Davies (MP), Katie Rabone (CEO of MSVA) and Trevor Leggo.

3. **MINUTES**

The Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting held on Monday 11 April 2022, 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 2022/3**

Former Leader of the Council, Robert Eggleston spoke on the following topics, and invited questions from attendees.

- **District Plan**

Councillor Eggleston explained the history of the District Plan and stated that there had been 2,500 responses to the consultation and that it would be taken to the Scrutiny Committee later in the year, and then back to consultation. Following the second consultation, it would then be taken to the Planning Inspector by December 2023, as stated on Mid Sussex District Council's

(MSDC) website. The approval date was expected to be June 2024. Councillor Eggleston went on to explain the difficulties in creating a District Plan, with pressures from developers, and the fact that there was no change to the mandatory legislative process, until the Levelling Up Bill was to be passed at Government level.

A member of the audience asked if Scrutiny Committee minutes were available to the public. Councillor Eggleston explained that they were in the public domain and that meetings were livestreamed.

Another question from the audience regarded whether it was true that Batchelors Farm Nature Reserve was included in the District Plan for housing development. It was explained that Batchelors Farm was an essential nature reserve which would never be sold or developed for housing. Councillor Eggleston stated that there was a small site just outside of Batchelors Farm which had been set aside for 25 units, but that the land in question was not owned by the Town Council.

- **Allotments**

Councillor Eggleston explained that MSDC had contracted Ethos EP to conduct a study into land available for allotments. He stated that there was a deficit in allotment provision in Burgess Hill and that once the new administration had been formed at MSDC the study would be shared with them, and then more widely to Town and Parish level. He stated that it was not yet known whether there would be land available for allotments.

It was explained that when leasing land for allotments, land that was not earmarked for development would be expected to have a considerably lower valuation than land that was. Should the available land fall within the financial capability of the Town Council, the cost of turning the land into allotments would also need to be considered. The Town Council would be able to apply to MSDC for provision through Section 106 monies or the Local Community Infrastructure fund, and would make the best use of any such monies.

The first question from the public was as to how the Chanctonbury Allotments were put into the District Plan, when Burgess Hill Town Council (BHTC) had a statutory requirement to provide allotments. It was explained that Town Councillors were surprised when the Chanctonbury Allotments were included on the District Plan, and that the sites were not reviewed by the working party, of which Councillor Henwood was a part. This was the reason that the Town Council sought to have the sites removed from the District Plan. The Town Council's statutory requirement to provide allotments was included in their movement against the site's inclusion in the plan. Looking to planning policy, it was explained that policy stated that one cannot build on open space unless it is surplus to requirements, which the land in question was not, and that the Burgess Hill Neighbourhood Plan stated that allotments should be retained.

This prompted a second question as to whether an allotment site owned by the Town Council could be put into the District Plan. It was explained that this would not happen, as sites were only included with the agreement of an owner, or suggestion of a developer. The Chanctonbury Allotment site was owned by Network Rail, and had been leased by the Town Council for a number of decades. It was stated that Network Rail had never wanted to sell the land, as it was not surplus to their requirements.

A third member of the public asked whether, with the newly elected Councillors, a Liberal Democrat majority at District Level would be able to take control of the Scrutiny Committee and argue in Burgess Hill's favour on the matter of allotments. Councillor Eggleston explained that the Liberal Democrats did not actually have a majority on the District Council, and rather held 20 seats. He stated that with the administration at MSDC not yet formed, it would be inappropriate to commit members of a Scrutiny Committee. He explained that the MSDC administration would be announced later in the week and that after its formation, members would be able to engage constructively with officers.

- **Beehive Project**

Councillor Eggleston confirmed the appointment of architecture firm Unknown Works, for the redesign on the Royal British Legion (RBL) site. He went on to explain that negotiations were being undertaken by the Town Council CEO with New River Retail (NRR). There was a possible opportunity to relocate the Beehive to a first-floor site, above the New Look unit, in the town centre. He stated that this would be in an attempt to rejuvenate the town centre, drive down the costs of the project and increase square footage of the Beehive site.

Councillor Eggleston explained that the outcome of the negotiations would be known quickly, and that if it was not an option the Town Council would re-engage with Unknown Works for stage three of the project. Money would not be spent on their design until the outcome of negotiations on the NRR site were known.

- **St John's Pavilion**

The Liberal Democrats had committed in their election literature to work with MSDC and Burgess Hill Cricket Club (BHCC) on the St John's Pavilion project. Councillor Eggleston stated that indicative funding had been put into the Town Council's Capital Programme, and that a planning application for the project would be submitted in the near future. The Town Council would be engaging with MSDC and BHCC to see how this could be brought forward. Match funding would be needed from MSDC, as well as a change in the governing arrangements for the building.

Councillor Eggleston explained the history of the building and its land, as it was chartered land, bequeathed to the town by Emily Temple. A CIO would be created for the project, with a new board of trustees including representatives from MSDC, BHCC and community representatives. He stated that at least one significant new partner was looking to take a space in the building thirty-eight weeks a year.

- **Martlets Shopping Centre**

The Martlets Shopping Centre was managed by MSDC and NRR. Last year, Lambert Smith Hampton were appointed to conduct negotiations with MSDC. Councillors Eggleston and Cornish were invited to hear how negotiations were progressing, and Councillor Eggleston stated that they were still ongoing which he took to be a good sign, however, he could not confirm whether the

development would definitely go ahead, and that he would expect an update in six months time.

The first question from the public was that previously it had been stated that NRR would not be able to 'cherry-pick' parts of the development; would this change going forward? Councillor Eggleston explained that under the current consented planning application, NRR would be unable to develop the residential section of the site, without also developing the commercial element. He stated that Burgess Hill had a challenging high street environment.

A second member of the public asked whether it was true that the Martlets Hall site still belonged to MSDC and not NRR. Councillor Eggleston confirmed that this was true, and that the Beehive project had been developed as an alternative to the now demolished Martlets Hall.

A third question was raised asking if when the Martlets Hall was demolished, if it was true that a £250,000 donation by NRR for the relocation of community groups was used by MSDC to fund Clair Hall, in Haywards Heath. It was confirmed that following the relocation of the existing users of Martlets Hall, there was £117,000 remaining, and that this surplus was placed in reserves. A portion of the money was used for Clair Hall.

This prompted a question from another member of the public, asking if with the closure of Clair Hall, this money was essentially donated to a dead-end scheme? Councillor Eggleston explained that when the money was spent, Clair Hall had the car park resurfaced, new windows and lighting equipment amongst other items. He stated that Clair Hall was fully functioning at this time and that it was the issues that MSDC suffered with leisure contracts during the pandemic which led to the closure of Clair Hall.

A fifth member of the public asked if the £117,000 that was placed in reserves was available for Burgess Hill, to be put towards the Beehive. Councillor Eggleston stated that BHTC asked and was told no.

A sixth member of the public questioned whether the money was specifically for Burgess Hill residents, and whether there was any opposition to the spend on the refurbishment of Clair Hall? It was explained that the money was not included in the Section 106 monies and did not conform to the regular rules – there was nothing specifically underhand. It was initially used as a relocation fund for Martlets Hall users and once they were relocated the money was no longer able to be used for its initial purpose and so MSDC took the decision to place it in general reserves.

A seventh member of the public asked where the proceeds of the sale of Marle Place would be going. As the land and building were owned by West Sussex County Council (WSSCC) all proceeds would go directly to them. An eighth member of the public asked if the footpath that ran to the side of Marle Place was included in the sale. The footpath was not included and the public right of way remained.

A ninth member of the public stated that she felt a lot of the problems in Burgess Hill were caused by the three different councils (BHTC, MSDC and WSCC) fighting in different ways. She asked what the panels thoughts were on a unitary authority. Councillor Eggleston responded, stating that he could only speak for himself on the matter and that other Councillors may have different views. He said that whilst he supported the idea of a unitary authority, as it made democracy and accountability more transparent, it was difficult to find the right structure.

A tenth member of the public lamented on the regrettable history of the town centre, and asked if now a scheme was in place for negotiation, who was acting on behalf of MSDC, and by extension the tax payer, as to what the developers would be allowed to do?

Councillor Eggleston stated that MSDC had appointed Lambert Smith Hampton (LSH), a firm of commercial property consultants, to undertake negotiations. He stated that if anything was to impact the scheme, that they would take appropriate advice from a KC (King's Counsel), to see what needed to be done.

The member of the public then questioned whether there was architectural input into the scheme. Councillor Eggleston explained that the design went through the Urban Design Team at MSDC, which was a robust group of people who commented on the impact of the scheme. He explained that there was a lot of independent scrutiny on the scheme, and that Lambert Smith Hampton is a reputable company, who are experts in their field.

An eleventh member of the public asked why, for the Beehive project, that Greenways had been allowed to continue with the demolition, when they had reported as overrunning on costs. He questioned whether this should have gone to Council following the report on overrunning costs. It was explained that all options had already been looked at, and that this possibility had been considered and decided upon at a previous Council meeting. It was also stated that the member of the public had already raised this question to the Town Council and had been given a response before the Annual Town Meeting.

- **Park Centre**

BHTC put forward a combined bid with Sussex Clubs for Young People (SCYP) and the Escape Youth Club (EYC), following WSCC's decision to close the Park Centre building. Councillor Eggleston announced that the Charity Commission had recently approved the set-up of a new CIO to run Park Centre. He stated that a board of trustees had been set up and that the combined bidders (BHTC, SCYP and EYC) were ready to take over the building. WSCC would have to work with the Charity Commission to change the assets over to this newly formed charity.

Councillor Eggleston stated that the target date for occupancy was the start of the new academic year, and that EYC would begin to use the building. He explained that after the occupancy began, architects would then be appointed to look at the internal configuration of the building, so that multiple occupants would be able to use the site. The possibility of an extension would also be

explored with the aim to increase capacity.

One member of the public questioned if the Park Centre building could be used in place of the Beehive. Councillor Eggleston explained that the plan for the building was for it to be a Youth Hub, and that the services SCYP would provide would mean that the building would be utilised for youth services.

A second member of the public asked the panel if it was true that BHTC had not supported MSDC's Levelling Up Fund application, as they had read in election literature and in the Mid Sussex Times. Councillor Eggleston stated that this had never been a statement made by MSDC. He explained that BHTC had reached out to MSDC to see if they wanted help in their second bid and were told no. Therefore, the Town Council did not write a letter in support, as it would have been immaterial. He also explained that as an organisation, MSDC was a category three – the lowest in priority for the Levelling Up Fund, and that the fund itself was oversubscribed.

Councillor Eves addressed the audience stating that even as District Councillors they were never allowed to see the bid, so how could they be expected to write in support of it as Town Councillors.

5. OPEN FORUM

Councillor Henwood thanked all Councillors from the previous administration for their work. She also extended her thanks to all staff at the Town Council, including the Community Engagement Team for their work trying to increase footfall into the town, and to support local businesses.

The first member of the public asked whether the Council was trying to encourage the reinstatement of a market. A brief overview of the history of the market was given, explaining that the outside operator employed to develop the market failed to do so, and the project was taken back in house. Members of staff were talking to potential stall holders regularly, but it was difficult to get market stall holders to take a risk on a new location in the current climate.

A second member of the public questioned whether BHTC would approach MSDC to abolish parking tax. It was explained that the parking strategy is set across the district and that whilst Haywards Heath and East Grinstead had the same parking fees, they had more established town centres, so people were more likely to utilise their car parks. Residents were encouraged to support local traders as best they could.

A third member of the public told the panel that she did not always know when events were going on in the town and asked if there could be a more structured platform for telling residents what is happening in the town. Councillors Henwood and Cherry thanked her for the suggestion and said that it would be taken on board. Councillor Eggleston recommended that residents follow the Town Council social media and signed up for the events mailing list. It was explained that the Town Council promote their events via Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as via the Town Council website, events

mailing list, banners and correx boards at strategic locations in the town, the About Town magazine and in the Help Point.

A fourth member of the public asked why the Help Point was not open on a Saturday, as many residents worked and could not get into town on a weekday. It was explained that a survey was done previously, which detailed the number of residents coming into the Help Point on a Saturday, and what they were looking for. It was decided that with the amount of people coming in on a Saturday that it didn't warrant the Help Point being open with a full service. Residents were reminded that Councillor Surgeries took place on the second and fourth Saturdays of every month, and residents could speak to Councillors then.

Several residents spoke on the subject of mowing verges and open spaces throughout the town. Residents felt that there was a lack of mowing and that areas of the town were looking shabby. It was explained that the majority of verges and open spaces were not maintained by the Town Council. WSCC Highways were responsible for the grass verges, and MSDC for the parks and open spaces. It was highlighted that certain verges had been rewilded by BHTC to encourage biodiversity.

Councillor Cherry encouraged residents to email him directly with names of roads where verges had not been mowed, so that in his capacity as a County Councillor, he could highlight issues to WSCC and get the contractors chased. Councillor Eggleston stated that BHTC would contact MSDC for the schedule of mowing for open spaces.

Another member of the public questioned whether the essence of the problems in Burgess Hill was that there are multiple towns being considered by MSDC and that Burgess Hill was being underrepresented.

Councillor Eggleston explained that even with twenty seats, the Liberal Democrats did not have a majority on MSDC, and that relationships between the authorities were a complaint in areas outside of Burgess Hill, as well. He said he hoped that better relationships would be seen between the town and district level. He said that the balance had been changed at district level and that it could be expected to be reflected in a changed agenda.

Councillor Cherry thanked attendees, stating he appreciated their candour and friendly criticism. Councillor Williams echoed the sentiment, stating that Councillors wanted to make the town better, and that he had become a Councillor because of his love of the town.

One resident spoke on the accessibility access to Wivelsfield train station. He stated that following a meeting with local residents, Network Rail had suggested a lift further from the station, as the location suggested by residents posed an engineering challenge. The resident asked if BHTC could support residents with their request. Councillor Eggleston said that he was personally committed to improving access at local train stations and would look to see what pressure he could apply and how the Town Council could help.

Another resident raised concerns over the potholes in the local area. It was explained that pothole repairs were the responsibility of WSCC and residents were encouraged to report potholes directly.

A second resident questioned if pressure could be put on WSCC Highways to attend meetings with the public, as they had many years ago. Councillor Cherry explained that these forums were decided by WSCC to no longer be worthwhile, and that Councillors had not been informed if they would be reinstated.

A member of the public raised concerns over WSCC not allowing the public to speak at meetings, questioning if it was undemocratic. Councillor Cherry stated that he could not comment specifically, but that there was disappointment that public speaking at meetings had come to an end.

The final question from the public regarded the new cycle lanes in the town, asking if they could be signposted as they were currently dangerous. Councillor Eggleston explained that the WSCC project was not yet over and that signage would be unlikely to be in place before August.

The meeting ended at 20:57 hours.