

OLNEY TOWN COUNCIL



DRAFT Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting held on Friday 16 May 2021 at 7:00 pm Via MS Teams

Present: Councillors J Rawlings (Mayor), Collins, Clark, D Eley, J. Eley, Geary, Harrison, Messenger, Tennant and 29 members of the public via MS Teams.

In attendance: Andrea Vincent and Sarah Kennedy (Town and Deputy Clerk)

1. Chairman's welcome

The Mayor firstly explained the IT difficulties and the inability to transmit to YouTube despite the fact this had worked perfectly earlier in the week. He explained that the Teams link could be found on our web page and Face book page. He requested if any of the listeners knew of someone who wanted to join the meeting but were having difficulties that they share this information.

Live Q and A is available for this Teams Meeting.

He apologised that this had caused the late starting of the meeting.

The Mayor welcomed everyone to the meeting and acknowledged that this meeting is being conducted in a period of national mourning following the death of HRH Prince Philip. Therefore, the meeting will be confined to factual statements.

The reason for the meeting is to appraise the meeting of what has going on in Olney for the last year, but in this case for the past 2 years as last year's meeting was cancelled because of the Covid Lockdown.

The Mayor stated that this will be the last meeting he will chair other than the ceremonial chairing of the meeting that will elect the new Mayor in May.

Cllr Rawlings is not standing for Council in this coming election.

2. Chairmen of the Town Council's Committees will report on their committees' activities of the past year.

- **Development Group**

Councillor Chris Tennant - Chair of the Olney Town Council Olney Development Group Committee.

This Committee was formed following the adoption of the Olney Neighbourhood Plan and is charged with the implementation, monitoring, promotion and management of the policies and proposals contained within the Olney Neighbourhood Plan (ONP).

The work of the Olney Development Group has two principal areas of activity:

(1) Firstly, the implementation, monitoring and continual review of the ONP involving commenting on strategic planning documents produced by Milton Keynes Council, responding to changes in national and local planning policy such the Governments Planning Reform Agenda or the consultation on the proposed spatial strategy MK2050. This involves making representations to planning applications, attending planning committee and liaison with developers and site promoters who have land and interests in the town.

(2) A second role is to link with local businesses, schools, healthcare providers, community and sporting groups to enhance the social and community infrastructure and physical environment of the town through utilisation of s.106 funds received from developments contained in the ONP.

Below is an update on the progress of site allocations and implementation of the Olney Neighbourhood Plan

Site A - Lavendon Road - The construction of 50 houses following grant of outline planning permission and reserved matters consent new affordable and market homes is underway.

Site B - Warrington Road – Outline planning permission granted and new owners, Angle Properties, are progressing Reserved Matters planning applications for infrastructure, access, the 1st and 2nd phases for offices/warehouses and a 66-bed care home.

Site C - Osiers Road – Construction of 66 houses underway. Some new and affordable houses are now occupied and/or sold.

Site D & E - Land off Aspreys and West of Yardley Road – Reserved Matters application approved by MKC Development Control Committee on 6th August 2020.

Monthly meetings with Bovis/Vistry Homes, Taylor Wimpey and their design team taking place to help with consultation on planning, design and construction matters, These meetings are attended by Olney Town Council, MKC Ward Councillors and 2 local residents to aid engagement and awareness of proposals. Additional proposals have also been recently received for the proposed multi-purpose Community Building which to be delivered 125th dwelling completion, i.e., early 2023.

Site F Land adjacent to Ousedale Campus – reserve site only to be used if sites A, D & E fail to deliver their planned 300 homes by 2031.

Site H Land off East Street/Austen Avenue – identified for health, social care or community uses. Discussions with MKC and healthcare providers have commenced into the feasibility for a new “Health Hub” and community facility for the town.

Site R - Retail - Sainsburys foodstore and Argos outlet complete and opened in late 2019. MKC, with OTC objecting and speaking at Planning Committee, a planning appeal for a McCarthy & Stone retirement village was allowed by the Planning Inspectorate in June 2020. Construction has commenced by McCarthy & Stone.

Site S – Stilebrook Road Industrial Estate – Construction of new industrial and warehouse buildings completed in May 2020 on part of the estate. The rest of the estate is safeguarded employment land.

A Review of the Olney Neighbourhood Plan has begun.

The ONP was made in September 2017 by MKC following the referendum in July 2017. A review of the existing ONP has begun with an assessment of the existing Plan to assess policies, the delivery on allocated sites, compliance with Plan:MK and other relevant National planning policy documents and guidance (NPPF and NPPG).

A “Modifications Version” of the ONP is being prepared and will be considered by the ODG following the election in May. This version of the ONP should reflect the changes to site allocations and policies within Plan:MK to ensure planning policy conformity.

Public consultation and engagement on the Modifications to the ONP are proposed during 2021 with a view to preparing a new Plan for public approval in 2022.No referendum is required for these modifications

The Development Group have several live Projects in the pipeline and continually check s.106 Tracking document.

Several projects are being considered:

Whirly Pit Play Area – designs and costs have been sourced from MKC and are being considered by OTC.

Woodpits Lane Play Area – residents and MKC are being consulted about improvements to the play space and amenity areas.

Johnsons Field Play Area – designs and costs received from MKC for review by OTC.

Yardley Road Multi-Purpose Community Hall and Sport Facilities – Development Brief and Specification produced. Design development is ongoing and subject to a cost review, the proposed will be subject of a further Reserved Matters Planning Application

Representations have been made to MKC and the FA for funding for a new AstroTurf pitch facility for the town.

Schools – support has been provided to OIA and OMS who are looking at making applications for s.106 funding to enhance school facilities.

- **Finance**

Councillor Paul Collins - Chair of the Olney Town Council Olney Finance Committee

The Committee is responsible for the management and oversight of the Council's finances. The year under review was, I would like to think, a once in a lifetime event with the effect of the global pandemic reverberating down to local level.

Unlike many businesses and charities, the town council as a precepting authority was not given relief from business rates. Additionally, for the same reason, we did not qualify for the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure grant unlike many community halls and clubhouses and no business disruption grants were received.

We did receive one discretionary grant of £10K towards our costs from Milton Keynes Council after much lobbying by the town office.

In relation to other grant monies received, we merely acted as a conduit, administering the funds received for the benefit of the ultimate beneficiaries. I'm thinking here of the reopening of the High Street initiative.

The impact of COVID 19 on the year under review was immediate.

On the income side two main areas were affected.

Market Income fell due to the restriction on "non-essential" stalls. We did however manage to keep our markets going throughout.

Room hire income simply fell to zero.

We were able to take swift action to control Olney centre costs by terminating our caretaking/cleaning contract.

On the expenditure side the main impact of COVID was on the enhanced cost of keeping our public toilets open and the provision of mobile phones and premises to the COVID 19 support group.

Aside from COVID 19 we also had to deal with an unexpected failure of the Olney Centre central heating system.

By continuous rigorous control of costs, we were able to keep overall expenditure below budget.

We anticipate that the operational surplus for the year ended 31st March 2021 will be of the order of £42,000 of which £5,000 will be allocated to the Community Fund to support the Amazing Grace 250 community project.

The surplus for the previous financial year was £39,000.

These surpluses have helped to rebuild our general reserve which had fallen to £1,150 as at 31st March 2019 – a perilously low level and one which drove a more focused approach to running the council by the new office staff and new chairmen of committees. It now stands at circa, £78,000 subject to audit.

However, as I said in the last council newsletter to residents, we are not out of the woods yet and this year will bring the challenges of reopening the Olney centre and resuming services such as Citizens Advice and Senior Citizens lunches. We do not anticipate a very high level of room hire income in the first half of this financial year.

Additionally, we are having to shoulder the burden of additional business rates in relation to the East St Carpark.

We still need to continue rebuilding our reserves to a prudent level.

Taking all these factors into account the precept for 21/22 was raised by 9.5% or circa £10 per year per Band D property.

A minor part of the Committee's remit is to consider applications for small community projects from our Community Support Fund (previously known as the Sidney Dix Fund). In the year under review, no applications were received.

The council remains committed to restoring sound finances and delivering value for money for residents.

- **HR**

Councillor Joanne Eley - Chair of the Olney Town Council Olney HR Committee

Cllr Eley thanked the Mayor, HR committee councillors and the staff for their unerring support during a very difficult period in the council's history.

THANK YOU

Since taking on the Chairmanship of the committee in September 2019 the committee has abided by the Nolan principles that guide public roles and worked diligently and tirelessly to put right the disarray HR was in.

We have established regular meetings, regular support and supervision of staff and regular appraisals.

The External Independent Report flagged up serious flaws in the way the council was running. In the past there was a history of breaches in Confidentiality at all levels of the organisation.

Copy of the Independent report summary is available on our website.

Prior to September 2019: No management controls were in place! This has been corrected and we now have timesheets and protocols in place. Staff are supported and encouraged to continue their personal professional development and keep the required training and certification up to date. No proper office handover was given to the incoming staff. The paperwork was not up to date and important annual tasks had been left unfinished.

This has meant the Clerks learning as they go no daybook or calendar schedule or reminders of monthly or annual tasks. Contracts, leases, rates and many more left either duplicated, out of date or just ignored.

No recruitment policy followed.

Recruitment policy is in place all jobs are now publicly advertised as we are required to do.

No written agreements were available between the council and its contractors.

No complaint handling process was in place.

Both Clerks are working towards their professional qualifications both have achieved the first level. The Town Clerk completing her Professional qualification. The Deputy Clerk has commenced this further training too.

They have taken many and varied training courses relevant and very necessary to the running of services that are a legal obligation to the council.

We now have a full complement of council staff.

Serious allegations have been levelled at the HR committee based on 'Hearsay and Rumour' have been reported on by unregulated media platforms.

No evidence has been produced or any source named. Repeating things that just are not true that have been said by democratically unaccountable individuals is disinformation, gossip| propaganda disseminated by supporters of those who quit their public role. The council have been ignored by these platforms when submitting the facts.

- **Planning**

Councillor Stephen Clark - Chair of the Olney Town Council Planning Committee

The duty of the planning committee is to look at all planning applications that come into Milton Keynes Council, this includes all applications big or small. This is something Olney Town Council (OTC) has done for some years. Historically many years ago only larger applications, about six years ago OTC took the view every application is important. Cllr Tennant has covered the large applications in good detail. This reflects the cooperation between the two committees. Cllr Tennant's contribution to the planning committee is invaluable given his background. Smaller applications such as tree work/ house extensions are not commented upon unless they clearly go against planning policy. It has been difficult in the past year to understand more about the applications. As chair I have always tried to look at each application site as it's not always easy to interpret things from plans alone. This has been restricted by following the Corona Virus regulations. The committee has still been able to take on board both the views of applicants and objectors. Where OTC has objected, I am of the view that since the Olney Neighbourhood Plan, they MKC have given our concerns equal weight which is encouraging news. Thank you to Councillor Colleagues and the office staff who have made our meetings possible.

- **Recreation and Services**

Councillor Desmond Eley - Chair of the Olney Town Council Recreation and Services Committee

Cemetery – Town clerks have completed specific cemetery training and are in the process of getting the records and management in line with current legislation, re-established some soft landscape maintenance in the old churchyard and necessary repair of the dilapidated stone walls.

Open Spaces – Open Spaces have been managed throughout the Covid pandemic and in accordance with the Olney Neighbourhood plan - circa 57% of all OTC Open Space is dedicated to wild meadow areas with Barnfield becoming a wonderful example. The remaining circa 43% maintained as grass playing surfaces.

30% of the grass playing surfaces are only rented by OTC and must be used and maintained in accordance with the terms of the lease eg the “permitted use” as sports ground and well-maintained hedges and ditches.

OTC have performed all the tasks required of the Milton Keynes Council Landscape agreement, one effect of the lockdowns forcing residents to stay at home or the local area is a significant increase in residents requests to the office for tree, hedge and shrub maintenance work which our ground staff have performed exceptionally well with compliments received by the office.

The introduction of management controls by the Office and Head grounds man including adding a padlock to the tank after a sudden significant drop in diesel stored in the middle of May 2020 has achieved circa 57% decrease in diesel purchases, a saving of 3200 Litres of diesel per year. It should be noted that there was a protracted grass mowing season last year which makes this reduction even more remarkable.

Fertiliser - The playing fields soils were tested in Sept 2019 for P,K,Ph & mg and results prove the soils have very high levels of nutrients. It was strongly recommended by the soil scientist not to apply any more general fertilizer on the pitches for at least another 5 years. A rogue order was delivered in Sept.2019 this was promptly taken back without charge by the supplier’s agent. We have not made any purchases since.

There may be a need to apply some nitrogen later this year after a close inspection to some or parts of the sports pitches only. The approximate saving from the evidence-based management of the recreation grounds is £3000 per year. This is in accordance with the environment management plan of last year both seeking to reduce the use age of artificial fertilisers but also lower the nutrient status of ground so that a wider biodiversity can be encouraged.

Flower displays - Grounds staff have continued with the full scope of all flower displays within the town on throughout the pandemic, bringing a touch of colour and beauty to our lives. The only exception was watering of the hanging baskets along the High Street, these were not provided by the independent community group as usual. Further management control has led to a significant reduction in bedding plant expenditure. This we hope to reduce still further this year whilst maintaining all the usual displays.

An audit of machinery was conducted in line the annual accounts asset register. It was established that two pieces of plant were being held outside of town and out of our direct control and these have subsequently been relocated to our compound.

Public Toilets – Apart of a few weeks when government forced their closure, we have resisted following many other authorities and kept public toilets open during most of 2020. The Office has now established a professional cleaning regime and resident feedback regarding maintaining cleanliness has been very positive indeed.

Olney Centre - The old Victorian underground pipework failure established that the long-term dampness in the Playschool area originated underground rather than from roof / chimney leak as previously reported. Significant works have been required to remedy and future proof the remainder of the heating system from similar catastrophic failures. There has been a programme of redecoration conveniently whilst the centre has been closed in readiness for bookings, particularly promoting the centre for weddings.

We continue to support the Pre-school and Library.

Markets – Unlike some authorities, we have successfully continued to run our markets throughout the whole of 2020 complying with all contemporary Covid-19 restrictions. The market traders both Thursday and the Farmers market have been fantastic providing us with a variety of supplies throughout the year.

Dog waste Bins – Increased numbers of these bins equate to one bin per 27 households in Olney. Additional signage is being considered to encourage dog owners who appear to be reluctant or resistant to clearing pick up after their pet. Dog fouling causes concern to many residents on a regular basis.

Open space signage and Bathing Place – The new installation of open space signage enables the authorities to act on non-compliance. The Police needed these signs to be insitu so they could act.

Further actions are under consideration as part of the effort to manage the expected influx of visitors again in 2021. Keeping all safe and the environment pleasant for all.

Climate change advisory group – A recent collegiate approach from the group has been welcomed and a meeting is being set up to progress the drafting of a joint action plan for Olney.

The Mayor asked if there were any questions.

There was a question in the Chat that asked about the meeting Cllr Rawlings and Cllr Geary confirmed that the Town format is with a number of reports and questions from the public. Normally face to face. There were no specific questions around the content of the reports so the Mayor continued.

- **Mayor's Report**

Councillor Jeremy Rawlings - Chair of the Olney Town Council

As you are all aware, I am not standing for Council on the 6th May so this will be my last Town Meeting. I had intended to stand down last year but there were no elections and Covid

Next year I will be able to attend as a member of the public! I quite look forward to that. The Covid pandemic meant that there was no annual meeting in 2020 so this brief report covers 2 years of council business.

New councillors and a new Town Clerk in 2019 highlighted some bad practices that OTC had got in to. Although all legal duties were correctly maintained, other aspects such as public transparency were lacking. A combination of councillor actions and poor officer advice led to this situation developing.

It became clear that some things would have to change and so began a difficult process to move the council to a better place. Some councillors decided for varying reasons, that they did not want to be part of this change and chose to resign their positions.

The Covid pandemic added to the difficulties faced by the council. The move to virtual meetings (previously illegal in Local Govt. rules) had 2 effects.

The good result is that meeting became much more accessible to anyone who wanted to listen.

The negative effect was that it brought out the “keyboard warriors” for want of a better term.

Over the last year, the council has been bombarded with half-truths, FOI requests, Code of Conduct complaints as well as downright lies and misinformation on social media platforms.

Much of what has been said could easily be challenged and shown to be wrong, but many people were not willing to listen.

I withdrew from social media groups a few months ago.

The hard work and support of council members and the huge efforts by the Town and Deputy Town clerks have moved this council to a much better place. Despite what some people in the town may think, the council is now working very well, is transparent in its decisions and its governance is second to none.

On the 6th May there will be elections and 15 of the 22 people (which must be a record for OTC) who have put themselves forward will become councillors. Some of them will be current councillors at this meeting now while there will be several new people joining maybe for the first time. I want to send my best wishes to all 22 nominees and look forward to hearing the results on Saturday 8th May.

I caution those elected however.

Becoming a councillor does not give you superpowers nor does it allow you to make decisions or change council policy without agreement of the full council. By all means campaign for your point of view but then accept the vote even if it goes against you, the work carried out over the last 12-18 month has resulted in a well-run and well governed council. New councillors must agree to the Code of Conduct (which you will adopt as one of your first actions) and understand and follow the council Standing Orders and the Nolan Principles. If you do not know what they are I suggest you look them up before the 6th May. They clearly state what authority you have, and you must follow the rules in these documents. Good luck!

Finally, I want to thank the people who have supported me throughout my time on the council. Current councillors, Steve Clark a solid pillar, Joanne Eley has worked tirelessly on HR, Desmond Eley who has worked really hard on the Recs and services, Malcolm Messenger another sturdy pillar of support, Peter Geary the superb information you bring us with your experience at Milton Keynes Councillor with very wise words, Graham Harrison for his work on HR and other things you do, Paul Collins the superb job on the finances moving the council into a better place financially and Chris Tennant for the amazing work on planning and the Neighbourhood plan and review have all been supportive of the changes in council and of me as Mayor.

I end with a vote of gratitude to Andrea Vincent and Sarah Kennedy the Town and Deputy Town clerks. They have both gone way beyond, and I mean way beyond what should be expected of them as employees of the Council. I commend them to the new Council and the Town.

3. Open Forum

There were 2 questions posed prior to the meeting.

I want to know how much further development is envisaged in the town in the next five years and what is OTC's assessment of the infrastructure challenges these will bring to the town and potential solutions. I am particularly interested in the adverse impact on traffic flow and parking within Olney and the stretch on our medical support services. I am wondering if and when OTC intends to update the strategic planning document for the town.

Cllr Rawlings said Cllr Tennant has alluded to the review of the plan in his report. Cllr Tennant explained that the review is in progress looking towards a new health hub on the plan and that new council will take that forward. Depending upon the level of the changes there may not be a requirement for a referendum.

"Does the Council hold a view on whether freemasonry is compatible or not with the Nolan principles of public life.

Given that Freemasons have traditionally excluded large sections of the public like females, could the outgoing Mayor make a statement on whether he believes Councillors should declare any membership of this secret society in the interests of openness and transparency".

Cllr Rawlings said

This has been addressed in a judgement handed down in 2007, the European Court of Human rights ruled that singling out freemasons for special treatment "was both discriminatory and unnecessary in modern democracy".

Consequently, a requirement to make such a disclosure would be unlawful and any council doing so would be held to be acting unlawfully.

In situations where a specific conflict of interest arose, there would be an obligation to disclose membership, and this would apply to membership of any organisation.

I personally have no problem with anyone's membership of any organisation so long as it does not interfere with the Code of Conduct, Standing Orders or the Nolan Principles. That is my statement.

Cllr J Eley interjected that Free Masonry is open to women, Cllr Rawlings agreed and added that it is not a secret society

The Town Clerk then went through the Chat function, there were a number of comments about the IT not working which was understandable.

"Always helps to blame previous councils, doesn't it? take some responsibility of what you have done so that the town can actually make up their own minds."

Cllr Rawlings's response was that he is not blaming the previous Council because most of the Councillors here today were part of that Council and I have alluded to the fact that all of us have been part of the change and improvement of the way the Council operates. Brought it up into operating in a proper way. I am not blaming the previous council just stating that is the way it was it's a fact.

*"Were does the Council stand in terms of the Allotment field as sports field v wild field
What communications training has the council and its officers received?"*

Cllr Rawlings explained that there are planning issues around the field from 2014 and that the new Council will take this forward. The clerk confirmed that staff have had communications training.

Cllr D Eley noted that this has been a topic of discussion for some time a group wants to make it a wild meadow and others groups want use it for other things. The new council has to sort it out. As per my report this is part of the grassed areas in the Neighbourhood plan and the new Council needs to be careful not to exceed its authority in this area.

Much discussion about it being a *council /annual/Town meeting*. To be clear it is not a Council meeting tonight but a Town meeting – which is held annually.
The Council Annual meeting will be held after the election on 24th May.

Discussion about the putting of this recording online which we will. It seems Monday's meeting was on the web on Tuesday and then removed the Clerk will look into this but cannot get back to the complainant with the outcome because they come up as anonymous.

"Jo Eley report - 'unregulated media platforms' - does the council think media should be regulated? Wrong country. Glad you are being transparent, but it will take longer for people to trust some councillors as many resignations aren't a good sign in regards to how you treat each other."

The next one was rude so not read out.

"Jeremy you just said something sensible. Don't let people be bullied"

"20 year and only current councillors thanked."

"But no Councillors have declared it"

The last question was assumed to be about the Masons, memberships only need to be declared if pertinent to the work of the Council. Cllr Rawlings commented he is a member of a caving club but has never had to declare it as its irrelevant to the work of the Council.

This meeting is now at an end, it is reports and Q and A obviously for anyone listening or not listening wants to ask questions they can do so at the beginning of all Council meetings. The next full Council meeting will be on 24th May.

The elections are on the 6th May and current Councillors remain in office until 11th May. Cllr Rawlings as incumbent Mayor will start the 24th May meeting by asking for nominations for Mayor. Once appointed he

steps down. The meeting on 24th will be face to face, the public will be able to be present but depending on the outcome of a court case it is not known if that will be virtually or in person.

There is a Finance meeting on Monday online.

Cllr Rawlings closed the meeting and Cllr Messenger thanked Cllr Rawlings for his time as Mayor.

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