



Flitwick Town Council

MINUTES OF FLITWICK TOWN COUNCIL ANNUAL ASSEMBLY HELD ON TUESDAY 30th APRIL 2024 AT THE RUFUS CENTRE

Present:

Cllr A Snape (Chairman)
Cllr I Blazeby
Cllr F Patterson
Cllr C Thompson
Cllr R Wilsmore
Cllr H Hodges
Cllr T Harald
Cllr T Connell
Cllr T Parsons
Cllr D Toinko
Cllr M Platt

Also present:

Cllr I Adams – Central Bedfordshire Council Ward Member
Stacie Lockey – Town Clerk & Chief Executive
Stephanie Stanley – Deputy Town Clerk & RFO
Mathew Earles – Business & Facilities Manager
Beverley Jones – Comms & Marketing Manager

7 members of the public

1. **Apologies**

It was **resolved** to accept apologies for absence from Cllr Gleave (work commitments), Cllr Roberts (holiday) and Cllr Copleston (family commitments).

2. **Minutes of Meeting**

It was **resolved** to adopt the minutes of the Annual Assembly held on Tuesday 23rd May 2023 as a true record of the meeting held at the Rufus Centre.

3. **Matters Arising**

Mr Culman referred to the presentation from Cash Access UK and asked if the Council had continued conversations with this organisation, given that the town did not have a bank or post office service. The Chairman advised that the Council was in touch with Post Office Ltd. with an aspiration to have a Post Office counter included within the 3 Station Road building refurbishment. Mr Culman was advised that there would be an opportunity for him to ask questions on this project later in the meeting.

The Chairman explained that the Chief Officer from Cash Access UK had attended last year's meeting as an invited speaker. 'Link' was responsible for access to cash review, but the Council had no further dealings with this company. Residents were reminded that three cash machines were free to use in Flitwick, but the view at the time was that this was inadequate because the one outside Tesco was often out of service and the one at the Co-op was not accessible once the store closed.

The Chairman explained that he had hoped the Banking Hub in Ampthill would be open by now. He commented that the building works had started, and a planning application was in for signage.

4. Presentation & Annual Report of Flitwick Town Council

The Chairman gave an overview of the past year, including the changes to the Councillors through resignations and subsequent co-options. He explained that there were currently two councillor vacancies and thanked the new Members for volunteering. He stated that residents wishing to learn more about the vacancies should contact the Town Clerk. Residents were informed about the Governance Review and that the Council had requested a change to the current format, where the town is divided into two wards for no real reason.

The Chairman explained that it had been a busy year with civic activities and that this was his third and final term as Town Mayor. Various events and activities had been held, and the county had welcomed a new Member of Parliament.

Town Mayor's Charity

Residents heard about the progression of the Town Mayor's Charity, which was run separately from the Town Council and had its own bank account. It brought new funding opportunities to support initiatives such as the Community Fridge and to raise more funds through businesses donating via their corporate/social responsibility. The Charity had four Trustees (3 Town Councillors and the Town Clerk as an ex-officio). There were two fundraising missions for the charity – for the Town Mayor's chosen charities and the community fund, which aimed to support projects and different community groups.

The Chairman presented some other highlights, including the development of the Community Fridge, which was helping many struggling local people. Residents were advised about the hard work that had gone into this and that working families often needed help. Cllr Connell was thanked for her assistance with this initiative. There was currently a team of nine volunteers collecting produce each week.

Proud AF

The flagship events from Proud AF were growing each year, and the group were learning about what events people wanted and making changes based on feedback.

The Rufus Centre

Investment had been made in the building, including works to improve the Lockyer Suite with new AV equipment, soundproofing, etc. The Council were beginning to see financial benefits coming in from this.

Planning Improvement Working Group (PIWG)

The Council was proud of the work being undertaken by the PIWG. The Chairman explained that it was previously unheard of that a Town Council would meet with developers. This group were making positive changes to how the Council interacted with developers and other external bodies on planning matters to achieve better outcomes for the town.

3 Station Road

The Council had secured Community Ownership Funding via the Levelling Up grant scheme. The Chairman was pleased to advise that architectural plans were being worked on for the building's refurbishment. Residents were informed that this project was progressing quickly and that they would soon start to see things happening.

Nature Park

The Chairman was proud that 27,000 trees had been planted at the Nature Park, a project that had been stalled for a long time. Residents were informed that additional grant funding had been secured so the project would not cost taxpayers. A significant amount of work had gone into this.

5. Town Council Strategy & Residents Survey Feedback

Councillor Blazeby introduced this item by reminding residents that this survey was introduced three years ago to benchmark the Council's work. Many of the questions were aligned with the Local Government Association's survey so that the Flitwick responses could be compared with national averages and results from previous years.

Cllr Blazeby discussed some percentage outcomes for key survey areas and how the current results compare to previous years. It was positive that scores were on an upward trend for the Council (they were not nationally). Parking remained the top concern for the third year running. Although FTC was not responsible for parking, it was important to consider parking as part of the upcoming strategy review to see if the Council could do anything to help the situation.

The top investment priority for residents was 3 Station Road (74% of respondents). The Council hoped to hold specialist markets to generate more town centre footfall.

Other matters that residents wanted the Council to focus on were being more environmentally friendly, continuing to support local organisations, and assisting with the development of affordable housing.

The Council was above the national average for communicating with residents.

Cllr Blazeby discussed the statistics from the survey responses related to public safety, particularly after dark and crime rates. He pointed out that the Police needed to do more work on this. The Council had installed CCTV at the skatepark, but the anti-social behaviour had been relocated to the Hinksley Road recreation ground and Beaumont Road play area.

Residents prioritised improving green spaces. Members discussed the work done to restore the gates at Manor Park and the progression of the Nature Park project. Work was underway on the planning application for the Nature Park, and residents were informed that the gates had recently been stolen and the fences had been cut.

Central Beds Council's reduced mowing schedule remained a challenge. Cllr Snape updated residents about the planting day for the Tiny Forest at Hinksley Road, which had been a joyous occasion with 50 pupils from two of the town's Lower Schools helping.

The Rufus Centre remained a thriving business and community hub. The Chairman explained its community usage and how the building generated a financial return for the town. The upgrades and modernisation of the Rufus Centre's services were mentioned, including updated AV equipment and refurbished tenant offices. The new ticket system for booking events was outlined, and this reduced admin costs. The 'café society' was discussed as Rendezvous continued its popularity with residents. 49% of survey respondents used the café this year, and the Council aimed to raise a surplus to be reinvested in other projects. This year had been busier than ever, mostly through word of mouth, and staff were investigating ways to increase seating capacity. The café had a 5-star food hygiene rating, and it was a community experience in that the prices were reasonable.

The Council had been successfully awarded grant funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Community Ownership Fund to assist with financing the refurbishment of 3 Station Road. The Chairman commented that the Council had finally announced the refurbishment plans to transform the space into a casual dining restaurant and a single-story retail unit. This news could not be released before the dilapidations settlement with Barclays. The glass façade would be updated, and the building and entrance would be fully accessible. The town square would see some investment to enable outdoor dining. The Council was working with Post Office Ltd. to explore securing a Post Office counter for the town within the retail unit. Revenue support had been secured to assist with subsidising rent for the tenant, and there was funding to help with set-up costs. It was hoped that architectural plans would be received within the next 4-5 weeks.

The Council continued to support local organisations with peppercorn rents for their buildings on Council-owned land. New leases had been completed for the Scouts and the Flitwick Gardeners' Association.

SHARE: Flitwick & Ampthill had relocated to the Rufus Centre.

The Hub remained the Council's most 'hidden asset' as Dan Gaze and his team continued their work on youth provision in the town. The young people who attended these sessions were a different demographic from those who were part of badged organisations (uniform groups). Dan Gaze had been contracted for two more years. The Skate Jam events were repeated and coincided with the Street Food Heroes events.

The Cost-of-Living initiatives have required huge effort and focus over the past year. The Fridge 'opened' in January 2023, and volunteers and Officers involved had contacted many residents who needed help. Plans were in place to extend the offer. Tesco Flitwick was now on board, and the Chairman had met with their Management Team to discuss how they would support the initiative. It has been challenging to secure food collection slots as they are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. It had been difficult and political to get these changed.

The Community Hub (Wednesdays) had now closed for the year; people could come to the Hub once a week throughout Autumn and Winter, and the service had expanded to include a hot evening meal for those who needed this. The team will be reviewing this service later in the year to discuss picking this back up again.

The free Movie Days had been successful, but the offer was revised due to demand to accommodate a more family-focused activity. It had been interesting to see the demographic attending, including single fathers bringing their children along.

The Chairman explained that the Cost-of-Living initiatives were not necessarily a Town Council's 'thing to do' but remained a priority. The Council was looking at how it could work with other groups to extend these services.

6. Resolution and Questions

The Chairman explained that this meeting section allowed the Members to consider any questions or resolutions from Flitwick electors affecting the town.

Mr Culman (resident) referred to the number of ATMs in the town and said they were often out of order. He asked if the refurbishment plans at Barclays would incorporate ATMs if a Post Office service were included. Mr Culman commented that the use of ATMs in Flitwick was high, so he asked the Council if they were planning to incorporate ATMs at the former Barclays building or relocate them elsewhere.

The Chairman commented that the Council may have the opportunity to influence the incorporation of ATMs but that the economics of the proposal would need to be considered.

Mr Culman asked a second question about the disabled parking provision at Manor Park. He commented about his problems using this space because the gates were impractical, and the battery was insufficient for what was required. He asked if bigger batteries were needed or if the solar panels were not providing enough power. The Chairman explained that the batteries were reaching the end of life and had design issues. The batteries would be replaced. The UK Power Network had quoted £30k for a power connection. The Town Clerk agreed to provide Mr Culman with a written response.

Mr Culman said he could not see any signage at Manor Park stating that the disabled parking area was open 7 a.m.–7 p.m. The Town Clerk stated that an order had just been placed for this.

Mr Culman asked if the Council planned to restore the lake. The Chairman stated that there were no plans for this. A management plan has been adopted, but the lake would not be restored because this would require significant intervention relating to depth, etc. The Chairman advised that only so much FTC could do and that Manor Park Lake was not a priority. Mr Culman was informed that the Council would be updating their strategy in the coming months and that residents could share their views on priorities for the town as part of the public consultation process. Members understood that residents might want the lake restoration completed, but no progress had been made at the site besides a hydrology survey.

A resident asked if there were any plans to improve the town's High Street, particularly for the area outside the former Post Office, as it looked terrible. The Chairman commented that it was not the Town Council's responsibility to do this, but he agreed that the area was unkept. Residents were informed that the ownership of this land was complicated as some of it was owned by the shopkeepers, and it was difficult for CBC to upgrade the area.

A resident asked about parking provisions for the 3 Station Road project since the Council had explained their plans for a restaurant as part of the scheme. The Chairman commented that this would be considered part of the planning process. He added that the Council were aware of the lack of parking in the East Ward of Flitwick and that increasing parking provisions was something Members were keen to address as part of future projects.

A resident mentioned the increased litter in Flitwick. He said the volunteer 'litter pick' days that FTC organised were positive, but he mentioned that this was getting worse and that Ampthill had a Street Operative to help keep the town tidy. The resident asked if there was a cost concern regarding employing an Operative for Flitwick. The Chairman stated that the Council could investigate this and commented that he had requested for the Ward Members to look at why the town lost the former Street Operative. He added that Ampthill Town Council were not paying for this position in their town so that he would discuss this matter with Cllr Adams. The Chairman stated that the Public Realm Team were proactive in tidying up the town in areas owned by the Town Council and agreed that the Litter Pick events were positive. He had met with Tesco staff and asked their team to sort litter issues within their boundary proactively.

A resident mentioned that this meeting had been very informative and asked what could be done to encourage more residents to attend in future. Cllr Blazeby commented that it was disappointing, but these meetings were never well attended. He added that FTC had tried several things to attract residents to attend previous Annual Assembly meetings, including topical guest speakers, changing the location to the town centre and promoting it widely across all publicity channels. This meeting was a legal requirement, and Members explained that sometimes it has higher attendance than other years. One resident commented that she remembered the meeting being held at the library, which was well attended.

Members explained that the Council was committed to engaging with residents through other communication channels throughout the year to open dialogue with residents who would not attend meetings. A resident asked if the PowerPoint presentation would be available on the website, and Members agreed that it would be uploaded.

A resident asked why the school crossing patrol was not reintroduced for Dunstable Road near Flitwick Lower. It was discussed that this was because CBC had not recruited for the role.

A resident mentioned parking issues on Beaumont Road, as people were parking on both sides. Cllr Adams stated that he would follow up on this with CBC. The Chairman explained that parking was the biggest concern raised in the residents' survey responses. The Council needed to decide how to deal with this, and the Chairman clarified that this was high on the Members' priority list.

Mrs Platt (resident) mentioned EV charging points and asked if there were any plans to install more in Flitwick. The Chairman stated that there were no plans to have more EV charging points, and there were challenges related to this for capacity on the grid. There was some discussion about the points outside the Village Hall not being very good. Residents felt that considering installing more points in the town was vital since the demand for these was due to increase in the next 10 years.

A resident mentioned the town's lack of Police presence and asked if there were plans to increase this on the ground. Cllr Wilsmore commented on the current Policing Team for the area and stated that the numbers were not sufficient, but he could not see the area being allocated any more police. The Chairman said he would try to source someone to attend the Friday Coffee Morning at the Village Hall. Residents commented that it made a difference to see a police member. The Town Council had a positive relationship with the Police.

7. Open Forum – Matters Relating to Flitwick

No items.

The meeting closed at 21:01.