

North Walsham Town Council
4 April 2017

**Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting held at North Walsham Community Centre
on 4 April 2017**

PRESENT

Town Mayor:	Cllr B Hester
Town Councillors:	
East Ward:	Cllr R Murphy Cllr R Sims Cllr S Stuckey Cllr D Turner Cllr E Wheeler
North Ward:	Cllr R Harris Cllr B Hester
West Ward:	Cllr P Edge Cllr A Fryer Cllr J Melville
County Councillors:	Cllr E Seward
District Councillors:	Cllr V Gay Cllr N Lloyd Cllr E Seward Cllr V Uprichard
Guest speakers:	
Mr Nigel Clarke	NWTC Market Manager
Mr Robert Scammell	Chair, Regenerate North Walsham

12 members of the public

The meeting commenced at 19:30.

Prior to the start, Cllr Richard Sims reported to attendees on the death of Mrs Margaret Foster, former Town Clerk – a position she had held for some 16 ½ years before retiring in January 2014. A minute’s silence was observed.

1 **WELCOME**

The Town Mayor welcomed those in attendance to the meeting.

2 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Town Cllrs Bull, Canham, Choudhury, Seward, West and Witte, District Councillors P and A Moore, County Councillor Timewell and Inspector T Futter (North Walsham Police).

3 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the Town Meeting held on 5 April 2016 were approved as a true record to be signed by the Town Mayor.

4 **TOWN MAYOR'S REPORT**

Good evening everyone, and thank you for attending this, the annual town meeting for North Walsham. As you may, or may not know, this is not a meeting of the Town Council, but rather the meeting at which the Town Council, through the Town Mayor, myself, reports to you the towns folk, and the meeting at which you get an opportunity to pose questions directly to Members of the three Councils which operate in North Walsham, them being the Town, District and County.

Since last year's annual meeting the Town Council has three new Councillors; Cllrs Robert Murphy, Peter Edge and Richard Harris. I am sure that residents in the East, West and North Wards respectively will get to know all three over time. Hopefully we can move forward to the next local government elections in May 2019 with a settled team of Councillors to represent everyone's interests within the town.

The JD Wetherspoon saga continues to loom large on the horizon, fast approaching epic scale in terms of time and coverage. Almost weekly rumours appear on social media, none of which have any basis in fact. These rumours cover the full range of possibilities, from "not coming to North Walsham any more" to "it will be open by Christmas". But such is life, especially when a big project for the town is involved. You can rest assured that the Town Council will be among the first to be informed by North Norfolk District Council, and as soon we have something to share the public will know about it.

The Town Council, as part of its contribution to the project, finally quit the New Road offices in September last year to move into shared accommodation with the North Walsham Registration Office at 18 Kings Arms Street. The necessary building work that makes this work is (finally!) coming to a conclusion, and the two organisations will share comfortable and fully provisioned offices thanks to North Norfolk District Council. The move does, however, accomplish one of the key "must haves" in agreeing to the move – that the Town Council remains accessible in or near to the town centre.

Also as part of the process the Information Office moved out of the New Road offices late in 2015 to be incorporated into the services offered by Arts North Norfolk operating from No 1 Market Place. This ultimately did not prove to be an ideal arrangement, and the partnership with ANN was ended late last year.

However, thanks to Martin Miles, landlord at the Kings Arms Hotel, I am pleased to confirm that the Information Office will shortly be reopening at **Bubby's Little Shop** in Kings Arms Loke. This is the small shop attached to Club KA. I am very pleased to say that some of the original volunteers at the Information Office have again come forward to help us run it, but we are always looking for more volunteers.

Our markets continue to be a success, and our Market Manager Nigel Clarke will be saying a few words later on. The improving weather is, as always, increasing the market footfall. As things stand, the Thursday market has no available pitches, although we are looking to expand into the newly paved area at the top of Market Street.

Unfortunately, the precinct remains a health and safety concern at this time due to the state of the footway – the Council would be neglecting its duty of care under health and safety legislation in moving into this area where accidents are quite clearly waiting to

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happen. This is being addressed and will see the Town Council and Regenerate North Walsham working in partnership with other groups to try and turn this around. Rob Scammell will also be saying a few words about the project later on.

The Sunday markets continue to raise funds for local charities and benefit from 50% of the pitch fee.

After much deliberation, the Town Council voted in December to increase its Council Tax precept by 16%. A much smaller percentage increase than last year, but still (in percentage terms at least) a relatively large number. Once again, this large percentage figure is overshadowing the actual increase of £10.84 per household per year. The Council's precept of £77.29 equates to £1.49 per household per week, based on a Band D property. The primary reasons for the increase are:

- A contribution of £15,000 towards the local project to renew St Nicholas Court aka "the precinct". The main problem – as everyone knows – is the state of the footway, with badly cracked and crumbling slabs and sunken drains causing severe trip hazards. We know there have been several accidents in the area, some requiring ambulance attendance, but the footway area is under the legal ownership of the Crown Estate, which has no legal responsibility other than to sell it. And this is where the problem starts. The Crown Estate has already stated that anyone can repair the area ... as long as they are prepared to take on all legal liability associated with it – something that is beyond a town council's ability. However, with the project mentioned earlier we hope a way forward has been found, based on a negotiated agreement with Crown Estate, grant funding and supported by further funding through the precept.
- Essential upgrades to the Council's IT system to take account of the District Council's move to an electronic planning system, amounting to £2,000. North Norfolk District Council are ceasing the circulation of planning documentation on paper, and we need a way of displaying plans to Members at Planning Committee meetings. A laptop and projector are being purchased to allow this, and we will also be providing facilities for members of the public to view plans locally.
- £14,500 has been set aside towards the cost of employing an additional groundsman, possibly an apprentice. The need for this has arisen as a direct result of calls by residents for more, and better, grass verge maintenance. The Town Council has entered into an agreement with Norfolk County Council to take on this task in the urban area, but will need additional staff to take on the extra work. The County Council itself is providing a little over £10,000 towards the cost (its calculation of the cost of carrying out the absolute minimum work), which will go towards essential equipment including a heavy-duty mower. We are also trying to negotiate a similar deal with the District Council, meaning we will be responsible for all grass cutting, with the exception of Victory Housing responsibilities.
- £8,000 has been set aside towards the cost of a CCTV camera and lighting at the War Memorial Park, again answering calls from residents for something to be done not only to provide a safer park but also to help address perceived anti-social behaviour there.
- The first joint project between the Town Council and North Walsham Play, for Woodville Park, proved successful, raising the £40,000 needed in less than a year – and leading to North Walsham Play's Chairman, Matt Smith, being nominated for

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a Big Society Award. Matt was a finalist in the Contribution to a Big Society Funded Project award category and we think him for his efforts. The Town Council has set aside £10,000 for his second project, which will be a complete overhaul of the young children's play area behind the Community Centre.

- Discussion about a bus interchange in the town – removing the horrendous tailbacks at the Yarmouth Road, New Road and Church Street junction and easing some of the pressure in the town centre – have been given a new lease of life recently, and the Town Council has agreed to make a contribution (amounting to £5,000 per year over three years) towards the cost of providing bus shelters. These aren't cheap, but will be a much-needed part of the project if it finally goes ahead as we hope.
- With the new equipment our grounds staff have taken on which includes a new tractor, a flatbed truck, a digger and some smaller ride-on mowers, and the need for further new items such as a heavy-duty mower for grass verge maintenance, we also need to have a secure space for these to be stored and maintained. The Council has set aside £10,000 for this in the precept.
- New dog waste bins have recently been sited around the town, some at what we all think are silly heights – but apparently there is a health and safety reason for this and it all has to do with the weight of a full bin and the post on which it is mounted. In support of these, we will also be adding some general litter bins at various locations, and £2,000 has been added to the precept to allow for this.
- Finally, our staff need to be properly trained to carry out their jobs. Our grounds staff need proper certification before they can drive the digger, or operate a chainsaw etc. Our office staff need to be trained to support the Council in an ever-changing world in which more and more work is being passed down from the centre. For this reasons, an additional £5,000 is being added to the precept.

It is very important to know that we could have sought a larger precept, as there are many other projects on the table. Some have been set aside for now. Others will be funded from Council reserves, which means that the increase is kept to a minimum. As we have said in previous years, the Council could have declined to increase the precept, but then we would not have been able to support projects which we see as vital to the town and the community.

There has been much discussion about the future of North Walsham and so the next big thing we need to do is start a conversation across the town about what we want North Walsham to look like 10, 15 or 20 years from now. North Norfolk District Council are currently developing a new Local Plan, and the Town Council is working closely with their team to lever in what we consider to be important points about where development (which could be several thousand new homes over the next twenty years) should be and what the town needs in essential infrastructure to be able to cope with such growth. We are now at a point where we can't keep seeing small developments of 80, 100 or 400 new homes which fall below the thresholds needed to trigger major infrastructure investment such as roads, schools, GP surgeries, etc. The town needs these as part of an integrated development plan. North Norfolk District Council seems sympathetic to this need, so we will continue to work with them. But at the same time, we need a clear vision of what the town should look like, and for this we need the public's input. We'll move in to this shortly.

The Christmas Lights Group continues to produce the goods, and Great Yarmouth College students have again given their support in producing some of the new structures

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on display during the festive period. Attendance at the annual switch-on continues to increase. The Council is particularly grateful for the time these volunteers give freely through the year (not just for the few weeks either side of the big day) to ensure that the town is prepared and lit for Christmas, and to the local businesses who continue to support their work in whatever way they are able. Similarly, the Funday Committee works very hard to organise the annual event in the War Memorial Park, which this year increases to a four-day event starting at the Atrium on Thursday 22 June followed by three days on the Park.

At the conclusion of this year's event the two groups will formally be separating from the Town Council, after some extensive discussions about practicalities and become one organisation. This will free them to establish as a single charity eligible for grant funding that isn't available to them as Town Council sub-committees.

I would like to thank the grounds staff for continuing to do an admirable job looking after the Cemetery, Churchyard, Parks and siting our SAM2 speed warning signs. This is not always an easy job, as they are often outside in poor weather. Please do feel free to approach them if you see them around our sites; they are happy to get feedback on what they are doing, even advice on hedge trimming. Or just to say hello. They are an important cog in the machine that is the Town Council.

I would also like to thank the office staff for continuing to support the councillors and ensuring that the office runs smoothly.

From a personal point of view, it has been an honour to represent the town as the Town Mayor and I have personally attended 57 public events on top of the usual meeting timetable. (list at Annex A)

Finally, some dates for your diaries:

- Civic Service – Sunday 18 June
- Funday – Thursday 22 to Sunday 25 June
- 3rd Annual Westover Vets Charity Dog Show – Sunday 13 August
- Markets – Every Thursday and the final Sunday of each month except December which will be on Sunday 17 December (100% of the stall fees from this one go to the Town Mayor's charity fund)

On behalf of Members of the Town, District and County Councils, may I thank you all for attending this evening and we will now move onto further reports, before turning the meeting over to you to address any queries you have to us as your representatives.

5 **REPORTS**

(a) **Police**

Unfortunately, Inspector Futter of North Walsham Police was not available to attend.

(b) **COUNTY COUNCILLORS**

Cllr Eric Seward reported on behalf of North Walsham's County Councillors.

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The County Council was coming to the end of its current four-year term, with the County Council elections on 4 May. For the first three years of this administration, it was run by a loose coalition of Liberal Democrat, Labour and Green. This final year has seen the Conservative majority running things. It has been a challenging period. 2/3 of all expenditure by the County Council was on adult social services, and it was still struggling to meet increasing demand for these services. Some things had not been done as well as the could and should have been, an example being the provision of care to young people in foster care and care homes. Some road repairs had been carried out in the town, mainly on junctions.

The Lynfield Road Estate flooded again during the summer of 2016. The County Council was now developing a project to improve the drainage system. This was worth up to £300,000, and was being targeted at the first quarter of 2018.

North Walsham has been earmarked for significant housing growth, as a growth town in the Local Plan. This must be linked to infrastructure development, and this needs to be in place before houses are built. There must also be proper financial support for our schools and GP surgeries.

The Town Council was to be congratulated for taking on the urban grass verge maintenance work from the County Council. A more localised grass cutting service would produce a better service.

(c) **DISTRICT COUNCILLORS' REPORTS**

Cllr Vivienne Uprichard:

- Wetherspoon's would probably happen, but it was not clear when it would happen. The Wetherspoon's Board of Directors had yet to approve the deal with NNDC and sign the contract. Until the sale is agreed nothing can progress. The site was likely to be sitting as it is now for some months to come. Some issues had been identified: the Cedar Court boiler room had been closed off when the site was fenced off, meaning that Victory Housing could not access for repairs. An arrangement had been agreed with NNDC that would allow access and result in a new door being installed. District Councillors were aware that people living in the area were unhappy that direct access to the post office across the old car park had been closed off. Nothing can really be done about this before a planning application is submitted.

Cllr Virginia Gay:

- NNDC was waiting to see if the developer would appeal the decision to refuse the proposed Greens Road/Aylsham Road development.
- Local members continued to ask questions in opposition, such as
 - How much revenue was raised in North Walsham, and how much of that revenue came back to the town?
 - What were the billable hours for the property consultant engaged for 'asset commercialisation'?

No satisfactory answers had been received to these questions.

- It was understood that major changes were envisaged at North Walsham Cottage Hospital, with questions around the provision of care in the District.

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- With Cllr Uprichard, Cllr Gay was a member of the Planning Policy and Built Heritage Working Party and as such invited anyone concerned for the shape of the Local Plan to attend their quarterly meetings, which were open to the public. Progress on the Local Plan was moving slowly due to ongoing difficulties in recruiting Planning Officers.
- Local members agreed that the new leadership setup of Joint Heads of Paid Service, replacing the departed CEO/Finance Officer/Head of HR, did not make it easy for opposition members to get information they needed, and it was noted that all 6 local members had opposed this.

Cllr Nigel Lloyd:

- The Town Council was congratulated on its achievements over the past year, especially the Christmas Lights switch-on
- The District Council had not increased its share of Council Tax this year. But cuts (such as the changes to the planning system) meant that costs were being pushed down onto parishes and towns.
- NNDC was anticipating that boundary changes would result in a reduction from 6 to 5 local District Councillors at the next local government elections in May 2019.
- Unitary proposals had been voted down at district level across North Norfolk, mainly due to opposition to a single mayor with huge, wide-ranging powers.
- NNDC currently was sitting on reserves of about £18 million, which would probably increase during the next year. It was prudent to retain a reserve fund, but this seemed to be taking things too far.

6 **A STRATEGY FOR NORTH WALSHAM**

The Town Clerk was invited to introduce this item. The Town Council had set aside funds last year as cover should it decide in the future to produce a Neighbourhood Plan. However, with the current development of a new Local Plan to replace the existing Local Development Plan and Core Strategy, the focus was on working closely with NNDCs Local Plan team to try and lever in the key points that the Council agreed were essential for the town. We know, and accept, that North Walsham is seen as a growth town for housing and that a significant number – up to 2,500 and possibly more – of houses will be coming over the next 20 years in order that the District can meet its housing targets. But the town needs essential infrastructure – roads, appropriate drainage, communications that can cope, schools and GP surgeries. A Neighbourhood Plan had to be assessed against the existing Local Plan and had to be compliant with it. In the absence of a Local Plan, therefore, a Neighbourhood Plan could not pass through to a referendum and attempting to produce one now would therefore be expensive and fruitless.

The Town Council had agreed though that a strategy should be developed, which would set out a vision for what the town should look like in 10, 15 or 20 years' time. This would not have the legal status of a Local or Neighbourhood Plan, but any document produced through clear consultation with local people would provide valuable evidence, and could eventually be translated into a properly compliant Neighbourhood Plan.

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Such a strategy could only be developed by consultation with the town. All interest groups would be consulted over the coming months and the output compiled into a summary document.

This was seen as a great opportunity, as there was a need to see a town that is attractive to the new people coming here and a need to attract the infrastructure to cope with this

7 **OPEN FORUM**

The following questions were raised:

- *Instead of a Strategy, should we be pushing for something with more statutory clout?*

Because there is no extant Local Plan against which an assessor can judge compliance, there is little point in embarking on a costly exercise that is guaranteed to fail. The Local Plan was seen as the best statutory vehicle to work with at this point in time, with a local strategy developed now to set out the local vision for the town.

- *What influence does the Town Council have in the Local Plan process?*

We have hosted a workshop with the NNDC Local Plan team, and know they are sympathetic towards what we need in the town and understand that local knowledge is important in the process they are working through. Although there seems to be little understanding of local needs at Member level, officers are much more closely involved and have taken on board Town Council suggestions about infrastructure needs. We are confident that we can have a better North Walsham focus in this document than in the previous version.

- *There is a lot of concern in the west of the town about traffic. It is an accident waiting to happen, especially along Aylsham Road. Speeding, bad driver behaviour and heavy traffic are all issues there. It is understood that there is no magic bullet, but something needs to be done urgently. What can the Town Council do to push a traffic management need?*

The Aylsham Road issue, and traffic more generally, has been known for a long time. It is a Highways issue, but the response has long been ‘not until there is blood on the road’. This is unacceptable, but without support from Highways for traffic management initiatives our options are very limited. No funding was allocated at present for a bypass, but local County Council members were working with planners to get this back onto the agenda. Piecemeal development of the town, which did not reach the necessary threshold to release major infrastructure investment, would not unlock the funding. Comprehensive development was needed. The alternative was for County to fund a bypass and then claim the investment back from developers. But this was very difficult to push. Short term measures would not happen now until after the County Council election on 4 May. The local Highway Engineer would determine what measures, if any, would be considered to address the issues. Double yellow lines were an option, but there was currently no budget for this. The Town Council could fund, but this is simply shunting costs down to the lower tier and would result in an increase in Council Tax precept. There had been some imaginative and innovative suggestions that were

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worth investigating. Residents and Councillors were urged to think about possible short term measures and to unite to lobby for some action.

- *The new dog exercise area at Trackside excluded mothers with prams, especially double buggies. Local health visitors had expressed concerns about the health and social exclusion issues arising from being unable to access the local public park. Could something be done to improve access?*

The Town Mayor agreed that this would be looked at urgently in conjunction with essential fence repairs, and that a solution would be found. The Town Clerk was asked to take this forward.

7 **PRESENTATIONS**

(a) *Nigel Clarke – Market Manager, North Walsham Town Council*

Mr Clarke had taken some facts from a variety of sources in order to compare where the North Walsham markets fitted in. Cromer market used to have 40 stalls, and now had 17 – a reduction of some 82%. Sheringham market stalls had fallen from 75 to 25, a drop of 75%. Yarmouth market had fallen by 83% from more than 80 to just 15 stalls. Attleborough had attracted 40+ stalls before being moved out of the town centre and into a car park; attendance had then fallen to just 4, although it has now increased to 10 following a return to the centre. By comparison, in North Walsham the number of stalls had increased by 50%, from 11 to 17, bucking the trend and continuing to grow.

Pitch fees for North Walsham Market were lower than some, reflecting the real trading position of the town. Income for the Town Council was not the first priority. The focus was more on bringing people into the town. Even Waitrose benefits from increased Thursday trading.

North Walsham was being transformed into a busker-friendly town. On Thursday 17 August, the town would be hosting the North Walsham Busking Day in association with Radio North Norfolk and The Music Hut. Buskers would appear at several sites around the town, with performers rotating between these. Please do come out and support them.

The Sunday Market had 31 stalls on its books, although it was rare for all to attend. After a highly successful launch in 2015, there were 28 stalls in November 2015. This fell to 12 in November 2016 but is now averaging 15 to 17 stalls per market. There was regular entertainment, and a maypole would be featured at the May market. Half the pitch fees from the Sunday markets went to local charities. This year the fund was supporting charities catering for elderly people; next year it would be raising funds for charities supporting disabled people. The Christmas Sunday Market fees were donated in full to the Town Mayor's charities.

Rob Scammell, of Café Kitale, was happy to confirm that the Thursday Market provided his best business day each week, and congratulated Nigel on his achievement to date.

(b) *Robert Scammell – Chairman, Regenerate North Walsham*

St Nicholas Court has been held in limbo for many years by the Crown Estate. RNW was working with the Town Council, District Council and University of East Anglia on

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a proposal for the area as a whole. The first stage of the project would involve the purchase of the land by RNW (a Community Interest Company), and NNDC had offered to insure the land at least in the short term. The area used to be a vibrant housing area with a lot of social history. The demolition, from which the precinct and car park were created, has been described as ‘ripping the heart out of North Walsham’, and was justified as ‘slum clearance’. This phase of the project would also be about recording history with two historians from the UEA, and this would help immensely with future funding bids.

This would be followed by refurbishing the external area which, once complete, would bring investment into the town. This would take time and strong willpower – but the hope is that in two to three years the town can look back and be proud of what it has achieved.

(c) *Matthew Smith – North Walsham Play*

Mr Smith set out about a year ago to help improve the play areas in the town. In that time, North Walsham Play had gained full charitable status and had raised some £45,000 which, with funding from the Town Council and NNDC Big Society Fund, will see the Woodville project come to fruition. This new playground would be North Walsham’s – and possibly Norfolk’s – first fully DDA-compliant playground.

The focus was now moving to the War Memorial Park, then to Trackside, and then further afield. NWP was running some public consultations about the War Memorial Park proposals over the next few months. The group was also looking to increase the outside gym equipment provision, by adding some environmentally-friendly pieces that could also generate electricity. NWP needed to raise about £99,000 for the proposed overhaul of the young children’s playground behind the Community Centre. The Town Council had set aside £10,000 of this and Mr Smith had about £35,000 in pledges already – these now needed to be firmed up.

Immediate activities included an Easter Egg Hunt in the War Memorial Park and a display of proposed plans at St Nicholas Church on Maundy Thursday.

All the speakers were thanked for their time.

8 **CLOSE**

The Town Mayor once again thanked everyone for attending, and closed the meeting at 21:05