

## ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting of Banbury Electors held on Monday, 08 March 2021 at 6.30 pm held by Zoom.

Present: John Colegrave (Town Mayor and Chairman of the Meeting)  
The following Town Councillors who were also Banbury electors:  
Councillors Banfield, Cherry, Clarke, Dhesi, Donaldson, Hussain, Kilsby, Mallon, Milne Home, Woodcock.

Officers: Mark Recchia (Town Clerk)  
Mark Hassall (Deputy Town Clerk & RFO)

### 1 **Notice to Convene the Meeting**

The Town Mayor welcomed the electors of Banbury to the Meeting. He noted that the Council was required by law to hold an Annual Town Meeting and it provided a forum for residents to hear what the Town Council had been doing and for Councillors to hear views of the town.

### 2 **Apologies for absence**

Apologies were received from the following Town Councillors who were also Banbury electors: Councillors Beere, Mepham, Richards and Wren.

### 3 **Minutes of the last Meeting**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on the 09 March 2020 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Town Mayor.

### 4 **Attendance Records**

The Town Mayor reported that the attendance record of individual Members of the Town Council had been circulated with the Agenda papers. There were no questions.

### 5 **Committee Reports**

#### **a) Report of the Planning Committee presented by the Leader of the Council, Councillor Kieron Mallon, on behalf of the Committee Chairman, Councillor Tony Ilott**

“Mr Mayor, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am pleased to present this report as Chairman of the Town Council’s Planning Committee. The Planning Committee normally meets every four weeks to consider planning applications, traffic orders, and any statutory consultations that may be ongoing. But things have been very different this year. The Planning Committee met in January and February for business as usual. Since then, because of the virus, the committee has been suspended.

A new system was put in place so that the applications that would have gone to committee have been the subject of briefing papers prepared by the council’s planning officer and circulated to the relevant ward councillors. They were then sent to myself as the chairman of the planning committee for clearance. This arrangement has worked well in that effective comments have been produced in a timely way – taking into account the views of the local elected representatives.

It seems that coronavirus has reduced the number of planning applications – but not dramatically. We received 325 applications from January to December 2020, which is a reduction from the 394 in 2019, but not significantly down from the 340 of 2018. This may be considered somewhat surprising with the prolonged periods of lockdown in March to June and in November. But the building industry has clearly been resilient – and the proposals to extend domestic properties has also held up well.

Major applications this year were:

1. Re-consultation on a proposal for 850 houses on Oxford Road
2. Proposed new warehouse alongside M40

3. Conversion of the former Magistrates Court to flats
4. Re-consultation on proposal for 200 dwellings at Grundons Higham Way
5. Proposed 49 dwellings at Balmoral Avenue
6. Conversion/extension of former Elephant and Castle in Middleton Road to flats
7. Conversion of offices to flats at 2-4 Middleton Road
8. New teaching block/main hall at Blessed George Napier School
9. Proposed gas off-loading facility adjacent railway off Higham Way
10. Continued multiple applications for conversion of first and second floor space in the town centre to flats

The Planning Committee notes the work of the Banbury Traffic Advisory Committee which brings together members and officers from the county, district and town councils with representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, bus companies, rail users, Civic Society, to discuss all transport issues in relation to the town. Although it has been unable to meet during the pandemic, Oxfordshire County Council has continued to produce updated traffic reports that have been circulated to members.

The Planning Committee also provides representatives on the Town Centre Partnership. This is a partnership of organisations that deliver services in the town centre. The aim of the partnership is to improve Banbury Town Centre for the benefit of the people of Banbury and to create of a desirable, and attractive place to live, work, visit, and invest. Its formal meetings have been replaced during the pandemic by weekly Zoom meetings of officers from Cherwell District Council and Banbury Town Council plus the Banbury BID manager and Castle Quay manager.

Those meetings have been instrumental in co-ordinating many of the town centre initiatives, such as covid signage, hand sanitisers around the town centre, covid measures in Castle Quay, the Xmas light projections, Xmas parking at the station, social distancing, and rejuvenation of the market plus the cancellation of Banbury Fair.

To conclude, I want to thank everyone who has played a part in the successful working of this committee in the difficult conditions of the past year.

It was proposed, and was agreed, to receive and note the report.

**b) Report of the General Services Committee presented by the Chairman, Councillor Colin Clarke**

“Mr Mayor, Ladies & Gentlemen, I am pleased to present the annual report of the General Services Committee which manages the day-to-day services and facilities provided by the town council.

Despite coronavirus restrictions, 2020 was a busy year and we achieved a great deal. Coronavirus played a part in our activities but we obeyed the lockdown rules and other virus requirements and still did almost everything that was planned. Our essential services were not affected by the pandemic. Everything that should have happened did happen. I have to congratulate our staff on their efforts during such a difficult time. We are looking to achieve even more in 2021 and in the longer term.

This committee’s responsibilities include the upkeep of our parks, play areas and sports fields and the maintenance of our cemeteries and allotment sites. The committee is the council’s ‘green’ committee. It oversees:

Parks, open spaces and play areas that include the maintenance and management of over 400 hectares (that’s 1000 acres) of grassland and the provision play areas and play equipment.

We maintain around 11,000 trees, and five and a half miles of hedgerows.

Our five principal parks include Spiceball Country Park and People's Park. There are twelve neighbourhood parks, 52 play and teenage areas, and 90 open spaces. We have five sportsgrounds – at Horton View, Easington Rec, Moorfields, Hardwick Fields and Chandos Close. They provide six full-sized football pitches, two mini pitches, and one cricket square.

We have six allotment sites. Four are managed by allotment associations and two are run directly by the town council. We have two cemeteries – at Southam Road and Hardwick Hill. In addition, we look after St Mary's Churchyard.

So, what have we done in the last year and what are we going to do in the future. Last year we continued our programme of up-dating and maintaining our play areas. Multi-use games areas at Hillview and Stanbridge were improved while Ferriston play area was completely refurbished. Work on the Timms Road play area will start in the very near future. We've also carried out essential running repairs at a number of other play areas. Hill View play area will be refurbished this coming year.

2021 will also see the completion of landscaping projects in St Mary's Churchyard and the walled garden in People's Park, plus fencing replacement in a number of other parks. Let's look at how we are moving forward – with the accent on tackling climate change.

We decided last year not to renew our grounds maintenance contract with an out-of-town company – and at the start of the 20/21 financial year we took on our own staff to maintain our cemeteries, People's Park and St Mary's Churchyard. Other parks and open spaces are being maintained under a new contract with local company 4th Corner Landscaping. This has given us more control over the work done in important areas and we have local people doing local work.

It has given us the opportunity to concentrate on 'close-to-home' climate change issues. Firstly, we are continuing projects that we have already started. In a joint venture with the Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust this council is involved in a wildlife makeover project that has transformed the River Cherwell in Spiceball Park. The project began in October 2015 and has opened up the riverside and improved natural habitats for fish, birds and river plants.

New woodland trails have been laid out and these are proving popular with members of the public. That work has been extended to Hanwell Brook Wetland Area, Bridge Street Park and the Mineral Railway. It is bio-diversity at its best.

Let's talk about the café and toilets in People's Park. The people of Banbury asked for them and we're providing them. The toilet building is finished and will open in the spring. It's a 'green' project. The new building is constructed of sustainable timber and complements the town council's commitment to be climate change active. Sustainable timber retains the carbon the tree absorbed while growing and is, therefore, a 'green' material. The internal lining of the building is a recycled material which is ecologically approved and fire-resistant.

The café facility will be completed later in the year and will 'recycle' an existing building.

This council's trees, parks, open spaces and hedgerows mentioned earlier also contribute towards Banbury's aim to become carbon neutral.

Our new contractors 4th Corner have had a successful first year. They have received compliments from residents about how sympathetic their working practices are to natural habitats and biodiversity. One letter said 'I am writing to pass on my thanks for the careful mowing that has taken place in Harriers Ground Park/Easington Rec, which I and other park users have noticed and appreciated.

The mowing has left the sides and corners for longer grass and wild flowers which are also abundant under the trees. This is of immense value to our declining insect population and I was delighted to watch the bees and insects on the Cow Parsley which is a key early plant for pollinators.'

During the next few months 4th Corner will begin a number of specific open space and biodiversity projects. For example, they will create a sensory garden in Princess Diana Park which will include bee and butterfly-friendly borders to help biodiversity.

They have also started a significant tree planting and biodiversity project at Spiceball Park. That project will add habitat, food and cover for wildlife. Crab apple and hazel trees are being planted on slopes and banks to reduce soil erosion and manage surface water.

Planting smaller native trees which are hardy and tolerate high drainage and low nutrient levels will help to ensure success. Planting can also take place around the trees, using bulbs such as snowdrops and bluebells and plugs of cowslips and primroses.

Tackling climate change is a partnership with Oxfordshire County Council and Cherwell District Council – and CDC has taken the lead in tree planting. For those interested in numbers, I can tell you that 30,000 trees have been planted in and around Banbury since the commitment to tackle climate change was made. They were planted mostly on land acquired by CDC after flood defence work – land that is now known as Banbury Country Park, behind the Gateway retail centre.

CDC has plans to plant up to three million trees on 3,000 hectares of land by 2045, working with private landlords and other community and public sector partners. More details are on CDC's website. Put 'climate change' into the search box and scroll down to 'climate commitment branches out.'

Banbury Town Council has acquired land in the Spital Farm area of Grimsbury and this committee will consider turning that into woodland. We will, of course, continue to plant trees as we always have. Tackling climate change is the target in everything we do. What's happening isn't always obvious to the public, but we are doing what we can as fast as we can.

In other areas, our two cemeteries are a credit to the town. They are maintained in immaculate condition and are true places of rest. Land purchased last year to extend Hardwick Hill Cemetery is being laid out with climate change and bio-diversity in mind until we need it for burials.

The town's allotments are in great demand with waiting lists for all sites. Cemeteries and allotments are 'green' and bio-diverse areas.

We continue to have a substantial number of snow wardens (about 100) on our books – though more are always wanted – and, in addition, more businesses have signalled their intention to help keep roads and pathways clear of snow and ice.

The General Services Committee is committed to providing high quality services at the lowest possible cost to council tax payers while concentrating on truly green issues. Myself and my colleagues will continue to strive to achieve all that is best for Banbury.

I would like to conclude by recognising the superb work done by the council's officers and staff members who have conscientiously carried out their duties for the benefit of the town.

It was proposed, and was agreed, to receive and note the report.

### **c) Report of the Resources Committee presented by the Chairman Councillor Mallon**

"Mr Mayor, Ladies and Gentlemen, as Chairman of the Resources Committee and Leader of the Council, it gives me much pleasure to present this report. The committee is responsible for

- Finance
- Property
- Policy
- Personnel matters

It's been a difficult year but I am proud to say that coronavirus has not prevented us from providing the services that residents have become accustomed to.

It may have caused a few administration problems behind the scenes but I can tell you that 'front of house' things have gone pretty much to plan. The exception was the town's annual events. The Banbury Show, Food Fairs, Remembrance Day, Christmas Lights Switch On, etc were all planned for – but obviously with virus restrictions in place they could not go ahead.

But we didn't forget Remembrance Sunday or Christmas. Light shows were projected on to the town hall to commemorate Armistice Day and more magic lantern shows in Cornhill celebrated Christmas and the New Year. The Christmas street lights and Christmas trees lit up the town as normal.

And on the positive side, all the annual events, the film shows and the street lights are budgeted for and planned for this coming year – so fingers crossed that the virus situation allows them, or at least some of them, to go ahead. The lifting of lockdown restrictions announced by the prime minister on February 22 gives us plenty of encouragement that some events might take place in the second half of the year.

Banbury Town Council concentrates on making our town a better place in which to live, work, and visit. There are many things that contribute to being a happy town – and this council sees its job as bringing all the different parts together.

Let's have a look at what we do. This committee deals with money – and money is important. Council tax is always a major issue. Banbury Town Council has an enviable record of low taxation while providing excellent services.

This council has its priorities right and is proud that it can provide those services without raising its tax demand. I can confirm, for the 11th year running, that the town's portion of the council tax bill for 2021/2022 will stay at £122.12 for Band D properties. Our council tax precept works out at £2.35 per week – and that's per household – not per person.

This council's finances are helped by the number of new houses that boost tax revenue – but it still means, as I've said in previous years, that for less than the price of a cup of coffee per family per week, we provide cemeteries, parks and open spaces, children's play areas, the town's free annual events, sports pitches, allotments, bus shelters, dog waste bins and litter bins. Wise policy decisions in recent years mean we can continue to provide and improve our services without asking residents to pay more.

So what have we done in the past year – and what can we look forward to in the coming months? We are delivering on our pledge to provide toilets and café facilities in People's Park. The toilet block is almost ready to open and the café facility will be completed later this year. The final phase of a three-year refurbishment of paths and facilities in People's Park is in progress.

Last year we spent well over £200,000 up-dating and maintaining our play areas. More than £60,000 went on up-grading multi-use games areas at Hillview and Stanbridge, and nearly £48,000 was spent on the refurbishment of Ferriston play area. Timms Road play area will be up-dated at a cost of £80,000. In addition, we've spent around £33,000 on essential running repairs at a number of play areas with a further £50,000 put aside for safe surface work on other play areas throughout the town.

In the coming year we will fund improvements to Hill View play area at a cost of £115,000. There will be an increased investment in the Woodgreen Outdoor Pool following a year of restricted opening and reduced income in 2020/2021. We have taken over the full £50,000 running costs of the Christmas street lights after our partnership with Cherwell District Council came to end.

Our annual grants scheme helps tremendously with the amount of work that the town's good causes – mostly run by volunteers – can do. The grants mean that many small good causes can be helped and the grants will benefit a greater number of people who, for various reasons, need assistance with their everyday lives. Charities and good causes in Banbury can apply for grants of up to £500. We launched a covid-19 grant scheme in March last year to help good causes in Banbury that were facing financial difficulties because of the virus. Since then we have given 24 grants worth nearly £12,000. Those grants are still available.

This council works well with other organisations. As founder members of the Cherwell Crime Prevention Scheme, we support a number of important crime prevention initiatives. We are continuing to work with the BID project – the Business Improvement District – to regenerate the town centre and keep the old streets alive and thriving.

This council is a key partner in a range of other formal partnerships, including the Town Centre Partnership. We will continue to work with our partners to improve the quality of life in the town and to preserve the unique character of Banbury.

We are also very proud of our relationships with Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire County Council, which have seen the three authorities working together on important projects.

This brings me to the important subject of climate change. In January last year, this council committed to playing its part in tackling climate change. The town council entered into a partnership with Oxfordshire County Council and Cherwell District Council so that each council does its bit to tackle climate change.

So what are WE doing. Banbury Town Council has always been a 'green' council and for us it is a matter of doing more of what we've been doing for the past 20 years. This council owns and maintains more than 11,000 trees, over five miles of hedgerows, and 1000 acres of grassland in its parks, sports fields, open spaces and cemeteries. We know that trees, hedges and grass absorb carbon dioxide and produce oxygen. Younger trees do this better than older trees and this council has a history of planting new trees over the years. We planted an orchard in Browning Park that now bears fruit each year – fruit that members of the public can pick, free of charge.

My colleague Cllr Clarke gave you some interesting facts and figures on green issues in his report and those figures clearly show that we are taking climate change very seriously. It's worth noting that Banbury Town Hall had an Energy Efficiency Report in March 2020 which found that the Victorian building has a better energy rating than one would expect of such a structure. That is due to the works and refurbishments we have recently undertaken including double glazing, heat recovery system, air handling system, low energy lighting etc.

We are still planning ahead and another wise decision has been made this year. In the new budget we have introduced a Vehicle Replacement Fund, currently standing at £140,000, so that we can introduce electric vehicles as we replace older ones. When the time to change comes, the money will be in the bank.

A new industrial wood chipper has been budgeted for at £15,000 to allow us to chip and recycle on site rather than transport green waste elsewhere. This council is taking its climate change commitment very responsibly. To control climate change councils, local industry and residents must work together. And this council will organise that togetherness and achieve a cleaner future.

What else can I tell you? Banbury is a debt-free council, and investments in recent years continue to pay dividends, and will continue to do so in the years ahead. This council will continue to manage the town's finances in a proper manner and carry on providing the services that townspeople need and depend on. I would remind members of the public that all town councillors represent the people of Banbury in a voluntary capacity.

The virus situation meant that local elections in May were cancelled and I want to thank all councillors for, especially the few who were thinking of retirement, for carrying on with their duties. Our councillors bring experience from many different walks of life and they give up their valuable time free of charge. A large proportion of a town councillor's work takes place away from the town hall, and much of that work is undertaken representing the town council on various bodies in the town. That aspect has been affected by coronavirus restrictions this year but councillors have still contributed by telephone, email, and by on-line meetings using the Zoom method.

Our Annual Report for 2020/21 will be published in the coming months.

Mister Mayor, I would like to conclude by thanking all councillors for their work during the year – and we must not forget the invaluable work of our officers and staff.

**6 Questions from Electors**

Councillor Woodcock asked about litter in and around the pathways leading to HelloFresh in Banbury. On a weekly occurrence, between 20 to 40 face masks were being dumped in the estates around the distribution plant. The majority of these were on the Overthorpe Road where there was no bin. Residents were having to pick these up despite there being a clear biological hazard. According to Cherwell District Council, they were waiting for Banbury Town Council to recruit a replacement for its recreation & Amenities Manager who had retired mid-December.

The Chairman undertook to discuss this as a matter of urgency with the Town Council's new Operations Manager. The Town Clerk added that CDC environmental enforcement team would be speaking to the business units on the industrial estate to ask them to do more in terms of educating their staff and providing onsite receptacles for disposal of masks. Whilst it was not practical to try to tackle this problem (which was by no means localised to this area) by seeking to proliferate litter bins across industrial estates, either in terms of installation or collection costs, BTC and CDC colleagues would meet on site shortly to assess where on BTC land a suitable bin could be located to serve the Overthorpe Road area.

Councillor Cherry asked a question about the situation at Mold Crescent, where an underground spring was causing drainage issues for adjacent properties. It was explained that Tony Brummell (CDC) had been working on this issue, given his experience in land drainage matters and had secured Thames Water agreement to their system taking the excess water. The matter would be discussed further at the next General Services Committee.

Councillor Dhesi asked about a tree overhanging the play area at Ironstones and the Chairman undertook to raise this with Town Council officers.

Before closing the meeting the Town Mayor asked that the meeting's thanks be conveyed back to Council staff for their efforts in maintaining service provision throughout what had been an extremely difficult year.

The Meeting ended at 7.15pm.