

ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting of Banbury Electors held on Monday, 07 March 2022 at 6.30 pm held at Banbury Town Hall.

Present: Shaida Hussain (Town Mayor and Chairman of the Meeting)
The following Town Councillors: Beere, Biegel, Bunce, Cherry, Colegrave, Garrett, Hodgson, Kilsby, Mallon, Mears, Reeves, Richards, Strangwood.
One member of the public.

Officers: Mark Recchia (Town Clerk)
Martyn Surfleet (Executive Officer)

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**

None.

3 **Minutes of the last Meeting**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on the 08 March 2021 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 Vice-Chairman, Councillor Johnny Bunce.

“Madam Mayor, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am pleased to present this report as Chairman of the Town Council's Planning Committee.

The Planning Committee considers planning applications, traffic orders, and any statutory consultations that may be ongoing.

Perhaps the biggest talking point this year has been the county council's Oxfordshire Plan 2050 which sets out options that will shape the future of the county.

It plans for the next 30 years, up to 2050, which is double the length of normal Local Plans.

I will summarise our response to the plan.

We agree with a policy setting out sustainable design and construction requirements to be applied to major residential and non-residential developments.

We agree with the option to maximise the use of renewable energy in new developments.

We agree that the plan should require the most ambitious minimum water efficiency standards.

We agree with the ambition to provide a strategic planning framework for managing flood risk.

We support a positive strategy for the protection and enhancement of landscape and townscape features

We support a policy that would assess the impact on the historic environment and heritage assets.

We agree that the Plan should set a minimum target for biodiversity net gain to protect and enhance the natural environment.

We consider that the Plan should focus on the protection and enhancement of the Green Belt
We agree with the protection and enhancement of water quality and air quality to create strong and healthy communities.

Cherwell District Council has started work on a new plan for the district called the Cherwell Local Plan Review

The paper discusses a number of issues that affect the area including; climate change, new housing, retail and town centres, the natural environment, community facilities, design and the choices for the plan.

The plan shows areas and sites for development, such as for new homes, offices, shops, and community facilities. It sets out how valuable historic and natural environments would be protected.

The CDC plan is about the future we are seeking to create. Housing, education, the economy and healthy well-being are the most significant areas.
The plan covers the location of employment land, the type of commercial use, and public transport.

We would like to see that start-up companies and other small unit users are catered for in new commercial development and that new development should provide a percentage of the new floor space in units under 100 sq. metres.

We agree there should be more flexibility within our town centres for different uses including residential development while protecting key shopping areas.
It is considered that additional affordable housing should be provided above current rates whenever it is financially possible to do so.

We should set sustainable design and construction standards for residential and non-residential development in Cherwell above those required by Central Government
We should identify and allocate specific sites for renewable energy generation and use a criteria-based policy to assess proposals for renewable energy generation.

There is a need to provide more sensory and accessible play provision and opportunities should be explored for enhancing existing facilities and using financial contributions from developers to enable increased facilities

We want to ensure that the traffic issues of Banbury are dealt with as a function of new development by identifying the need for a new link road from the south of the town to the motorway and/or new junctions.

All new development must deal with M40 junction capacity and the need for a new link road.
The proposed development around Nethercote, east of the M40, is a major issue.

Our initial response is that it could be considered harmful to that small settlement and to the landscape setting of Banbury. We will make a full response at a later date.

We would like to limit development at Banbury to protect its landscape setting and maintain separation between the town and surrounding villages.

We would be looking at protecting the town centre and Banbury's network of green spaces.
Going back to the key objectives we are keen to see policies that address educational attainment and the need for greater training opportunities. The improvement of community and leisure opportunities is also needed.

We received 319 applications from January to December 2021, which is not significantly down from the 325 of 2020.

The Planning Committee also 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, and Civic Society, to discuss all transport issues in relation to the town.

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.

A private meeting was also held with CDC to discuss processes related to planning applications. It was noted that due to Covid-19, staff shortages and an unusual increase in applications they are working hard to maintain levels of service. CDC have acknowledged the need to expand the team of officers, and is actively recruiting. The committee requested that CDC look into improved communication with planning applicants.

To finish I'd like to thank the committee for its hard work and commitment and attendance during the difficult Covid-19 period, and to give thanks to the officers for their support.

b) Report of the General Services Committee presented by the Chairman, Councillor John Colegrave.

“Madam 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, 2021 was a busy year and we achieved a great deal.

Coronavirus played a part in our activities but we adhered to the 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 2022 and in the longer term.

The general services committee is the council's 'green' committee.

It oversees Parks, open spaces and play areas that include the maintenance and management of 1000 acres of grassland plus 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, one cricket square and one all-weather wicket.

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.

Let's look at what we've achieved in 21/22 and also look forward to the future.

The new community building and toilet block in People's Park is now complete and open to the public.

Landscape planting around the building is finished thanks to the in-house green team.

Work has also started on the refreshment facility in the park.

More on those later.

Work has commenced on the design and refurbishment of the walled garden to make that an added attraction and restore some history to the park.

To commemorate the Queens Platinum Jubilee this year, a 3 metre band of daffodil bulbs has been planted each side of the central path underneath the avenue of cherry trees.

St Mary's Churchyard landscape refurbishment proposals have been presented to the church and are supported locally. They have now been sent on for faculty approval.

The Hardwick Hill Cemetery extension's planning application has been granted subject to a number of conditions. Although the initial archaeological trench works have been completed, there could be further works required.

In the meantime, a licence had been renewed with a local farmer to graze the land on the understanding that it does not interfere with the site development.

The drainage scheme to prevent water run-off from Princess Diana Park into Mold Crescent was completed in September by Oxfordshire County Council.

Following the completion, our Landscape Officer worked with Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust volunteers to sow wild flower seed on the site. BBOWT has a monitoring and maintenance role going forward.

The 4th Corner Landscape contract is being delivered and officers have no issues or concerns with the contractor's performance.

Service delivery is very good and the work programme is being delivered as per the schedules.

The Park Ranger team has continued to keep up to date with Health and Safety inspections in children's play areas and have overseen any necessary repairs.

Following the retirement of Jeannie O'Brien at Christmas, an internal advert was placed for someone to take on the Aviary Maintenance role. Pete Holly is now doing the job outside of his duties as a Park Ranger.

We have continued our programme of up-dating and maintaining our play areas.

Let's now look at how we are moving forward – with the accent on tackling climate change.

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 by 4th Corner Landscaping as I mentioned earlier.

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.

4th Corner are working on a number of specific open space and biodiversity projects.

They are creating a sensory garden in Princess Diana Park which includes 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 have been 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.

A new 100-yard hedge will be planted this Spring. We are undertaking a joint project with BBOWT and Banbury Trees, to plant 450 native mixed hedgerow plants with a lean towards fruit and flowers to help the birds and insects while strengthening this wildlife corridor through Banbury.

It is bio-diversity at its best.

Going back to 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 has been open for some months.

It's a 'green' project.

The building is constructed of sustainable timber and complements the town council's commitment to be climate change active.

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

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 'tree planting' into the search box.

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.

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.

Last year the Council was approached by Activate Learning in conjunction with Banbury United to run a football training course at Chandos Close Recreation Ground twice a week during the season.

This was agreed but caused concerns about overplaying the pitches – and subsequently the condition of the pitches was raised by the league teams that played there at weekends.

Sports pitch provision at Horton View was currently one senior football pitch and a cricket square but there has been no demand for cricket at this site, either by a resident team or casual hire.

The council is, therefore, maintaining the square at considerable costs and not receiving any income for cricket.

It was suggested that an intermediate football pitch should be marked out at Horton View in preference to maintaining the cricket square.

A decision on this matter has been deferred to enable further research to be undertaken.

Following the problems with the Christmas Lights switch-on event when some street lights didn't come on, I can report that all lights were working within 48 hours of the event.

A meeting with the company director and managers at Blachere Illuminations Ltd was held and the outcomes of that meeting were:

- A written apology from Blachere Illuminations Ltd for their poor performance.
- The town council's event costs were re-credited via a deduction from the installation costs.
- Furthermore an enhanced scheme was proposed for the rest of the contract term at no additional cost to the council.

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 thanking the members of the general services committee for their valuable contributions during the year and I also recognise 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."

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

“Madam Mayor, Ladies and Gentlemen.

As chairman of the Resources Committee and leader of the town council, it gives me much pleasure to present this report.

The committee is responsible for

- Finance
- Property
- Policy
- Personnel matters

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 an important consideration with council tax being a major issue.

This council has an enviable record of low taxation while providing excellent services. We have set our priorities and can be proud that we have provided those services without huge tax increases.

This year, however, after 11 years without a tax increase, increased costs such as Christmas Lights for example, uncertainty in local government in Oxfordshire and preparing for life after Covid, have forced a rise in the town’s portion of the total council tax bill for 2022/23. It will be an increase of 2 per cent (that’s an extra £2.44 a year)

It means that the current £122.12 a year for Band D properties will go up to £124.56 a year – the equivalent of a 20p a month rise.

I would point out that is per household – not per person.
And for that, we provide dog waste bins and litter bins, Burials and cemeteries, sports pitches and pavilions, parks and open spaces, children’s play areas, the town’s huge free annual events calendar, allotments, bus shelters, and partnerships with other organisations to achieve more with our and their financial and personal resources.

Financially, this council is in good health and this committee’s expenditure is within forecast. The council’s auditor has concluded that, on the basis of the programme of work undertaken, the council had maintained adequate and effective internal control over financial arrangements during the year.

No major issues or concerns were identified and it was considered that the clerk and staff have operated effective control procedures in all relevant areas. For this I must thank Mr. Hassall for his professional financial guidance.

The council’s events programme has been decimated by covid restrictions over the past two years but some events did go ahead in the past year.

Our annual civic events including Armed Forces Day and Battle of Britain Day were held despite the COVID situation - and Remembrance Sunday was back to the full procedure. The lights switch-on before Christmas attracted good crowds.

I’d like to say a few words about the new Christmas lights scheme for the town centre. CDC withdrew from the joint funding arrangement before Christmas 2020, they also withdrew from the storage and installation of the existing lights. However, this year the town council assumed full responsibility for the town centre Christmas lights.

We bought new lights and though there were teething problems, as Cllr Colegrave has told you, they were quickly overcome and we are now well set up for future years.

There was also a good turnout for the finish of the first stage of the women's tour cycle race in South Bar in September. It brought a lot of new people to the town and hopefully local businesses prospered from the event.

A full programme of events is planned for the coming year and our celebrations for the Queen's platinum jubilee will be second to none.

Regarding the jubilee celebrations, a small working group was formed to oversee this and report back to the Committee.

the group comprises the mayor, deputy mayor, high steward, and the chairmen of resources and general services committees as ex-officio members.

This council was approached last year by a number of third parties who wanted to organise events in our parks.

They included the annual Banbury Playdays in People's Park and Princess Diana Park, a production by Cherwell Theatre Company in People's Park, Hatwell's funfair in PDP, a Park Run in Spiceball Park, and an Emergency Services Day in Spiceball Park in September to thank blue light services for their work during the pandemic.

Where the rules allowed they went ahead.

The Town Clerk advised this committee of a planned Community Governance Review by Cherwell District Council.

This review is the process that allows CDC to make changes to the governance of towns and parishes in the district and to ensure that such governance continues to reflect the identities of local towns and villages.

The Town Clerk reported and indeed we knew that there had been a significant amount of housing development on the urban fringes of Banbury over the last few years.

Not all of this new housing was picked up in the last boundary review and this has left situations where new homes, buildings or sports provision straddles parish boundaries.

It should be noted that asking for an issue to be included in the review doesn't commit either the town council or CDC to make changes. It just enables CDC to carry out consultation on the issues.

Let me expand on that.

The problem to be addressed is the expansion of the town into adjoining rural parishes as a result of housing development.

New housing developments can often lead to existing parish boundaries becoming irrelevant as new houses are built across the boundaries.

In such circumstances, the review needs to consider the boundaries of existing parishes.

It was therefore suggested that all current and planned housing growth should be incorporated within the town boundary in the interests of convenient and effective local government and to reflect the identities and interests of the community.

Furthermore, it was suggested that the sports pitch provision associated with the housing development off Wykham Lane should also lie wholly within Banbury parish.

We therefore asked CDC to include Banbury in the Community Governance Review.

This committee also received a copy of this council's 4 Year Plan – our Financial Forecast.

This incorporates the proposed 2022/23 budget as the base case, and projects forward using the current economic environment and the council's agreed plans to date.

It is envisaged that this document will evolve in line with the direction taken by the council in the future.

The forecast has been prepared in line with the council's current reserves policy that aims to maintain general reserve at around 50% of net budgeted annual running costs.

I would like to thank all our staff who through the pandemic continued to work to deliver the services the town council provides.

We also used this time to undertake a full staff review to enable the council to face the future of local government whatever may happen with the potential of Unitary or Regional mayors and now with the separation of the partnership between Cherwell and Oxfordshire councils this foresight may also pay dividends.

If a change occurs some extra functions may devolve to larger town and parish councils. We believe that finance must follow function and our staffing must be flexible and capable to face the future and gear up to accommodate it. Also the inevitable extra development we are witnessing all around our town, which will lead to more parks, open spaces, sporting facilities and burial ground.

To this effect we have set up a new staff structure to be effective and fit for the future with both internal promotion and external recruitment into key roles.

Our outside and cemetery staff who have worked at the coal face and implemented the covid restrictions in our parks, sports fields and open spaces deserve special mention, they did not have the option of working from home but every day faced the public in delivering for the people of Banbury.

Finally, I would like to mention our town clerk Mark Recchia who is retiring at the end of this month after 15 years in this role and a full working life in local government.

Mark has been a cornerstone of the council and with his guidance the council has gone from strength to strength without tripping up over legal or other unwanted issues.

I'm sure the whole council will join me in wishing Mark and Karen a long and happy retirement – though it's likely that March 31 won't be the last we'll see of him.

No doubt he'll attend our events and other occasions and of course we will always be pleased to see him.

It just remains for me to thank all committee members for their time, application and ideas. And we will continue in the future to do all that is right for Banbury.”

6 Questions from Electors

Councillor Kilsby asked a question regarding the timescale for clearing of damaged tree limbs and debris. Cllr Colegrave responded that he would refer back to the relevant officer for a response, Cllr Mallon assured that the works were in hand.

Councillor Colegrave raised the matter of the council's response to the current situation in Ukraine. It was requested that the council hold an extraordinary meeting to discuss. The Town Mayor agreed to hold an Extra-Ordinary Council meeting as soon as possible and expressed her sympathy for Ukraine.

The Meeting ended at 7.10pm.