

MINUTES OF THE ALTON TOWN ELECTORS' MEETING
HELD IN THE ASSEMBLY ROOMS ON 10th MARCH 2016 AT 7:00PM

Present: Councillor Peter Hicks
Councillor Graham Hill
Councillor Graham Titterington

Others In Attendance: 89 members of the public, including EHDC Councillor Robert Saunders, and Hampshire County Councillor Andrew

Joy
1 member of the press

Welcome and announcements

The Chairwoman Pam Bradford opened the meeting at 7pm, and advised general housekeeping information.

Christopher Say welcomed everyone and asked if all agreed that Pam Bradford be the Chairwoman for the evening. He also asked that no Assembly Rooms (AR) staff person be referred to by name. All agreed.

Christopher reported that he is a regular user of the Assembly Rooms and as a regular user had not been asked for any input to the proposed changes, nor was he given any information. He voiced further concern emphasising that he knew very little about the ACA and wanted this meeting called to get some answers. He said the building had more soul than the community centre.

Pam Bradford then asked that speakers keep their questions and answers precise and that no one speaks for more than 5 minutes due to the number of speakers. She then read a statement on behalf of Alton Town Mayor Pam Jones. Pam B then noted apologies from Pam Jones, Leah Coney (Town Clerk), Cllrs Sharon Cullen, Mike Dicker, Derek Gardner, Dean Phillips, and James Voller.

Cllr Graham Hill read out a statement from ATC of which copies were distributed to those present. Also distributed was a question and answer page on outsourcing services from the ATC to ACA for the AR and a question and answer page on detail and clarification on the collaborative agreements between Alton Town Council and Alton Community Association. Pam B. read out the statement from the ACA and then invited the first speaker to open the questions and comment.

Apologies were made for the distractions of distributing the above mentioned paperwork, which had only been handed over by Cllr Hicks a few minutes before the start of the meeting.

Electors' Questions and Comments

1. Paddy Mendham noted that 20 years ago a similar proposal was suggested but, that after 2 not so different public meetings, 99% of the public consulted then wanted the AR kept under Council control. This time the public had not been consulted, however there seems to be agreement that the AR is a Town property for the town's people and should stay in direct control by ATC.

2 . Sandie Earp. Had read that the AR loses in the region of £20,000 to £30,000 a year, and that the ATC were going to pay £23,000 to the ACA for running the AR, and ACA would receive a share of any money made. ATC would continue to pay all buildings and maintenance costs. How is this going to save money? Is this a ploy so that it continues to lose money so that it can be changed into flats in the future.

Cllr Hicks firmly stated that there was no intention of selling the Assembly Rooms or turning it into flats. He stated that it is a valuable public asset to remain for public use. ATC is not losing control of the Assembly Rooms, just trying to save money with a collaborative service agreement with the ACA. ATC will be monitoring the performance of the ACA to ensure that it is being run correctly. Sandie Earp then pointed out that her question about finance had not been answered.

Cllr Hill re-iterated Cllr Hick's remarks that the Assembly Rooms won't change in use and the ATC will still be responsible for repairs and maintenance of the building and the flat. They are suggesting only a change in operator for marketing, bookings and invoicing. For this they would give £23,000 to the ACA per year. All revenue from the AR's up to £33,000 would go to ATC, any above that threshold is split 50/50. Several comments followed from the public present suggesting that the numbers given didn't add up, and are not clear in their reported format. Cllr Hill added that currently the AR's running costs are £41,000, and the outsourcing will cost £23,000 giving a saving. Many public comments followed questioning the figures, and suggesting that the saving would be at the detriment of possibly losing a very efficient Manager who works very hard to provide excellent customer service, to replace them with someone who may not know what they are doing at the detriment to bookings.

3. A comment was made about cutting of events which ATC had suggested would happen at a previous meeting. Cllr Hicks firmly stated that no events were going to be cut whatsoever, except for (which raised laughter from the public) Altonon-Sea which had not been approved, and all events have to be approved by the events committee. All the other events will go ahead as planned.

4. Who will employ the existing members of staff , and are you aware that the ACA has an item in its constitution as a charity that it cannot take on substantial permanent trading activities.

Cllr Hicks reported that the staff were being consulted and that they would transfer to the ACA under a TUPE arrangement. The questioner then asked if this was all of the staff. The public expressed frustration at the repeated re-iteration by Cllr. Hicks of his previous comments.

5. Is this a merger of 2 charities or a management contract?

Cllr Hill repeated that it is an outsourcing contract. ATC is not a charity. He said the ACA will provide a service contract to ATC.

6. Can you say there will be no risk of loss at all to the ACA? This was clarified to 'financial loss'. Cllr Hill stated that that is correct, the ACA cannot suffer a financial loss as a result of this contract, nor would be expected to.

7. Is this (6) written into the contract?

Cllr Hill stated he will have to check and see.

8. It has been stated that ATC will not run some events like Altcon, Teddy Bear Festival, Holiday crafts and will need to look for a third party to run them. Is it expected that ACA will run similar events to their own when they will have to give over or split the revenue with you, rather than keep 100% themselves. How can you say Business won't be taken away when only a £32 an hour room hire fee will be paid instead of £700 revenue?

Cllr Hicks reported that all events will be run by the ACA or a 3rd party, except Alton At Sea. The questioner said that by using a third party ATC would be making a loss. Cllr Hicks said that if you take into account officer time that events don't make a lot of money. ACA have agreed that all events that take place here are covered in the agreement to continue to take place here (AR). There was concern voiced as to why some information has been answered but not that of the position of the AR Manager, despite it being reported in the Alton Herald (from a comment made, the speaker thought, by a district councillor) that he (AR Manager) had lost his job. Cllr Hill responded that you cannot always believe that what appears in the Alton Herald is always factually correct – which the public gallery responded to with loud annoyance. Cllr Hill then carried on to give more information on revenue.

The Chairwoman mediated and moved on to the next speaker.

9. Carol Samuda. Asked if the contract has been signed.

Cllr Hicks confirmed it had not been signed at this time, and he was sure that Cllr Titterington (present) would agree that at the last closed council session it was agreed that there were a couple of bits still to agree, and it is still going through the solicitors.

Carol checked again if the contract between ATC and ACA was signed yet, and Cllr Hicks confirmed 'That is correct'. She then raised the issue that since the contract has not been signed her data details as a previous user of the Assembly Rooms should not have been passed on to ACA, but she has received a letter from ACA soliciting her business, so therefore the data protection act had been breached, and asked if this would be right. This received loud applause.

After some faltering Cllr Hicks read out a pre-prepared statement 'ATC and ACA have complied with the Information Commission's requirements and The Data Protection Act 1998. ACA are acting as data processors on behalf of the ATC who remain the data controller. There are written safeguards in place to ensure the information is handled correctly in accordance with ICO guidance relating to data protection.'

Another member of the public then stated that this was only correct if a contract was in force, and it had been said that there was no contract. Carol then re-iterated that if there is no contract in place then they can't be acting on your behalf, and said she would be following it up with the Data Commissioner.

Cllrs Hicks and Hill said that they would discuss this outside of the meeting, and the Chair advised this would be minuted and not forgotten.

10. Cllr Titterington gave his views on why he was unhappy and uneasy about the outsourcing deal. He said that while he was informed along with the rest of Council with the confidential details, he was still confused as to where the losses and the savings were. He does not expect to see any savings. He notes the Town Council is driven to save Council taxpayers money which is right and proper, but that it also has a responsibility to take a wider view than that.. He noted that people who come to events spend money in the town. He noted that after the initial 18-month period the events were not certain as the team who put them on may not be around, and that the ACA was a room hiring business and not an event staging business; and thus neither was the residual benefit to the town certain after this period. He added that the agreement itself doesn't encourage the development of the Assembly Rooms. He also said he did not want to insinuate that the ACA would not act in the best interests of the AR. The ACA is receiving a fixed fee, so where is the incentive to redirect a client when it would result in a loss of revenue for the ACA. He also made the point that every event booked would result in additional costs to the ACA team. He failed to see how the joining of the ACA and the Assembly Rooms would result in a seamless operation covering the 2 buildings. He then spoke about the great team at the Assembly Rooms and how well and efficiently it works, and expressed concerns that if this agreement did not work out what a loss it would be as once this team has gone it cannot be recreated.

Cllr Hicks wanted to reply, but the Chairwoman moved on to the next public question due to time restraints, and as the last item had been a Councillors statement and not a question.

10. Jane Gray asked to hear more about the other options and the journey that ATC had looked and taken before arriving at the place they are now at.

Cllr Hill reported that they had considered options over several years, one was a relationship with the Hampshire Cultural Trust, but after several meetings nothing came of it. He then said that ATC had on two occasions worked with the AR Manager to assist him to produce a document to try and maximise bookings and control costs, but we did not pursue those two options as we thought they did not give opportunity to grow.

Jane asked why the running of the Assembly Rooms had not gone to tender, and said that she felt the public would not be questioning the ATC's integrity if this had taken place.

Cllr Hill replied that the ATC have a duty of integrity to keep confidential certain matters of staffing and of commercial interest. He then went on to say that the EU regulation that quotes a figure of value at £60,000 before going to Tender applies. He quoted figures based on the first 18 months, as the maximum cost period at this time (contracted period before 'opt out' clauses apply) of a 4year total contract. This brought the figures down to £34,500. There was some more confusion and suggestions that 3 quotes were needed when enlisting a service over £500. Another suggestion was that an even smaller amount would require a Parish Council to go to Tender. It was obvious that no one really knew the hard and fast rule on this. The general suggestion was that this service could be provided by more local organisations than just the ACA, and challenged the reasoning for this being called a specialist service that didn't need to be tendered. Cllr Hicks continued by explaining that the booking had to be carried out by someone with a proven track record of making bookings for a community building, locally located with a proper IT structure, and to be to maximise the potential of synergies -the Community Association meets all those criteria as being specialist.

A member of the public then gave a list of examples of others that could assume this role, i.e The Maltings. St Lawrence Church Hall, other Church Halls and Holybourne Theatre.

The Chair then brought the meeting back to the list of speakers awaiting their turn.

11 Alison Crow Asked that if this is the best option, why is it so confidential and secret, why do you feel the need to cover it up?

Cllr Hicks stated that a lot of Town Council decisions about the way forward working with 3rd parties had to be done behind closed doors. He said they are being transparent as far as they can with this stuff.

A member of the public noted that openness and transparency are important to the people of the Town and the Electorate have been treated badly, why were they not involved. Surely someone of the 20,000 town's people – would have some good ideas to feed back into the town council.

Cllr Hicks responded 'First of all I am going to take you back to 2009 when there had been a service provision change and at that point there was no public consultation either, but the service being provided to residents in the form of a hiring facility remains unaltered for this current xxxxx (unable to confirm word used).

The Chair and others assembled were confused by this statement, but proceedings were moved on by the Chair to the next speaker.

12. Anna Lang. Is there a clause in the contract to stop ACA poaching existing hirers, or undercutting for them to go to ACA instead?

Cllr Hill responded 'Yes. Simple answer'

13. Luath Grant-Ferguson mentioned that he was a founding member of both ATC and ACA many years ago. He said this was one of the shabbiest episodes that he could recall in over 40 years. This was accompanied by much applause from the room. He thought the answers this evening were described by his carefully chosen word 'pathetic', and that Cllrs Hicks and Hill were struggling to find answers. He was not sure whether to say he was angry or ashamed of ATC, and to have got this far without consulting the people they represent was disgraceful. He noted that the ACA had not asked any of their members before consulting over a new community centre, nor before deciding to go ahead with the collaboration. He felt that the ATC should have checked that the ACA had all their members behind them. He discussed tendering, and that the mention of £60,000 as a threshold was pathetic for a parish council who should be tendering around the town and getting people behind them. He had learned nothing from the papers he had read of with due diligence, especially since the ACA have been struggling for years, and only in the last few years have brought this round, but it is still new. His advice for the ACA would be to concentrate on what they are doing and don't touch this with a barge pole. He added that there was no knowledge of a business plan, and no sign tonight of one in place, which was not good management or good practice. He had seen no sign of risk assessment, and there was a huge risk involved, and said that a full risk assessment for this type of undertaking should have taken place and been made public. He put forth the information that the local Government Ombudsman is there to protect local people and in these circumstances the town's people are fully entitled to ask the ombudsman to look at this deal. He asked 'are you absolutely confident that the process you have gone through here is open, and straightforward

and reliable', then noted that the ATC did not have the town's confidence and should go back and discuss this further to regain the town's confidence.

Cllr Hicks stated a risk assessment will be covered by the contract. The way it is written ensures zero risk to both sides. When challenged 'about the risk to the community' he said 'what risk to the community?' the public member answered 'that after 18 months nobody will be managing it'. Cllr Hicks responded that 'at any time after 18 months both parties can walk away from that agreement'. Again challenged by the comment 'exactly' he added 'and it comes back to town council again, no problem'.

The audience laughed lightly at the comments made, to which Cllr Hicks responded 'You can laugh at that, I don't care'. He added that they do care about the facility and do not wish to lose it. He felt that with this agreement he would see it prosper. He then said there is a Business Plan that will not be made public so competitors won't get the information, it is a confidential document.

LGF called Cllr Hicks a laughing stock and accused ATC of not performing as a local authority should, and asked them to start talking sense.

14. Jonathan Hughes started by drawing analogy with the Titanic, going down. He said the designers of the ship, and those on the bridge believed it was unsinkable, but it took just one small boy rating to see the iceberg, and it was doomed. He noted question and answer number 10 on the sheet presented at the start of the meeting by the Cllrs Hicks and Hill, and asked 'Is the Council confident of its transparency in regard to its process?' Cllrs Hicks and Hill stated 'Absolutely.' Jonathan said that he thought most people in the room would say 'absolutely not!' He then mentioned the 6 pages of redacted notes from the ATC from their subcommittee with every word blanked out to members of the public. He noted bit by bit the information is getting released, dragged screaming from the town council. He thought it was good news that the final signatures have not been put to the contract giving time for reflection and reconsideration, and that those on the bridge may yet see the iceberg.

15. Lindsey Mayo asked that if the Assembly rooms are such an important public asset and if it is so important why was there no public consultation? Lindsay also referred back to the comments about the service provision change in 2009, and asked what this was about. She also queried how this new agreement does not mean a service change, as if the formally council run events are not council run in the future then there is a change to the service provision. Why was this decision being made now, and how is it best value and if so for who? She ended by saying she was confused that last week we were told there is no business plan, today we are told there is, and in the Q and A sheet it says there's no need for one – could they shed some light please.

Cllr Hill stated that firstly the ACA option was the best to ensure the best value. They looked at all the assets and made sure it was being used to its best.

Lindsay came back and challenged him as to whether it was the best value option, and whether enough had gone into ensuring the ACA contract was a reliable one to provide best value. It was a public asset, the public should have a say in best value, and there was a need for consultation and the vote tonight.

Cllr Hill continued by saying that the option of buying a booking package would not deliver the service they are looking for, as the service that they want is the service that they have but at lower cost. Also that there was no tendering process so that staff could go under TUPE to the ACA, and this was another 'special' reason to use them rather than any other organisation either in Alton, or anywhere else.

16. Don't you see the conflict of interest with the ACA? How can it be a success with no Manager owning and driving with passion the changes and new initiative that need to be made.

Cllr Hicks noted the ACA and Assembly Rooms compete for events but the council wanted to look at ways to improve the way they work better together and make a better service and better choice of venue.

17. Steve Barnes Why did we have to find out this was happening from the Alton Herald, and how long would we have had to wait to find out about it if they hadn't published something? The Manager has done a fantastic job. The Alton U3A are a considerable hirer of the facility, and appreciate the standard of the floor and the level of its maintenance by the current staff. Will the new staff have the necessary skills to maintain its condition? He talked about the cost of the 'lack of consultations' so far and how much it must be costing, finishing with 'if it ain't broke, why mend it?'

18. David Willoughby did not really ask a question, or give any answers, but noted he was a member of the ACA and had been a local Councillor. He thought that legitimate concerns were being raised, but that the council had been voted in to make decisions on the public's behalf. He said that most people had a lack of knowledge of how the ACA works. The ACA does the best possible with its lack of funding and that the HCC, EHDC and ATC grant fund the facilities. He felt the two facilities complement each other. How do we make the Assembly Rooms more desirable and less of a financial drain? He concurred that options had been looked at in the past, and that the ATC auditor has asked if anything more could be done to save money. It was noted the Assembly Rooms Manager has increased bookings but hasn't increased them substantially to reduce costs and the general loss. He understood the public's concern on the future of the building, and suspicions, some of which were understandable. He said not to worry about lack of availability, as he thought the existing ACA staff had enough capacity to service the contract without taking on more staff.

The Chair challenged the length of his contribution, and he responded by saying that he was trying to put forward an alternative opinion to the expressed views that Cllrs Hicks and Hill are trying to connive, and that this is an unfair painting of the position that many people here seem to think. There may have been ways to do it better. This matter could have been handled better, there are legitimate questions, but it should be a matter of trust of the Town Council.

The Chair asked him again if he would sit down as there were still four others to speak.

18. Gill Cooper noted most of her questions have been covered, but said she has asked for a freedom of information set of the accounts that has the flat costs split out from the hiring costs. This would give a better comparison of the actual costs for comparison as flat costs should not be included in the present discussions. She is still waiting for a reply. She had also asked for the Town Council minutes from last week's meetings so that everyone tonight would have known what was being discussed and why, but had been told they are not available yet and to wait until they were published. She said that the Alton Herald's report on last week's meeting was a very true representation of what was said, including comments from a County Councillor. Then she read a section from the Good Councillors Guide, Section 16

Hazards, stating the national expectations of a good local councillor. These are not listed here but can be found at <http://www.nalc.gov.uk/library/publications/801-good-councillors-guide/file> She spoke of how she took personal offence that the ACA was being deemed in a sweeping statement to be the only suitable and adequate employer to take on the AR staff. She said that Cllrs Hicks and Hill must not know much about the business or business people in their town if they thought there were no other suitable employers to supply a reliable employment. Cllrs Hicks and Hill did not respond.

19. John Pritchard restated that the Assembly Room is a public owned and managed asset of Town Council and the ACA is the responsibility of EHDC. He spoke about upcoming changes to the way that key services will be funded, no longer through council tax and central government grants, but through 'other' sources. He stated that it was clear that key services would be run on a business model. ACA would need to maximise income for East Hants. He wonders whether this might lead the ACA to give priority to maximise the revenue of the ACA on behalf of the EHDC in preference to the Assembly Rooms. In contrast, the Assembly Rooms were donated in 1918 as a Town community facility and not a business. Will the town council acknowledge that this should not be run as a business and should be here to provide a much needed social service for our community.

Cllr Hill confirmed that the Assembly Rooms were not being run as a business, just Town Council trying to run it at a lower cost.

20. Statement by Andrew Joy who began saying that he was here in a personal presence, not as a County Councillor, and he had heard some very eloquent comments from the public. He was not going to criticise the Town Council because from experience knows as a councillor himself that if you live in a glass house yourself it is never good to throw stones. He added that we all make either errors of judgement or mistakes from time to time because we are all human. He then clarified (in response to John Pritchard's comments) that the EHDC recent comments via Cllr Cowper seek to reduce the demand from council tax by introducing income generating opportunities, and running the District Council in a more businesslike fashion in order to reduce demand on us. He then brought his comments back to the Assembly Rooms subject and recalled the issue of the difficult time in the past with the Curtis Museum and the Allan Gallery, and a previous public meeting of some 400 public wanting blood from the brave councillors that attended. He noted that out of that came a solution from the Towns Folk here tonight. 50+ volunteers now provide the very vibrant service they have now. Is it possible that this kind of model could be looked at as the current agreement has not been concluded? Andrew Joy volunteered his support and help, and that other groups around town could join together to form a working party to look at options to increase efficiency and performance rather than just a cost cutting exercise.

21. Terry Taggart from Four Marks spoke in general for those outside of Alton who also regularly use the Assembly Rooms. He repeated concerns about the use of the figure £23,000 as an annual cost to the ATC, and thought it was clear that the cost of handing over further potential revenue to the ACA would inevitably increase that cost. He challenged the lack of tendering process, as the contract was longer term than the 18 months quoted to produce the ATC figure of 'under £60,000 so no tendering is required'. He said he thought many people were here for the same

reasons as him, and to show compassion to the staff, who he felt had been badly managed and must be feeling insecurities and had been let down by the ATC. He reminded people of previous talks about a new Community Centre and what if another planning application was put in during the contract time, how 106 monies were already earmarked for the sports centre, and how when the old Alton Urban District Council had lost car parks and their revenue to EHDC when it changed to the ATC. He said that revenue generated by the AR users parking in the car parks should perhaps be paid back to help run the AR for the use of the people of Alton and the surrounding villages.

The Chair then asked for assistance in reading the motions. She asked the councillors if they would like to speak.

Cllr Hicks thanked the public for their input which he felt was most interesting, and had made lots of notes on it all and would 'see where we go'. Cllr Hill wanted to echo the Leader's words, and spoke of this being obviously a challenging subject and had lots of input of all kinds of sources. He spoke of his own use of the facilities as a member of the U3A. He reiterated the duty of care of the Town Council and its need to use this an opportunity to reduce their operating costs and that is what this is about – to 'run the same facility, to offer the same service, but at a lower cost. A quite significant lower cost we they estimate to be at about £20,000 a year" Again he re-iterated that this was an audit requirement and to not try to reduce costs would be a dereliction of their duty. He went on to talk about the volunteer model and how this would be zero cost but require no staff, whereas this agreement transfers the staff under TUPE to the Community Centre. He closed by saying there was lots of things to think about and thank the public for their input.

The Chair explained that the vote on the motions was only for voters on the Alton electoral roll, and that the names and addresses of those eligible had been taken on entering the room so that they could be verified against the roll. All eligible voters had been given a coloured paper on entering to denote their right to vote.

The Chairwoman then drew the questioning part of the meeting to a close and Christopher say read out the motions to be voted on.

The 1st Motion:

Rejects any plans for the Alton Community Association(ACA) to take over the running of the Assembly Rooms until the electors and the users of the Assembly Rooms have been publicly consulted.

77 voted for this motion and 2 voted against, abstainers not counted due to high 'for' count.

The 2nd Motion:

Moves that Alton Town Council does not enter into any agreement with the ACA until the ACA has presented a business and marketing plan to the electors which demonstrates how they (ACA) will improve and better the income of the Assembly Rooms as it currently is under the council' s own management system

54 voted for this motion, 9 voted against and there were 16 abstentions.

Jane Grey then asked for a third motion, proposing that 'the ACA contract is not signed and that the Town Council go back and put this to tender' and then obviously the ACA could apply under an open tender process. There was at least a dozen hands went up in support of Jane Grey's attempt to bring in a motion for tendering. Andrew Joy then respectfully informed that this was not an allowable option at an Electors' meeting and would need to be called separately by 10 electors, and his input was appreciated by all present.

Gill Cooper suggested that this was recorded in the minutes and would then be passed back to the Town Council to make them aware of Jane's attempt to call this motion.

A gentleman then asked if the consultation tonight was in fact that being requested in Motion 1, or if not then what was the next stage. The Chair confirmed that the motion expected a further public consultation, and that tonight was a public meeting and not a consultation. Cllrs present would not confirm their next course of action, but the Chair explained that they would be presented with tonight's minutes for discussion.

The motions were re-read for the vote:

Motion 1 was passed with an overwhelming show of hands for the motion, with only 2 voting against. Abstainers were not counted due the overwhelming majority in favour.

Motion 2 was passed with 54 voted for this motion, 9 voted against and there were 16 abstentions

A gentleman then asked how the public will now be consulted. The Chair said that the information would be passed to the Town Council who should come back with their decisions or thoughts, which should be at the next Full Council Meeting. She then thanked Chris Say who had organised the meeting, and who was also going to have to pay the bill, but there would be a collection on the door if people wanted to contribute (any residue going to St Michael's Hospice). The public gallery also showed their appreciation.

Cllr Joy lead the room in giving their thanks to Cllrs Hicks and Hill for coming to face a difficult discussion. This was met with a genuine round of applause for the Cllrs. Also thanks were given to the Chair.

The meeting then closed.