

**ALTON TOWN COUNCIL
MINUTES OF THE ALTON TOWN ELECTORS' MEETING
HELD IN THE ASSEMBLY ROOMS ON 22 MARCH 2006**

Present: Councillor P V Mendham - Town Mayor
D Crocker
Mrs P Jones
R A Saunders
D J Willoughby
5 members of the public and press

In attendance: S J Parkinson - Town Clerk
G C Burt - Deputy Town Clerk
Mrs R Wallis - Assistant Town Clerk
Councillor David Kirk - Hampshire County Council
Councillor F E Cowper - East Hampshire District Council

1 Town Mayor's Announcements

The Town Mayor reminded all those present to switch off or silence their mobile phones.

2 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 April 2005 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Town Mayor.

3 Town Mayor's Address

The Town Mayor reflected upon his year in office and the many important issues that had come to the fore in Alton, together with the numerous events he had attended.

A full copy of the address is appended to and forms part of these minutes.

4 Accounts for the year ending 31 March 2005

Copies of the accounts had been distributed and the Mayor invited questions.

Councillor Crocker queried the council's policies on the building up of reserves. Councillor Willoughby explained that the council had received a large capital receipt some years ago on the sale of part of Borovere Allotments, but because the council had not been operating a balanced budget this had been gradually eroded. The sale of 23 Ashdell Road had replenished the council's capital reserves once again and as the council was operating a balanced budget this should not be eroded on supporting revenue expenditure.

There were no other questions on the accounts.

5 Discussion on Council Tax

Councillor David Kirk gave a brief introduction on how Hampshire County Council sets its council tax and where the money is spent.



HCC is responsible for more services for the benefit of the people of Hampshire than all the other councils and central government combined, and its budget is currently £1.3 billion. There is increasing demand for social care for an ageing population, and increased costs in transportation. HCC is constantly striving to provide high-quality services and value for money and continues to lobby the government for reform of the council tax system. Government grant received pays for only 20% of the total costs for all services, other than schools, and 80% is funded through the council tax. As a result HCC has had to make cutbacks most notably road maintenance, to keep tax increases reasonably close to inflation. It has set its council tax rise for 2006/07 at 4.7% representing £910 for a Band D property. From April 2006 government will provide a dedicated schools grant to cover the full cost of running Hampshire's schools.

Councillor Kirk said that the Police Authority charge had gone up 4.98% to £119 for a Band D property, and that Hampshire Fire & Rescue charge had gone up 2.9% to £53 for a Band D property.

Councillor Ferris Cowper also gave a brief resume on how East Hampshire District Council sets its council tax and where the money is spent.

EHDC's portion of the council tax has been held down to the level of inflation at 2.5% with a continuation of a balanced budget providing value for money. This equates to £127 for a Band D property i.e. around 35 pence per day, for the cost of refuse collection, recycling, environment health, housing and leisure.

Councillor Cowper said that additional service improvements would include:

- Trialling a kerbside scheme for glass recycling.
- Unrestricted concessionary fares scheme (free bus travel).
- Work smarter.

Councillor David Willoughby explained the situation with regard to Alton Town Council's precept and that Altonians would ask *what do you get for your money? Why has precept risen? And how do we compare with other towns?*

Cllr Willoughby explained that the Town Council earlier this year had approved its core activities in aiming to improve the quality of life for the people of Alton:

- (1) Providing outdoor recreational facilities.
- (2) Influencing policies and plans that affect Alton.
- (3) Improving the appearance and amenities of the town.
- (4) Contributing to public safety and crime reduction.
- (5) Supporting community activity.

The council supports East Hampshire's priorities of building successful communities; providing good quality services; and protecting the environment.

In setting its 2006/07 budget the council agreed to include proposals to build up reserves of £100,000 by 2010, and in order to provide funding for its proposed budget a precept of £370,000 was required for 2006/07. Cllr Willoughby gave comparisons of precepts over previous years.

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The Town Council's prime core activity is outdoor recreation facilities, with over 170 acres of public open space and 208 allotments which are fully occupied. On the communications side the editions of the *Altonian* have been increased to four a year and further work will be carried out to the council's website. We also support other organisations in the town through our grants budget. We introduced in a new service two years ago with security patrols as we had been suffering from and responded to, the fear of crime, which has been very well received especially by our Anstey Park User Groups.

Cllr Willoughby looked at comparisons in council tax for a Band D property in other towns, despite representing smaller populations in some cases, and felt that Altonians got a very good deal for £56.02:

Petersfield	£67.08
New Alresford	£80.06
Bishops Waltham	£91.07
Lymington	£68.88
Hythe	£63.00

Cllr Willoughby paid tribute to the work done by AIM and the new Alton Town Partnership and thanked everyone for their support.

Questions were invited:

- (1) Mr Geoff Nicholas asked why the free bus passes were only operative from 9.30am and if it operated earlier in the mornings would the council have to pay a subsidy to the bus company?

Cllr Cowper said that the district council had topped up the travel concessions scheme to provide a better choice of travel for people over 60 or who have a disability, and the new improved scheme provides unlimited free bus travel at any time of day across Hampshire and adjacent areas of Surrey and Sussex provided the journey starts in Hampshire.

- (2) Mr Jowett asked if the council pension had a black hole, and how much was taken out of the council tax to support so called golden pensions. As someone who had lost a pension having worked for 35 years, he felt like taking £35 off his council tax and putting it into his pension scheme.

Cllr Kirk said that the local authority pension scheme covered all district, county council and other organisations as well as **civilian** staff in the Hampshire Police and Hampshire Fire & Rescue Authorities, however, councillors did not benefit. Cllr Kirk was unsure of the figure taken out of council tax for pensions but would investigate and get the information back to the Town Hall.

[Post meeting note: Cllr Kirk since confirmed that £34 of a Band D council tax to HCC goes on employers' contributions to employees' pensions i.e. 3.8%.]

Steve Parkinson said that for Alton the pension contribution was approximately £2.00 but he would also check the figure. Cllr Willoughby said that for the Town Council's 2006/07 budget approximately £34,000 was allocated for employers' pension contributions.

- (3) Greg Burt asked if the new kerbside scheme for glass collection would be to the detriment of the ones provided in car parks as he felt these would still be more convenient for residents living in flats, and asked for assurance that they would not be slowly removed.

Cllr Cowper said that the kerbside collection was currently a trial and would see how things went, but confirmed that those in the local recycling centres would remain.

- (4) Mr John Batten asked if the police pensions were funded by government as a nil figure was shown in their leaflet, and also asked if HCC and EHDC could show pensions in their leaflets.

Cllr Kirk said that it may be possible to show pension figures but it was a very complex issue and agreement would be needed as to how to present it.

- (5) Mr Geoff Nicholas understanding that council tax was capped, said that Alton suffered from badly defective pavements and roads and asked if a survey was done every year or every five years.

Cllr Kirk said that surveys were now done very regularly by the highway team and that £3 million had been put into the budget over and above the expected level. There is a local panel which sits at Penns Place involving county and district members to prioritise and determine where the money is spent.

- (6) Mr Jowett said that market traders parked their vehicles on the pavements early in the mornings on market day whilst setting up their stalls and asked if a levy was taken from the traders.


Steve Parkinson said that the market manager should ensure that this does not happen and that there was a similar problem with delivery lorries. When instances are identified to the Town Council they are reported to the county.

- (7) Cllr Mendham noted that government share of our local authority expenditure would be reduced to 12% in the future; if there was a change of government, or change in heart, could this situation be reversed?

Cllr Kirk said that government clearly say that there is a need to move money from the South to the North, even though the lowest level of disposable income is in the South East.

There being no other business, the Town Mayor thanked everyone for attending and brought the meeting to a close.

Meeting finished at 7.26pm


14/3/07

Mayor's Annual Address

22nd March 2006

Almost ten months have passed since I resumed responsibility for the Mayoral chain. During that time many important issues have come to the fore in our town, most of them positive. The event that caused the biggest furore was the sudden closure of Inward Ward at the Community Hospital last summer. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the 300 people who came to the first public meeting here in the Assembly Rooms to start redressing this situation. I was also fortunate enough to be part of the Stakeholder Group that helped the PCT to reverse their decision and to declare so publicly in the second meeting, in The Maltings, in February. We can expect to see both wards open by September.

All living communities develop or stagnate. In order for Alton to thrive and to attract business, shops, developers' money and grants to improve our services and infrastructure, we have to accept house building. The art is to try to influence the style of building to be suitable for our town. As Town Councillors we each strive to achieve satisfactory outcomes in this area.

Recently several other major matters have emerged. Inevitably a number of these have been in the planning area. As a Town Council we have always tried to keep our precept low and to utilise our assets as well as possible for everyone in Alton. This year the future of three of our buildings has come under our scrutiny. The first was this building - The Assembly Rooms and after much discussion and planning we changed the entry and corridor layout, installed disabled toilets, modified the storage and other toilets and put in vastly improved kitchen facilities. Now we are moving into the phase of exploring greater use of all the rooms. During the year time has had to be called on two of our old wooden 'houses' that have been used for staff accommodation. These are the places on each side of Kings Pond. They are each to come down and be replaced by small modern homes. This will provide much needed funds for several projects and one house for a member of staff. We should also be able to take greater care of this area of Alton.

Development will go ahead behind Chandos Lodge at one end of Alton and the second phase of development on the old Treloar Hospital site will begin at the other. Sometime during the next two or three years will also see housing on the present Coors sports field. Some will see these matters as threats to the present scene; we prefer to see them as opportunities to continue to develop this small market town as we wish to see it grow. There will be a shift of sporting facilities and even more chance to improve the health of all of us

On lighter matters, I had the privilege to be invited to officiate at the opening of a wonderful new asset for Alton, last October. This was when The Harvest Church opened its Christian doors to all Altonians. The various rooms under their impressive roof are available for use by different groups and have already been used for such diverse occasions as The Alton Beer Festival, the second Hospital Meeting, an Alton Welcomes Christmas service and many other events. Once again this venture provides greater choice for us all and not simply in Church worship.

Talking of Church worship, we had our first Civic Service in St Lawrence Church last August. It was very well supported and should become a welcome addition to our town calendar. In a similar vein, it was a great pleasure to me to be present at our tenth Alton opens the Christmas season event in and around the town square at the end of November. As usual, about 1,000 people enjoyed the occasion, a large proportion being

children. We organised the first of these when I was Mayor ten years ago and thanks to our Chaplains, Vicars, schools and the Salvation Army, the whole thing has become hugely successful.

Now, whilst I would like to record my thanks to all our members of staff, I wish, in particular, to thank publicly three hard-working and dedicated people. They are Greg Burt, Rita Wallis and John Saddler. The former two slave away in the cold of the Town Hall and come up with ideas to improve the lot of us all. They then work extremely hard to make sure that these occasions are a success. They are also well supported and managed by our Town Clerk, Steve Parkinson. As a Town Council we have sports fields and open-air facilities second to none. This does not happen by chance. John Saddler and his team work extremely hard the year round to keep our fields and other green areas in first class condition. Thank you all.

Two of the regular happenings that Greg and Rita become involved in are the annual Southern Area in Bloom competition and our annual pancake race. Neither would happen without their constant effort and attention. The same can be said of Rita in her efforts to enhance our town allotments. She really slogs over the proverbial spade to make sure that all users keep to a high standard and has personally been responsible for the inauguration and success of our new raised or disabled access gardens.

Now I shall come to you. In Alton we have hundreds of sporting, charitable, health-related, vocational and other clubs. We also have hundreds of retail and other businesses. During the course of this year, as with each of my predecessors, I have been invited to join in many special events, such as fairs, dinners, launches, openings, campaigns, sports occasions and much else. I thank you all for your constancy, effort, patience and welcome. You enhance our lives.

Now it is rather invidious to single out a few of you for special mention but I cannot include all of you in detail, so please read yourself into these occasions.

In January and again earlier this week I had the pleasure to attend first a Christmas Party and latterly a regular monthly meeting, of the Alton Parkinson Support Group. When anyone feels the onset of something like Parkinson's disease or MS overwhelming them they could not continue to contribute to society without the dedication of close friends and relatives to support and help them. This particular group was founded a year ago and is thriving. They meet every third Tuesday at the Limes and welcome anyone who needs or indeed can offer help. Ginnie and your team I wish you well. In recent years we have lost established retail businesses that have enhanced our lives. These include shops such as Kingdoms, Army & Navy and the Alton Camera Shop. The most recent large faller by the wayside was Phillips. I, personally, shall miss being able to pop in there for the odd nut, bolt or tube of Polyfilla. It will not be the same getting into the car and going to the Trading Estate. However, all is not lost. Besides the new Focus Store that is coming to the Alton Trading Estate sometime in the next year, ex-employees of the former two larger establishments have opened two other, smaller shops. Each has gained considerable regular custom over the past year or so and merits your support. One is called Outdoor World and the other is Interior Designs, both may be found in Market Street. A month or two ago I opened a new children's shoe shop in Westbrook Walk and this Saturday I am due to open a new toy-shop in Market Street. As one could say, "one person's set back is another's opportunity". We need to support these new ventures in Alton.

Two other milestones have occurred in my life this year. We celebrated our Ruby Wedding Anniversary in September with a superb meal for 42 friends and relatives at the Leathern Bottle. Since then it has transmogrified itself from a good restaurant to a welcoming Tapas Bar. Alton Rotarians also gave us, their President and his wife and the

Mayor of Petersfield and his wife a special anniversary barbecue/dinner in a necessarily weatherproof marquee because 1965 was the year in which each of us got married. This event and the Youth Speaks competition were just two of a number of the Rotary occasions that we attended during the year.

We visited our twin town of Montecchio Maggiore last Summer and were regally welcomed by their Mayor and his staff. I look forward to doing the same for them on the weekend of my Mayor's Reception that is here on May 19th. We can also look forward to a further re-enactment of the Battle of Alton on the weekend of April 23rd, the Queen's eightieth birthday, when we shall also be welcoming an official Mayoral party from our potential French twin, Pertuis. Thanks are very definitely due to our hard working Twinning Committee.

Having been the Tabler responsible for one year (a long while ago) of the Annual Alton Firework display for 5,000 in Coor's Sports Ground, it was a pleasure to be asked by his year's Round Table Chairman, to judge the Guys and light the fire on November 5th. Later this year we should be able to see it from the comfort of an upstairs room in our new house.

During the year the Alton 2020 Group was launched following several years of very hard work by a fairly small number of people. I wish them well for the future and ask you to support them.

Now I have given you enough of a flavour of a typical year in the life the Alton Mayor, there were many other sporting, dining, musical and other occasions but I cannot mention them all. May I just say a big thank you to you all and wish you well in your continued endeavours. Without you, not only would my year have been far less interesting but this town would not be the thriving place that we all love.

Councillor Paddy Mendham, Alton Town Mayor

