

Folkestone Town Meeting

MINUTES of the Annual Assembly of the Town Meeting for the Parish and Town of Folkestone held at the Town Hall, Folkestone on Tuesday, 23rd May 2023 at 7 p.m.

TOWN COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Abena Akuffo-Kelly, Bridget Chapman, Jane Darling, Laura Davison, Christine Dickinson, Nicola Keen, Kieran Leigh, Adrian Lockwood, Connor McConville, Liz McShane, Lucy McGirr, Jackie Meade, John Renshaw, Belinda Walker and Roger West.

REPRESENTATIVES FROM OTHER ORGANISATIONS: Chief Inspector Mark Hedges – District Commander for Folkestone and Hythe and Detective Inspector James Wiles, Kent Police.

Scott Dance – Folkestone Station Manager and Anton Hart – Station Leader, Folkestone Fire Station.

Ann McGovern – East Folkestone Youth Club, Dave and Hayley Berry, Bob Race – For Young People, Youth Charity, Russell Reilly – Folkestone Rescue.

Rev. Mark Haldon-Jones

County Councillors Rory Love and Dylan Jeffrey.

District Councillors Rebecca Shoob and Polly Blackman.

Matthew and Debby Jones and Mark Hourahane – New Folkestone Society.

6 Folkestone Electors.

IN ATTENDANCE: Phil Cross – Acting Town Clerk, Ian Bishop – Town Sergeant and Georgina Wilson – Executive Assistant.

Prayers

Prayers were led by the Mayors Chaplain, Rev John Walker.

1946. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Charles Bain Smith due to holiday, Peter Gane due to attendance at another meeting and Tim Prater for unknown reasons.

RESOLVED: To accept the apologies from Cllrs Bain Smith, Gane and Prater.

Proposed: Councillor Jackie Meade

Seconded: Councillor Nicola Keen

Voting: F:14, Ag:0, Ab:0

1947. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations.

1948. MINUTES

The Council was asked to receive and authorise the Minutes of the Town

Meeting held on 17th May 2022 and to ask the Town Mayor to sign them as a correct record.

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Town Meeting held on 17th May 2022 be received and signed as a correct record.

Proposed: Councillor Roger West

Seconded: Councillor Lucy McGirr

Voting: F:14, Ag:0, Ab:0

1949. OPENING OF PROCEEDINGS BY THE TOWN MAYOR

The Town Mayor, Cllr Belinda Walker welcomed Councillors, electors and guests to the meeting held in accordance with the requirements of Section 9(1) of the Local Government Act 1972.

1950. QUESTIONS FROM ELECTORS

Jon Wicken commented that there are lots of people looking to find a home, but rental prices are too high and there is a lack of social housing. What pressure can the Town Council put on relevant authorities to change this and simplify the planning and housing system? Also, Mr Wicken wanted to know what the Town Council would be doing with regard to providing training for new Councillors and additional training for existing Councillors.

Councillor Belinda Walker responded that there would be meetings arranged shortly between all the Councillors to discuss the issues raised by Mr Wicken. One of the charities being supported by the Mayor this year is the Rainbow Centre which works on homeless issues. Training is being undertaken by Councillors at District level and a training schedule for Town Councillors will be drawn up shortly.

Matthew Jones, Chair, and Mark Hourahane, Vice Chair of the New Folkestone Society gave an update on the activities of the Society in the last year. These included a petition signed by over 1,500 people against the demolition of the Folca building; becoming involved in the Save Folkestone Library Campaign and helping to gather 2,500 signatures for this petition; commenting on planning applications and raising heritage issues.

1951. REPORTS BY KENT POLICE

Chief Inspector Mark Hedges (District Commander) and Deputy Inspector James Wiles (Community Safety Inspector) gave a report on the issues faced by Folkestone Police in the last year.

A particular focus of the Police nationally is Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), following recent events, and building the trust between the Police and vulnerable people.

They gave some details on published crime data including 19.2% reduction in victim-based crime, 7.9% reduction in violent crime. There has been a 22.3% increase in offences being solved, 17.1% decrease in criminal damage, 12.4% decrease in public order offences and 16.8% decrease in anti-social behaviour. There has been an increase in drug possession but that is down to a Town Centre Officer doing a lot of work in the Town Centre, stopping and searching those suspected of possessing drugs. Overall Folkestone's crime levels have not increase at the same level as other towns since the pandemic.

There has been additional funding for extra Officers during the school summer holidays to help with the increase of visitors over this period. As well as additional funding to help deal with violence around the Town Centre.

From 7th June every Ward in the area will have a dedicated Police Officer instead of a PCSO to be the main point of contact for that area. They will be working closely with partners and the Neighbourhood Taskforce to deal with specific issues, with a focus on prevention.

Everyone was encouraged to sign up to 'My Community Voice' which is a two-way communication platform and aims to connect local people to with their local policing teams. Anyone can reply to alerts and share issues affecting local people. The service can be accessed at www.mycommunityvoicekent.co.uk

Online reporting of incidents via the Kent Police website was also discussed. Incidents that are reported online are treated the same as if they were reported over the phone, all incidents are assessed as they are reported and dealt with accordingly.

Cllr Jackie Meade talked about young people between the ages of 16-17 and their perceived fear of knife crime and having drugs pushed on them. They are a particularly difficult age group to engage with and Cllr Meade wanted to know what the Police were doing to deal with these issues and to engage with young people.

CI Hedges responded that the Child Centred Policing Team will be carrying out work around the issues raised. A lot of young people have a negative impression of the Police and a lot of this is from what they see on social media, including TikTok. The Police are using social media to try to change that view. They have an account on Instagram that follows new Police Officers through the recruitment journey to try to engage with young people in a positive way.

Lynne Smith of The Shed youth project commented that the best way to engage young people in conversations around knife crime is to have a person who has been in prison for this type of crime come and speak to them about their life experiences.

CI James Wiles reported that this strategy has been used and is a very useful way of engaging with young people.

It was also reported that currently there is the highest level of Police Officers due to an uplift programme in Kent Police. It will take time for these additional officers to complete training, but there is currently a Town Team of four Police Officers who will be very visible around the Town.

Councillor Nicola Keen asked about Police Officers being involved in youth justice in Folkestone. Other areas have a taskforce but there is not one in Folkestone.

CI James Wiles will arrange to meet with Cllr Keen to discuss this as they are looking at implementing best practice in Folkestone using a new model based on the taskforces that are already in operation.

It was recommended to check on the Kent Police website to stay up to date with local policing news.

The Mayor thanked CI Mark Hedges and DI James Wiles for attending the meeting and providing an update.

1952. REPORTS BY KENT FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Scott Dance, Station Manager and Anton Hart, Station Leader gave an update on activities over the last year. Last year 450 home fire safety checks were carried out, this year there is a big drive to carry out 700 visits, targeted at vulnerable people. Home safety checks can be requested via the website.

Lots of campaigns have been taking place to raise awareness of particular causes of fires, for instance kitchen fires, 'Hook it, Don't Cook it' to reduce the number of accidental kitchen fires. All of these are on the website www.kent.fire-uk.org/our-campaigns.

Every two weeks representatives meet with other groups such as Police, and information is shared. This helps to target the campaigns.

Councillor Jackie Meade asked if there will be campaigns focused on BBQs with the weather getting warmer?

Anton Hart responded that they do have seasonal campaigns targeted at those kinds of issues. There has also been additional training to help with fighting wildfires caused by excessive heat in the summer as this is becoming a bigger threat.

Mark Hourahane asked if they provide advice to heritage properties.

Scott Dance confirmed that there is a Technical Rescue Team to cover this area as it is a specialist department.

The Mayor thanked Scott Dance and Anton Hart for attending the meeting and providing an update.

1953. CHEQUE PRESENTATION

Councillor Nicola Keen presented cheques to her nominated charities; Folkestone Rescue, East Folkestone Youth Project and For Young People Youth Charity, for the 2022/23 Municipal Year.

1954. REPORTS BY KENT COUNTY COUNCILLORS (FOLKESTONE AREA)

County Councillor Dylan Jeffrey, Deputy Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services gave a report on unaccompanied children in Kent. There has been a lot of pressure on services and accommodation with access to appropriate services.

An update was given on the Homes for Ukraine Scheme. Over 400 people matched with accommodation locally with 1% of primary school children now being from Ukraine.

A new consultation around the cycle scheme in Cheriton will begin in June, with changes made to the original scheme to satisfy residents and businesses.

Cllr Jeffrey reported that over many years there has been a reduction in funding to the maintenance of buildings, meaning some buildings have not had the funding to carry out the required maintenance. One such building is the Folkestone Library which is currently temporarily closed. Around £1.8 million is estimated to be needed to repair the Library building, assurances have been given that KCC will maintain a library and archive service in the centre of Folkestone. Lots of work is ongoing around securing additional funding.

County Councillor Rory Love, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills reported on an initiative called Solar Together which is using the buying power of KCC to help local residents to get lower prices on solar panels.

Kent's Plan Bee is a plan to protect and preserve pollinating insects across Kent. There have been changes to mowing schedules in some areas where it is safe allowing wildflowers to grow and changes to hedge cutting to encourage birds to stay for longer. Everyone is encouraged to participate in this initiative by creating their own wildflower areas.

Cllr Love reported that over 90% of children in primary, secondary and special educational schools received their first choice of school. A lot of work around the improvement plan to improve SEND Services to the same performance level of the other children's services.

Work has continued with getting a safe crossing in Cheriton.

County Councillor Jackie Meade added that she continues to fight for the Library reopening and making it a community hub. Another project taking place is making the Warren more accessible to disabled people with a new gate recently being installed.

There was a short discussion around the Tram Road and Harbour Way crossing, which Cllr Nicola Keen felt was a particularly dangerous area and should not have been made into a two-way road.

The representatives from The New Folkestone Society asked if it would be possible to look at increasing the number of 20 MPH zones in the local area. There was then some discussion around having these limits around schools and they only apply during the school drop off and pick up times. Cllr Love responded that this is a consideration for the Cheriton High Street area and would be included in the consultation. Cllr Meade discussed a project where training would be provided to local residents, in areas where speeding was an issue, for them to use a speed gun. If a car was caught speeding three times with a speedgun, the Police would act on that information.

Ray Duff asked what KCC were doing to support less well used and rural bus services that are at risk.

Cllr Love responded that KCC does all it can to support people in using the bus, but the buses are not run by KCC and there is only so much they can do. There have been changes to the way people use the buses since the lockdown with more people working from home. If not enough people use the buses, then the bus companies will have to look at reducing some services as it would not be viable for them to run an empty bus. Cllr Meade also commented that Government grants have been slashed and KCC does subsidise bus services. It would be for the bus companies to look at where buses run, but no one should be without a local bus route.

Mark Hourahane brought up the issue of the roads in the area and particularly potholes, he has noticed potholes being filled in temporarily, but the permanent fix never happens, leaving the roads in a dangerous state. Mr Hourahane also asked about the possibility of a public meeting taking place with regard to the Folkestone Library.

Cllr Jeffrey responded that a public meeting is not felt appropriate at the current time as not all the information is known. However as soon as it is felt appropriate, Cllr Jeffrey would fully support a public meeting.

Cllr Love agreed, in respect of the potholes, that the roads are particularly bad now, but that it is not just a local issue and there are problems nationally with potholes. Work is being done to look at the best way forward and creating a targeted strategy to fix the roads.

Cllr Lucy McGirr asked about SEN adults now having to travel to New Romney to access the Adult Education Centre.

Cllr Love answered that it is part of the consultation and will be looked at further and commented on the specialised provision for a wide range of children with varying needs within local mainstream schools.

Cllr Jane Darling brought up the issue of substitute teachers in schools teaching lessons that they have not received the training for. This shows a lack of qualified teachers in schools to educate our children.

Cllr Love commented that Academies deal with their own recruitment and KCC are not involved in that provision, but it is a concern and he requested that Cllr Darling email him with further details.

The Mayor thanked County Councillors for their updates.

1955. REPORTS BY FOLKESTONE & HYTHE DISTRICT COUNCILLORS (FOLKESTONE AREA)

Cllr Laura Davison commented that the local community deserves thanks for raising the profile of the library and not letting it be closed without a fight and there is work ongoing to try to get the library building open again, as it can be used by so many people in lots of different ways, especially with the current cost of living crisis. Cllr Davison also spoke about the levelling up funding that the District Council successfully bid for. Further work needs to take place with the community about the best way forward with this funding.

Matthew Houghton raised the issue of affordable properties for people who are not entitled to benefits but not earning enough to afford the high rents in the area and what can be done to help support this group.

Cllr Keen responded that there is a lot of affordable housing being built in various developments, with affordable rent being about 80% of market value, but understands that may still not be affordable to many.

Cllr Meade encouraged Mr Houghton to lobby his MP on this issue.

The Mayor thanked District Councillors for their updates.

1956. DATES OF THE NEXT MEETINGS OF FOLKESTONE TOWN COUNCIL

15 June 2023 at 6.30 p.m. – Ordinary Full Council Meeting (Annual Governance and Accountability Return)

21 September 2023 at 7.00 p.m. – Ordinary Full Council Meeting

14 May 2024 – (Provisional Town (Electors) Annual Assembly)

The Meeting concluded at 9pm.

.....Town Mayor