

BIRCHWOOD ANNUAL TOWN MEETING
HELD AT PARKERS FARM COMMUNITY CENTRE,
DELENTY DRIVE, BIRCHWOOD, WA3 6AN
ON TUESDAY 26TH MAY 2015, 6PM

The purpose of the Meeting is to comply with the Local Government Act 1972.

PRESENT: Chair – Councillor Higgins
Clerk – Fiona McDonald
Deputy Clerk – Clare Caddock

16 Residents (three of whom arrived part way through the meeting)

Apologies were received from the Business & Finance Officer – Gary Crowe

057/2015 **OPENING OF THE MEETING**

The Chair, Councillor Tony Higgins, opened the meeting at 6.00 pm and reported on the local activities of the Town Council during the 2014/2015 municipal year.

As one addition to the content of his Chair's report, Councillor Higgins stated that he had also been pleased to have supported the installation of the defibrillator, currently situated on the outside wall of Risley Police Station.

058/2015 **MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS 2014**

The Minutes of the Annual Meeting held on the 27th May 2014 had previously been presented at the June 2014 Town Council meeting and signed as a correct record.

Copies of the Chair's Annual Report for 2014/2015 were available for anyone present who wished to see a copy.

This report will be published on the Town Council's website.

059/2015 **CHAIR'S REPORT 2014/2015 – COUNCILLOR HIGGINS**

The Chair welcomed residents to the meeting and reported as follows:

Chair's Annual Report 2014/2015

My year as Chair of Birchwood Town Council has been varied, enjoyable and challenging. I am proud to say that I am a resident of Birchwood, a lovely, green area with many local amenities, one of which is Birchwood Forest Park, opened just over 30 years ago when Birchwood was in the midst of being built. At the last Annual Town Meeting held in May 2014, my predecessor, Cllr Nelson announced that we had just received confirmation that WREN had awarded funding of £50,000 toward the costs of refurbishing the play and recreation facilities within Birchwood Forest Park and I am delighted to report that this project is now well underway.

Phase One of the works saw the thinning of the wooded areas within the park, something which had caused people concern, particularly with regards to safety. The trees have now been thinned to allow natural daylight through and to give other healthy trees the environment they need in which to grow. This phase is now complete.

At the time of writing this report, Phase Two is well underway, with additional play equipment, some refurbishment of existing equipment, new safety surfacing and the addition of some informal fitness equipment which we hope will provide the opportunity for more varied play for our children and young people whilst providing some exercise equipment on site for those who may wish to use it on an ad hoc basis.

The Town Council is keen to make the park an area for the whole community to enjoy by providing a variety of amenities. There are outline plans for future phases of the park's development which we would hope to be able to share with you at the Birchwood Carnival on 7th June. This will be an opportunity for people to share their thoughts with us not only about the Forest Park, but Birchwood in general, what concerns them and what they like about the area.

There have also been a number of long standing local campaigns which have seen progress in recent months.

I am also pleased to report that the long awaited improvements to Birchwood Railway Station are underway. This will involve the installation of a much needed lift, a new footbridge and other works to improve accessibility at the Station. Although these works have been delayed due to unexpectedly poor ground conditions, the piling work is now well underway and the complementary station frontage works to provide a new crossing and improved access to the station building has been started, with the remaining works to tie into the station building after the lifts and footbridge are in place. We are hoping that all of this work will be complete by the end of the year.

Other major investment in the Birchwood area has come in the form of improvements/enhancements to some of the footpaths and cycleways around Birchwood. This work has been possible because of funding available from the LSTF (Local Sustainable Transport Fund). The improved route begins at Birchwood Way and passes by Birchwood Fire Station, Admirals Road, Dewhurst Road and Birchwood Boulevard.

This work is now almost complete with the final groundwork and electrical installations nearing completion. As part of the project, the traffic island near to Birchwood Boulevard was levelled following complaints about poor visibility from motorists and pedestrians. I am sure you will agree that it is now much easier to see vehicles travelling around the island.

In the next few months, we should see two new pedestrian crossings; one located near to ASDA assisting people crossing Dewhurst Road and the other, as previously mentioned, close to the Railway Station, again helping people to cross Dewhurst Road. The landscaping works for the Birchwood pinch point works have recently been completed. This scheme will see the introduction of traffic lights and other highway improvements on the dog bone island at the junction with Birchwood Park Avenue in an effort to address peak time congestion. In addition, a bus gate is to be introduced between the Faraday Street roundabout and Ordnance Avenue which should allow shorter and faster bus journeys between north and south Birchwood and greatly increase the options for local bus companies in planning their routes. Improved crossing facilities are also proposed to the east of the junction as part of this scheme which will enable a direct pedestrian crossing over the carriageway.

Finally, the Moss Gate roundabout will be converted into a signalised junction which should provide the greatest reduction in vehicle delays and give the most benefits for all road users. Again, there are to be crossing points for pedestrians and an advanced stop line for cyclists on two arms enabling safer connections between the Business Park and the residential areas to the south.

During the year, parking continues to be problematic for some residents. We have had discussions with the Borough Council and the Police on many occasions regarding inconsiderate parking and speed limit reinforcement. Some additional parking and waiting restrictions have been introduced, and we will continue to raise similar issues with the relevant agencies as, when and if they occur.

Many residents are concerned about the speed of traffic and we have been liaising with the Police and the Borough Council to monitor and review speed limits where, and if, appropriate. This will be an ongoing matter as speed surveys and other advice needs to be gathered.

Councillors have been liaising with local landowners regarding environmental maintenance within Birchwood as the reduction in the frequency of grass cutting and weed spraying experienced last year was of concern to residents. Although the frequency will not be as regular as it was several years ago, Councillors have been working on behalf of residents to increase the frequency of grass cutting and weed spraying and I am pleased to say that this has met with some success.

We have also been working with the Borough Council on a scheme to 'borrow' equipment which would enable our in-house team (once trained) to utilise some of the Borough Council's larger maintenance equipment in an effort to address some of the local issues such as cleansing the footpaths more frequently. The service level agreement is currently being worked on.

Unfortunately, dog fouling remains an issue, with some areas worse than others. The Town Council is currently working on a project with the Borough Council to address this. In the meantime, we would ask that if you are a dog owner, please clear up after your dog to keep the area clean and safe.

You may have noticed the spring bulbs this year which looked absolutely fantastic and lots of compliments were received. In order to build on that success and make the area colourful for a longer period of time, the Town Council has decided to invest in some wildflowers for the area during 2015 having left the area fallow last year. The areas we have been looking at are the grass verge at the end of Ordnance Avenue near to the Forest Park entrance as a new area as well as Fisherfield Drive in Gorse Covert which is done annually.

The street lighting in Birchwood is due to be upgraded during year 3 which is 2016/2017, so we are a little closer to that happening. Not all will be done, particularly if they have been changed recently, but the majority of lighting in Warrington will be either upgraded or replaced as part of the "invest to save" project, a project looking at the structural integrity of current street lighting columns and the efficiency of the lanterns.

Town Councillors continue to go on regular walkabouts with Your Housing and the Police to identify any areas which may need some attention. For example, litter grot spots or areas prone to flytipping, graffiti, faulty street lamps, evidence of anti social behaviour etc. Any concerns identified are then passed on to the relevant organisation for appropriate action.

The Town Council is involved day to day with many other activities such as: being a statutory consultee for planning applications, cleansing and litter picking, graffiti removal, landscaping and maintenance work to name a few.

At the time of 'going to press' the Town Council is arranging to meet with senior Police representatives to discuss the proposed changes to policing which Councillors feel are inappropriate and not in the best interests of our community.

The Town Council works with many partner organisations and businesses to serve the needs of the community and continues to provide an excellent service within Birchwood.

Technology wise, we are now on Facebook so that residents can 'follow us', and we are also in the process of upgrading our website to make it mobile and tablet 'friendly' and to make information more easily accessible.

I have enjoyed being Chair of the Council during 2014/2015 and having the opportunity to work with the local community on the things that matter.

I would like to thank my fellow Councillors, Town Council Officers and the Maintenance Team for their continued support during the last twelve months. I have thoroughly enjoyed working with you all, and I wish my successor well during their term of office.

*Councillor Tony Higgins
Chair of Birchwood Town Council 2014/2015*

060/2015 **COMMUNITY ISSUES**

The Chair invited questions or comments from residents.

(a) Defibrillator

A resident asked what would happen to the defibrillator if the Police Station was to close at some time in the future.

Councillor Higgins replied that it would depend on the new owners of the building. It might be that any new owner would be happy for it to stay in place.

Councillor Higgins said that if the defibrillator had to move, it would remain in the vicinity; with the potential for it to be re-situated either at Parkers Farm (note – we would need to obtain permission to put it on the wall at Parkers Farm as it is a listed building) or on the Youth and Community Centre building.

(b) Grass Cutting and Weed Spraying

A resident asked about grass cutting and weed spraying; whether some areas that have wildflowers growing in them could be left.

Councillor Higgins stated that the Borough Council (which does the grass cutting and the majority of the weed spraying – with the exception of Your Housing Group areas) is sensitive to where wildflowers have been sown.

The resident indicated that it was also areas where flowers have seeded naturally that she was enquiring about and asked if she requested areas to be left would it make a difference. She said that one person's weed might be another person's wildflower.

Councillor Higgins said the areas cut and sprayed by the Borough Council usually go on previous history and if there are 'hot spots' of weeds, such as thistles and dandelions then it unlikely that these would be left.

Mr. Nigel Balding said that if there are areas where plants such as orchids might be growing, it could be worth asking the Borough Council not to undertake grass cutting in that area.

Mrs Jill Bolton asked where in particular the resident was enquiring about.

The resident stated that it is the whole of Birchwood that she would like not to be sprayed, or cut as much, so that wildflowers are not lost. She said that years ago there was an area on the Brook Footpath that used to have a particular type of wildflower that she can no longer find anywhere in the area.

Councillor Higgins said he does not think spraying is done on the Brook Footpath; it is usually done around the residential areas, near kerbs, on footpaths, roundabout edges, etc.

(c) Street Lighting

A resident asked whether street lighting could be replaced with solar powered lights.

Councillor Higgins stated that the Borough Council would not replace street lights with solar powered lights.

There is currently a programme of street lighting replacement throughout the whole of Warrington as part of the Borough Council's 'invest to save' programme. The old lights are being replaced with more energy efficient and environmentally friendly (as there is not as much upward light pollution) LED lights.

The resident asked who he should write to for his request to be considered by the Borough Council. He added that some street signs are lit by solar power.

Mrs. Pauline Nelson suggested that the resident could write to the Borough Council's Chief Executive, Steven Broomhead and he would pass the request on.

Councillor Higgins said that the LEDs are much more efficient than the old lights and that solar power is, unfortunately, not as reliable.

Mr. Chris Bolton said that the time during which the lighting would be most needed, in the winter, would be the time when there is usually the least amount of solar energy available to power the lights.

The power that would be needed to run the lighting for the signs is much less than for street lighting.

(d) Compliment

A resident said that she would like to pass on something that she overheard whilst travelling on a bus, through Birchwood.

Three people were having a conversation, saying what a lovely, green area Birchwood is and how nice it was kept compared to where they live.

Residents were pleased to hear this feedback and Councillor Higgins thanked the resident for passing this on.

(e) Cheshire Police – Proposed Changes

A resident asked whether a response had been received by the Town Council from Cheshire Police, relating to some proposed changes to move the base for the PCSOs and Police Officers.

This was raised at the April 2015 Town Council meeting when Members were informed that from June 2015 PCSOs will no longer be formally based at Risley Police Station.

Whilst the station will be open for refreshment breaks and for Officers to use the computers during the day, all PCSOs and Police Officers will have to go to Charles Stuart House in Warrington to book in at the beginning of their shifts before they make their way to their respective areas. They will have to return to Warrington at the end of their shift in order to 'book off'.

It was felt that the additional travelling associated with this move would take up valuable policing time.

The Clerk stated that she has received a response from the Northern Area Commander, offering dates for a meeting. This will be raised later during the Annual Council Meeting.

The Clerk added that the local Inspector had also raised concerns that the shift patterns suggested as part of the proposals would not allow the PCSOs to be in the area at the time when schools are opening/closing.

A resident asked whether the Town Council still part-funds a PCSO and commented that the community should have been consulted about the proposals.

The Clerk said that we do still have a commitment to part-fund a PCSO (although we have not yet received an invoice for this year) and it was highlighted in the letter she sent that there should have been a consultation before any of the proposed changes were made.

Following further discussion it was agreed that the meeting with the Police should be a public meeting.

Action: Clerk to inform the Northern Area Commander that we would like the meeting to be a public meeting, when arranging the date and time.

(f) Sightline Issue – Stonecrop Close

A resident stated that the sightlines coming out of the junction of Stonecrop Close are currently impeded by shrubs.

Action: Clerk's office to put this area on the work schedule for cutting.

(g) Speeding Traffic – Glover Road and Admirals Road

A resident raised the ongoing issue of speeding traffic on Glover Road. They stated that people don't seem to care and need educating about the dangers; adding that something needs to be done before there is a serious accident. The resident suggested setting up a community speedwatch.

Councillor Higgins said that he would personally support a community speedwatch scheme and thought that the Town Council probably would as well. He said that there would need to be some funding found in order to obtain the resources that would be necessary for the scheme.

The resident said that PCSO Gina Jones had advised them to ask the Town Council for funding.

Mrs. Jill Bolton said that in September 2015, she and Mr. Russ Bowden will be re-starting the Birchwood Partnership with monthly themed meetings. Whilst the content of the September meeting has already been decided, she suggested that the October meeting could have 'Safety' as its theme, covering emergency planning, community speedwatch, Home Watch, etc.

Mrs. Nelson said the speeding situation on Admirals Road is the same as on Glover Road. Mr. Balding said that he cannot imagine the items needed for a community speedwatch scheme would be too expensive. He suggested asking the local Inspector what would be involved.

Another resident said that at the April Town Council Meeting a gentleman had raised his concern about Glover Road following an incident which involved his children. The resident asked if that complaint had been escalated.

The Clerk said that an email had been sent to the Borough Council and a reply had been received, which was in Councillors late papers. This would be discussed later in the evening, during the May Annual Council Meeting.

(h) Travellers

A resident raised the issue of travellers within Birchwood and stated that something needs to be done, especially given the costs that he presumes are incurred to evict them and clean up the waste they leave behind. He said that, in his opinion there needs to be a transit site in Warrington.

A discussion took place about the recent problems with traveller incursions in areas of Birchwood.

Mrs Nelson said that the Borough Council is treating the matter very seriously and a working party is looking to identify a site which could be utilised within Warrington. She added that this is an emotive issue and has to be dealt with sensitively.

Mr. Chris Fitzsimmons said that if there is a transit site available within the Borough, then travellers have to move on when asked, or risk being arrested; the procedures that currently have to be followed would no longer apply.

A resident said that they had been unable to run their business on Silver Lane whilst the travellers had been there, resulting in them losing business and as they pay for a licence for the pitch, they are hoping to be able to get a partial refund from the Borough Council.

Mr. Fitzsimmons said that he would support the resident, however, technically Silver Lane is in not within the Birchwood Parish, it is within Croft Parish, therefore they might also like to enlist the support of other Parish Councillors.

(i) Unfinished Work near ASDA Petrol Station

A resident enquired whether the work near the ASDA petrol station will be completed soon. The matter of the incorrect telephone number on the sign was also raised.

The Clerk read out the email responses we had received from Warrington Borough Council regarding questions about the works being undertaken in this area:

Regarding incomplete work and raised ironworks with no warning signs, the Borough replied:

“The scheme has been delayed as a result of issues related to the provision of the new street lighting columns and the associated new ducting and replacement cabling for the electricity supply to the columns. This delay has set the overall completion back by a number of weeks. The new lighting columns have now been installed and are awaiting a connection. Once the new columns have been connected up to the electricity supply, the old columns will be removed and then the surface course for the footpath can be laid. Although the area in question appears unfinished at present we are trying to avoid abortive work by waiting for the lighting columns to be connected before the surface course is laid, if the surfacing was undertaken before the connections to the new lighting columns were made, the new surface course would need to be broken out again and to enable the cable to be connected and then re-instated, resulting in further surfacing work.

I have been advised that the Councils Street Lighting section will be installing new cables, connecting the cables to the new columns this week, once the new columns have been tested the old columns will then be removed and the surfacing can be completed, this work will approximately take a further 3 weeks to complete.

I note that the raised ironworks present a trip hazard and will instruct the contractor to provide some ramping boards to cover the trips and warning signs to advise of the hazards.”

The Clerk said that it appears that some tarmac may have been put around the edges of the raised manhole covers to try to minimise the trip hazard.

In relation to the telephone number on the sign near petrol station showing the wrong telephone number – 01952 instead of 01925 the Borough has acknowledged that this was a typographical error, “ . . . and should have been identified and corrected at the start of the scheme, however as the scheme is nearing completion, the boards will be removed shortly.”

In response to a question about a footpath on Dewhurst Road that still has soil debris on it, the Borough replied, *“I appreciate that the presence of the spoil heap to the side of the footpath makes this section appear tidy and unfinished. Sweeping and general tidying will be undertaken by the contractor as part of the final elements of the work, where this spoil heap and others will be removed and disposed of by the contractor. Once completed the whole of the phase 2 scheme from the Railway Station to the footpath leading to the subway will be subject to a comprehensive inspection by our Clerk of Works and any defects or untidy areas will be snagged for the contractor to address and rectify to our satisfaction.”*

(j) Understanding the Role of and Communicating with the Town Council

A resident submitted a document to the Clerk which raised some issues that he feels have not yet been satisfactorily resolved during the time he has been communicating with the Town Council.

Firstly, he believes that the Town Council needs to make it clearer what the role of the Town Council is and to that end the document he submitted included a suggested ‘purpose statement’ which he would like to be included on the Town Council’s website.

Secondly, the resident feels that the Town Council needs to take action to make improvements and /or changes *“to its communication, complaints and engagement process with residents and other stakeholders to achieve more satisfactory dialogues and outcomes for all concerned.”*

Another resident added that they were not aware of the protocol when dealing with some issues.

The resident stated that at a meeting arranged by the Town Council with the Borough Council and Your Housing Group to discuss an issue (raised by two residents) but which the Town Council cannot deal with as they are not landowners in the area, it had been agreed that the Town Council would be the conduit for information. At the meeting a significant document, put together by residents, had been handed to the Borough Council; however, the resident stated that no proper response from the Borough Council has been forthcoming.

Mr. Evans said that he felt the Town Council had done what it could in arranging meetings with other organisations for residents; arranging and attending walkabouts, writing and circulating notes regarding meetings, etc. He was unsure what else the residents expected from the Town Council. Borough Council representatives had also attended these meetings and walkabouts.

Mrs. Jill Bolton said that perhaps it does need to be made clearer what the roles of the various organisations are. She added that we can possibly improve the way we involve the public in our meetings.

Mrs. Bolton suggested that Councillors could run a surgery before meetings so residents can come and talk to Councillors earlier; then, if necessary, if the Councillor cannot help or advise directly, the resident’s concern or query can be raised with the full Council. This might be useful, as time set aside for public participation (previously known as ‘recess’) in the meeting is limited; which can be frustrating for both residents and Councillors.

Mr. Evans stated that monthly surgeries had been held for two years on Saturday mornings at the Encounter Café, where the Police were also available, but that people rarely attended.

Mrs. Bolton said that she has been speaking with Mr. Bowden about the re-launch of the Birchwood.org.uk website and it is hoped that there will be a discussion forum set up as part of that site. She acknowledged that it might be misused and is therefore a bit controversial, but argued that it is worth a try.

Mr. Bolton agreed that the Town Council could perhaps clarify what the Town Council does, how it works in the community and how we can help people. He said that he does not see the Town Council as a ‘conduit’ to simply pass information backwards and forwards between parties. He believes that our role in some instances is to put residents in touch with the relevant organisations that have the authority to assist with their queries or complaints, if the Town Council cannot, or does not have the powers to. It would then be up to that organisation to deal with the matter.

A resident stated that if the Town Council does not consider itself to be a ‘conduit’ then it would find itself ‘outside of the loop’ and would not know what was being done with regards to matters raised.

Councillor Higgins stated that residents can always come to the Town Council in the first instance, but there are some things that we are unable to deal with.

Another resident raised a point that he, as a resident, had written to the Chief Constable regarding his concerns about the proposed changes to Policing, but had not received a response; whereas the Town Council has. He said that residents need to learn what the role of the Town Council is and the Town Council needs to find the best way forward to make residents aware of this.

Mrs. Nelson said that she believes Birchwood Town Council is quite different from other Local Councils and that it will be willing to look at the suggestions made by the resident to improve how we interact with our community.

A resident added that they are reluctant to contact the Borough Council with any concerns as the Borough automatically has ten working days in which to respond; whereas if they ring the Town Council concerns are dealt with as quickly as possible, sometimes the same day (note - as long as it is within the Town Council's remit to act on / deal with those concerns).

Councillor Higgins said that the Town Council undertakes much more than it is required to do, especially as cuts to the Borough Council's resources mean that it cannot do as much as it used to. Residents often circumvent the Borough as they know the Town Council will do what it can to help, but the real issue is with the lack of resources at the Borough Council.

Councillor Higgins added that it is possible that the lines have become blurred for residents, because the Town Council does undertake so much work in the community. This is something we probably need to be clearer on; to clarify the roles of each organisation.

A resident reiterated that he still believes that the Town Council should act as a conduit in order to remain informed as to how concerns or complaints are being dealt with by other organisations.

Action To move issues raised above to a future meeting for further action.

The Chair stated that unfortunately the meeting had to draw to a close as the Annual Town Meeting followed at 7pm.

Councillor Higgins therefore thanked all residents for attending and declared the meeting closed.

The meeting concluded at 6.55 pm.