

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
WOODSTOCK TOWN COUNCIL
HELD AT 7.30 PM ON TUESDAY 22 MARCH 2011
IN THE MAYOR'S PARLOUR, WOODSTOCK TOWN HALL**

PRESENT:

Cllr J Cooper (Town Mayor)	Cllr Mrs V Edwards (Deputy Mayor)
Cllr C Carritt	Cllr E Poskitt
Cllr Mrs J Dunsmore	Cllr Mrs A Grant
Cllr Mrs E Jay	

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Cllr I Hudspeth and one other member of the public.

WTC/283/10 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs T Gardiner, A Glee, Mrs L Glee, P Jay, P Redpath, Mrs T Redpath, Mrs P Richardson and Mrs E Stokes.

WTC/284/10 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

WTC/285/10 PROPOSED CLOSURE OF VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRE AT THE MUSEUM, PARK STREET, WOODSTOCK

Cllr C Carritt reported that tourism in West Oxfordshire is worth over £200 million to the local economy. Blenheim is unquestionably the primary tourist venue in the District. 170,000 visitors came to the Woodstock Museum in 2009. He considered that to downgrade the Visitor Information is to slay the goose that lays the golden egg. He proposed that Woodstock Town Council (WTC) call upon West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC) and Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) to reconsider this proposal recognising:

1. The primary position of Woodstock/Blenheim as a tourist attraction.
2. That the fundamental quality of a Visitor Information Centre (VIC) is its dedicated and experienced staff.
3. That cross-subsidy between the three West Oxfordshire Visitor Information Centres (VIC's) ensures that a high quality service can be maintained across the District in all locations.
4. That the duty of the principal authorities is to work together, is mutually beneficial and that alternative means must be found to increase income at the Woodstock VIC by a more equitable sharing of retail space.
5. That WODC owes it to WTC to attend at the next available Council meeting to hear the views of local people, the business community and the town councillors.

This proposal was seconded by The Mayor. Discussion followed.

The Mayor said that in his role as District Councillor he had instigated a 'Call In' notice and was confident that he would secure the four Cllr signatures required. He had distributed a paper to Cllrs entitled 'Future Options for the Visitor Information Service', produced by the Head of Leisure and Tourism to Cllrs before the ETC meeting. He considered that no attempt had been made to find alternative solutions and was disappointed that OCC had failed to recognise its financial support to the Woodstock VIC on two previous occasions. He considered the decision to be based on a 'snap shot' that had not noted the opportunities for other events that could bring in income. He noted that the closure could cost £15.5k in the first year.

The Deputy Mayor expressed outrage and asked to see figures explaining the cost of the three current museum resources. She considered that the WODC report contained insufficient information, was a knee-jerk reaction and that this matter should have gone out for consultation. The WODC report suggested that Burford VIC would increase its income but did not take into account Woodstock VIC's ability to also do so. She said that there were no facts to support the claims about Burford facility. Cllr E Poskitt queried how they had estimated the stated increased income. Cllr Mrs A Grant agreed that there was not enough detail.

Cllr Mrs E Jay noted that the report referred to the VIC's in Burford, Witney and Woodstock. She suggested that the VIC was not the reason why people visit Witney. The real reason for them doing so has little to do with tourism but is because WODC is based there. They visit the town to pay their council tax etc. She also considered that a breakdown was required as it was very clear that Woodstock was a bigger tourist attraction than Witney.

County and District Cllr I Hudspeth said that he had spoken to various people at OCC and WODC when forming his views on the Woodstock VIC. The figures presented in the report were discussed. Cllr I Hudspeth said that the report mixes income with turnover. He said that two members of staff could be 'cross-saved' and more use could be made of volunteers. He said that the museum wanted the space currently occupied by the VIC to increase and enhance its income scheme. OCC had considered 'moth balling' the Woodstock museum but had decided to work with the 'Soldiers of Oxfordshire' museum instead. The proposal is to jointly train the museum staff so that they can also manage the information requirements of visitors to Woodstock. It is hoped that the new 'Destinations Management Organisation' will encourage more people to Oxfordshire – John Hoy will Chair this. Cllr I Hudspeth felt that now that he knew more about the proposals he could no longer support the 'Call In' notice instigated by District Cllr J Cooper.

The Deputy Mayor supported the idea of cross-training staff but noted the size of the proposed training budget over two years and asked how the museums running costs would be funded. She suggested that the VIC was currently justifying its existence and made a small profit. Cllr I Hudspeth said that this £4k profit was based on sales and therefore when staff costs were taken out of this the VIC was making a loss.

Cllr C Carritt suggested that the 'Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum' will increase footfall and usage of the VIC and the retail facilities therefore there was the possibility of increased income. If OCC replace the VIC with a Visitors Information Point it will merely be a desk with leaflets and lose the personal level of service that currently exists. He considered that the three VIC's should have been considered as a total concept rather than three separate centres. It would then be reasonable to suggest that if Witney VIC makes a profit because WODC is based there, it should subsidise Woodstock VIC as this is the prime tourist destination.

Cllr Mrs E Jay proposed that point 4 of the motion be amended to read 'That the duty of the principal authorities is to work together to be mutually beneficial. Alternative means must be found to increase income at the Woodstock VIC by a more equitable sharing of retail space'. She also asked that point 5 be removed and made into a separate new paragraph at the end of the motion and that the words 'owes it to' be replaced by 'is requested by' Cllr C Carritt and the Mayor accepted these amendments. Cllr Mrs J Dunsmore asked that the motion be considered in four separate parts as she could not support all of the points included in it. She wanted all three VIC's to be profitable and was worried about any possibility of the Woodstock museum closing. Cllr C Carritt and the Mayor agreed to this request.

The voting on the motion was as follows:

RESOLVED

That WTC calls upon WODC and OCC to reconsider this proposal recognising:

- (i) **RESOLVED** (unanimous)
The primary position of Woodstock/Blenheim as a tourist attraction.
- (ii) **RESOLVED** (5 votes for, 2 against)
That the fundamental quality of a Visitor Information Centre is its dedicated and experienced staff.
- (iii) **RESOLVED** (unanimous)
That cross-subsidy between the three West Oxfordshire Visitor Information Centres (VIC's) ensures that a high quality service can be maintained across the District in all locations.
- (iv) **RESOLVED** (unanimous)
That the duty of the principal authorities is to work together to be mutually beneficial. Alternative means must be found to increase income at the Woodstock VIC by a more equitable sharing of retail space.

RESOLVED (unanimous)

That WODC is requested by WTC to attend at the next available Council meeting to hear the views of local people, the business community and the town councillors. The Clerk will send a letter recording WTC's resolutions to Barry Norton at WODC

WTC/286/10 PLANNING MATTERS - APPLICATIONS

The following planning applications were received and considered

- (a) Ref: 11/0339/P/FP
Retention of Garden Shed (Retrospective).
70 Oxford Street, Woodstock

The Deputy Mayor proposed that the structure resulted in overdevelopment of the site. Cllr C Carritt seconded this motion.

RESOLVED (6 votes for and 1 against)

That WTC objects to this proposal on the grounds of overdevelopment of the site.

Cllr Mrs J Dunsmore asked that WODC be notified that WTC is not in favour of retrospective planning applications.

RESOLVED

That WODC be advised that WTC is not in favour of retrospective planning applications.

The meeting rose at 8.15pm.

Signed Date