

NMB Mayor Report – Tuesday 26 March 2024

Welcome

Thank you all for coming to the Annual Town Meeting. My name is Nick Manby-Brown, and I'm currently the Town Mayor. I joined the Council in May 2021, and was elected Mayor in May 2023 by the Councillors. For those that don't know, this happens every May. I was honoured to become your Mayor, and I have enjoyed the responsibility. I have been able to chair every meeting except one, and have had a busy year supporting our staff in the office. Plenty of administrative jobs have been completed – revaluing the Town's assets and buildings, renegotiating BT contracts to save money, improving the wifi in the Town Hall, buying recording equipment for Town meetings, buying an internal/external PA system, updating the very antiquated CCTV system, amongst others.

Staff

And I would like to take this opportunity to thank our staff – Karen Howe joined us in December 2022, and we have benefited greatly from her experience in local government. Rachel Peters is our RFO – Responsible Finance Officer – and she has been with us for 20 months. She has done a truly amazing job in managing our accounts, and also looks after the bookings for weddings and functions, and additionally looks after the cemeteries that the Council owns. Ian Watkins is our Caretaker. He joined the Council about 5 years ago and he looks after the Town Hall and the Community Centre. I want to publicly thank them for all their hard work and can honestly say that working with them has been one of the highlights of this last year. Thank you.

Staff Turnover

Sadly however, Karen has given her notice to leave Woodstock - she is kindly staying until the new Council starts. We will miss her, and I would like to thank her for her invaluable support.

Whilst on this subject, I would like to express my very great concern about the high turnover of staff - and Councillors - at Woodstock. The Council sadly has a bad reputation with the Clerk community, and I have grave concerns about what is going to happen next year. In the 3 years that I have been on the Council, we have had 5 Clerks – 2 of them were Locum Clerks. The situation is not as it should be and I believe all councillors need to continue to question it. This open, public meeting, is not the right place to discuss the issue but it is one that must be addressed if we are to have a fully functioning Council. We have also had to deal with quite a few, internal, legal issues –which we are also not able to comment on publicly. But these issues take our staff (and Councillors) away from doing the job that we all should be doing – that of serving our Community.

Finances

Going on to good news, the Council is in a healthy financial state, and the precept (the money that the Council requests annually from WODC) has remained the same for the last 2 years. In fact, the amount that the ratepayers pay has gone down slightly because of our larger town. The Town Council has quite a large property portfolio, and we have had a good year with occupancy, with no significant problems. The internal administration has been streamlined, with new accounting software and an online booking system for functions.

Grants

We have changed the process of applying for grants, as we felt the previous system was not transparent and clear enough. Grants will be allocated twice a year from now on, and details will soon be able to be seen on our website.

Newsletters etc

The previous method of subscribing to receive notifications was completely broken, and after a lot of work, it has been repaired. We now send monthly Newsletters out to those that have subscribed, and I would urge everyone to look at our website to join. We also have an active Facebook page to help promote Town Council events.

Planning

The major issue has been the Botley West Solar Farm, which the Town Council has objected to, in its current form. There will be plenty of work to do in the coming months on this, and other issues. The Hill Rise development has gone ahead despite strong local objections from many residents and great work by CPOW - Campaign to Protect Old Woodstock - at the Appeal - which sadly the developers won.

Transport

The new controversial parking system is now in place, and has obviously had a mixed impact – it has certainly freed up spaces in the centre of town, making it easier for shoppers and visitors to come to enjoy our wonderful shops and pubs and restaurants, but as expected it does seem to have caused many displacement issues. OCC is going to make some tweaks to the arrangements, and I would like to thank those who sent in their suggestions.

There has been a lot of changes affecting bus services, especially the difficulties of large double-decker buses turning in the town centre, and most recently the cancellation of evening services on the S7.

The Watermeadows

The Watermeadows (and the OWL – Old Woodstock Line) are listed in the Council's Assets Register, and whilst they are an enormous asset for the town, they also come with huge liabilities. We have spent about £35,000 on the Watermeadows and Council trees this year. 2 bridges have been refurbished and boardwalks have been repaired. Also the County Council has replaced the main bridge by the Black Prince. Added signage and extended fencing has given us a very good ROSPA report this year. All the high and medium risks trees have been felled or pollarded – this has also happened on the OWL and the New Road Play Area. I would like to thank Cllr Manson for her hard work and enthusiasm in being the Cllr responsible for the Watermeadows, and also Maurice Parkinson who is an Environment Warden and has taken over the responsibility of strimming the paths.

The OWL

I would like to talk a bit about a recently discovered problem on the Old Woodstock Line Nature Reserve. This area was taken over by the Town Council about 20 years ago, and about 10 years ago the Council agreed to take over the extension (between Verenia Court and Budds Close). Unfortunately, previous Councils only negotiated a 20 year access, so we have learnt just very recently that we may not be able to have any further access from Verenia Court. This is another legacy issue, and the Clerk is currently investigating options. My feeling is that, like the Watermeadows, the Council and local Community are going to have to work together to come up with solutions. I would like to thank Bob Pomfret and his team who spend countless hours maintaining the eastern section of the OWL.

Bus Shelters

I would like to recount the saga of the bus shelters, because it goes to illustrate the difficulties of trying to get things done in local government and is another example of the current Council coming up against legacy issues. I first got involved with the bus shelter issue in the summer of 2021, and we asked other Councils how they approached the issue. Eventually, we came up with what I thought was a perfect solution – a local company was prepared to install 2 new bus shelters at Park View (with advertising) and renovate and renew our existing 3 shelters. We started negotiations with the company and discussions at Full Council (with the usual arguments between Cllrs of course). It then transpired that about 5 years ago, the developers had agreed to pay S106 money towards these two new shelters. In fact our questions kick started the process to install the new shelters – these are owned by OCC, and not the Town Council. We are left in the situation now of again having to work out how to manage the existing three shelters.

S106

S106 is money received from developers for the benefit of the Community. The problem is that we all spend a lot of time arguing about whether a development goes ahead or not, and then forget to negotiate the S106 element. The huge development of Woodstock House is a case in point, where unknown millions are being spent over nearly a decade, and the Town has received absolutely no benefit from this. So we proposed a S106 working group last year to try to separate arguments about Planning from S106 concerns, and I very much hope that next year's Councillors takes up the challenge to deal with this issue.

Ending

Finally, I would like to mention that the whole Town Council comes up for re-election on May 2nd, and anyone who is interested in applying to be a Councillor can collect a pack from the Town Hall, or get details from the WODC website. Forms have to be with WODC by April 5th.