

Minutes of the Okehampton Town Annual Assembly held on Monday 23 March 2015 in the Charter Hall, Okehampton at 7.00 pm

Councillors Present: Councillor P Vachon (Town Mayor)
Councillor T Cummings
Councillor Rev'd M Davies
Councillor Mrs J Goffey
Councillor Dr M Ireland
Councillor A Leech
Councillor C Letchford
Councillor Mrs M McDonald
Councillor Mrs C Marsh
Councillor B Tolley
Councillor D Weekes
Councillor Mrs J Yelland
in addition to 29 members of the public

In Attendance: P R Snell (Town Clerk)

Before business, prayers were offered by Fr Darline Marianathon

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| 2015.1 <u>Apologies for Absence</u> - Apologies were presented on behalf of Councillor K Ball. | |
| 2015.2 <u>Welcome</u> - The Mayor, Councillor Paul Vachon, welcomed all to the Annual Assembly and presented an outline for the meeting before summarising the key initiatives undertaken during the year. | |
| 2015.3 <u>Minutes of Previous Assembly</u> - The Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting held on 24 March 2014 were agreed as correct on the proposition of Councillor Marsh, seconded by Councillor Ireland. | |
| 2015.4 <u>Informal Discussions with Committee Chairs</u> - The Chairmen of the Committees (Councillor McDonald - Policy & Resources; Councillor Marsh - Parks; Councillor Leech – Planning; Councillor Goffey - Property) summarised the areas of responsibility of their respective Committees. There were no outstanding questions from this item. | |
| 2015.5 <u>Community Group Presentations</u> - Councillor Vachon welcomed representatives of the various community organisations and groups who had agreed to present a brief summary on their activities and how grants received from the Town Council had been used.

(i) Community Lynx CIC - Heather Parks. Multi-agency and partner working to enhance the lives of young people. Project to provide music with Okehampton College, giving 100 children the opportunity to learn | |

an instrument, working towards the formation of a community orchestra.

- (ii) **Museum of Dartmoor Life - Debbie Pritchard.** The Museum Association, based on a volunteer team, was now building a new foundation for the future, producing stunning exhibitions, partnership working with both Primary School and the College. Visitor numbers had increased and the Museum was recognised as a school resource. The Town Council was the only organisation that supported the tourist information aspect of the Museum's activities, which was entirely volunteer-based, providing a significant service to the area.
- (iii) **Ockment Centre - Jennie Hopkins.** Primary objective to provide a community centre in the old primary school building, offering hire of low-cost rooms for a variety of activities: e.g. CAB, Okehampton Times Office, Drug & Alcohol Recovery Services, Friday hub and back-to-work support. Approximately 1800 people per month visiting premises. The grant from the Town Council was in part supporting the reception service, providing a first point of contact for those requiring assistance and not knowing where to go.
- (iv) **OCRA - Stuart Lord.** A local registered charity delivering activities throughout the year using the existing facilities of all-weather pitch, skate park and pavilion. Town Council grant used to support Okehampton Sports & Fitness Festival, providing a diverse range of activities in which some 3000 individual people took part in 2014. The final day of the Festival attracted some 800 people from further afield in Devon.
- (v) **Okehampton and District Chamber of Trade - Lesley Poole.** Focus on improving business and opportunities in the Okehampton area, currently comprising some 41 members. Responsibility for hanging baskets, Golden Bunny Trail, Edwardian Evening, Christmas lighting and trees, Food & Folk Festival.
- (vi) **Okehampton & District Local History Society - Malcolm Francis Lang.** The group, comprising 45 active members, was currently working on aspects of the impact of World War I on the Okehampton community and had in preparation a further World War II project, with a view to preparing a booklet to be available in 2016.
- (vii) **Okehampton Fairtrade Group - Cynthia Higbee.** The Group achieved Fairtrade Town status, which involved a renewal process every 2 years. The group maintained a high profile and supported the Fairtrade Fortnight including the Schools' Conference, promoting the procurement and supply of Fairtrade products.

(viii) **Okement Rivers Improvement Group - Councillor Christine Marsh.** In 2015, the Group would become 15 years old, with a particular focus on keeping the rivers running clear. Previous grants and major awards had facilitated the re-instatement of the Pig Bridge, Castle Trail near the hospital, the viewing platform at the confluence behind Lidl, clearance of West Bridge and Clapps Wood, which had become overgrown with laurel. The improvement to the Okement Rivers was now evidenced by sightings of otters, spawning trout and salmon. The entirely volunteer group now also carried out a litter pick on a regular basis, as this was a burgeoning problem.

(ix) **Room 13 - Ali Hiron.** A facility available to any young person in the community. There was now separate provision for Year 8-10 on Thursdays. The Town Council's grant was to support development of the garden, incorporating young people's ideas, and working towards a Devon award.

2015.6 Community Energy Feasibility Study - Andrew Shadrake of DARE (Devon Association for Renewable Energy) gave a presentation on renewable energy opportunities in the Okehampton and Hamlets area, explaining feed-in tariffs, the opportunity for communities to produce and purchase electricity locally and the benefits that already-established community benefit companies were expecting to realise. The Town and Hamlets Councils had jointly agreed to commission a Feasibility Study (funding for which was available from the Government) to explore the potential for solar PV and small-scale hydro generation in the area and it was anticipated the study would be complete by the end of the year.

2015.7 Questions from the Public

(i) A written question from Mrs K Bickley noted the 13.6% increase in precept and questioned if town and parish councils should be capped at 2% like higher-level local authorities, or be subject to local referenda. Councillor McDonald responded by analysing the relative figures comprising the council tax, and noting that the precept for town residents was an increase from £1.21 per week to £1.38 per week. The council budget was set as necessary for the good management of their facilities: the maintenance of Town Hall and associated buildings, Simmons Park and associated play areas and skate park. Over a 7 year period, the precept had increased by less than inflation. The cost of a referendum would also be a significant expenditure, amounting to some thousands of pounds, which would also have to be funded from the precept.

(ii) A written question from Mrs Bickley asked what measures the Council had taken to increase income from their assets and reduce overheads and staffing costs. Councillor McDonald responded that the office was now closed on Fridays and that the majority of staff were not full time.

The Council had also invested reserves to obtain a better return than the 0.1% that was common amongst high street banks currently. Councillor Goffey added that the Council were monitoring the availability of their rooms for hire, noting the number of other rooms and halls that were now available in the town as alternatives. There was more monitoring of heating and lighting use, and a recent programme of window repair was helping to reduce heat loss in the listed building.

- (iii) A comment from the floor from Mr G Wise noted the prospect of 900 additional houses in the immediate Okehampton area and expressed concern about the inadequate infrastructure. Councillor Leech responded that the completion of a neighbourhood plan would - at least in part - help to address the decisions of location for new housing determinations.
- (iv) A comment from the floor referred to the forthcoming elections and the potential for inconsistency between town and borough councils. Councillor McDonald responded that Okehampton worked on a committee structure, whereby most subjects were referred to and discussed by a specific committee with endorsement by the full council where necessary. Councillor Ireland noted the work of the Destination Okehampton sub-committee, where the meetings involved not only councillors from town and parish, borough and county but also interested individuals who could contribute towards the regeneration of the town and the area through re-establishment of a scheduled passenger rail service from Okehampton.

Further questions and comments of a more general nature included policing in the town, recent acts of vandalism, possible use of CCTV, police response times after emergency calls, the future of the Dartmoor Rover for the 2015 season and the regret that this was limited to Sundays in the summer season only.

2015.8 Conclusion - The Mayor thanked all who had attended and contributed to the Annual Town Assembly this year, noting that there had been many interesting presentations showing the wide range of voluntary activities that were carried out in and around Okehampton and closed the meeting at 9.30 pm.

Councillor P Vachon
Mayor