Battle Parish Assembly 2024

The following notes summarise the proceedings at the Assembly held on 17 April 2024 at Battle Memorial Hall, High Street, Battle at 7.30pm.

Approximately 110 attendees plus County, District and Town Councillors. The Town Clerk took the notes.

Cllr Vikki Cook, Chairman of Battle Town Council, welcomed everyone to the meeting, pointed out the emergency exits and highlighted that it is not a Council meeting but a gathering of electors facilitated by the Council. She welcomed County Cllr Kathryn Field, who is also a District Councillor, and District Cllr Sue Burton who, with herself, are the three District Councillors for the Battle Civil Parish. Unfortunately, due to injury, Sussex Police were unable to attend.

Awards

Cllr Cook reported that Council considers nominations for the Battle Civil Parish **Community Award** from members of the community to recognise the particular part or role a group, or an individual, have made to the lives of those who Live, Work or Visit Battle. She reported that it is by dedication of volunteers that ~~the~~ events in Battle happen every year, often with fancy dress involved, and two such volunteers have consistently been involved and encouraged new volunteers to join. **Alan and Kay Hunting** were invited to receive the Community Award for 2024.

On behalf of the Battle **Chamber of Commerce** awards were presented to:

- Angie of **Barnaby's** for the traditional Judges Award for her handmade skating animals scene;
- **Age UK** won the new Haines and Sons cup, which is decided by public vote, for their Christmas window.

Reports by County and District Councillors

Cllr Sprong reminded the meeting that all are welcome to express an opinion with respect and that questions should concise; any questions not answered will be responded to in writing, post meeting.

County Cllr Kathryn Field reported that the Council tax had been increased by the maximum permitted, '4.99% and reserves will need to subsidise expenditure. She confirmed that Children's Services had received a good with outstanding characteristics Ofsted report and that there is a shortage of foster carers, resulting in the use of outside agencies, causing additional costs. Residents were encouraged to consider the demanding but rewarding position of Foster Carer. A Peer Review by the Local Government Association for Adult Social Care Services has been undertaken in anticipation of a full review by the Care Quality Commission is expected. In relation to potholes, Cllr Field reported that Balfour Beattie are the new contractor with 30 gangs undertaking pothole and drainage issues – including 115 repairs in Battle. She highlighted the various current issues in the area causing the frustrating road closures and diversions and reassured those present that ES Highways are working on the issues, where feasible. Cllr Field requested that Business consider work placements for looked after children and care leavers.

Responses to questions:

- East Sussex Highways do have a planned maintenance programme.
- It is not possible to prevent Heavy Goods Vehicles from travelling through the town, as these are classified as A roads.
- Following a change of contractor, the Battle Hill crossing requires further safety surveys. It remains on the programme for works.
- Provision of additional street lighting at junction of Lillybank on A2100 will be researched and responded post meeting.
- Highway engineers at the next Strengthening Local Relationship meeting will be approached to raise the concerns at poor signage and vehicle parking at new development near Tollgates.

- Discussions on infrastructure, in anticipation of the planned new developments at Blackfriars, have suggested that a doctor's surgery will be expanded, and that a new school is not required as Battle children will be offered a space prior to those out of area.

Residents were invited to contact Cllr Kathryn Field with any additional concerns or questions.

District Cllr Sue Burton confirmed that the Town Council is kept informed of the key areas of change and development every month with a report to Full Council. She reported that Rother District Council provides services for over 90,000 residents and a month-by-month report will be attached to these notes for information. Cllr Burton highlighted a few issues pertinent to Battle residents: the temporary closure of the Mount Street public toilets in November last year was one of many across Rother. She reiterated that providing toilets is not a statutory service that Rother has to provide and, to save money, made this decision while also discussing with the Town Council the potential devolvement of both blocks of public toilets in Battle; the maintenance of green spaces e.g. Netherfield Play area, Kingsmead, among others, to manage and pay for; the new Local Plan (2024-2040) which will be out for consultation later this month. Cllr Burton encourage residents to complete the consultation form; particularly the sections important to individuals as it would be a shame not to get the views of Battle residents included; Food Waste collections from the doorstep have to be in place from 2026 and preparations are ongoing to plan for this.

Responses to questions:

- It was noted that there is no legal responsibility to provide public toilets but that Market Square conveniences remain open, including a disabled toilet. The availability of appropriate keys will be clarified post meeting. The assessment of 'trial' was not clear and all residents were invited to email RDC with comments and a request for better signage.
- The removal of affordable housing at Blackfriars was made on a financial assessment, although the intention of RDC Housing Company is to sell to a social housing company to provide affordable homes.
- The current over-expenditure on the Blackfriars development will be provided post meeting.
- Town Cllr Silk reported that advice received from RDC suggested that it costs approximately £40k pa to maintain the two public toilet facilities in the town and around £18-22k for grounds maintenance. He highlighted that residents would be required to pay an additional sum in Council Tax if the Town Council take on the devolvement of these services.
- It was accepted that, in these times of funds being short, alternative ways of carrying out the services should be explored eg some residents may be prepared to be trained to undertake some tasks.

Updates

The Chairman reminded the meeting that several councillors who served this civil parish with dedication and determination had started many projects that are now complete, almost complete or reaching fruition and we would like to recognise the part they have played in their aspirations to make Battle a great place to Live, Work and Visit. She reported that, following the election in May and further co-options, the Town Council now has a full complement of 13 Councillors who will continue the good works the previous Council began.

Cllr Andrew Barton reported on the rebuilding of the Pavilion in the Recreation Ground at North Trade Road. He highlighted that this project has been ongoing for some time with planning permission and preferred contractor in place. Cllr Barton reported that a revised Business Plan has been agreed and the Fundraising Task & Finish Group, a welcome mix of Councillors and enthusiastic residents, are pushing for the final funds required. On behalf of the Pavilion Technical Task & Finish Group, Cllr David Russell reported that this Group will seek clarification that the right heating, lighting and water provision will be provided. He invited any resident experienced in these matters to join the Group.

Responses to questions:

- The cost of the basic pavilion rebuild is approx. £750k. (post meeting note: whole project, including provision of solar panels with battery storage, community café, compliant changing facilities for all and adequate toilet facilities is around £850k.).

- One of the benefits to this scheme is that the Battle Town Football Club will be able to return to its home town.
- Improved sight lights and vehicle parking on North Trade Road will be looked at.

On behalf of the Battle Emergency Plan Task & Finish Group, Cllr Chelsey Sprong highlighted the recent events such as Covid, Storm Eunice and the 'big freeze' which had emphasised the need for a Plan on how to access help in unforeseen situations. She asked that residents able to offer any assistance, from providing water or food, to transport for rescue or a bed to sleep in, either complete the sign-up sheet available at the meeting or contact the Council Officers, who would pass on details.

Following several years without a designated Tree Warden, the Town Council had recently appointed Dr Andrew Barton (in an independent capacity) to fill this role. Dr Barton invited residents to join a group that are passionate about trees and hedgerows to help build a strategy to raise awareness and protect and enhance trees in the Civil Parish of Battle.
Responses to questions:

- The Town Council has a responsibility to arrange for regular tree condition surveys on its land.
- All residents may make an application to Rother District Council for a Tree Preservation Order.
- The Battle Civil Parish Neighbourhood Plan has a green infrastructure report, dated 2018, that contains plans and audits.

Responses to questions received in advance of the meeting:
Cllr Vikki Cook, Chairman of Council:
Q1 In relation to the Battle Town Council element of the 2024/25 Council Tax increase, there have been expenditure items this year that have called on the Council's General Reserves. These include: essential structural repairs to the Almonry chimney that was identified during the programmed refurbishment works, which, as many projects, particularly to Grade II Listed Buildings, unfortunately went over the original anticipated budget; the rebuilding of a potentially dangerous wall at George Meadow, during which the opportunity to install a gate between Tills Courtyard and the public rights of way to improve access for all walkers and assist with a parking issue for Battle Cricket Club; and additional auditors fees relating to 2019/20. To ensure that the Council starts to reinstate a recommended General Reserve, it was agreed to postpone several proposed projects and increase the precept for this year. Due to the timing of the budget setting, there is a £12,000 provisional sum for the running of the Station Masters House. It is unlikely that this will now be required.

Q2 The decision in 2021/22 that 'residents would be consulted if the precept needed to be increased by more than 3%' was made by the previous Council, for its term. There was an election in May 2023 and a new Council was formed.

In response to a supplementary question, Cllr Vikki Cook confirmed that the Annual Report relates to the previous year, there was a Statement, published on the Council's website and submitted to the local Observer, in relation to the budget for 2024/25.

Q3 In relation to the delay in publishing the Budget Statement, Cllr Vikki Cook commented that no Councillor makes a response about such a major item without discussing it with their fellow Councillors. As a body, we believe that statements such as these need to be a collective response born out of partnership. The statement was initially drafted by the Chair and Vice Chair and then discussed by all Members to ensure a collaborative decision was published. This was particularly relevant given the need to increase the precept by a higher percentage than initially planned.

Q4 County Cllr Field reiterated that of the 4,000 potholes filled since the beginning of the year, 115, not including spread patching, have been filled in Battle.

Cllr David Russell, on behalf of the Planning & Transport Committee:
Q5 The primary benefit to the adoption of the Battle Civil Parish Neighbourhood Plan is the increase from 15% to 25% of Local Community Infrastructure Levy funds; this increase also increases the amount of Strategic CIL that we are able to access, as we can bid for as much as equal to the amount generated locally in total – as with the case of the Sports Pavilion, for which we have been awarded up to £400,000. He confirmed that, within Rother, Battle has by far generated the most amount of Local CIL and the amounts have increased year on year since the adoption of the Neighbourhood Plan. Cllr Russell reported that, in total the Town Council has received £314,103.88 and allocated, or spent £284,972.50: professional fees for infrastructure projects £7350; a double swing, including a seat for disabled people £4500; Skate ramp £16,122.50; resurfacing for sections of footpaths £22,000; pavilion rebuild £165,000; access for all bid for step free access to both platforms at the railway station £20,000; £50,000 Marley Lane footway extension

Q6 The Town Council shares the concerns about speeding motorists through the town and is working with others to gather data to support the need for speed limit reductions in some areas of the Parish. Rother District Council is undertaking air quality monitoring again on Battle High Street throughout 2024 and the Town Council is attempting to set up a Black Cat device in various areas of concern that can accommodate this equipment. There is also a newly reinstated Battle Community Speedwatch Group, that Cllr Andy Ratcliffe has agreed to join to represent the Council.

Cllr Darren Buss, on behalf of the Estates Committee:
Q7 The allocation of up to £400,000 Strategic CIL for the Pavilion in March 2023 was secured during the previous Council term, with the current Pavilion Fundraising Task & Finish Group tasked with raising the remainder of the funds required to get this project to completion.

Q8 The Pavilion Business Plan projects an outgoing sum of £799 every year for 10 years to ensure that adequate batteries are provided for the solar system and that future replacement batteries and/or solar panels are budgeted for.

Q9 Although there will be approximately 60 solar panels on the roof of the new Pavilion, it is anticipated that the highest use of electricity will be during the winter period and evenings when the stored and grid power will be used. It was therefore decided to not forecast income at this time.

Q10 The Junior Park Run and Guided Walks in the Cemetery are organised by other groups and individuals. The Council provides administrative time to assist with these events, provides the Pavilion and Ceremonies Room at no cost to allow for the storage of equipment for the Junior Park Run and refreshments post Guided Walks events and grounds staff continue to maintain the areas in the cemetery to be fit for use.

Open Forum

- A member of the public commended the Town Council on the condition of the cemetery and the work already carried out at the recreation ground.

- Cllr Cook confirmed that, whilst Council is also disappointed that the repair to the Town Clock could not be justified within this year's budget, it remains on the Council's plan to repair.

- Gratitude for the great works carried out by RDC's barrow operative, funded within the Biffa contract, will be reported.

- Following concern at the inadequate speed limit of 40mph by the new Lillybank development, County Cllr Field reported that a petition to move the speed restriction further towards Canadia Road had

been refused. She asked that all issues or evidence of incidents be reported. It was highlighted that the Town Council plans to install a Black Cat device to collate data in that location. Andy Holter, on behalf of the Community Speed Watch group, confirmed that this will be a location for data collection.

- Cllr Cook reported that, following several discussions on the refurbished Station Master's House, the Council has not taken on this liability but hopes to facilitate alternative arrangements to ensure that the building is available for community use.

- In response to concern that shops are struggling and many have closed, potentially due to parking costs, Cllr Cook highlighted that fees are lower in the bottom Market Road car park and there is a small free car park available in the town.

- It was confirmed that the rebuilt Pavilion will have more than one public toilet, during open times, to more adequately serve visitors at the recreation ground.

Due to the time, the Chairman requested that any additional questions be sent to the Clerk and reminded residents that they are welcome to join a Council meeting.

The Chairman thanked the Deputy Town Clerk and Clerk for all their work in preparing for this Assembly. She then congratulated the Town Clerk, Carol Harris, who has now served Battle Town Council faithfully for 25 years with strength, tact and diplomacy. The meeting responded with resounding applause.

In closing, all were thanked for attending and reminded that many of the groups and societies that work so hard for the young people and the more mature, that offer support to the bereaved and the lonely, that care for the environment and our high street, and especially our businesses, shops and restaurants need everyone's support. Many of the groups and societies would welcome additional offers to help, volunteer, run or event start up something new. To boost personal and others' mental and physical wellbeing, residents were asked to support the local businesses and public transport "if we don't use it, we will lose it".

There being no further matters, the meeting closed at 20.58.