

Droitwich Spa Town Council

MINUTES of the Extra - ordinary meeting of Droitwich Spa Town Council held at the Community Hall on **Monday 13 September 2021** at 7.22 pm.

PRESENT: Councillor WT Moy (Mayor)
Councillor Mrs C Bowden
Councillor E Bowden
Councillor GR Brookes
Councillor Mrs JM Chaudry
Councillor DM Craigie
Councillor G Duffy
Councillor J Grady
Councillor NR Griffiths
Councillor RP Hopkins
Councillor A Humphries
Councillor AH Laird
Councillor DJ Morris
Councillor RJ Morris
Councillor CM Murray
Councillor AM Sinton

APOLOGIES for absence: Councillors RG Beale and Mrs Kate Fellows.

PUBLIC QUESTIONS SESSION

10 Members of the Public attended the Meeting for the duration.

The Chairman had announced at 5.45 pm from the beginning of the Public Session prior to the start of the scheduled Planning Committee and Community & Amenities Committee Meetings that following a request Mr Rhys Jones wished to film and record the meetings this evening. There had been no questions presented within the public session at 5.45pm.

Councillor A Humphries asked what rules are being used to make decisions at the Meeting ? The Town Clerk confirmed that the recommended NALC Standing Orders and Financial Regulations had been adopted. Councillor A Humphries asked for it to be noted that “he does not recognise the Town Council standing orders”.

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110. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were none.

111. TO TRANSACT BUSINESS REGARDING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN GROUP

The Chairman read out the following statement.

“We now come to agenda item (3a). I think it would be useful at this point for me to give some background to this meeting.

This EGM was requested by Councillors Humphries & Hopkins in July. The report of issues that they refer to was requested on 13th July at the same time of notice being provided for the EGM from DSTC.

Mr Mike Lambden only provided the aforementioned report on 7th September and confirmed that he was sending this “at the request of Cllrs Humphries and Hopkins”.

No information has been provided as to who the authors of this document are or in whose names it stands.

The Town Council “Feasibility Study for Issues & Options for Neighbourhood Planning” was reported to Full Council on 21st June. This piece of work was collated following professional input from Wychavon District Council Planning Department and others. The Town Council has no reason to doubt the authenticity and content of the feasibility report presented following the consultation which took place during May. Representatives from Wychavon District Council had sight of the DSTC Feasibility Study and endorsed the document content prior to presentation for Full Council on 21 June.

The report provided by Mr Lambden is noted. There are several anomalies and some different opinions raised within the report, which in part reference and quote Wychavon District Council. To this effect these points are being clarified with our District Council colleagues for further interpretation and context. This will enable proper and informed consideration before a response on points raised in due course.

For the benefit of members of the public present and who may have read incorrect information either on the DSNP website or on social media, we will only be discussing the two motions before us tonight as listed on the agenda. The procedural rules for local government do not permit “Any Other Business” on a Council agenda.

I would ask members to confine their remarks to the motions at hand. This will not be a general debate.

I now ask Cllr Humphries to propose the motion.”

Councillor A Humphries updated the following.

“All I wish recorded is the following:

1. It was incorrect to say the Neighbourhood Plan would cost £100,000.00 as a result of the meeting held with Wychavon DC in the autumn 2020.
2. It was incorrect to say the provisions of the SWDP were crucial to the ongoing development of the Neighbourhood Plan and should be used to delay it as a result of discussions held at the same meeting.
3. It was incorrect to say training was pivotal to this project - again stated at the same meeting with WDC - as they had none to provide.
4. Finally, attempts had been made to speak to the Town Council's representative with an offer to explain the documentation surrounding the Neighbourhood Plan but these have been ignored.”

Councillor Humphries proposed the following motion.

“That this Town Council:

Addresses and corrects incorrect statements that have been made, both written and verbal, as identified in the attached document concerning the Droitwich Spa Neighbourhood Plan and the

Droitwich Spa Neighbourhood Plan Management Group. To this effect, the Droitwich Spa Neighbourhood Plan Management Group will deliver a short presentation to the Town Council which will explain their reaction to recent events which excluded them from defending their position and will allow them to correct erroneous statements made about them.”

The motion was seconded by Councillors RP Hopkins & NR Griffiths. Councillor Hopkins read from the following statement.

Droitwich Spa Town Council 13th September 2021- Presentation by RPH responding on behalf of the Management Group.

I make specific reference to the Report prepared for the Full Council meeting on 21st June 2021 regarding the Agenda item on the Neighbourhood Plan which has been described as “offensive” by those impacted by the criticism contained in it because it was withheld from the MG and two opposition members of the Council to prevent them from challenging the tone and accuracy of the Report even though the Wychavon Planning representative who met with the “official” claimed he had intended it to be forwarded to all those who attended the meeting with Wychavon last Autumn. The question as to why it was withheld remains unanswered. The immediate consequence of this report was that two opposition councillors resigned from the MG due to potential conflict of interest. The Wychavon Planner has since issued a written Report based on the commitment by Wychavon Planners to review the work carried out to the end of 2020. It is written in a distinctly different tone—far more constructive than critical—compared with the document issued to the Council which implied that the current project documentation was deficient when all it needed was the funding to bring a local expert in as an advisor in specific specialist areas. This was not possible because the majority Group would not appoint the two additional members of the “Oversight Group” agreed by the Council last December.

I am now going to address individual paragraphs in the Report.

The writer refers to his perception of a breakdown in relationships between the MG and the Council. Apart from the frustration felt by the members of the MG over the failure to appoint representatives from the majority group, any disagreements that may have arisen from time to time were no different from any project in my experience where different opinions are expressed and so far, until now, at no time have the MG been influenced by politics. What is clear, is that the MG have been prevented, and still are, from defending their position fully. In the MG’s opinion, the report is a one-sided expression of opinion which more appropriately should have been given by a member of the majority group.

No account has been taken in the Report of the problems caused by COVID 19 which has restricted the work of the MG and its’ supporters and has had a serious impact on business and family relationships in the community and in the team.

The comments listed as 4c) and 4d) in the Report on the structure, quality and format of material are not unreasonable given the absence of funds to engage experts and, also, because at the beginning of 2021 the project was still at an early stage being 2 years away from the deadline for completion. The MG had already planned that an experienced volunteer would be invited join the Group once the Project was registered and funded by Locality to assist with the project in specialist areas and even have an input in writing the NHP. It is worth saying also that until the SWDP is complete at least through the public consultation stage we cannot finalise the project although both Wychavon and Locality recommend that the work should commence in advance preparing the groundwork.

Point 4f) is already accepted. Aspirational ideas are not part of the NHP, but most Neighbourhood Plans are supported by a document which sets out the clear objectives to be achieved for the town in the coming years such as the Westlands Ring Development for Westlands pedestrian safety.

Point I), recruitment of professional help, is not a subject of disagreement as the MG has always intended to seek professional input and did so in framing the questionnaire which, one year after the event, is now derided as unsuitable probably by the expert with a professional contract in mind. In fact, this criticism is contradicted by the evidence that 45% of Residents in another Parish Council responded to similar questions in the preparation of their approved NHP.

In section 5 and 6 the report refers to the project in Malvern which has been completed. The Report states that the cost to the Taxpayers in Malvern was more than £100,000 and that the estimate for

Droitwich Spa would, according to the writer, cost a similar amount because of significant consultancy costs. This is in contrast with the current project which Wychavon agreed last autumn could be done with expert help for £9000, the sum available at the time from Locality. The base figure has since been increased to £10,000 and a further Grant of £8000 is available for a large town like ours with over 25000 residents which the MG intended to use as a contingency with a focus on consultancy. Of course, the delays to the programme, no fault of the MG, may now result in higher costs than originally planned.

Finally, what needs to be said is that the MG has looked for help from members of the Majority Group since last autumn, but this has not happened although some members have shown initial interest, and it is now clear that a decision has been made by the Majority Group to launch a consultant driven project lead by a majority group councillor. As things stand, unless significant changes are made to the proposal which follows to ensure that local people, with professional skills particularly in areas such as project management are treated as equal members in a team environment. Being expected “to do what they are told” as has been stated will result in the few volunteers that are left leaving and this may threaten the overall cost of the project and the viability of the project itself.

Councillor GR Brookes responded as follows,

“Mr Mayor. I am frankly quite amazed at the outrageous behaviour of Cllrs Humphries and Hopkins in calling this additional ordinary meeting of the town council to transact business that could easily have waited for the next scheduled meeting in just two weeks' time. To be clear to members of the public present, this is not an “extraordinary” meeting at all, despite the misleading claims on the Volunteer group website and Facebook. It's just an additional meeting which is why it has been added to the end of the already scheduled committee meetings.

Having called this meeting, it seems Cllrs Humphries and Hopkins' only action is to propose a trivial motion to correct claimed errors. This is totally unnecessary since all the group had to do was contact me with a list of issues they wished to raise, and I would have actioned it. There is absolutely no need to waste everyone's time with extra meetings, and it is extraordinary that these two councillors think this is an appropriate use of council and officer time.

The document has no named authors. This motion is of no value since it relies on a flawed document. How can we discuss possible corrections to the alleged errors if we don't know who we are dealing with Mr Mayor, there is absolutely no merit in this vexatious motion and I will certainly not be supporting it”

The vote was taken as 4 in favour, 11 against and 1 abstention.

RESOLVED

Not to support the motion (Agenda Item 3 a).

That this Town Council:

Addresses and corrects incorrect statements that have been made, both written and verbal, as identified in the attached document concerning the Droitwich Spa Neighbourhood Plan and the Droitwich Spa Neighbourhood Plan Management Group. To this effect, the Droitwich Spa Neighbourhood Plan Management Group will deliver a short presentation to the Town Council which will explain their reaction to recent events which excluded them from defending their position and will allow them to correct erroneous statements made about them.”

The Chairman then proceeded with,

“We now move to Agenda item 3(b) and I will ask Cllr Brookes to propose the motion.”

Councillor GR Brookes updated the following,

“Mr Mayor. Since Cllrs Humphries and Hopkins have not seen fit to reaffirm this Council’s interest in a Neighbourhood Plan but called this meeting only to present a rather trivial and unnecessary motion which would have achieved nothing to support our volunteer group, I felt it was appropriate to present a positive motion to confirm the situation.

I would refer members to the report I presented at the last meeting. Copies will be available at the end of this meeting for anyone who would like one and the text will also be available as part of the published minutes of the last meeting. This full report of the possible options to continue with the Plan, which by the way was checked for accuracy by a planning professional, makes it clear that we can only seriously move forward when the revised version of the SWDP is published by Wychavon District Council. Anything we do with a Neighbourhood Plan must be in full conformity with the revised SWDP, so it is pointless to proceed until we know its content. I am not privy to what it contains of course, but I have been assured that there are some significant differences to the current version. I now present this motion as an opportunity for a breathing space so that this council can re-examine the situation once the SWDP revision is published and available to us. There is an added bonus to waiting, in that we are also expecting Wychavon to publish the Town Centres’ Masterplan which will of course include Droitwich. I have been advised that it is likely to contain much useful information that can be used in a Neighbourhood Plan.

There is a recommended “Leading National Expert” available to help decipher the requirements to implement and deliver a successful NHP Project. To maintain commitment and review best options and value, the Statutory Body (i.e. this Town Council) reserves the option to commission this Lead Professional to support and provide further informed advice – to coincide with the publication of the aforementioned SWDP Review – in due course. This approach will no doubt benefit all stake holders – including Elected Members, Officers and Volunteers who may wish to be involved in the project.

I further understand that there may be a possibility to arrange a speaker to provide training and information regarding Neighbourhood Plans for councillors and volunteers, and I will ask our Town Clerk to make enquiries to see if something can be arranged in the interim. If anyone is interested in attending such a session, please would they email our Town Clerk to express an interest should anything be arranged.

Councillor Brookes proposed the following motion.

“That due to the pivotal importance of the South Worcestershire Development Plan for informed consideration in determining the local detail and scope for Neighbourhood Plan options in Droitwich Spa - That any further discussion is deferred until completion of and full publication of the current revisions programme. At this stage this is anticipated to be during 2022”.

The Chairman then called on Councillor G Duffy to second the motion.
Councillor Duffy seconded the motion and responded as follows,

“I am disappointed to see another approach to the Town Council that shows no progress towards a Neighbourhood Plan and shows even further the contents of Cllr Brookes last report which detailed a lack of engagement with the Town Council or its representative. A Neighbourhood Plan is a Community project to express the mind of the town so collaboration and communication are key. Rather than support the Neighbourhood Plan group

to communicate properly with the Town Council, two Cllr's have called a meeting of the Town Council with a motive that certainly does nothing for the Town or the Neighbourhood Plan, so a political one is all I can see".

Councillor RJ Morris updated the following,

"As I initiated the development of a Neighbourhood Plan with three local community groups and Mrs K Hamilton, I can say that if we had been allowed to continue work I am sure it would be nearly complete by now.

I congratulate the Neighbourhood Plan Group on their work, but if ALL parties used the energy they put into distrust, annoyance, and abstention/delay, into working together for the Town's benefit, we could be well on our way to a Neighbourhood Plan for our Town.

We MUST work together on a neighbourhood plan to realise the many benefits it could bring:

- Ensure our open spaces are not built on
- Support the need for required recreation amenities
- List and preserve historic buildings
- Detail infrastructure requirements

To name a few....

If we had been afforded the opportunity to develop a Neighbourhood Plan in the 1970/80's we may still have some of our unique historic buildings and amenities

We need a joint meeting & training & agree jointly our way forward and de-politicise the process".

Councillor AM Sinton then updated on the following and proposed the amendment as outlined.

"Since this motion was originally tabled, it has been announced that there is a significant delay expected before the SWDPR is published and available to this council. So, with the full agreement of Cllr Brookes, I wish to propose an amendment to this motion to more accurately reflect the commitment of this Council to progressing a Neighbourhood Plan provided the Neighbourhood Plan Group will undertake to work co-operatively with this council. In order to support the group and keep the project on track we can use the time available to make Neighbourhood Planning training available to Councillors, Volunteers, and the public. I propose the following amendment:"

"Due to the pivotal importance of the SWDP development plan for informed consideration and in determining the local detail and scope for neighbourhood plan options in Droitwich Spa the Council recognises that the completion of the Droitwich Spa Neighbourhood Plan will not be fully practical before the full publication of the current revisions programme. This has been delayed until 2022. However, the Council also recognises the importance of moving forward with the NHP. It is therefore suggested that the training that can be provided by the national expert recommended by CALC should be provided for all councillors and other stakeholders, including the current NHP group at the earliest opportunity. Following this training the Council should liaise with the NHP group to examine work that has been done and areas that could still be addressed and consider any cost implications/requirements to deliver a beneficial plan for Droitwich."

“Due to the SWDP revision we now have an enforced break in activity until full details of the revised SWDP are published in due course. Hopefully this will be an opportunity to re-set the Neighbourhood Plan process with a fresh start.

I propose this amendment to the motion so that as soon as conditions permit, we can revisit the plan process.”

The Chairman asked Councillor G Duffy to second the amendment. Councillor Duffy seconded the amendment and responded as follows,

“It is unfortunate that the pandemic interfered with the training and subsequent elected member group that had been motioned but I still believe this is the way forward and fully support this different avenue to access that training. And if these delays are the worst a person has suffered during the pandemic, I would consider them lucky

I hope to look forward to a Neighbourhood Plan that offers value for the potential costs so as well as the thought that went into the project plan displayed on their website I hope to see the detailed spending plan required for the use of public funds when we are better informed to be able to partner it with the SWDP as is a requirement.

This amendment for the motion clarifies the present situation, provides an opportunity for everyone to increase their knowledge of Neighbourhood Planning, and it will have my full support. I second this motion.”

The Chairman advised that, “We will now vote on the amendment only.”

The vote was taken as 12 in favour, none against and 4 abstentions.

RESOLVED

To support the amendment for (Agenda Item 3 b).

That due to the pivotal importance of the SWDP development plan for informed consideration and in determining the local detail and scope for neighbourhood plan options in Droitwich Spa the Council recognises that the completion of the Droitwich Spa Neighbourhood Plan will not be fully practical before the full publication of the current revisions programme. This has been delayed until 2022.

However, the Council also recognises the importance of moving forward with the NHP. It is therefore suggested that the training that can be provided by the national expert recommended by CALC should be provided for all Councillors and other stakeholders, including the current NHP group at the earliest opportunity. Following this training the Council should liaise with the NHP group to examine work that has been done and areas that could still be addressed and consider any cost implications/requirements to deliver a beneficial plan for Droitwich.”

The Chairman declared that,
"This amendment is clearly carried and will now form part of the substantive motion [for agenda item 3(b)] and we will now take to the vote".
The vote was taken as 12 in favour, 4 against and no abstentions.

RESOLVED

To support the substantive motion.

That due to the pivotal importance of the SWDP development plan for informed consideration and in determining the local detail and scope for neighbourhood plan options in Droitwich Spa the Council recognises that the completion of the Droitwich Spa Neighbourhood Plan will not be fully practical before the full publication of the current revisions programme. This has been delayed until 2022.

However, the Council also recognises the importance of moving forward with the NHP. It is therefore suggested that the training that can be provided by the national expert recommended by CALC should be provided for all Councillors and other stakeholders, including the current NHP group at the earliest opportunity. Following this training the Council should liaise with the NHP group to examine work that has been done and areas that could still be addressed and consider any cost implications/requirements to deliver a beneficial plan for Droitwich."

The Chairman thanked everyone for attending and closed the meeting.
The meeting ended at 8.10 pm.

Chairman of Council -----
27 September 2021