

Woodley Town Council

Minutes of the Annual Town Electors Meeting held virtually on
Tuesday 25 May 2021 at 7 pm

Present: *Councillors J. Sartorel (Chairman); J. Anderson; D. Bragg; S. Brindley; J. Cheng; M. Forrer; K. Gilder; A. Heap; R. Horskins; C. Jewell; B. Rowland; R. Skegg;*

WTC Officers: *D. Mander; K. Murray; A. Ransley; M. Filmore; B. Fennelly*

Also present: *Jake Morrison (Citizens' Advice Bureau)
Peter Absolon (Readibus)
Marjie Walker (The Link Visiting Scheme)
Jayne Streak (Friendship Alliance)
Richard Davies (Woodley Food Bank)
Tracy Ward (Woodley Volunteer for Covid 19 Facebook Group)
3 other members of the public*

Apologies: *Councillors K. Baker; A. Chadwick; S. Rahmouni; P. Wicks*

1. **TOWN MAYOR WELCOME**

The Mayor welcomed everyone to the Town Electors' meeting, highlighting a new format this year where participants share and celebrate how the community has come together during the pandemic with presentations from those who have worked with local residents.

2. **PRESENTATIONS**

2.1 **Jake Morrison, Citizens' Advice Bureau**

Jake explained that the organisation currently undertakes three key activities; providing a volunteer led, free advice and information service dealing with day to day, practical problems people have, including finance, housing, and employment law; operating 'one front door' during Covid and referring people on to other services where the Citizen's Advice Bureau cannot help; research and campaigns which analyse and try to understand the issues that are going on and why.

During 2020/21, 750 people in Woodley were supported; this was a 48% increase on the previous year. The support led to an income gain of over £103k for these individuals, as well as over £12k of debts being written off.

A number of case studies were presented. One resident with mental health issues, who struggled to access the service, was appointed an individual adviser to provide a consistent point of contact. The organisation helped the individual to apply for a Personal Independence Payment, greatly increasing their household income. Another individual was supported to resolve a debt issue with their water and energy companies. The organisation also helped a couple receive food support during the pandemic. While working on the case it was identified that one of the residents, who had a terminal illness, required a specialised bed. Citizen's Advice helped the couple received an emergency grant from United Charities to purchase a suitable bed and received support from the Woodley Covid Group to remove the old bed.

Jake ended the presentation by highlighting some of the positive feedback received from those who had accessed the service. He stated that the organisation can be contacted six days a week on their advice line (Mon-Fri 9am-5pm / Sat 9am-1pm - 0808 278 7958), with the Woodley office likely to open two days a week from July/August to provide face to face support, although the organisation has been meeting vulnerable clients at the Oakwood Centre, with the Town Council's help, where necessary during the pandemic.

2.2 **Peter Absolon, Readibus**

Peter explained that the organisation provides a door to door transport service, with additional assistance from the driver, helping individuals overcome barriers to travelling on public buses. Residents who access the service tend to be elderly or disabled, and needed to continue to get out during the pandemic for activities such as attending doctor's or hospital appointments, or a vaccination clinic, or food shopping.

Peter told the story of some of the residents who have used the service during the pandemic. One 90 year old described Readibus as the best service someone of her age could have. She felt safe travelling with Readibus and was much happier to have got out as it would've been difficult to start going out again had she stopped. Another individual highlighted how lucky she was that Readibus enabled her to safely attend appointments and get food shopping during the pandemic.

Peter also highlighted that the organisation had worked closely with the Ambulance service. One individual, receiving regular cancer treatment during the pandemic, stated that using Readibus had taken all the worry out of travelling.

Readibus implemented a new set of procedures when the pandemic hit to ensure users and staff were kept safe; including social distancing, individual transport for the particularly vulnerable, PPE, and new training for staff with advice from the Ambulance service. Ultimately, the service provided 2,187 safe journeys during the year.

Peter concluded by telling the story of an individual whose husband of 65 years died during the pandemic. She had previously used the service with her husband but had stopped, with relatives helping with shopping. She decided that she must get out for herself, so started using the service again and was so pleased she did. She expressed her thanks to Woodley Town Council for supporting the Readibus service.

2.3 **Marjie Walker, The Link Visiting Scheme, & Jayne Streak, Friendship Alliance**

Marjie explained that the Link Visiting Scheme supports people struggling with loneliness and isolation. Whilst there is no specific age range for the service, focus tends to be on the elderly as this is the biggest area of need. Individuals are supported by a one to one befriending services and through a programme of activities and events.

During the pandemic there was a huge impact on service users, especially the most vulnerable. The befriending service had to be redesigned to solely provide telephone support, but grew from supporting 350 people to just over 700 at the height of the pandemic, and now to just under 500 people, 78 of which live in Woodley. Support is provided by over 400 volunteers, 33 of which reside in Woodley.

The organisation joined forces with other local charities and Wokingham Borough Council to form the Community Response Team. Temporary welfare calls were made to just under 3,000 people who were shielding to provide social support and advice. Just over 16,000 calls were made during this time, with each reported back to the Borough Council; 556 people in Woodley were supported. Following 140 referrals from Adult Social Services, the organisation supported a further 25 individuals within Woodley during the second lockdown.

The organisation also recruited over 650 new volunteers for the Community Response Team, rapidly introducing new processes and virtual training sessions to support those taking calls.

Volunteers delivered over 500 support packages to those on the long term befriending project to ensure no one felt forgotten; this included 60 Woodley residents. Regular newsletters were also sent by post to keep vulnerable people updated. Volunteers delivered over 100 hot meals on Christmas day to people in isolation. Virtual friendship groups were also implemented via

Zoom, and a Link Online project was launched which delivered tablet computers and training to help people connect.

Moving out of lockdown the organisation realised that many members had lost their mobility and confidence, so worked with Wokingham Borough Council's Sports and Leisure team and Occupational Therapists to provide individual support to get people mobile again.

The organisation continues to need more volunteers, and Marjie invited anyone who might be interested to get in touch; more information is available on the organisations website.

Jayne provided details of the Friendship Alliance project. Initially the aim was to set up friendship tables across a number of cafes but when restrictions prohibited this an online café was set up, with people meeting for 2 hours every Wednesday via Zoom. Following the relaxation of restrictions the group have been able to meet twice in Woodford Park for a walk followed by a coffee. The project is now seeking to set up in-person Friendship Tables.

Jayne gave an example of one Woodley resident who, having referred herself to the Link Visiting Scheme in January 2021, had started attending the Online Café. She had previously been active in the community but Covid restrictions had meant she was no longer able to go out. She has attended the Online Café weekly, and through this has also been involved with an online arts and crafts group, the Moving with Confidence project, and the Linked Nature project, and has gained a lot from the experiences she has been having.

2.4 Richard Davies, Woodley Food Bank

Richard explained that the Food Bank had a long established presence in Woodley, having operated for about 10 years. Historically the service only operated in the mornings and did not provide many deliveries, however this changed during the pandemic when demand for the service, especially deliveries, increased significantly.

The pandemic created a lot of new demand for support from people who had traditionally not needed support; this included the clinically vulnerable, as well as those who were cautious, shielding, furloughed, newly unemployed or unable to work. Previously people accessing support tended to be those who struggling financially, but the pandemic caused an increase in demand from people who could afford to pay but simply couldn't get out to get food.

Richard commented that community support during the pandemic had been stunning. The amount of food donated rose to another level and met demand. The organisation also recruited a substantial number of new volunteers. People have enjoyed volunteering, and many have indicated they continue even when work levels return to normal.

The Food Bank also received support from the SFL Group who supplied a van once a week to assist with the transport of food parcels and donations. The organisation cooperated with Wokingham Covid Response Unit to share supplies and donations.

Richard explained it was a tremendous team effort, with the community supplying the food, and volunteers packing and delivering. Whilst demand is dropping off slightly, this may increase later in the year when the Furlough scheme ends. Richard ended by stating they are always keen to hear from people who either need, or know people who need support, or who want to offer support. Details can be found on the organisations Facebook page.

2.5 Tracy Ward, Woodley Volunteer for Covid 19 Facebook Group

Tracy explained that, after two individual groups had initially formed at the start of the pandemic, a combined Woodley Volunteer for Covid 19 Facebook Group was set up. Members of the community encouraged each other to join the group, and there are currently around 1,500 members.

The group recruited a Road Coordinator for every one of Woodley's 300+ roads. Every house in Woodley received a card with the name of their Road Coordinator and the group's details, with people responding to say they were really grateful to know support was available.

The group arranged gifts for individuals at certain times of the year, providing children with birthday and Christmas presents, as well as distributing bottles of water and snack bars to key workers. They also arranged an out of hours collection point for the Food Bank; one resident had boxes outside their house 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, even on Christmas day, to receive collections, with nearly 100,000 items donated.

The group helped to link residents needing support with the organisations and volunteers who could help them. Tracy ended by stating the community had worked well as a whole, and hopefully made a difference to people.

2.6 **Deborah Mander, Woodley Town Council Town Clerk**

The Town Clerk provided an updated on the Town Council's activities over the past year, and how the council responded to the pandemic.

By April 2020, the Town Council had set up new ways of working, including home working and Covid risk assessments, and buildings had been adapted to meet Covid guidelines. The Council was able to claim for Furlough for employees unable to work due to the pandemic and topped this up to the employees full salary; this really supported employees, especially those on part-time or lower hours contracts.

Full Council first met on 23rd June, with Committee meetings beginning in July. The Town Council, expecting to face a severe reduction in income, tasked the Urgency Committee with looking at the Council's finances and £87,500 was released to cover potential losses.

In September the Council started to seek views on the precept for the 2021/22 year. Around 22% of residents responded to the survey, 43% of which supported a 50% increase. However returns also highlighted some residents were struggling financially and ultimately it was decided to increase the precept by only £6.77 per year based on a Band D property.

The Town Clerk stated it had been a delight to see how many people have been using Woodford Park over the past 14 months, and thanked Council Members from 1918 onwards who kept buying parcels of land to create the park. The Council has also been able to continue providing space at the Oakwood Centre for blood donations and family support sessions, which have continued during lockdown, as well for Covid vaccinations.

The Town Clerk thanked the Friends of Woodford Park for managing the flower beds, which have looked amazing during the year, and to all colleagues who have kept services running in the face of ever changing guidelines.

Looking ahead, during the next year there is a project to install a new play area in Woodford Park; £200k has been provided from section 106 money for the project and the Council is seeking views from members of the public on the three possible designs. Other projects include removing the algae in the lake at Woodford Park using barley sausages, completing the refurbishment of the Maintenance Depot, replacing the low fencing in Woodford Park, restricting unauthorised access to Malone Park and putting pathways into the little play area, and developing a SLA to support Young People in Woodley.

The year also sadly saw the death of two serving Councillors; Jon MacNaught and Dave Mills, who was the serving Mayor. The Town Clerk expressed her appreciation for all their work and stated that the Council's and residents thoughts go out to their families.

4. **QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC**

4.1 *When will the Town Centre garden be completed, and how will it be maintained and the rubbish managed?*

The Deputy Town Clerk confirmed that the Council has allocated money to plant the garden, and a planting plan has been agreed by the Leisure Services Committee. The Council is currently waiting for Wokingham Borough Council to undertake works on trees within the garden before commencing with planting; the Borough Council, who own the trees, are waiting until early Summer to assess the condition of the trees before commencing the works.

The Town Council received a lot of volunteer interest to help with the planting and be involved with the garden moving forward. These people will be contacted to see if they still wish to be involved once planting is ready to proceed. Maintenance will form part of the Grounds Team's maintenance regime, but it is hoped some volunteer support will continue in respect of the maintenance of the plants. Also, going forward, the Council is interested to hear from community groups that might have suggestions about alternative uses for the space, for example for art installations.

4.2 *Reading Voluntary Action completed a well informed and thorough survey of young people's needs across Reading, although this did not include Woodley schools it did identify 4 areas of need which we believe are very relevant to the young people of Woodley. These are:*

- *Mental health and wellbeing, especially tackling loneliness*
- *Being and feeling safe*
- *Creating a sense of community*
- *Widening the diversity of activities and opportunities available for young people.*

We would like to know how these areas of need are being addressed within the town.

Currently there is little non-faith-based youth support in Woodley and we would like to ask how Woodley Town Council hopes to support all young people of any faith in the future.

The Town Clerk confirmed that Chris Moore has been taken on as a consultant to work with the Council on a youth strategy. From that a SLA will be developed to go out to tender.

The Town Clerk highlighted that the results of the Reading Voluntary Action survey were similar to that of Berkshire Youth Survey, where mental health and anxiety have scored high in response. This will definitely form part of the strategy for whoever wins the tender.

Councillor Skegg agreed there is currently a lack of non-faith based support in Woodley. He stated the town is blessed with a lot of particularly church based groups which offer their services, but confirmed the SLA will be open to any groups that apply for it and that the Council wants to see a diverse range of organisations tendering for the work in order to represent as many children and young people as possible.

4.3 Councillor Anderson highlighted that no other questions had been received prior to the meeting. A number of other suggestions had been made however, due to the lateness of the hour, it was confirmed that these suggestions, along with a response from the Town Council, would be published on the website. She encouraged any resident who might have a question or query in future to write to the Council.

5. **MEETING CLOSE**

The Mayor brought the meeting to a close by offering her thanks to those who had taken part; she stated she felt humbled and moved by the things that have been said. She also thanked those residents who have attended or viewed the meeting.

The Council hopes to expand on this format of meeting next year, and to continue to celebrate our wonderful town.

The meeting closed at 8:00 pm

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