

Minutes of a PARISH MEETING of the Local Electors of the Parish of Crowborough held at Crowborough Community Centre on Monday 12th January 2015 at 7.30pm.

This meeting was called by the following electors:

Roger Bishop	Hilary Lyon
David Brooker	Rosalind Marriott
Brian Dalby	Malcolm Place
Anthony Holcombe	Andrew Stevens
Alan Hooper	Clive Wilson

Town Councillors present:

Quentin Burch	Ron Reed
Michael Cooke	Wendy Scrace
Peter Cowie	David Shaw
Philip Fermor	Andrew Steen
Beverley Johnstone	Matthew Street
George Moss	Sandra Timms
Kay Moss	

In attendance:

WDC Councillors:	David Larkin, Ken Ogden, Di Phillips
ESCC Councillors:	Sylvia Tidy
Philippa Hewes	Town Clerk + 7 members of staff
Two members of the press	

463 members of the public

The meeting was chaired by the Town Mayor, Cllr Ron Reed, assisted by the Deputy Mayor, Cllr Kay Moss.

The meeting did not commence until 7.50pm due to the large number of people attending, all of whom needed to be checked against the electoral roll. Some people were accommodated in a meeting room downstairs to which the proceedings were relayed in sound only, but were able to participate in the voting procedure.

MAYOR'S INTRODUCTION

The Mayor welcomed all those present. He explained that the meeting would be sound recorded and that only those people listed on the electoral roll of Crowborough parish, would be permitted to vote.

APOLOGIES

Nus Ghani, Conservative Parliamentary Candidate for Wealden
Cllr Stephen Isted, Wealden Councillor for Jarvis Brook

Cllr Neil Waller, Wealden and Town Councillor for North Ward
Cllr Richard Stogdon, East Sussex County Councillor
Richard Wilkinson, Finance Director, Crowborough Community Association (CCA)
Andrew Stevens, assentor to the meeting
David Brooker, assentor to the meeting
Caroline Button, dance teacher at Crowborough Community Centre (CCC)

TO RECEIVE THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 9TH APRIL 2014

The Minutes of the meeting held on 9th April 2014 were approved and signed.

RESOLUTIONS TO BE CONSIDERED AT THE MEETING

The Mayor explained that four Resolutions had been submitted in advance of the meeting. The resolutions would be considered in turn; each would be read out by its proposer, who would speak about the proposal, followed by a debate from the floor and, finally, a vote. The Mayor read out the list of Resolutions and the names of their proposers.

JUSTIFICATION FOR THE MEETING

The Mayor called on each of the ten assentors to give their reasons for calling the meeting:

Roger Bishop – the future of CCC would be endangered by the demolition of Pine Grove. Wealden seems determined to ignore the opinions of the people of Crowborough and the Town Council on issues that affect Crowborough.

Alan Hooper – the people of Crowborough should be consulted. CCC had cost £2.7M, but although now successful and self-sufficient, its future is threatened. The creation of a business hub next door would provide space to run businesses, administered by an experienced and successful company. Pine Grove is the only site that could provide additional employment space within the town.

Malcolm Place – Wealden vacated Pine Grove after forcing the CCA to pay for double glazing and is now threatening to remove the CCC car park. The views of others in Crowborough must be represented.

Brian Dalby – U3A is a big user of CCC and has been able to grow its membership and activities exponentially due to the hall facilities; U3A members need such facilities on their doorstep with adjacent parking.

Anthony Holcombe – the voice of Crowborough is not being listened to regarding the changing centre of the town.

Hilary Lyon – the building next door should be retained for business use in the town centre; this will help to protect the CCC.

Clive Wilson – the CCC site is being compromised on all four sides by its landlord, Wealden, due to additional proposed housing development involving the demolition of Pine Grove and the library. It is important to stand up for the town that we live in.

Rosalind Marriott – Crowborough has waited decades to have this much needed community centre; there is a golden opportunity to create a business hub next door which, together with CCC, can support the whole community. Wealden is not complying with its own plan for the Pine Grove site.

David Brooker – (not present – his statement was read out by the Mayor). It is important to retain Pine Grove for commercial use, particularly to replace jobs lost when Wealden moved to Hailsham. Concern at the loss of the library and parking.

Andrew Stevens – (not present – his statement was read out by the Mayor).

Concern that Wealden has abandoned the future of the town. There is increasing potential for new business within the town and the retention of Pine Grove as an enterprise centre would be a good indication that Wealden cares about the future of Crowborough.

BACKGROUND TO THE ISSUES OF THE MEETING

Clive Wilson provided supporting information, assisted by projected maps of the town. The position of the 160-house development at Walshes Manor was highlighted, along with the site of the adjacent SANGS, which will also be required to mitigate development at Pine Grove. The loss was explained of various town centre car parking areas over the last few years to permit the expansion of Waitrose and creation of Morrisons. The Mead House car park, intended to replace the lost parking, is soon to disappear itself under housing development on Pine Grove. Hookstead, owned by ESCC, was closed as a care home two years ago and refurbished as office space to house the registrar's office, which moved from Beaconwood, now boarded up pending demolition.

FIRST RESOLUTION

Roger Bishop read out and spoke in support of his Resolution:

'Crowborough condemns Wealden District Council's misuse of the planning system to further its own financial interests at the expense of the community, employment opportunities and the economic future of Crowborough.'

Wealden is not engaging with the people of Crowborough, the Town Council, Chamber of Commerce or CCA regarding the future of Pine Grove. Income from a future business hub could be used to fund future community projects, whereas the millions to be paid to Wealden from the sale of the site will not be used to benefit Crowborough. The loss of Pine Grove does not comply with Wealden's own planning policy and will mean an uncertain future for the library and CCC will be blighted by being surrounded by a building site for two years. The candidates for the local by-election on 22nd January were called upon to campaign to save Pine Grove.

In open debate the following points and questions were raised:-

- Shame that Wealden has ignored the wishes and welfare of Crowborough.
- How could the purchase of the Pine Grove building and land be financed?
- The extra care flats could be accommodated on the site of Hookstead.
- Wealden was not expressly invited to send a representative to the meeting but every Crowborough Councillor from the Town, District and County Councils was informed about the meeting.
- What can realistically be done about the situation?

- The Conservative by-election candidate supports both the business hub and the proposed 35% affordable housing on the rest of the site.
- The plan to build 80 flats on the site of Pine Grove is outside Wealden's own Local Plan (Core Strategy) and is additional to the 300 homes agreed for Crowborough.
- The Town Council is considering a plan to take out a loan to buy Pine Grove, to be repaid by Crowborough tax payers over 25 years; the matter would have to be decided by referendum because Council Tax would rise by about £30 p.a. per band D property.
- Council Tax was raised once before in order to repay the public loan to build CCC; this could happen again and would be viable because of the revenue generated by the business hub.
- An application should be made for funds from the EU Convergence Fund, which requires match funding and exists to assist local residents trying to regenerate their communities.
- It is possible, given a successful referendum, that the resulting rise in Council Tax could be reduced if the hub is commercially successful. The building is a community asset and should not be asset stripped by Wealden, especially as Crowborough comprises one sixth of the population of Wealden. Additional housing will be built in contravention of the 7km rule yet no further employment opportunities can be provided within the town if Pine Grove is lost. Town Council/CCA collaboration is required to provide a long term strategic investment for the town.
- Last October, Wealden's Cabinet agreed to give £1M to the Ashdown Forest; this money could be diverted to assist with the Pine Grove initiative. Wealden Councillors were informed that, should the Walshes Manor application be approved, the resulting SANGS would not only enable the sale of Pine Grove to proceed, but would mitigate other development in neighbouring parishes.
- All Crowborough Councillors objected to the Walshes Road planning application but they were ignored by Wealden. Members voted along party lines; this may happen again with regard to Pine Grove unless there is a scheme to buy it.

Public vote: unanimously in favour of the Resolution.

SECOND RESOLUTION

Ade Morris, Chairman of Crowborough Players, read out and spoke in support of his Resolution:

'Crowborough calls upon Crowborough Town Council to ensure the future viability of the Crowborough Community Centre in whatever way it can.'

CCC is a brilliant community facility which has enabled many community groups to flourish, including Crowborough Players, which has been able to increase its membership from 20 to 70 and create a new youth group. The town now needs a business hub too; the Town Council must act to save Pine Grove.

In open debate the following points and questions were raised:-

- To continue to succeed, CCC needs adequate parking nearby and to be surrounded by the right ambience. Being positioned 6 yards away from flats and hemmed in by development on the other side does not create the right environment. Wealden Councillors must consider the impact of their decisions, rather than short-term profit.
- The political stranglehold on Wealden must be broken. Wealden has taken a very hardnosed approach to the EU Habitats Regulations, whereas the other five councils affected have taken a more pragmatic view. Local firms wishing to expand are having to relocate and taking jobs with them.
- Wealden must engage in proper dialogue with the Town Council and other groups over the matter of Pine Grove.
- Wealden could be invited to send representatives to the next Town Meeting on 4th March. The efforts of the CCA and Town Council to secure the wishes of the people of Crowborough constitute local democracy or localism, which is promoted by the government. The planning application for the flats is expected by the middle of this year.
- How can Wealden circumvent its own Local Plan? Would a petition help?
- The Leader of Wealden has agreed to a local exhibition of the plans for the flats, which may allay some fears.
- In answer to a direct question, the developer of the proposed flats has stated that some community facilities will be incorporated into the development, including a new library, hairdressers and restaurant. There will be no residential staff, some of the flats will be sold on the open market and the rest will be social housing.
- A public exhibition of the plans would not make people content to lose Pine Grove and car parking. The flats should be built on the woodland area instead.
- If Hookstead was sold for housing, the registrar's office could move into the business hub at Pine Grove.
- There is a problem with council mismanagement; there should be a vote of no confidence in Wealden District Council.
- The arguments are too political; the solution should be based on common sense, such as the Town Council selling the old CCA hall site to help fund the purchase of Pine Grove.

Public vote: unanimously in favour of the Resolution.

THIRD RESOLUTION

Hugh Fenton read out and spoke in support of his Resolution:

'Crowborough calls upon the Town Council and CCA to

- **do everything possible to bring the existing Pine Grove office buildings under Crowborough's ownership and control;**
- **to preserve and promote them for future business use;**

- **and to secure the associated car parking at Pine Grove together with the existing library and expanded community uses in accordance with local and national planning policy and to report back to the 2015 Crowborough Town Meeting.'**

As a business coach with clients ranging from startups upwards, he has clients who use business hubs in Kent and Sussex. Several of his Crowborough clients cannot find suitable office space within the town, which would indicate demand for a business hub.

In open debate the following points and questions were raised:-

- Wealden has only recently started monitoring nitrogen on the Ashdown Forest and no conclusive results will be available for 5 years. In the meantime, there is a complete embargo on the creation of new business premises in the area apart from over 20,000sq.m. in Maresfield. Crowborough is expanding, yet there will be no new jobs or business premises within the town and jobs are being lost as companies relocate elsewhere. The Chamber of Commerce supports the planning application for a business hub at Pine Grove because it represents the only possibility for the creation of new jobs. If Wealden Councillors refuse to vote as instructed, along party lines, they get deselected.
- Wealden do not engage in the resolution of problems, its behaviour is not reasonable, they do not care about Crowborough.
- Most young people move away from the town due to the lack of jobs and because it is difficult to start new enterprises within the town. If the trend towards an ageing population is to be halted, younger people need to be attracted to stay by providing business opportunities.
- East Sussex and Wealden make decisions prior to meetings at which decisions are supposed to be made; will the same thing happen with regard to Pine Grove?

Public vote: unanimously in favour of the Resolution.

FOURTH RESOLUTION

Peter Ellefsen, Chairman of Western Road Residents' Association (WRRRA), addressed the meeting prior to reading out his Resolution:

Despite all efforts by WRRRA and others to ensure East Sussex Highways and Wealden understand the full extent of the traffic problems in southern Crowborough, all representation has been ignored. Thanks to the Town Council, WRRRA was recently able to put forward its own traffic scheme for Western Road; a non-committal response to this was received from Highways only late this afternoon. WRRRA is also seeking legal advice concerning the case for Judicial Review of the Walshes Manor planning application. Any legal action would be on behalf of the whole town and would require a town-wide public fundraising campaign. The population of Crowborough has almost tripled since the 1960s, with most of the expansion in the southern half of the town. Little investment has correspondingly

been made in the local road network, which can barely cope. Western Road is simply the worst manifestation of a more widespread problem and additional development should be halted until the road network has been made fit for purpose. Therefore:

'Western Road Residents' Association proposes that no further development, either housing, commercial or industrial, be permitted in the southern half of Crowborough (to be identified roughly as that section of the town south of Montargis Way) prior to the completion of a major road improvement scheme and/or bypass situated in that section of the town to be funded from sources not limited to developer funding.'

In open debate the following points and questions were raised:-

- The road and traffic problems also affect Whitehill Road, Queens Road, Hurtis Hill, Sheep Plain, Luxford Road and other roads in the area.
- The government needs to deal with the rising population and therefore rising car use, which is leading to total gridlock.
- No real investment in infrastructure is being made in Crowborough due to the fact that only 300 homes are being built in the town. Rydon Homes has, however, offered the SANGS land adjacent to Walshes Manor. Wealden is therefore profiting from the Walshes Manor development because the SANGS will enable Wealden to sell off its own land at Pine Grove for housing.

Public vote: unanimously in favour of the Resolution.

FIFTH RESOLUTION

A further Resolution was proposed by Elaine Cox:

'A vote of no confidence in Wealden District Council.'

Public vote: unanimously in favour of the Resolution.

The Mayor declared the meeting closed at 9.40pm.