

Report

Present: Councillors;

A Fleming, (Chair), A Baldwin P Dutton, S Leverett, R Lewis, M Took, N Rees (Town Clerk), District Cllr Tony Goldson, 34 representatives from Halesworth Businesses.

The businesses that recorded their attendance: AWD Goldsmith, Boutique, C A Palmers, Cheries, Children's Society, Coopers, Densons Jewellers, Edwards Café, Focus Organic, Gecko Shoes, Halesworth Stationers, Halesworth Toy Shop, Hughes, Jeffrey's Opticians, Just Nice Things, Number Seven Hair, Pinkys, Rehability, Remnants, Richardson's, Spar, The Hideout Café, The House of Flowers, Thoroughfare Deli, Tres Belle, Valeries, Wotsits.

The Chair thanked Cllr Goldson for attending in spite of the fact that he was unwell and due to the Chair's other commitment the meeting would need to be closed by 6.45pm. If it was not possible to take all the questions the questions would be recorded by the Clerk and answered after the meeting. A report of the meeting would be made available online and by email as soon as possible.

The Chair wished to confirm that HTC had at no time said that it was not willing to pay towards retaining the one hour free parking but that simply the Council could not afford to pay the amount requested by WDC, i.e. 17.5k in the first year, 25k in the second and 34k in the third year and onwards. The Chair had roughly estimated that the final figure (£34k) would, she thought, add approximately £30 to the Council Tax bill for every householder [note this was not calculated using the latest tax base, a D band house would pay £21 for example]. The Chair confirmed that there had been an offer of £10,000 at one point however this was part of a three year payment plan which still culminated in the third year figure of £34k and then onwards year on year at that level or higher. The Chair referring to the many times Bungay had been compared to Halesworth publicly by WDC wished to explain the differences. Bungay's District Councillor offered to pay £5,000, the town traders offered £2,000, leaving the Town Council to pay £3,000. Cllr Goldson would have offered the same amount had the figure not been revised to £17,500 with the three year plan previously mentioned. The Chair also compared the on street parking that Bungay enjoys and the free car parks that Beccles has as well as the considerable differences in venue and assets. Halesworth by contrast has no significant on street parking and no appreciable assets nor any venue other than the small amounts of Market and Allotment rents.

Cllr Goldson explained the history behind the introduction of the one hour free parking. Cllr Goldson also explained the offer made to WDC which involved repricing the rates on other car parks and the other rates for over one hour, which based on WDC figures would have produced the revenues that WDC required. However this was rejected almost immediately.

It was noted by the Chair and Cllr Goldson that there had been many attempts to communicate with WDC to find a resolution and presently there were several meeting requests logged with WDC.

A question was asked to why WDC's were saying that HTC are not communicating with them. Cllr Goldson stated that he had been in constant communication with various members of WDC arguing the case for Halesworth in collaboration with HTC. Cllr Goldson confirmed that he was aware that Cllr Law had offered 10k for the first year but the issue was the amounts required for all the following years.

A question was asked as to why this had not been resolved before because the Council had known about it since October, 2015. Cllr Goldson responded that the Business Community had been invited on two separate occasions to put forward suggestions and had been asked to contribute.

Some of those attended stated that they had not been asked to contribute. Cllr Goldson responded that those who had attended the meetings in December 2015 had suggested that it was added to the Precept. It was stated again by several of those attending that they had not been asked to contribute to the £10k. Cllr Goldson explained again that it was not just £10k, it was the following years that were unsustainable.

At this point it was confirmed by several members of the business community that at a recent private meeting with Cllr Law & Andrew Jarvis it was stated by Cllr Law that the first year was on offer at £10k without a contract for three years and that after the first year WDC would assess it again. This was news to both HTC and Cllr Goldson as neither had known about this offer. Cllr Goldson wished to make it perfectly clear that during his long periods of negotiation with WDC at no point had this offer been made in writing or verbally.

It was asked why WDC were not at this meeting, it was confirmed by other members of the business community that had attended the meeting with Cllr Law, and also by Cllr Goldson that they had refused the offer to attend the meeting.

A question was asked why HTC were not informing the town what they were doing with the negotiation with WDC. The Chair confirmed that the website contained all the minutes of the Council, Town Development and Town Forum meetings where the parking had been discussed many times and updates were regularly given in the Community News.

One trader could not understand why HTC were having problems persuading WDC to attend meetings as a recent meeting with businesses and Cllr Law had been arranged at short notice. The Clerk confirmed that there had been an email received on the 2nd June from WDC acknowledging the various requests received from HTC for meetings and public meetings. In this email it confirmed the dates suggested were not convenient and this highlighted the problems HTC were having in sitting down with WDC to resolve the matter

The Chair suggested that a solution to keep the business community informed would be for them to appoint one or two contacts so the Clerk has a central contact point to send emails so that HTC can keep them all updated.

A trader requested whether HTC could try again to arrange a meeting with WDC to include the businesses.

A question was asked as to what reserves the Town Council had. The Clerk confirmed that the Audit would be available online shortly but roughly the Council had a total of £180,000 of which £40,000 were earmarked funds raised by GAPP for the Play equipment. The balance would be in the region of £140,000. Clearly this would be consumed very quickly if the Council had to pay the full amount for the free parking. A trader made the point that WDC made £60,000 profit out of the car parks in Halesworth. The Precept is paid by residents in Halesworth and some might take exception to paying for free parking to support businesses in the town where the owners reside outside the town, he said. However, the trader concluded we were all in this together and that perhaps the Council might consider contributing along with the businesses in the way that Bungay had.

Cllr Took asked whether Bungay were in the same position with regard to higher costs in years two and three. Cllr Goldson was not able to confirm this but Bungay were offered the same deal but as Bungay's car parks were not used as much as the car parks in Halesworth, it was likely that the costs were much less.

The Chair confirmed that there were residents that would not be happy with simply adding the cost to the Precept, one way to find out conclusively would be to have a referendum but this would be a long and costly process.

A point was made regarding the attempt to have the Chair of Halesworth Business Connections attend a meeting with HTC and WDC had resulted in the then Chair of HBC not turning up. This demonstrated the need to have better communication, a point raised many times during the meeting.

It was noted that the one trader had obtained initial figures from WDC that showed there were over 1,000 less issued by the ticket machines during April and this demonstrated a huge drop in visitors to

the town. The Chair confirmed that HTC had just received more figures from WDC today but were awaiting figures for all the car parks so a proper evaluation could be made.

It was noted that WDC would ultimately be losing revenue from business rates if this situation carried on as businesses were suffering and some had already closed. The Chair made special reference to the very useful information from Coopers which showed that sales were down in Halesworth (8.6%) and up in Bungay (13.1%) and Beccles (26.0%).

Cllr Dutton took the time to explain in detail the plan HTC offered to WDC which would have resulted (on paper) the amount of revenue WDC were looking for but still retaining the one hour free parking. This offer had been rejected the next day which led Cllr Dutton to conclude it had not been considered carefully. Cllr Dutton reaffirmed the problems HTC had with getting WDC to come to meetings to discuss the problem.

Cllr Goldson referred again to the meeting between the businesses and Cllr Law and Andrew Jarvis and requested; 'Please would you tell me exactly what was said at the meeting as it was obvious that many of those present were very upset about it'. Cllr Goldson needed to know what was promised so he take this information back to WDC. Several traders confirmed that the offer was £10k for the first year and although the 2nd year (£22k) and 3rd year (£34k) figures were mentioned, the point was that after the first year this could be re-negotiated again. One reason given for this was that a large part of the car park was leased off Tesco and the future of this part of the car park was not known. Cllr Goldson asked about the cost of recalibrating the ticket machines. It was confirmed that the cost was approximately £2,500 but that WDC would absorb that cost. It was noted that WDC had said that they would review the parking charges and may be able to reduce them however they were bound to keep charges in line with other WDC car parks in the district. WDC were also asked if they would double the number of free spaces and at the same time reduce the free time from one hour to half an hour. WDC confirmed that they would consider this option.

Everyone at the meeting were in agreement that a plan of action was needed urgently.

It was proposed and agreed, that the Clerk would request tomorrow (Thursday 9th June, 2016) for an urgent meeting between WDC, Halesworth businesses and the Town Council. It was also agreed that the Clerk would, for this one time, copy in all those present to add weight to the request and that WDC would then see all the businesses copied in and would hopefully take the matter seriously. The businesses would in the meantime find two volunteers to represent the businesses present (and any others that wished to join the group).

The Clerk had circulated a record sheet which also requested permission to use the businesses emails for HTC to use for important town information. All businesses provided emails with one or two exceptions and this would be added to those that had sent apologies to the Clerk and who had requested a report of the meeting.

The meeting was closed at 6.45pm