

**DRAFT MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL ASSEMBLY MEETING HELD ON**  
**MONDAY 4 MARCH 2024 IN AXBRIDGE TOWN HALL**

**Meeting commenced: 8.00pm**

**Meeting concluded: 9.25pm**

**Present:** Councillor Mitton (Chairman) together with 20 members of the public including: -

**By invitation:** Mr Harding (Axbridge Action Group), Ms Healey, Ms Izzard, Ms Owen (Axbridge Blackberry Carnival); Mr Bailey, Mrs Bailey and Mr Saunders (Axbridge Community Theatre), Mr Fowler and Mr Hughes (Axbridge Pageant), Ms L Watts (Axbridge and District Rotary Club) and Mr Canham (Axbridge Town Trust)

**Also in Attendance:** Mrs V Brice (Axbridge Town Council Clerk and Axbridge Active Living)

**Apologies for absence:** Councillors Faulkner, Mearns and Thomas, PCSO Chard, Ms Binns (Axbridge Active Living), Mr Wells (Axbridge and District Museum Trust), Mr Scott (Axbridge Pageant), Mrs Hill (Axbridge Parochial Charities), Mrs Browne (Warm Spaces Group) and Ms Curiale-Hopkinson (Village Agent).

**1.24 WELCOME**

The Chairman welcomed those present to the Annual Assembly meeting.

**2.24 MINUTES**

The Clerk read out the draft minutes of the meeting held on 6 March 2023, copies of which had been made available online and sent to invitees. The minutes were approved as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman subject to the word "ability" under minute 8(m) being amended to read "agility".

**3.24 AXBRIDGE BLACKBERRY CARNIVAL**

The Mayor agreed to take this item earlier in the agenda. The 2023 carnival had been a great success and very well supported. More stringent health and safety measures had been required – impacting on the finances, which would further increase next year. Fundraising efforts were underway including a music quiz and Rumble in the Jumble and grant applications would be made as appropriate. The Stuart Conning Memorial Cup had been introduced. New members would be welcome.

**4.24 POLICE REPORT**

The Police had been unable to be represented at the meeting. They did provide monthly crime statistics reports to the Town Council and any matters raised could be reported back.

**5.24 REPORT OF THE TOWN COUNCIL**

Councillor Mitton, Mayor, advised that 2024 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Axbridge Town Council, which would be celebrated later in the year, and welcomed Barbara Wells and Richard Willis who had recently been co-opted onto the Council. She had also had great pleasure in representing the Council at civic events within Somerset and inviting guest to the Celebration of the Maces event, the Carnival and to Axbridge Civic Service. This service had seen Ellen Campbell receive the Youth Award and Andrew Laken receive the Civic Award for their contribution to the community. It had, however, been a difficult year, with the financial pressures on Somerset Council being a challenge to all. The Town Council already owned or managed many of its facilities and had worked hard this year to secure a long-term lease on the Old Station Building.

The Mayor advised that the Council had several Committees and Advisory Groups and invited the Chairmen to present their own reports - summarised below (full report attached).

The Personnel and Protocol Committee looked after the Council's three employees and oversaw the civic events and protocols. The 400th year celebration of the maces had taken place and the beautiful wooden maces carved by the Men's Shed were now in use. There was a vacancy for the Sergeant at Mace position and the Mayor thanked James Roper for undertaking this role and to the Clerk and Assistant Clerk for all their hard work.

The Planning and Licenses Committee considered and responded to the planning authority on local planning applications which had included small extensions, changes to the mast at Fry's Hill and variation of conditions relating to the power plant at Townsend. Household tree applications were delegated to the Clerk. The reserved matters application for Houlgate Way had been approved by the planning authority, the site had been cleared with highways/frontage works undertaken. Building works had not yet commenced.

The Administration and Finance Advisory Group advised on administrative and financial matters. Scribe software was now being used to record and manage the accounts, and was being extended to record assets, allotments and cemetery records. The external audit for the last financial year had gone through without any auditors' comments and payroll had been outsourced to an external provider. The Chairman thanked officers for their hard work in getting this all in place. The budget had been the major item for debate at Council and the budget and precept had been increased to enable the Town Council to cover the additional costs which will be incurred with the administration and supply of some services currently provided by Somerset Council.

The Cemetery, Allotments and Open Spaces Group looked after open spaces matters and paid particular attention to the Town Cemetery (along the bypass) and the allotments at Hillside. It undertook inspections to ensure there was consistency with cemetery memorabilia and to achieve an equitable standard of plot care at the allotments. There was also a focus on maintaining safe access to both sites.

The Highways Advisory Group advised the Council on highway related matters. The wet weather continued to cause issues with drainage and potholes and the Council was in regular contact with Somerset Highways on these matters and on future lining works. Road safety measures included looking at creating gateways into the Town, the Speed Watch group were working hard to keep the speed down and the provision of Speed Indicator Devices was being discussed. The Council would be renewing the damaged parking signs in the car park. Efforts continued regarding the provision of a safe path between Axbridge and Cross.

The Leisure and Recreation Group covered the changing rooms, furlong recreation field, play area and the public conveniences. The play area continued to be well used and boasted a new cradle swing. The wet weather had made things difficult for the football clubs but the field was in good condition and new fencing would be installed shortly. Numerous maintenance works had taken place at the changing rooms and minor improvements and works were planned at the public conveniences facility.

The Strategic Planning Advisory Group's remit was to progress and monitor large projects and Town Council initiatives and to investigate potential income streams. The main focus of the group had been to complete the acquisition of the Old Station Building as a community asset, specifically for use by the Men's Shed. A 99-year lease had been achieved together with a underlease with Axe Valley Men's Shed

## **6.24 SOMERSET COUNCILLOR'S REPORT**

Somerset Councillor Pauline Ham reported on the first full year of the Somerset Unitary Authority and the challenges it faced, the financial difficulties arising and efforts taken to balance the budget. Service provision and the financial situation would continue to be an issue for the 2005/6 budget. The Town Council already owned/managed facilities and there was a strong volunteer/community network. The Local Community Network, a group of local parishes organised and supported by Somerset Council, had been created to encourage parishes to work together for the common good.

## **7.24 SCHOOL GOVERNOR'S REPORT**

Mrs Browne, Town Council representative on the governing body of Axbridge C of E First School Academy updated the meeting on the school year. She reported on the pupil numbers, updated on the management and leadership and the "Good" Ofsted inspection based on its new

framework. Pupils had enjoyed a wide variety of activities both inside and outside school, which had been supported by excellent fundraising by the PTA.

## **8.24 PRESENTATION FROM LOCAL ORGANISATIONS**

- a. Axbridge Action Group – The group provided a lead in campaigns and projects which had historically focused on anti-social behaviour and the Streets of Axbridge. It had been involved in the concessionary scheme for the pageant, setting up the Good Neighbourhood Scheme (with the volunteers undertaking sterling work to assist residents) and the Heritage Trails. Work to improve the Streets of Axbridge continued, as did the support to create a safe path to Cross and to assist in the administration of the Progressive Support. Further volunteers would be welcome.
- b. Axbridge Active Living – This social group for the over 50's had continued to meet on alternate Wednesday afternoons with around 15 members who had enjoyed a visit to the Animal Sanctuary in Weare, listening to Sally singing 1950's and 1960's songs, playing Flower bingo with Bouquet Florist and going out for lunch. They had joined with the Town Trust to hear the presentation on the museum clocks. Thanks went to all the volunteers and new members would be made very welcome.
- c. Axbridge and District Museum Trust - The museum had opened for 6 days a week for the majority of 2023 with record visitor numbers. Key highlights including hosting five school visits, purchasing four long case clocks and holding a range of branded gifts for visitors and residents to purchase. Volunteers were still required with recruitment being a priority in 2024.
- d. Axbridge Community Theatre – ACT had successfully put on two plays after the pandemic – Birthday Party by Harold Pinter and The Government Inspector – with rehearsals well underway for its next play "Gaslight". Theatre visits and improvisation workshops had also been arranged. They thanked the Town Trust and Town Hall Manager and apologised to local groups displaced from the Town Hall during the weeks of the shows.
- e. Chamber of Commerce – No further update this year.
- f. Cheddar Guides and Cheddar Valley Ranger – Cheddar Guides and the Senior Rangers continued to meet and had supported the Civic Service serving refreshments and washing up.
- g. Handbells Group – the handbells had previously been restored and a small group met weekly to play the bells and had also taken part in other events.
- h. Men's Shed – The Men's Shed now based at the Old Station Building had around 60 members and were working hard to preserve and improve the building (including CCTV), alongside its usual activities. A stall would be held at the Farmers Market to promote the group.
- i. Axbridge Pageant – The Pageant Trust had been making plans for the next pageant to be held in August 2029 to coincide with the 800<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Royal Charter. A lot of planning was now needed from open days, seeking volunteers, fundraising and script writing to name but a few! The cost of the pageant was high and the cost of storing props was a major concern. The group urged the Town Council and community to work together to solve this issue in support of the Pageant. Efforts were also being made to ensure that succession planning would leave things in a good place for future pageants.
- j. Parochial Charities – these accounts had been made available.
- k. Axbridge and District Rotary Club – This group had been granted its charter by Rotary International meaning it could now operate alone and could access match funding and grants. They continued to recruit new members and were undertaking various projects including refurbishing the steps opposite the Station Building, repairing the handrails and maintaining Bailiffs Wall. They would be looking for sites to plant more crocuses in October, continued to support the Dorset and Somerset Air Ambulance and Freewheelers with fundraising quizzes and intended to hold collections for Cheddar Valley Foodbank.
- l. Axbridge Sports and Social Community Association – Several events had been held including an enjoyable Coronation Street Party in the Square in May, a family quiz in October and Father Christmas Night. The main tree had been donated by a local resident and the evening was a lovely occasion. The Chairman wished to thank all the committee members and volunteers for their continued support.
- m. Town Trust – The Town Trust continued to improve and maintain its assets. The Town Hall now had automatic heating control, a convenient hot water supply and the floor had been refurbished. Consideration was being given to installing a projector and a remotely operated screen and the Maces were now on display in the Town Hall. The next project would be the restoration of the town gild banners and works to the balcony. The white lining in the Square would be refurbished shortly. The annual accounts were published on the Charity Commission website.
- n. Village Agent – Lina Curiale-Hopkinson, the Village Agent, had been unable to attend but continued to assist individuals in the community and local community groups. She was often available to speak with residents at the Warm Spaces Group.

- o. Warm Spaces Group – the Warm Spaces group opened in November 2022 and has now evolved serving hot soup, bread, cakes and coffee every Monday between 10.30 and 2pm. It was well attended and provided a good opportunity for residents to get together and chat.
- p. Woman of Axbridge Group – this group had been active for nearly a year, launching in May 2023 with a Coronation themed party – with over 40 women attending and 23 taking an annual membership. The group meet on the first Wednesday of the month in the Town Hall with its purpose being to have fun, share hobbies and skills, keeping fit physically and mentally and “all things Axbridge”.

The accounts of the Town Council were made available for inspection.

**9.24 OTHER BUSINESS** – none

**10.24 CONCLUSION OF MEETING** – The Mayor thanked all those present for attending.

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Town Mayor

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Date

## **Appendix A**

### **Axbridge Annual Assembly – Monday 4 March 2024 Report of Axbridge Town Council**

#### **Mayor's Introduction - Councillor Franchesca Mitton**

It has been a privilege to be Mayor in a year which will now celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the establishment of Axbridge Town Council. I would like to welcome two new members to the Council – Barbara Wells and Richard Willis. Anyone interested in applying to join the council to fill the remaining vacancies should contact the Clerk.

I have had great pleasure in attending a number of civic occasions and hosting our own events – the Carnival lunch and procession of Mayors, the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the maces and the Civic Service. At this service the High Sheriff of Somerset presented awards to Andy Laken and Ellen Campbell on behalf of the community.

The year has not all be fun with a number of challenges particularly relating to Somerset Council's financial situation and the services they provide. Axbridge is already quite independent having responsibility for many of its assets and so a lot of facilities will be unaffected. The Town Council continues to work for the benefit of the Town and was delighted to lease the Old Station Building on a 99 year lease, which has been sub-leased to the Axe Valley Men's Shed.

The Committees and Advisory Groups meet regularly and a summary of their work is given in the council report.

#### **Personnel & Protocol Committee report – Councillor Franchesca Mitton (Chairman)**

The council employs 3 people; The Clerk, The Assistant Clerk & Facilities Manager. The Committee looks after council staff, pay and protocol including civic events. The Mayor thanked the officers for their support over the year. She also thanked the honorary officers for their attendance and support at various events. There was a vacancy for a mace bearer, following the resignation of James Roper. The Mayor particularly enjoyed the 400th Anniversary of the Maces and the blessing of the new maces, which had been beautifully carved by the Men's Shed.

#### **Planning and Licensing Committee – Councillor Jo Jenkins (Chairman)**

The Committee is made up of the Mayor and Deputy Mayor and interested Councillors. Meetings are held when planning applications and related business dictate which can be once or twice a month. They are usually held on the 4<sup>th</sup> Monday of each month. If there is urgent business, items can be included in the Full Council meeting each month or a specially convened meeting.

The committee members have dealt with applications regarding the mast on Frys hill, the gas powered energy generator facility, extensions, works to listed buildings and plans in a conservation area on a regular basis to name but a few. Applications for tree works are delegated to the clerk.

The committee has a duty to comment on licensing issues, such as road closures and premises opening hours, these are seldom controversial. The members also deal with various surveys, questionnaires & consultations.

Large developments have to be considered by full council but they take into account the recommendations of the committee, which looks at the plans in detail. There is currently a significant planning development underway, that being The Lavender Fields by the developers Bellway, which is to comprise of 53 homes and is located on Houlgate way. The site has been cleared and main road frontage path laid, new street lighting is to be reinstalled from March onwards as a rough estimate of works commencing, but no definitive date has yet been

given. Yellow lining is yet to be installed along the length of the site perimeter. A 2m wooden construction fencing is currently being installed to replace the mesh harass fencing, this will allegedly minimize noise pollution from the site. There is also potential for the southern perimeter of the open green space to be planted prior to development and this would allow for green areas to mature, enhancing the visual appearance of the site. Building work is yet to commence and will not be starting in the near future due to a number of factors.

#### **Administration and Finance Advisory Group report – Councillor Mike Taylor (Chairman)**

The Group membership is the Mayor and Deputy, interested councillors and the Town Clerk. It is a purely advisory body and has no powers. However, its work is important for the day to day running of the Town Council. Members of the Group meet monthly, generally by zoom, to consider regular items and new issues, and a report goes to every full Council meeting, summarising the work done by the Group, putting forward items for the Council agenda, and making recommendations on them.

In its administration role, the Group advises on grants, insurance, the larger and long-term contracts, asset and risk management, the office facilities and communications. They also review changes in legislation and advice to see how this may affect operation of the Council.

Group members liaise with the Town Clerk on all financial matters including the payroll, the budget, the accounts, Vat, and the annual audit. The accounts are checked by group members every month and a summary report of the accounts is presented to Council quarterly, to keep all Councillors informed, and for Council to consider and adopt.

The annual audit is the item which probably concerns the Group most, but I am glad to report that for the last financial year, the audit went through again, without any comments from the external auditor. We must record a thanks to the clerk for her continued accuracy in record keeping and the commitment to achieving this result.

As reported last year, Somerset Council has decided not to take over the Town Council's payroll from Sedgemoor. The payroll has now been outsourced to PATA who provide the required information for the clerk to pay employees, the pension providers, and HMRC. This change has given the office staff a lot of work and continues to do so. Thanks go to them from the Council for taking the extra responsibility.

Budgeting. This has been a major item of debate in Council. At the moment, this Council is not certain which non-statutory services will continue to be delivered by Somerset Council or at what level they will be supplied. Because of their financial problems, it is almost certain that the budget restraints on Somerset will mean that Axbridge Town Council will need to take on or financially support certain existing services. This Council has therefore increased its budget and precept to enable it to cover the additional costs which will be incurred with the administration and supply of some services currently provided by Somerset.

Scribe software is now in use to record and manage the accounts. The Council is also using the system to record assets and manage other facilities such as the cemeteries. This means a lot of data has to be transferred from existing systems giving the clerk and her assistant a lot of work. Thanks again to them.

#### **Cemetery, Allotments and Open Spaces Group – Councillor Tony Jordan**

Whilst generally paying attention to open spaces matters within the town, the group concentrates on the cemetery (at the bypass) and the allotments (at Hillside). In particular, inspections take place to ensure that there is consistency with cemetery memorabilia and to achieve an equitable standard of plot care within the allotments. There is also a focus on both sites on maintenance of safe access to each (avoiding moss, subsidence etc).

## **Highways Advisory Group – Councillor Pauline Ham (Chairman)**

### **Weather**

The Highways Group is an advisory body to Axbridge Town Council with responsibility for highways related business.

- As we are all very aware the wet weather has had an over-riding effect this winter. We have been liaising with Somerset Highways Department, who have sent someone out to record and investigate the situation. The drains are running free but, unfortunately, volume of water has been a problem.
- The amount of rain and lying water has also created an increased number of pot holes. We have been reporting those we are aware of. Individuals are also able to go to the Somerset web-site, search for report a pot hole.

### **Road Safety**

- We are currently looking at creating gateways into the town, to emphasise the need to reduce speed and drive safely.
- We have a very active “Speed Watch Group” who are working hard to keep the speed down.
- With the Speed Watch Group we are currently working to find a way to enable us to get Speed Indicator Devices for Axbridge without incurring a cost to the town. This making slow progress at the moment but, hopefully, we will be able to find a way forward.
- We have sent a letter of support from Axbridge Town Council to the Cross Footpath Group which will enable them to have the support of an officer from Somerset to approach the land owner reference their footpath plans.
- We are compiling a list for Somerset Highways to refresh the current road markings around the town and to add new, where and if required. The white lines in the Square will be refreshed as soon as the weather permits, hopefully this week. We need to identify where to site a “disabled parking only” sign by the disabled space to make it legally enforceable.
- We are in conversation with the developers reference the street lighting that needs to be replaced in Houlgate Way.

### **Car Parks**

- We are in the process of renewing the parking signs that were damaged, in the Meadow Street/Old Church Road car park. We will use this opportunity to update the other information the signs contain.
- A white line needs to be added by the disabled parking space in the Moorland Street car park.

## **Leisure and Recreation Advisory Group report – Councillor Pauline Ham (Chairman)**

### **Leisure and Recreation Report**

The Leisure and Recreation Group is an advisory body with responsibility for the furlong recreation field, the changing rooms, the children’s play area, and other associated recreation matters and for the public conveniences.

### **Play Area**

The children’s play area continues to be well used. This year, thanks to money raised from the filming that took place in the town, we have been able to add a Cradle Swing in the space freed up when the new Agility Trail was fitted. After a few teething problems when it was initially fitted, this inclusive piece of equipment is proving to be a big success.

We continue to inspect and monitor the play area and equipment on a weekly basis and an annual external inspection, carried out on behalf of The Playing Fields Association, takes place in the late spring/early summer. We address any recommendations they identify, on a scale of urgency.

#### Main field and car park

The furlong field is looking in good condition. Obviously, the wet weather we have experienced this year has caused problems for the football clubs.

The fence to the furlong car park has finally been damaged beyond repair. Over the years various repairs have been carried out. However, the recent damage has shown that a new fence is required. The work is planned soon.

#### Changing Rooms

Darren continues to maintain the facility to a good standard. Various works and servicing have been carried out during this year:

- The boiler has been serviced.
- The external metal box, housing electric sockets, has been replaced.
- Legionnaire testing has taken place. Darren will continue to test the hot water on a regular basis.
- A fixed wiring inspection has been carried out. We are awaiting the report but we anticipate some remedial works will be required.

Darren will be painting the facility in the coming year, when the weather permits, and will be carrying out some repairs to the fascia boards.

The football clubs continue from strength to strength, providing an important facility for Axbridge.

#### Public conveniences

The overall standard of cleanliness continues to be acceptable, with only the occasional hiccup.

During the current incredibly inclement weather there has been a problem with the doors to the cubicles swelling in the rain. We will keep an eye on the situation to ensure they shrink back as they dry out.

- The back wall into the car park has been cleaned. Darren will be painting the facility soon.
- Work is planned to repair and replace the external lighting of the facility.
- A fixed wiring inspection is also due to be carried out.
- The hand washing facilities are serviced twice a year.

Unfortunately, the drinking fountain sited by the conveniences is still out of action but a repair is being considered.

#### **Strategic Planning Advisory Group - Councillor Pauline Ham (Chairman)**

The remit of the Strategic Planning Advisory Group (SPAG) is to progress and monitor large projects and town council initiatives: to investigate potential income streams and to arrange work as necessary.

The main focus of the group this year has been to complete the acquisition of the Old Station Building as a community asset, specifically for use by the Men's Shed. A 99 year lease was achieved; ATC signed the lease with Somerset and followed this by signing the under-lease with Axe Valley Men Shed. Somerset Council was very supportive in this venture, offering help



and advice along the way. Our solicitor was equally as supportive with all the legalities involved in the transactions both for the main lease and the under lease. The work was completed at a substantially reduced rate!

The Men Shed group are now working extremely hard to restore the building to its former glory and, I am told the Station will become a listed building in the near future. (Andy Laken will be giving a fuller update on this project later in the meeting.)

The group is currently discussing potential projects for the coming year.