

WELLS CIVIC SOCIETY: Meeting of 12 April 2023

A panel discussion with Wells City Councillors covering the Bishop's Barn and Recreation Ground, the Portway Annexe, Planning and the new Unitary Authority.



Chair Chris Winter in discussion at the April meeting with councillors Sarah Powell, Deborah Orrett, Theo Butt Philip and Louis Agabani, listed from left to right. *Picture: Philip Welch*

T.S. Eliot's "April is the cruellest month" would have been an apt description of the weather on the evening of the most recent meeting of the Wells Civic Society. But even before the meeting started, there was a warm buzz of animated conversation as the audience geared itself up to welcome city councillors Louis Agabani, Theo Butt Philip, Deborah Orrett and Sarah Powell. They were to explain aspects of the ramifications inherent in the acquisition of certain properties and responsibilities by Wells City Council from Mendip District Council, and other matters related to Wells, following the disbanding of all Somerset's local district councils and the creation of the unitary authority of Somerset Council (not Somerset County Council). This happened on April 1, with the Civic Society immediately properly inquisitive to know where Wells was heading as a consequence.

Having stressed that the Civic Society was a non-party political organisation in any way whatsoever, chair Chris Winter welcomed first into this most courteous of lions' dens Sarah Powell, who was representing Wells Recreation Ground Trust, including the Bishop's Barn.

Sarah gave a brief, interesting history of the fifteenth century barn, which is both grade 1 listed and a scheduled ancient monument, meaning it has national significance. Its recent history since the last local government reorganisation in 1974 has been the responsibility of Mendip DC but now this duty of care has well and truly passed to Wells. The same is true of the Recreation Ground (the Rec) and so the questions as to what is to become of these assets, and how they can be best used and financed have really come home to roost.

Where the Rec is concerned, the relatively new adventure playground is largely judged to be a

success. Perhaps there could be an increase in the fitness equipment. The football pitch merits discussion. Is it, proportionately, too big; could two or more smaller pitches be accommodated? Could a running track be created? Should the Rec be more amenable to use by the older generation?

There are, similarly, many things to be decided about the barn. Despite its national heritage significance, it is not much within our visitors' typical exploration of Wells. There is no directional signage, only signs saying what must not be done. Parking alongside is probably not appropriate in this setting. But how shall the barn actually be utilised: bands; exhibitions; soft play; concerts; roller skating; flower shows?

Should some of the nearby trees be deemed inappropriate and taken down? Should some or all of the wall which separates the Rec from the moat path be removed, and attractive access from that side of the site created?

So much to be decided and resourced. Whatever is decided, Sarah stressed that a vision for the future of both these rather different amenities was needed. The public can help formulate this ideal at an open day on May 28 in the barn. Also, Sarah is keen to consider a Friends group to generate ideas, and she also thinks that the formal existence of such a group would make it more likely that funding might be obtained from various sources.

Deborah Orrett also informed the highly engaged audience of development plans for another listed building, this time at Grade 2, the Portway Annexe, which is situated at the junction of Portway and Portway Avenue. This was acquired not from Mendip District Council but actually purchased by the city council from Somerset County Council, and this happened some two years ago, following local consultation and, in the main, approval. To cover the purchase and have moneys in hand for immediate routine expenses, the council borrowed £620 000 from the Government's then Public Works Loan Board. The loan is repayable over 25 years and the current annual repayment is approximately £32 000. This is being covered by an increase in the local precept, currently of 5.54%.

Built in 1900 as the Blue School for Girls, the Annexe is within a conservation area and has distinctive Art Nouveau features; since the 1970s it has been used for teacher resources, adult education and the like. It reopened, now owned by the city, in May, 2022 and is already used by hundreds of people each week, engaging in a wide variety of activities, ranging from kick boxing to U3A and, of course, there is a cafe, and so the Annexe is already going a long way to fulfilling the council's original fundamental aim of providing a new, accessible community space. In fact, there are ten spaces for hire, several bearing names with local connections such as the Patch Room and the Bignal Rand room.

So, to the nitty-gritty of financing the whole Annexe operation. Broadly speaking, annually outgoings amount to about £117 000, comprising: staffing £55 000; utilities £30 000; loan interest £32 000. Income is made up of: lettings £48 000; car park (there are some car park spaces that local residents can hire on a permanent basis) £24 000; CHARIS (an organisation that funds the Ukrainian hub) £36 000. Thus, there is, in these relatively early days, a shortfall of £9 000. But, over and above paying off the loan, the aims are financial stability and becoming self-sustaining. The Annexe is seeking to be even more widely used, but always at affordable rates, and is looking at other initiatives, too, such as links with Strode College.

It fell to Louis Agabani to tackle the always hot potato of Planning, and the process by which permissions are granted or refused. These, as he said, are always viewed as the worst or best scenarios, depending upon the individual's personal perspective and how the individual is affected. But he had, early on, to make the fundamentally important point that the city council does not and

cannot make decisions. It certainly can make recommendations after carefully considering applications, but the last word has always lain with Mendip DC, and this power now has passed to Somerset Council. Further, the city's recommendations are not subjective, but follow aligning the planning proposal with some dozen criteria by which it might be refused or accepted, risk of flooding being one good example of these. Permission and refusal recommendations are not made at the personal whims of councillors, but in the light of compliance or otherwise with these criteria.

Louis wanted to stress the importance of the Neighbourhood Plan, produced and finalised recently by the city council, passed to Mendip DC, and now with the new Somerset. If approved and adopted, it will be of considerable benefit to Wells. By no means least among these will be the degree of protection it will give against inappropriate development. Not surprisingly, he mentioned the 225 new houses currently proposed by developers. Louis also wanted to stress the open nature of the planning process; all are welcome to make points beforehand and to attend the council's planning meetings, which take place on the third Thursday of the month at 7.0pm.

The broader picture of what the demise of Mendip DC and the birth of Somerset Council means and the ramifications for Wells in particular were elaborated upon by Theo Butt Philip. But he started by placing this change in a degree of historical context, commenting upon the fact that Wells has had a city council since 1201, and still has. And this is by no means the first local government re-organisation. One has to think back to no further than the 1970s when Mendip DC came into being, or the creation of Avon County in 1974 and its abolition in 1996, with effects on Somerset and, therefore, Wells. So, change is not new, and can be coped with.

In any event, the immediate change will not be very noticeable; for instance, the Mendip DC offices in Shepton Mallet will still be used by Somerset Council, although the phone number will change and will, in fact, be a single one, 0300 123 2224, for the whole of Somerset. The same applies to a new, single web-site, www.somerset.gov.uk

The Mendip Local Plan is still in force. But, Somerset will be transferring some assets to town and city councils in due course. There will be 18 Local Community Networks (LCNs) set up with power to influence decisions about their particular area and be intermediate points between local and Somerset-wide interests. Planning will be handled by four Area Planning groups, with Wells coming under one entitled Mendip, which is not to be confused with the old Mendip DC. Perhaps what Theo was keenest to stress was that the change now in place was not a one-off event and *fait accompli*, and that we are now only at the beginning of a process that will take time. Also, that it is helpful not to view this change as a takeover of the five district councils by Somerset County Council but to see the nascent Somerset Council as a new and different authority which will develop and improve over time.

Later, in the Q&A session, not surprisingly the question of whether there would now be savings was asked of Theo. He replied that there would still be the need for the same number of refuse collectors, social workers and many other categories of staff. But there would be fewer senior managers and in time, various efficiencies, such as the avoidance of duplication, will come into operation. Again, he stressed the need for perspective in viewing this reorganisation and urged people to look ten years hence to see the benefits.

No one was surprised when the first question which was raised from the floor was about parking. It has to be said that from our panel of councillors the immediate response was one of silence. Then, many points from the audience and the panel did flow, again many of them very familiar when this fraught topic is discussed. These included signage, affordability, time restrictions which are too brief, problems for people who work in the city and need to park, scarce parking at the Portway Annexe. Some suggestions did emerge, some from the panel, some from the audience; greater use of the top level parking at Waitrose; a reduced parking fee for those who paid, say, 12 or three

months in advance; a Park and Ride. Before the discussion went too much round in circles, chair Chris Winter summarised this tricky problem as emanating from the fact that Wells is a medieval city, built without cars in mind.

It had been a stimulating evening, a truly civic sort of evening. One might say that underlying it was the Churchillian remark that we shape our buildings, thereafter they shape us. Chris was warm in her praise of the councillors' willingness to participate in this evening, and the audience were clearly given food for thought, which they showed they appreciated by the warmth of their applause.

After a sequence of meetings interrogating city civic matters, the mood changes with the next two events. On Wednesday, May 10, starting at 7.00 pm, there is a tour of St Cuthbert's, the parish church of Wells, led by Antonia Gwynn, and including a trip up the tower for those so inclined. On Wednesday, June 14, commencing at 6.30 pm, there is the annual Summer Social. This will be at the museum, Cathedral Green as usual, but in the now-splendid garden, weather permitting. It is hoped that Edgar Phillips, artist-in-residence at The Bishop's Palace and stained glass specialist will be attending. For further details or to learn more about the society, please contact Chris Winter on chris.f.winter@btinternet.com, or go to wellscivicsociety.org.uk

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