

HEATHFIELD PARTNERSHIP TRUST LTD CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2019

A very warm welcome to everyone who is attending the Annual General Meeting. This will be my 17th as Chairman and the conclusion of our 24th year in one format or another as steering group and then Partnership and Trust. I will only take questions at the AGM and will not be reading out this report as had been the tradition. There was a time when betting took place on the length of the duration of my presentation.

As our policy dictates we conduct our formalities in the public eye and provide a platform for questions from the general public we serve. We provide an executive Committee (Chaired until now by Director Colin Williams) which currently meets 4 times a year for elected representatives of all institutions in the Parish to engage in the programmes and have their say on directions taken. Those minutes are published on the heathfield.net website for all to see. We are going to be surveying all of our Stakeholder Organisations to see what they would like to see from this model and by doing so adapt to their needs and the frequency they wish to attend. This we hope will lead to a greater attendance when we do meet.

As a limited Company we make an annual report to Company House and as a Registered Charity we report to the Charity Commission. The Annual accounts are once again subject for approval by those attending the meeting.

I would emphasize the important role that our Strategic Partners play in ensuring the Partnership Trust operates in harmony with collective objectives. It was, of course, set up by the Parish Council in 1995 to enable grant bids to be made by a steering group set up to be an independent outreach for the Council and that independence has been accelerated by becoming a Company limited by Guarantee in January 2002 and a registered Charity in May 2003. The connection, however, has been maintained with the principle of an elected Parish Councillor being on all project committees to ensure the parish is aware of all of our activities. We also provided, until this September, a regular progress report to the members of the Finance and General Purposes Committee. This Chairman's report, once delivered, will be available in full on the community website, www.heathfield.net.

The Annual Accounts, which will be approved at the AGM, were put together by a team of our Treasurer, Tim Hough, our Company Secretary Peter Bailey and Alan Staples our independent Examiner. This is done with meticulous care and again I am sure both Directors would join with me to express our gratitude for Alan's expertise, generosity of advice and indeed his own Company's contribution to their community.

It is now very important to inform everybody of the change to the make-up of the Trust Board. Colin Williams will be retiring as a Director at this AGM, but will remain as Treasurer of the market until the end of this financial year. Director Paula Gear will be taking over the role of Chair of the Executive Committee and also as Chair of the Farmers Market.

Farmer's Market

The first project I would then make reference to is the Farmer's Market which has maintained the numbers of stalls where in many cases other markets are struggling. Many of the initiatives to maintain stall numbers have combined new marketing ideas and cutting unnecessary costs wherever possible. My compliments in despatches here to John Miller, the recently retired manager of the Co-op, who demonstrated how important the market is to the Co-op business by working with us at all times in harmony and we hope this continues with the new manager, Robbie Box. We use the "Heathfieldabout" Facebook medium to promote the market each month with any new features being prominent.

It is an important moment to recall the enormous contribution that Colin has made to the overall efforts of the Partnership. He accepted an invitation to join the Board in 2005 but had long been involved, especially with the Farmer's Market. He joined the Farmer's Market committee as early as 2000 and started taking the bookings in January 2001. He had previously been on the committee of the Heathfield and Waldron Community Association who raised a lot of the money to build the Community Hall and managed it for a number of years. It is symbolic that we are in this venue for this evening. He has also played a significant role in the development of the website using career knowledge on the committee involved.

He and his family had made heroic efforts to maintain the Market and to draw the trust of traders who have long been associated. The generosity of Colin and wife, Sue, providing hot and cold drinks each market day whatever the weather conditions stood the Heathfield Market out from associated events in the other Wealden market towns. He took great pride in "his" market outperforming the others. His own family, children and grandchildren, also involved was heart-warming to see and created the family atmosphere on the third Saturday of each month.

As Director he also took on the responsibility of the Executive Committee from former Director, Teresa Blaxland, and by doing so ensured the public face of the organisation where all the institutions of the Town and Parish could examine all of the projects being undertaken by the Partnership. That consultation programme was important to the shared objectives being held in the Parish with its public initiatives. Colin has kindly agreed to help with the Farmer's Market accounts until the end of the financial year before finally handing over completely. It will have been a sterling job over a lengthy period of time and hugely appreciated by his close colleagues.

Inward Investment Committee

Of huge importance to the vitality of the retail centre, which is the Town, is the asset of free car parking. We have always marketed Heathfield on the premise of frequency and convenience. Parking metres and Parking Officers is not the image we wish to project for our Market Town. Many will know that our Sussex Police have now simply forgone their statutory duties to enforce car parking offences. That is also not a satisfactory turn of events. We do have an option that can provide for a mechanism which can make a compensation for the cost of covering these duties but still maintaining the police presence which is essential to public confidence. We should note that Rother District have succumbed to Police pressure which only goes to highlight the courage and wisdom of Wealden District Councillors in rejecting any such approach. Hopefully a sensible agreement will shortly be reached which can help our Market Towns survive. Enforcement is still needed to preclude gratuitous parking in dangerous locations and maintain particularly the freedom of disabled people to have access to the pavements and crossings of our market town.

The vulnerability of our traders was illustrated by the emergency of the High Street collapsing in late autumn last year. Many of our traders were convinced this would see an end of the Christmas season crucial to their success. Their fears were allayed by the professionalism of the engineers who uncovered the longstanding water mains leak which had eroded the underground structure of the High Street and in close proximity to the tunnel which could have had dramatic implications. They also finished their work two days ahead of schedule which was appreciated. It was a passage which underlined the importance of the retail vitality of the Town Centre and the mass weight of importance of our services as well. Director Chris Macklin was extremely helpful during this time.

The other area that the Inward Investment committee has been highly active in was responding to the Draft Local Plan published by Wealden District Council. We are still awaiting the date of the Public enquiry examination session to attend. At the time of this report, there is as yet, no definition as to whether the Inspector considers the draft plan worthy of consideration and so it is still not clear whether attendance at the enquiry will be required. Too many of the sites identified by the Planning Authority had safety issues regarding access points and none of these had been consulted with the Highways Authority at all. The Partnership put together 27 representations identifying concerns about proposed locations of development but at no time criticizing the concept of new housing in the first place.

One outstanding objective for this committee is still to try and find land or buildings with which to develop an incubator unit. One of our highest priorities is to create a centre to stimulate new start-up businesses and provide them with marketing and financial advice during their early years. To also set up an environment where businesses in similar predicaments could help themselves to succeed will help the entrepreneurs of our community get going with a firmer starting platform. We are still looking for a suitable location or site which could simulate such an initiative.

Two other matters came to a head during the year as the Inward Investment Committee was seeking authority from the traders to represent them in questioning landlords about seemingly excessive recent examples of rental increases. It was thought short-termism to exclude the traditional traders who created the market weight of value in the town, in favour of short-term flight opportunists who may be gone in the blink of an eye.

Secondly the issue came up as to applying where possible for business rate rebates to ease the strain on retail at this time. We are yet to take this up with the Local Authority, Wealden District Council, who appear to have granted some but not to all traders and consistency would be helpful.

Transport Committee and Youth Centre

The planning gain on the Police Station site should be released when a percentage of the houses have been sold and some of the £400,000 raised should go towards the Heathfield to Uckfield bus service.

Our brilliant "Youth Express" project flourished when the Youth Centre entertained youth groups throughout the week and went on expeditions. There is no such organiser on the staff now and outings are sporadic.

Since the New Year there is a Community Youth Committee comprising representatives from The Partnership, Parish Council, Rotary, Street Pastors, Churches Together and staff from East Sussex County Council (ESCC). This group is starting to come together and recently Reverend Christian Mitchell has also joined the committee. The lay readers of the Kings Church have also taken part. The Partnership is the accountable body and the committee is trying to provide additional activities for the youth in the community and have raised the first funds to facilitate this. A business plan has been produced of activities that could be provided both at the Youth Centre and also in expeditions to locations outside the Parish. There is a core offer for young people in need at the Centre and this would be protected. An additional objective would be to raise the profile of the youth in the community and to make that a more positive imagery.

There has been a great deal of sympathy for the youth and providing interesting actions to lead more positive engagement. A strong rapport has been reached with the Director of Children's Services at ESCC and agreement has been reached whereby payment can be made through the payroll of ESCC for hours spent on additional duties by Children's Social Workers in supervising these programmes. The hard reality is that the severe cut backs made by ESCC into the provision at the Youth Centre because of savings needed has limited the offer and here the community is setting out to replace those most valued items. Most notable is the intention to create a new Student Youth Council who will play a significant part in designing the schedules in future. The Youth Centre has many assets of music making, arts and sports and these can be brought back to life with eager participation. The remaining youth transport budget can be used to ensure transport projects can be licenced.

Wealden Works

The Trust Board still carries the responsibilities and indeed liabilities and enables the operation to continue with charitable recognition. Nonetheless we publish the second annual accounts for the independent Wealden Works and that integrity is maintained throughout. I would pay my own gratitude to Alan Staples whose Company conducts that independent examination and also provides

the system for payroll, pensions and national insurance for our team. Tim Hough remains as Treasurer and is scrupulous in managing the funds.

A Stakeholder Committee meeting is held currently three times a year where all donors can nominate a representative to attend in person and raise questions of the progress of the programme. In addition a newsletter is provided by email to all involved. A review of all mentors and their time on the programme was conducted and this is now in place with some increased hours each week. A fourth member of the team joined in March, Ethan Todd, who is a past participant of the scheme, a former graduate and an ideal complement to the existing female team. All in all we have an exemplary team of individuals who give of their all to provide new life chances to our cohorts. All considerations are given to the circumstances for each young person, their attributes, their capabilities and aspirations. There are many exhilarating stories of young people triumphing from a stand still start and it is recognizable how the community at large have acknowledged the amazing contribution of this team.

We have continued to raise funds to keep our business plan intact in always having sufficient resource to maintain the current year and one further year at all times. That business plan now looks at the objective of spreading more services into Hailsham and Uckfield. Already we have a good track record in taking young people from both towns and promoting their future careers and these are providing most effective.

The Wealden Works Board has set a business plan for the next three years and Tim's projections throughout that detailed exercise have already proven remarkably accurate in this, the first documented year. The business dimension is sound and has sufficient finance promised or already received to trade for another further year. This does not mean we take our foot off the bidding process and further prospects are sought after throughout the year.

The annual achievements ceremony will be held on Tuesday 3 December and more details will be available nearer the date. Already we have the acknowledgment from the Lord Lieutenant that he will attend this year. Earlier this year my Deputy Chairman of the Wealden Works Board, Peter Bailey, and I received the visit of the High Sheriff who was immensely impressed by the work of the mentor team. I would also like to highlight the prominence of the actions conducted by Peter in his excellent role as line manager for our staff team and seemingly always providing a cash resource for inevitable expenses. His offices in the High Street have provided easier and convenient access points for the day to day running of the organisation.

Much to be looked forward to is the possible inclusion in the programme of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex who have many engagements with youth and mental health which is one of the major successes of our programme. We will await further advance indications. Since the resurrection of the Heathfield Works programme and the launch of the Wealden Works expanded provision, this has gone from strength to strength and is without doubt perhaps our finest moment.

Information Communication Technology (ICT) Committee

During the year continued programming has gone into improving and updating the website www.heathfield.net. We would thank 21st Century and Nick Potter in particular for all the expertise and support contributed to the website. The number of hits to the site is now slightly less because of the advance of social media but the purpose is to still provide a comprehensive guide to the whole community. It provides a profile on all businesses in the Parish and helps to promote the businesses, it raises the profile of all voluntary organisations and clubs and social group activities.

The "HeathfieldAbout" Facebook page (founded by Parish, Chamber, College and Partnership) is widely used for the whole of the community and as with the website, is managed by Joanne Aldous.

Sports and Leisure Committee

Richard Karn and myself met with Isobel Garden, the new Director of Planning and Leisure at Wealden District Council (WDC), in June as she was conducting a 6 month review into all leisure

facilities and so she was briefed on the history of the project and discussion was had as to the part the proposal would have. There have been refreshed talks with ESCC who in principle have still offered a 125 year peppercorn rent leasehold package. The County Solicitor, Pauline Young, for estates has agreed to a meeting shortly with Richard and myself to maintain our original agreements. The sheer scale of the funds needed to realise this ambition has been disconcerting in this period of austerity. However as an objective for the community at large it would be of real value being a provision for the youngest to the eldest in equal measure.

Police Local Action Team (LAT)

At a time when the Sussex Police have withdrawn from Neighbourhood Policing, the Partnership initiative to maintain our Police LATs committee has been invaluable. During the year we have had 2 meetings with Inspector Jonathan Gross attending and all corners of our Parish are represented by this committee including Neighbourhood Watches and so the reach is considerable. Objectives are still getting the CCTV scheme we championed and the Parish Council so generously managed back into full action. A Police presence, even if with PCSOs, was wonderful in building intelligence communication throughout the community and would be welcomed back in a flash. A mention in despatches of the Street Pastors who completed their 11th year in June and still maintain a presence on Friday and Saturday nights. The Police to be fair do come into Heathfield with their blitz operation on a Friday night or Saturday night and relations with Inspector Gross have improved directly. An invitation to Mel Butcher (Sussex Express) as a Neighbourhood Coordinator of Sheepsetting Lane will go out to the next meeting. Some reviews are taking place at the Police Board to consider re-investing in Neighbourhood Policing and this is an important next step to be championed. Shortly announced Policing numbers for recruitment should also be encouraging.

Productivity

Each year we, the Partnership Trust, calculate the return in monetary value of our voluntary service plus the grants we secure and compare those to the outgoings incurred. This year was profound again with a performance of 1193.53% which is a massive dividend and something we are particularly proud of. It is a generous return on the public investment being made by the Parish Council towards our running costs. I would mark my appreciation of Chairman, Cllr Richard Ridley, who took a generous amount of time to attend a meeting to examine the draft proposals of the bid for the annual grant. The support from the Parish Council is fundamental to all that we do and the incorporation of an elected Parish Councillor on all project committees is an essential accountability in the way we go about our business. In addition a progress report is provided to the F&GP Committee now on a yearly basis.

Stakeholders

Our Stakeholders have all had sound years. The Community College has again returned outstanding academic results at both GSCE and A levels. The GSCE performance with 82% reaching the recognised "good" rate of 9-4 including English and Maths outperformed all other secondary schools in East Sussex. With A levels producing 78%% A*-C levels, the cream of achievement. Caroline Barlow, Headteacher is quoted as saying "I am immensely proud of how well our students achieved at this level. This is a mark of their commitment, sheer hard work and the dedicated support of their great teachers and families." Academically this College is making real headway. This is great credit to all of the management of the College including the Board of Governors, Chairman Richard Karn and Trevor Goldsmith who are both Governors and also Directors of the Partnership. I should record that my deputy Chairman, Trevor, has now completed a full set of representations this year. He has become President of the Rotary, an elected Parish Councillor but has now stood down as Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce having carried that organisation for so long.

A much cherished mention in despatches to the organisers of Le Marche on August Bank Holiday. The Heathfield Twinning Association and the Event Committee work tirelessly to get this event off the ground each year and once again triumphed. My compliments especially to Richard Ridley as Chairman of the Organising Committee and Sheila Drennan Chairman of the Twinning Society. It

brings in huge numbers from a very wide hinterland and now the Heathfield shops are opening and showing their wares to people who once having sampled are then tempted to come back on a more frequent basis.

Not a stakeholder as such but a prestigious event in the Heathfield year is the Agricultural Show in May. This the largest single day show in the Country, it is surely going to be of increased importance post Brexit and separation from the European Common Agricultural policies paying compensation or incentive payments, the industry has got used to. It is brilliantly run and of massive value to the wider area. This year I had the privilege of being invited as stall judge with the Deputy Lord Lieutenant and it was impressive to see how well the event is prepared and executed with precision. It is prestigious to have this annual event in our Parish.

Increasingly of value in our community is the Street Pastors initiative. This voluntary group of citizens give generously of their time each Friday and Saturday night and have already been given credit for creating a more civilised atmosphere in the town. They have gained credibility with especially the youth in the town at night and have provided a presence when our Police Force have been withdrawn.

Christmas Festival

Christmas in Heathfield will be championed by the Chamber on Saturday 30 November, with the event finishing with the Parish Council lighting the Christmas Tree at the Fire Station with carols being sung by Cross in Hand Primary School Choir. There will be a Santa's Grotto at Kings Church with activities and market stalls will also be found around the town. There will also be two late night shopping events held on the 5 and 12 December. Please support this initiative where you can.

Conclusion

The Partnership is a voluntary organisation that continues to serve the community as a whole to the best of its capability. It has had to adapt to the increasingly professional bidding world and enjoys the hugely appreciated and frequently heroic Joanne Aldous as our co-ordinator and now the team of experts who run the Wealden Works programme. That is a level of depth and responsibility that we could never have envisaged those 24 years ago.

Is Heathfield in a better place than it was in 1995? a run-down town with vacant shops. With massive investment of in excess of £1million, disabled access to every property and incorporating more amenable design features without a shadow of doubt and this enables me to use one of my favourite words: Indubitably! The Partnership continues to show its worth.

Rupert Simmons
Chairman, The Heathfield Partnership Trust Ltd
Wednesday 16 October 2019
Heathfield Community Centre, Sheepsetting Lane, Heathfield