

## **HEATHFIELD PARTNERSHIP TRUST LTD CHAIRMAN'S REPORT**

A very warm welcome to everyone who is attending this virtual Annual General Meeting. This will be my 18<sup>th</sup> as Chairman and the conclusion of our 25th year in one format or another as steering group and then Partnership and Trust. That is already a quarter of a century and the transition in the community has already been formidable. This year because of the Covid19 pandemic, the meeting will be a virtual meeting but will still enable the Public we serve to ask questions. Ordinarily this event will have taken place in the autumn of 2020 but because of the various lockdowns, has been delayed until the spring of 2021.

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 which currently is designed to meet 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. It is fair to say that since March and the initial lockdown these meetings have not taken place. The Chairman, Paula Gear has written to all Members of the committee to ensure the opportunity for questions is maintained. Those minutes are published on the heathfield.net website for all to see. When we can return to real meetings, it is hoped to consult all representatives as to the format they would wish to see continued.

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 this 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 provide, a comprehensive report to the Finance and General Purposes Committee at their autumn meeting. This Chairman's report, once delivered, will be available in full on the community website, [www.heathfield.net](http://www.heathfield.net).

The Annual Accounts, which hopefully will be approved at the AGM this evening, were put together by a team of our Treasurer, Tim Hough, our Company Secretary Peter Bailey and Alan Staples our independent Examiner. That is done with great care and in meticulous detail. I would join with fellow Directors Messrs Hough and Bailey to express our thanks to Alan for both his and his Company's tremendous help and advice to our Charity. In doing so he is conscious of making his own specialist help to the Community.

I would make a public welcome of Sally Frost to the Board of the Heathfield Partnership Trust. Sally has been a founder member of the Wealden Works Board and has provided profound expertise to that cause and now will offer considerate local business knowledge to the Full Board.

I would now make a whistle stop tour of the numerous projects that we dealt with this last year.

### **Farmer's Market**

The first project I would then make reference to is the Farmer's Market which has done very well indeed to maintain the numbers of stalls where in many cases other markets are struggling. This service of course was impacted by the pandemic and the Market was stopped in March before being launched again in July. Many of the initiatives to maintain stall numbers have been introduced by Director, Paula Gear, who now has full responsibility for the Market. The Market has been running

for 20 years now and proves a stimulant for Shoppers from the wider hinterland of Heathfield to shop in the Town on the third Saturday of the Month. There is a very good cooperation with the CO-OP Supermarket, and I would compliment Manager Robbie Box with working so well together. We use the "Heathfield about" Facebook medium to promote the market each month with any new features being promoted. We faced another closure of the market over the winter and ran into a concern about a needed licence. At this time of the AGM the Co-op Company based in Manchester are seeking to create a licence for us to run the market on their Land. Hopefully this will be in place and be ready for us to re-launch the Market when the Lockdown is released. That should be very shortly.

### **Inward Investment Committee**

Still of massive importance to the vitality of our Market Town is the offer of free car parking. We have always maximised it in any promotion of the Town in terms of frequency and convenience. We should continue to mark our appreciation of Wealden District Councillors who have rejected the demands of the Sussex Police in not succumbing to decriminalise Parking offences. This is the statutory duty of the Police and safety issues that spring from inappropriate parking can cause hazards to many vulnerable Citizens. Given the Partnership raised over £1 million in 6 phases to ensure Heathfield was disabled access friendly in accordance with the Disabled access act of 2004, it is a flagrant abuse of that effort where Citizens gratuitously park on double yellow lines or indeed worse still, pavements. Very shortly parking in Rother district will be charged and no doubt further pressure will be placed on Wealden. That is going to hit our Market Town in devastating fashion and vacancies will spread like wildfire. The Partnership continue to work towards a sensible solution and will continue to offer to participate in dialogue.

I am pleased to report that the Partnership had a meeting in January with the Chief Executive of Wealden District Council to discuss discounts for retailers in Heathfield High Street of their business rates demands. This was very successful, and the District did indeed effect that change by March. Little did we know of the impact of the lockdown of that month but nevertheless it did make a difference. We invited James McNay along with Directors, Chris Macklin and Trevor Goldsmith, still Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce. The pressure on Retailers with Online shopping becoming ever more prevalent is causing alarm to the vitality of our Shopping High Streets. Hopefully we will also have dialogue with prominent Landlords in the Town for ease of rents on the same premise.

One piece of work was of substantial importance in the last year. The Inward Investment Committee made a detailed representation to the Planning Authority in the creation of their draft local plan. We registered 27 separate site concerns and justified our challenge with planning laws, regulations, and practice. We received 19 acknowledgements for our cases from the Planning Inspector and were due to present our concerns to the planning enquiry. It never got that far as the Inspector had already thrown out the draft plan. Wealden have now embarked on a new Plan, but serious alarms arise from even more demanding housing numbers required. We will continue to observe all sites in the Parish coming forward for consideration. Of equal concern was the lack of commercial opportunities being suggested in the draft plan in and around the Parish. Without those local job opportunities, the pressure on commuter journeys on already unsatisfactory road infrastructure would be unsustainable.

This past year has not seen any progress towards one of our primary objectives. This is the ambition to bring into play an Incubator Unit to help stimulate start-up businesses get going with as much support as possible. With the feverish clamour for housing sites, there has been scant account of this valuable asset in helping to grow the economy.

### **Transport Committee and Youth Centre**

The housing development site behind the Police Station has long been completed. However, the long promised planning gain of £400,000 towards bus services has not yet been seen. The Heathfield to

Uckfield route does need investment but this still needs chasing down. This will be of particular importance to the Wealden Works scheme where transport links with Uckfield are currently not helpful.

The Community Youth Committee comprising representatives from The Partnership, Parish Council, Rotary, Street Pastors, Churches Together and Youth Working staff from East Sussex County Council (ESCC) was brought to an abrupt end with the Covid 19 Pandemic which closed the Youth Centre in March 2020. Early in the year much progress was being made to set up additional activities for the Youth of the Parish either in more events in the Youth Centre or expeditions outside. A basic business plan had been designed but the impact of the lockdown curtailed all ongoing activity. We will need to be alert to the earliest opportunity to kick start this initiative into life as soon as possible on the reactivation of the building.

Most prominent of the Youth Workers has been Sarah Northwood whose energy and enthusiasm to expand the possibilities for the Youth in the Community has been exemplary and her imagination regarding potential initiatives has been uplifting.

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**

We are at a point of change in the organisation. Since re-launched as Wealden Works in May 2017 the operation has at all times been under the supervision of the overall Heathfield Partnership Trust Ltd. The Trust Board has carried all the responsibilities and liabilities of the Works programme and its Staff. A decision was made early in 2020 to seek independence through a CIO from the Charity Commission. A full application was made in July and finally agreed in February 2021. This meant quite a great deal of complicated paperwork but now it has been achieved, the Wealden Works initiative has its own independence. Nonetheless we publish the third independent accounts for Wealden Works. I would pay my own gratitude to Alan Staples whose Company conducts that independent examination and provides the system for payroll, a pension scheme and national insurance for our team. Tim Hough remains as Treasurer and is scrupulous in managing the funds. The programme has had another very successful trading year until the impact of the Covid pandemic in March 2020.

A Stakeholder Committee meeting to be held three times a year where all donors can nominate a representative to attend in person and raise questions of the progress of the programme has been postponed during the closure of the Youth Centre. In addition, a newsletter is provided by email to all involved and that has been crucial in place of the Stakeholder meetings. 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.

The Staff Team increased to include Ethan Todd who is already making a positive impression not least his influence on the 16–24-year-old male cohort. 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 success of the "Wealden Works" programme has undoubtedly been the outstanding participation of Lisa Crozier as Team Leader and Tora Bowdler, Senior Mentor. They have been the fulcrum of the dynamic that has driven the standards that have established our reputation and credibility. Their spirit during the lockdown has been exhilarating and maintained links with young People in need with advice and guidance throughout.

The Wealden Works Board has set a business plan for the next three years and Director, Tim Hough'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 originally scheduled for the early December event was sadly cancelled due to the pandemic. This glorious occasion celebrates the achievements of so many of the cohorts of the previous year. Applause reigns in from Businesses who have successfully recruited, the community who honour the performance of so many recovered careers and finally Families who recognise the return to their embrace of young who had previously struggled and had agitated the Family Home.

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.

In the report last year, I reported that Wealden Works had been recommended for a potential visit of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. This year a lot of water has run under the bridge and it seems unlikely the Duke and Duchess will resume their previous roles. That is a shame as it would have given much prominence to the programme and its contribution to the Mental Health of its cohort. The Pandemic however has locked down the Youth Centre and made any such visit problematic.

In March of 2020 we also had a visit from the Minister from the Department of Works and Pensions, Baroness Stedman-Scott. She and her entourage of Department Officers met with the current cohort and debated the work that the programme achieved. Later that month, The Minister phoned me as Chairman to discuss what involvement Wealden Works could contribute to the Department of Works and Pensions "Kick Start" initiative. That then led to discussions with Helen James, a senior Officer of the DWP based in Hastings. Eventually we were invited to make a bid for work in the programme extending beyond Wealden into Eastbourne as well. In August we submitted our proposals, and these were accepted gratefully. However, at the time of writing this report, we have not progressed the commission. At one point we were informed that we needed the cooperation of Wealden District Council in making provision for use of a building in the Hailsham area as a Youth Hub for our Officers to operate from. This would then become a joint bid but seemingly no progress from this has been seen as yet. Bruce Campbell the Officer at the DWP who took over the programme has kept in touch but nothing yet has been resolved. Following the pandemic and the serious shut down of the economy, it has had major impingements on the progress of young People into employment. There is no doubt, Wealden Works could prove a brilliant mechanism to help so many young People in the predicament of being NEET.

One footnote to this report is the departure of Frances Conway. During the furlough of our Staff Team, Frances was struggling with the responsibilities of dealing with candidates for our programme on a one to one basis. Eventually it was acknowledged and agreed that she could no longer participate because of her health. It was sad to receive her resignation and all provisions were made to ensure her entitlements were met. Since 2011 She had made a profound difference to the success of the programme and she will be sorely missed. This was carried out towards the end of the year and her departure is a fine memorial of the triumph of the scheme which so successfully evolved into Wealden Works. Frances's combative style will be sorely missed as we move forwards, she had always taken no prisoners in getting placements for jobs or work placements or potential funding.

Another departure has been Director Julie Kay. Julie had been our earliest appointed Team Leader when we operated in partnership with Tomorrow's People. Her experience in dealing with Social work supervision of the Students at Heathfield Community College gave her an excellent professional background and her knowledge of the Staff at the College, a helpful insight into former Pupil's needs. She and her Family moved away from the area and it was no longer practical to maintain the involvement. Her contribution throughout the development of the scheme was invaluable and much appreciated. Her role as Director of the Wealden Works Board has been taken by Paula Gear who is already a sound contributor.

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. It will now move to the independence it deserves which hopefully will enable it to appeal to more financial contributions. An experienced professional Fund Raiser will be commissioned to take up the cause and ensure the project has sustainable funds to keep going.

### **Information Communication Technology (ICT) Committee**

During the year continued programming has gone into improving and updating the website [www.heathfield.net](http://www.heathfield.net). In recent times the expert programming has been provided by Nick Potter from a Family run business in Cross in Hand. We would thank 21st Century and Nick Potter in particular for all the expertise and support contributed to the website. During the year very sadly Nick's Father died, and this has placed huge pressure on Nick and his Brother to keep the overall company going. They have moved to new premises in Uckfield but still maintain the commitment to our web-site management. 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.

For the last years the editor has been Joanne Aldous who did a sterling job in ensuring the web-site was kept up to date and frequently did substantial pieces of research to ensure new features provided invaluable reference sites of historical value for the Public to refer to. The liaison between Joanne and Nick always ensured the content was been refreshed and re-presented. This now comes under the responsibility of Lisa and Tora who have jointly taken over Joanne's roles.

The "Heathfield About" Facebook page (founded by Parish, Chamber, College and Partnership) is widely used for the whole of the community and as with the website, was managed by Joanne Aldous and is now run by Lisa and Tora. More their medium than Joanne, this should ensure it is exercised more regularly to promote the Town and its activities.

I would also acknowledge the contribution of Former Parish Councillor, Jean Holmwood. She made many contributions to the website and Facebook service before recently standing down. She was a great help and her efforts will be missed.

## **Sports and Leisure Committee**

One of our oldest commitments as a Partnership has been the campaign to stimulate investment in a new Swimming Pool for the community. It had long been a passion for Rosemary Mays-Smith and led to early triumphs of community fund raising and eventually the hiring of architects and securing planning permission on part of the College site in Old Heathfield. The support of Sport England and the assurance of one of the Swimming Pools used in the London 2012 Olympics seemed to be an exciting foundation for a successful securing of funds. An early promise of £100,000 from a local donation looked promising. The agreement of ESCC to offer a 125 peppercorn lease also created a momentum. However, we were shortly to run into the period of national austerity and grants simply dried up. The fact that we were then looking at a capital need of £3.25 million, inflation would have increased that by now made the scheme daunting. I reported last year that Wealden District Council, the Leisure Authority, were reviewing their provisions across the District. They published their report earlier this year where consultants made no need of the Pool to be sited in Heathfield. They also recommended abandoning the dry leisure facilities currently on the college site.

Given that the Partnership had accepted the responsibility of raising the capital to build the swimming Pool and new Leisure facility we had hoped the running of the centre would be done by Freedom Leisure, the operators for the other Pools in Wealden, indeed they were enthusiastic to do so and were party to the business plan.

The decision by WDC to pull out altogether from Heathfield brought the prospect of raising the capital to a sharp focus. Was this now a viable proposition. Director, Richard Karn, undertook to review what realistically could be achieved. The subsequent Board meeting to review his recommendations resulted in the decision to close the campaign.

One of the factors of consideration was the small working funds that remained. These had been raised in good faith by the Public and consideration needed to be made as to how these funds should be distributed. Richard Karn, Chairman of Governors at the Community College was certainly cognisant of the need for the feeder Primary Schools to have access to more laptops for their students to use in home schooling during the lockdown. This meant Cross in Hand, Park Side, St Richards and Old Heathfield and Punnett's Town schools benefiting with lap top provision and the other consideration was the swimming pool at Cross in Hand School which had £5,000 donated towards the maintenance costs of its own swimming pool. A press release was published, and very favourable coverage was seen in the Sussex Express. Concern was expressed by the Parish Council but much of that was animosity towards the WDC decision. It should be acknowledged that Rosemary Mays-Smith and Ken Brewster early protagonists for the Swimming Pool campaign, who both contributed hugely to its early progress, both acknowledged the decision by the Partnership with good grace and understanding.

There is a sadness to this report in that this campaign had been a long established priority for the Partnership and to realise it would have served every single member of the community from the youngest to the oldest with the healthiest of facilities. However sensible a decision, it is with regret that this major objective is not to be reached.

## **Police Local Action Team (LAT)**

Last month saw the retirement of Inspector Jon Gross as Wealden's Police commander. The year had seen Jon enthusiastically attend LATs meetings and in recent Lockdown conditions maintained with virtual meetings. He found the opinions from representatives from all corners of the Parish to be invaluable. This sensible relationship built a rapport with the Police which had been damaged by the removal of Neighbourhood Police Teams. I have paid tribute to his efforts to build liaison with community leaders and his last efforts were to instigate a Community Safety action group to cover the territory from Wadhurst through Mayfield to Warbleton and Horam. This has already gone into operation and new invitees are being encouraged to join ahead of the next meeting in May. His

successor, Inspector Kendell Wells has already attended the last LATs meeting in early March and pledges to keep his attendance going.

Policing in Wealden is being sorted by areas and Heathfield has been combined with Hailsham to have a regular Team of PCSOs. It is hoped that further recruitment of Police Officers should make the prospects of Neighbourhood Policing a possibility once more.

The still stand off from Sussex Police dealing with parking crimes has resulted in my being involved in a package offer to Sussex Police in how to maintain the current status quo of not decriminalising the streets of Wealden but in turn for the costs of policing being met by a contribution from Wealden District Council. This will also include an allowance for the processing of tickets. This is also an understanding that the vitality of the Wealden Market Towns are under huge pressure at this time and cannot afford the disincentive to shop locally caused by car park charges. The initial proposal has been made to Senior Police Officers and we await the response shortly. I would pay my respect to the Leader of Wealden District Council, Cllr Bob Standley, who has led on this huge initiative. We are still grateful to Wealden District Councillors who continue to preserve free parking in Wealden.

## **Productivity**

Once again, we have done a mathematical calculation of our productivity. We have taken into account our Volunteers contributions in time plus the grants we have secured. Last year we concluded a dividend of 1193.53% and this financial year we produced a value of 1538.00% which is astonishing productivity and hopefully gives the Parish Council real confidence in the sum they grant us to help with our administration. A cautionary note will be that next year's report will have far less of the voluntary contributions simply because of the lockdown conditions afflicting much of the year. I would acknowledge the trouble taken by Chairman of the Finance and General Purposes Committee, Cllr Richard Ridley, who took time out to assess the details of our performance and assess our bid for the service level agreement which was later forthcoming from his Committee. The support we receive from the Parish Council is fundamental to how we can operate and the fact that a Parish Councillor is appointed to each of our working committees ensures we are accountable for all the projects we are involved in. In addition, we provide a formal report on our business each autumn to the Finance and General Purposes Committee.

## **Stakeholders**

It has been a very different year for most our Partnership Stakeholders. The devastation of the lockdown caused by the pandemic beginning in March had the effect of closing the Schools, cancelling the Heathfield Show, and postponing the Le Marche. The intended V.E. and VJ day celebrations were also cancelled and seemingly the culture of Heathfield Town was diminished. Our Pubs and Restaurants were closed and the community itself shrunk from sight. What has been inspirational is the number of volunteers in every part of the Parish who stood up and supported their neighbours. The more vulnerable have been helped and that speaks volumes for the value of the Residents of the Parish we serve. We should note the closure of Broad Oak Primary School and albeit by assessment, the academic success of the Community College which continues to thrive at GCSE and A levels.

## **Conclusion**

The Partnership Trust is a voluntary organisation seeking to serve the community as a whole. Its track record is outstanding, but it must adapt to the conditions we face and the lockdown has created a very different environment within which to operate. We must react to the release from the projected lockdown with a sharp attention to the needs of the Town and encourage its recovery to former vitality. The retail centre of the Town will be dependent on the loyalty of shoppers to re-establish its

prosperity and purpose. Much will depend on the attitude of Landlords in ensuring their tenants have a potential to thrive and the shops are a collective draw factor to stimulate the attraction to bring the Trade into the Town. The Partnership must play its part in ensuring the Town does not return to its state of demise in the late 1990s which inspired the creation of the Partnership in the first place. It will be a very important year.

The report must deal with a hugely important development which happened in September. This was the departure of Joanne Aldous after 16 years of service as the coordinator of the Partnership. As Chairman I was in a position to really appreciate her contribution in so much of our business. Her professional capabilities added to her intelligence and devoted dedication to the cause enabled the Partnership to have the platform from which to become the productive organisation it has become. I am pleased to report that her successors, Lisa Crozier and Tora Bowdler, a fine double act, have already got away to a good start but part of that success has been the generous briefings provided by Joanne to ensure a smooth takeover. We will miss the formal AGM that we will not enjoy this year and the preparation for the ceremony which Joanne so commendably arranged each year. Her creativity in illustrating the year's exploits with a floral display of photographs to highlight the projects and their achievements was always something to look forward to. We now wish her well with her new career.

Hopefully we will return to our normal AGM in October of this year.

Rupert Simmons  
Chairman, The Heathfield Partnership Trust Ltd  
Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> April 2021  
Held via Zoom