

## HEATHFIELD PARTNERSHIP TRUST LTD CHAIRMAN'S REPORT October 12<sup>th</sup> 2021

A very warm welcome to everyone who is attending this virtual Annual General Meeting. This will be a briefer up-date on the not so long-ago AGM celebrated on the 14<sup>th</sup> April this year. That was held very late on because of the disruption caused by the Pandemic This now will be my 19<sup>th</sup> as Chairman and the conclusion of our 26<sup>th</sup> year in our capacity as first a steering group set up by the Parish Council as an independent body capable of raising funds to invest in the Parish. This then evolved into the Partnership and later the Trust and Company listed by Guarantee. The history is one of a profound impact on the Community and its vitality and long may that continue. It is important to note the heavy impact the Pandemic has had in the provision of our services and it is to be hoped that normal meetings can return to normal practice and next year's AGM can be restored to a public meeting. Regardless of the Virtual meeting the Public and Strategic Partners are able to ask questions of the Partnership and it's Directors and to satisfy any enquiry. Our Annual Accounts are on parade and these can also be examined. We have the presence of our Auditor, Mr Alan Staples and our own Treasurer, Director Tim Hough, to answer any questions about the published figures.

I would wish to acknowledge the significant help and guidance that Alan provides throughout the year and Mannington's assistance is hugely appreciated.

During our long history we have always provided public accountability in the way we conduct our business. As soon as the Covid 19 infections are alleayed, we should be able to re-construct our Executive Committee where all strategic Partners are able to appoint a representative to attend and examine the detail of our projects. The minutes of these meetings are published on the [www.Heathfield.net](http://www.Heathfield.net) web-site. All project committees have a Parish Councillor on their membership to ensure an involvement of the Elected Council. We complete a report to the Finance and General Purposes Committee for their autumn meeting to ensure that can also be questioned.

As a limited Company we make an annual report to Company House and as a Registered Charity we report annually to the Charity Commission. Those disciplines are followed rigorously. This Chairman's report will be published in the [www.Heathfield.net](http://www.Heathfield.net) web-site as soon as this virtual meeting is concluded and it is amazing how many queries we get from far and wide because of this.

It is because of these various practices that we ensure our objectives remain in harmony with those of the Parish Council and Strategic Partners. There is a consistency throughout our Policies that should give all of our Strategic Partners confidence in our productivity.

It is with great sadness that I would report the recent resignation of Director, Trevor Goldsmith. He has made a profound contribution to The Partnership bringing with him his massive experience as the Chairman of the Chamber of Trade, a force behind the Heathfield Area Rotary, several times President, as a Governor for many years of Heathfield Community College and a little while ago as a Parish Councillor. His was a central fugal force amongst the business community of Heathfield. His recent illness has meant that he has stood down from all of his Public duties. We, his fellow Directors, would pay tribute to his contribution over so many years.

I would make a public welcome of Bob Bowdler to the Board of the Partnership Trust and also the Board of the Wealden Works. Bob has long been a huge supporter of the Wealden Works programme raising significant funds with his Music Trio. He has also taken the initiative to drive members of the cohort to interviews and appointments. His spirit has been wholeheartedly behind the project and will add a balance being a resident of the east of the Parish. Bob is both a District and County Councillor and those relationships should be strengthened.

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

## **Farmer's Market**

Since the last report in April the Market became embroiled in a licence issue with the Coop Head office in Manchester. To cut a long story short I am pleased to state that this issue is now behind us and a licence is in place and the Market is restored to its former status. I can mention Director Paula Gear in despatches as her diplomatic skills ensured a successful outcome. The number of stalls have also been restored to sound numbers and the prospects look promising again after the hiatus. The Market now in its 21<sup>st</sup> year, plays a significant part in drawing a greater number of customers into the Town on the third Saturday of the month. Throughout the concerns with the Coop Head office the cooperation with Local Manager, Robbie Box have always remained cooperative and that liaison has been very helpful. We continue to use the "HeathfieldAbout" Facebook promotion to stimulate growth for the market and we should acknowledge the contribution being made by Lisa Crozier and Tora Bowdler in their Coordinator capacity in setting up of the market and collecting Stallholder contributions. It would be reassuring that one of our oldest projects was restarted in June and is now back on course and set fair for the next year.

## **Inward Investment Committee**

We still have a stand off from Sussex Police regarding a sensible solution to enforcement of parking offences which obstruct particularly disabled use of the pavements in Wealden's Market Towns. A very constructive offer was made by the Leader of Wealden District Council to the Assistant Chief Constable to pay a contribution to cover administration costs for parking tickets and a contribution towards PCSO costs to supervise this enforcement. This deals directly with the Police Commissioner's concern with the costs of dealing with the parking enforcement service. No progress has yet been made on this front. It is noted that Rother District Council have now succumbed to this bludgeoning approach which leaves Wealden District more isolated. It remains of considerable importance to Heathfield to maintain free car parking as an asset to the vitality of the Town. Retailers are under huge pressure of competition from web-site promotions added to that of the motivation of Customers to shop online with the Pandemic still uppermost on their mind and Retailers in the Town centre need all the best actions to go in their favour. Again, we need to acknowledge the efforts of Wealden District Councillors in resisting the exhortation to Decriminalise Car Parking Offences which would mean Car Parking attendants from the private sector and a major disincentive to shop in Heathfield. I would re-iterate that the Partnership raised over £1 million pounds in 6 tranches to ensure Heathfield was disabled access friendly and compliant with the 2004 Disabled access act. Then being impacted by mindless obstructions on pavements or junctions or indeed crossings is not helpful to these citizens in particular and a complete contradiction of the original objectives. The Partnership continue to work towards a sensible solution and will continue to offer to participate in dialogue.

In my April report, I did cover the initiative of the Partnership to meet with the Chief Executive of Wealden District Council to encourage discounts on business rates for retailers in the Town Centre. This was very successful and indeed discounts were offered to many retailers who had undergone severe competition from online promoters. They were then hit by the lockdown from the pandemic and took another hit. They have battled back admirably but the number of vacancies currently being observed is uncomfortable and we do need to meet with the primary 6 Landlords to discuss the slowing of rental increases at this difficult time. What has become a growing trend is the withdrawal from the High Street of our Banks and Building Societies. It is currently rumoured that Barclay's Bank, the last man standing, is threatening to close. This would be devastating to the high street and it is noted that the Post Office offers a cash machine and limited banking services for former Natwest and Lloyds customers. We will make representation to Barclays Head office to try and maintain their presence. The vitality of the High Street is again diminished if we lose our last Banking Offer. Our role as a Market Town will be damaged irreparably.

I reported in April of the major piece of work conducted by the Partnership in challenging the assortments of sites being promoted by the then new Local Plan being presented by the Wealden District Council. We had had a history of making impactful representation at planning enquiries

regarding the Police Station Site, eventually won as being constructive and in the case of the new Local Plan 27 challenges to the Inspector, 19 of which were recognised as substantial. The Plan was eventually thrown out by the Inspector, and we had no need to appear at the enquiry as scheduled to do. Wealden are now embarking on a new Plan, but housing numbers are being increased. A very recent change of appointment as the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in Michael Gove may yet see a revised policy being adopted which could help reduce the tension. We will need to keep a close eye on developments here. One issue we also need to observe is the recent experience of severe flooding in Heathfield caused by tumultuous rainfall which overwhelmed the capability of dealing with surface water run-off. It proved that there had been a dangerous amount of over intensive building on previous open land where concrete now exacerbated the situation. There is an independent report on the implications being undertaken right now but the conclusions when they are published will have many ramifications for the community as a whole. These very seriously need to be understood when creating the new plan. 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.

I must report that there has been no progress with regards one of our primary objectives, that is the creation of an incubator unit to help start-up businesses get going in the real world with assistance and advice from experienced practitioners. The problems created by housing pressure devour such sites from such a constructive concept. Grow your own businesses is a stimulant for the local economy and the creation of job opportunities of critical importance. Hopefully such an opportunity will arise in the not too distant future.

### **Transport Committee and Youth Initiative**

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. Part of the reason for this has been the slowness of the new development having been sold. 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. Only now is the Youth Centre being considered for a very limited youth Programme. It will be the intention of the Youth Initiative Committee to meet this autumn to kick new life into these objectives and to create a Youth Committee in order to consult the Members on future projects. Hopefully all age groups will have a representative on that committee. When this initiative first started 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 outstanding and her involvement is crucial to taking this project forward. Recently Sarah has already been out and about with the Street Pastors getting to know some of the Youth “kicking about” in the Town on a Friday and Saturday night. Some of these relationships will hopefully bear fruit with the plans for the Youth Initiative. The Youth Worker Team is down on numbers, but recruitment is in place and new appointments are shortly to be made. 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

I reported the business of the adoption as a CIO in my April report. With the creation of a new Bank Account the operation will be able to commence the commissioning of a new Professional Fund Raiser which in turn should inject new longer-term funds behind the project. The same creation of a new Bank Account has caused our Treasurer immense difficulties, but he assures all that this should be achieved shortly. The Partnership Trust can take huge pride in being capable of taking on the responsibilities of the Programme of Heathfield Works from the now collapsed Tomorrow's People in May 2017 and launching the newly formed Wealden Works with its wider objectives. Taking on the employment of the Team of Mentors was a significant step and successfully achieved. Although the Wealden Works accounts were very separately administered with strong discipline from Tim Hough and independently audited each year by Alan Staples and Manningtons, there was still a concern when fund raising when our books contained Partnership account's details. This was further emphasized when we sought to recruit a professional fund raiser, and this was stipulated as a condition. We are now almost ready to set out on our new platform and we have ambition to succeed with greater expansion.

We are now being invited to participate in two Government Schemes. The first is ESTAR where help is required to help those in social housing getting into the world of employment. The second "Kick Start" is a DWP scheme to help those on social welfare again get into employment or apprenticeships. We were first approached for the second programme back in February 2020 by the Minister no loess, and it has taken this long to actually get a commission. I would acknowledge the help of Caroline McKiddie at County and Director Averil Price at Wealden District Council for their help in trying to bring this about. Ray Cade was certainly trying his best to open up new dialogue with Wealden District Council who needed to be an intermediary.. Either way both programmes should be under way shortly. The credibility of our programme has certainly attracted such interest in this world of providing assistance to 16-24 year olds getting a career started and because of that future independence.

In terms of our independence, we have spent much of this year being constrained by the County Council in gaining access to the Youth Centre because of the covid19 threat of infections. The Lockdown period saw the building closed and so our Team had to use their ingenuity to serve the Young People in our cohort gain access to training and advice and guidance. At that point one of our Benefactors Tunstall Jubilee foundation offered to see whether they might help purchase a building with the objective of leasing it back to us on similar terms and conditions currently enjoyed with the County Council. Very exciting and indeed a property was found in the Parish which appeared to suit our needs extremely well. This was very promising, and an offer accepted on the building, but a structural survey revealed too much to engineer to bring it up to scratch before we even sorted out disabled access and an internal lift for example. All in all, a disappointment but the search is still on and the Benefactor still keen to help.

A tumultuous year in many ways but the reputation of the Project Team is still sensational and the track record of success stories massively impressive when compared to Schemes in urban environments throughout the Country. The one to one mentorship with mental health provision where needed is second to none and the sound experience of Lisa and Tora especially, is particularly special. 90% success rates are simply astounding when seen in comparison to similar programmes across the Country and something Heathfield can be very proud of.

We publish a Newsletter distributed throughout all stakeholders including Grant bodies three times a year. This incorporates stories of success which frequently capture the imagination of all concerned. Particularly during lockdown this has proven a very effective means of communication. I would mark my appreciation of Director, Peter Bailey, who goes out of his way to provide Line Management to the Team and makes himself easily accessible in his Offices in the High Street.

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

One of the stalwarts of the Partnership productivity is the Community Web-site [www.heathfield.net](http://www.heathfield.net). This is now under the stewardship of Lisa and Tora and plays a core role in our Society in providing the fabric of the community together in one site. It promotes all businesses in the Parish and provides easy access to all clubs, voluntary associations, and groups. It is a fundamental role of our Coordinators to keep the site up to date and fresh with new material. There are a number of social media sites including our own, "Heathfieldabout" but they all relate to the Web-site as a base camp for references. The Heathfieldabout initiative is designed to promote events in the Town and this it does most effectively in its Facebook version. Professional expertise is provided by Nick Potter and his business 21<sup>st</sup> Century who originated from Cross in Hand but now have premises in Uckfield. We will be shortly meeting to review the site and its programming and that will be warmly welcomed.

The "HeathfieldAbout" Facebook page (founded by Parish, Chamber, College and Partnership) is still available for all Partners to use and perhaps should be encouraged in its use by the Partners when they have initiatives to publicise.

All of the Partnership Business is reported on the web-site and it is an important mechanism to ensure we remain accountable to the Public we serve.

## **Sports and Leisure Committee**

In April I reported that the Partnership had had to close the campaign for a new Swimming Pool and Fitness centre. The Fund raising opportunities had dried up and Wealden District Council's decision to pull out of the Leisure centre completely put the final nail on the project. The recommended plan for distribution of the remaining funds made by Director Richard Karn were sympathetically received which was welcome. The Primary Schools which benefited with laptops were grateful and indeed with the lockdown were able to put them to immediate use. The contribution to the maintenance of the swimming Pool at Cross in Hand School also went down well.

The Sport & Leisure Committee had originally sought to extend the Avenue Vert cycle and walking route (from Paris to London) through Heathfield and beyond north to Tunbridge Wells. The former railway route of the Cuckoo Line was ideally suited to this objective. The former line north of the Millennium Green adjacent to the Co-op in Heathfield was now in private ownership and a scheme to make a compulsory purchase was being done in conjunction with the County Council and its then Director, Bob Wilkins. It would be fair to say this was not going to be a smooth process but sadly the project came to an end when Bob Wilkins retired.

There is a new opportunity to resurrect his project. The new Local Cycle and Walking Infrastructure Plan a new policy issued by Government recently has potential to resurrect this scheme and I have registered an interest with the Director of Community, Economy and Transport, Rupert Clubb, to explore the possibility of working again with the County Council to see if this can be extended past the currently embarrassing blockage of Heathfield. Hopefully we can get this project into the pipeline and explore its potential to be realised. I will be reporting on progress of this scheme shortly.

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

Inspector Kendall Wells has now taken over from the retired Jon Gross in taking charge of Wealden Policing. Jon Gross had done much to establish improved relations with communities that they had responsibility for. Kendall Wells clearly has ambitions to do the same. He has already attended virtual meetings of the LATs committee and there needs to be another one soon. This is proving to be a very

effective way of all corners of the Parish being able to raise questions of service by the Inspector and also importantly passing on intelligence of activities in their communities. Hopefully we can organise the future meetings in the Kings Church where previous meetings were held.

Parallel to that has been the creation of a Crime & Safety Action Group covering the surrounding area to Heathfield and incorporating many neighbouring Parishes from Wadhurst in the north to Warbleton and Horam in the south. A small number of representatives have been invited to attend and report concerns in their communities to the Inspector. A draft group of objectives have been identified to guide the drive for improved Policing. The Clerk to Heathfield & Waldron Parish, Helen Johnson, has taken the responsibility to coordinate and minute the meetings. This is a new initiative and we will see how this progresses. Inspector Kendall Wells has already said he is happy to attend our own LATs meeting and that is as it should be. I have been asked to chair the CSAG meetings and hopefully we will make the most of them.

## **Productivity**

In April I had already reported on the productivity of the Partnership in the last financial year. The service level agreement on the administration costs of the Partnership Trust reveal that in the last financial year we achieved a dividend on the contribution of the Parish Council with an astonishing figure of 1538.00% which is even higher than the previous year of 1193.53%. This I hope gives the Parish Council huge confidence that their grant is well invested. I am delighted to acknowledge the recommendation made by the Finance and General Purposes Committee has again confirmed grants both to the Partnership Trust and separately to Wealden Works for the forthcoming financial year and this is extremely welcome. The trust placed in both initiatives is of critical importance and enables Citizens, all of all ages, to benefit.

## **Stakeholders**

The lockdown period was extended well into the year. Fortunately, the Schools are back, and many businesses are up and running even the hospitality venues and cultural provision in the surrounding County. A great credit to Richard Ridley and his committee as they managed to put on Le Marche at the end of August and it was rewarding to see such a good turnout. Heathfield College produced outstanding GCSE and A level results which in the circumstances was a brilliant effort on the part of the Teaching Staff, the Governors and all support staff but also the Parents who played a huge part. What spoke particularly well of the community was the extended help of volunteers looking out for the more vulnerable in ensuring they were well looked out for. The presence of the Street Pastors, the enthusiasm of the Brighter Heathfield Brigade all adds to the value in the Town and Parish. Newcomers to the Town are pleasantly surprised by the atmosphere they discover. Hopefully the good will continues well into the hoped recovery.

## **Conclusion**

A somewhat rushed run through the Projects that we are currently pursuing. Briefer still because of the close distance from the postponed AGM in April. Hopefully next year will see a return to a live meeting and the confidence of People to attend. The Partnership Trust is a voluntary organisation and is very dependant particularly on Directors who go out of their way to make massive contribution to the Community they serve. I would also acknowledge the contributions of Lisa Crozier and Tora Bowdler who have managed magnificently from taking over from Joanne Aldous as Coordinators, they both have done a sterling job.

I think we will concentrate a great deal in the forthcoming year on the prosperity of the High Street as it weathers the storm of the lockdown. We will seek to find ways of enticing back customers into the High Street and ensure the Market Town can again thrive. We will seek to grow the Wealden Works enterprise as it becomes more independent but continues to play a massive role in regenerating the

lives of so many 16-24 year olds struggling to find their way. Hopefully the Youth Initiative can get going again and stimulate the interests of young People in our community and reduce those who claim there is nothing to do in Heathfield. All in all, we should assist wherever we can in getting the Community back on its feet. We should celebrate the NHS Clinicians who succeeded with the vaccination programme and bring this forward to the 12 year olds and create booster jabs for the elderly and more vulnerable. With good fortune we can assure the doubters that a vaccination injection is of absolute value, and we collectively can withstand the threat of the pandemic for good.

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Hopefully we will return to our normal AGM in October of next year. In the meantime, please seek to do as much of your Christmas Shopping here in Heathfield. It will make a difference to the Town as we know it.

Rupert Simmons  
Chairman, The Heathfield Partnership Trust Ltd  
Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> October 2021