



New Romney Town Council

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COMMUNITY HALL, SPORTS PAVILION AND NURSERY PROJECT – INFORMATION CORRECTION

Councillor David Wimble published an article about New Romney Town Council's Community Hall, Sports Pavilion and Nursery Project last week in Issue 339 of The Looker, in his capacity as editor of that newspaper, which, once again, included a large number of repeated inaccuracies. This inaccurate article was published despite being able to access all of the facts throughout the history of the project in his capacity as a Councillor and despite having been provided specifically with the correct information on numerous occasions by the Town Clerk.

Page 2 of The Looker states that every effort is made by The Looker newspaper to ensure that information is correct. However, Councillor Wimble, once again, did not take any account of the factual information that has been freely available to all Members of the Town Council via regular written reports and updates – but also through the wealth of information that is freely available to the general public on the Town Council website as well as specific, detailed information provided directly to Councillor Wimble by the Town Clerk.

So, in order to correct misinformation published in Councillor Wimble's article, please see below:

Article entitled 'All We Want for Christmas is a Community Hall'.

In the Looker article (issue 339) by Stephen Daily, *having earlier this year stated in a published article that the New Romney Town Council Community Hall, Sports Pavilion and Nursery Project has been in the pipeline for 12 years*, now states that it has been in development for 14 years, further stating that the project dates back to 2009!

This project was actually commenced in **2016** with the appointment of a Project Management Team, following some initial public consultation to find out what residents would like in the Town, having concluded a land sale in 2013 which resulted in a sum of money (£650,000.00) to be set aside for all capital projects. Of this sum, £630,000.00 was allocated for a community hall and sports pavilion.

The project was to provide a Community Hall and Sports Pavilion (NOT a sports hall) and to upgrade facilities for the adjacent nursery.

The article then claims that the Town Council sold the plot of land in Church Lane for just over £2 million with a promise to build a new sports pavilion. This was absolutely not the case.

In August 2008, NRTC agreed to find a buyer for the land in Church Lane and agreed to accept a minimum of £850,000 (after all fees and charges had been settled). The land sale was agreed in July 2009 and an offer of £1.4 million was accepted from the Developer (Akehurst Homes) but in 2010, due to the need for the Developer to purchase access land from Shepway District Council, without which the development

project could not proceed, the purchase offer was reduced to £1.1 million – reflecting the 22% ransom charged by the District Council for the purchase of the access land. In March 2011, due to a change in housing legislation, the Developer found that anticipated grant funding to provide low cost housing would no longer be forthcoming. As a result, a further reduction in the purchase price was agreed, without which the Developer would be unable to proceed with the land purchase. The final purchase price was, therefore, agreed in the amount of £820,000.00. This sale was not concluded until January 2013, following which consultation was then undertaken to find out what residents would like in New Romney.

At an especial Council meeting in October 2013 (min ref 409/2012-13), it was agreed that this project would be allocated £630,000.00 from the balance of the capital receipt (after first reimbursing general reserves and allocating a small amount to the new outdoor gym and playground on The Greens. A further small amount was allocated, at that time, to new outdoor play equipment, town signage and a potential heritage centre. A Capital Spending Plan was approved which identified these allocations.

The community hall and sports pavilion project commenced in earnest in 2016 following some initial consultation to find out what local residents thought should be provided within these proposed facilities - and in 2017 the intention to upgrade nursery facilities as part of this project was established.

The Town Council did, much more recently, conclude the sale of a second parcel of land for £2,001,308.00. On this occasion, it was, indeed, to part-finance the community hall, sports pavilion and nursery project, having decided to progress this large scale community project. However, the Town Council has, to date, only received £1,129,000.00 of the income, since the remaining £872,308.00 is currently held by the District Council, ring-fenced to contribute to this project and will be released to the Town Council on evidencing a signed construction contract.

In 2018, it was agreed, following public consultation, that an application for a £1 million loan would be submitted following the initial granting of planning consent for this project as it was recognised from the outset that additional funding would be required to deliver a project of this nature.

The article states that costly design work and the use of a build management company caused delays and increasing expense due to repeated alterations to plans.

Plans were only ever altered in response to the requirements of key stakeholders (ie the Town's local sports clubs) and the need to downsize the scale of the project due to financial limitations following the coronavirus pandemic which impacted negatively on economies around the world.

The original project design was put out to tender in July 2021 and the tenders received from six well known Kent firms ranged from £3,808,318.00 to £5,080,119.00.

NRTC worked with the lowest tenderer to identify design changes that would reduce costs but this still resulting in a building cost well in excess of the available budget.

In February 2022, the Council took the brave decision, as a result of the aforementioned tendering process, to halt the project in its original design, to set a fixed budget and to re-design the project to be delivered within a fixed budget.

This article states that the revised project design is now rather bland and aims to house a commercial enterprise in the form of a day nursery.

In fact, January 2023, NRTC agreed to move forward with a revised, fully costed design that could be achieved within the available budget. The appointed Project Management Team and the Architect showed the revised scheme, including a new building for the nursery, would be much better use of public money than re-furbishing the very old Nursery building. The day nursery has always featured within the project and is an established community facility that is extremely highly valued. There is and has never been any intention to subsidise the nursery and the building within which it will be housed will be a Town Council-owned public which could easily be re-utilised for any alternative purpose should the existing nursery decide to vacate.

The revised Project Design was discussed with the District Council's Chief Planning Officer at a pre-submission meeting and the Town Council was advised that the design was very good and, in some ways, much more charming than the original and more in keeping with New Romney – so not a bland design at all.

Yet again it has been stated that the Town Council is looking to borrow an additional £1 million to help fund the project. This is not correct; the Town Council will be making its final decision to draw down the original £1 million loan which it approved following public consultation and for which it subsequently acquired government consent to borrow.

Having stated at the start of the article that the project has been on-going for some 14 years now, the article then goes on to state that it has been on-going for the past 13 years!!

Both of the afore-mentioned statements are inaccurate as the timeline above has clearly identified – with the project commencing in 2016, following consultation that took place between 2013 and 2015.

Councillor Wimble is then quoted, within the article, as stating that he and other Town Council Members are frustrated with the lack of progress on the project over the past three months, also stating that the Project Steering Group Chairman advised that work would commence in January 2024. This is entirely inaccurate.

The Town Council is fully aware that since September 2023, the project has been in a phase whereby, the relevant planning application had been submitted to the District Council for processing and the formal tendering process had been commenced. Therefore, there has been nothing that the Town Council can do to progress the project any further until such time as (a) the planning application has been determined by the Folkestone & Hythe District Council Planning Department and (b) the formal tendering process has been concluded. Councillors have been kept fully informed of the current status of the project via regular written reports to Full Council (available to view on the Town Council website).

The tendering process is a 12 – 14 week process; it cannot be shortened and follows the legal procedures as per government directives; the preliminary stage of this process will conclude on 11th December 2023.

The project's planning application was, in fact, being dealt with under delegated authority until very recently – since it is an application for a project which already has precedent in that the District Council supports the project and supported the original planning application. There was no legal requirement for the project to be called in and a delegated decision would have resulted in a speedier determination of the application. However, Councillor Wimble, himself, recently decided to 'call in' the application (noting that there was no legal requirement to do so) and the application must now be determined via the FHDC Planning Committee. Therefore, any delays to the project

relating to the planning process will now actually be the result of Councillor Wimble 'calling in' the application.

Councillor Wimble is also quoted, within the article, as stating that frustrations and challenges arise when there is lack of transparency and communication amongst those involved – going on to state the importance of local authorities and project leaders to address local concerns and keep stakeholders informed about the progress and challenges of projects.

This is an unsubstantiated claim which appears to suggest that the Town Council and its Members are somewhat unprofessional and that information is not adequately shared. However, this is far from the case. Any Council Member that has read the immense amount of information disseminated through untold number of written reports and updates – both financial and general – would be in a position to disseminate that information accurately to their electorate. Furthermore, there is an entire page provided on the Town Council's website which is dedicated specifically to providing local residents with all of the background information, financial updates and reports, general updates and reports, borrowing matters and all things project. This page is and has been regularly updated and provides an immense body of information about the project for anybody who is interested to read. Furthermore, all reports to Council are embedded in the meeting agendas and made available for the public to read ahead of every meeting. New Romney Town Council is, in fact, extremely transparent and conveys to the public vast amounts of information about the progress and challenges of the Community Hall, Sports Pavilion and Nursery Project on a very regular basis along with a vast amount of information about all Council business.

Councillor Wimble is quoted, within the report, as having asked the Town Clerk some simple questions about the project ie how many companies have applied for the contract .

As an experienced Councillor, Cllr Wimble will fully understand that there is a legal requirement not to open any tenders until the deadline date and, of those then received, any number might immediately be discarded if they do not meet criteria as set out on the formal tendering pack, so it is impossible to know how many tenders the Council will be required to consider until after the official deadline.

Councillor Wimble is then also quoted as stating, once again, that he has repeatedly offered two alternatives to the current project design approach and has claimed – completely incorrectly – that the Town Clerk has consistently declined to raise relevant agenda items. This claim is entirely untrue. He is further quoted as claiming that a modular building approach could deliver the project within 12 weeks. This is also an unsubstantiated claim which is completely unfeasible.

Firstly, Councillor Wimble has never provided New Romney Town Council with any information on a revised design, neither has he formally tabled any proposal for the Project Steering Group or Full Council to consider (this would require a detailed, written paper to be presented, including designs and envisaged costings in order that the Council could make an informed and comparative decision).

A single modular building might well be able to be designed for the community hall and sports pavilion; it would not, however, include a second modern building to replace what is currently in use as a much-valued nursery for the community, or even significant upgrading of the elderly building that currently houses the existing nursery. Any change to the original project design – including one relating to a modular building - will require

a planning application re-submission, even if a full submission is not required, and will take equally as long to be considered by the District Council as a revised planning submission relating to a traditional build. Furthermore, the Town Council is not permitted to 'just go out to one or two companies of its choosing' to procure a building of this cost scale; it must go out to tender using the government contract finder website and offer the contract opportunity out to all interested parties.

This process will take exactly the same amount of time whether the Council has opted for a traditional build project or a modular build project.

Councillor Wimble did suggest to the Council that it should consider holding off making any decision to proceed with the project in its current design and maybe ask the public what they think about having an alternative modular building instead. However, NO formal proposal was received at that time or voted on. Having ascertained that the traditional build project in its current form could be delivered within budget, the FORMAL PROPOSAL was put to progress the existing project, a vote was taken and the progression of the existing project was voted through by a large majority.

The formal decision was, therefore, made to progress through to re-tendering of the existing project in order to deliver the project in its current form subject to a favourable outcome of the tendering process.

Furthermore, even if the Council had considered that it favoured pausing the project, a modular building could NOT be delivered within 12 weeks (previously stated in an article in The Looker earlier this year by Councillor Wimble to take 6 months); a revised planning application would need to be submitted which would take at least 14 weeks.

A modular building approach would still need to go through the tendering process via the government portal and would, therefore, take at least three months prior to considering tenders received.

The Council would need to go out to tender separately for pre-construction/installation demolition works and post construction/installation landscaping and car park works – none of which would be included in the installation of a modular building – nor in the indicated cost of the modular building. Whilst it could go out to tender in parallel, pre-installation works would need to be undertaken prior to installation and post-installation works would need to be undertaken after installation – thus it is NOT possible for the Council to 'have a modular building up and running in 12 weeks' (nor even within the previously stated 6 months).

Finally, Councillor Wimble is quoted within the report as accusing the Council of mis-managing the project and failing to work transparently...

Neither of these accusations can be substantiated since, as identified above, New Romney Town Council is one of the most Transparent Town/Parish Councils in the District and its audit record shows that it clearly manages its business absolutely correctly and appropriately.

... and within the report Councillor Wimble has likened the Council to a business which would be at the brink of collapse.

Once again, this is an unsubstantiated comparison; any delay in the project due to re-vising the approach to the project was, in fact, to protect public finance and ensure that the project was not pushed forward at risk to the public purse. This is entirely opposite to that which is insinuated within the report.

The reasons why the Council has not, as yet, been able to realise this project are due to the numerous unforeseen and significant delays which could not have been predicted ie. The protracted time the original project planning application was held up in the District Council planning system, followed by the further protracted period finalising the associated s106 agreement – during which time covid arrived, followed by the Ukraine war and escalating costs. Had the project not spent so long in the planning system, it may well be that the public works loan application could have been submitted much sooner and a contract signed prior to the economic downturn.

Town Clerk - For and on behalf of New Romney Town Council
04.12.23