

Presentation 23rd February 2017.

Thank you all for turning out tonight for this presentation on the Town Council's plans to preserve vital assets and services which are under threat as a result of the cutbacks by Powys County Council.

I thought it might be helpful to start by explaining very briefly what the Town Council does in respect of assets already. Town Councils used to be responsible for much more than they are now. For example they used to provide education and council housing, and they owned the buildings and land where these and others services were provided.

However in the various local government reorganisations that have taken place over the last thirty years the responsibility for provision of community services and the ownership of the associated assets has been taken away from the Town Councils and passed to the Unitary authorities known as the County Councils. In our case Powys County Council.

Town Councils in recent years have thus had little real responsibility and have largely been a mechanism for the County Council to consult the local community on matters such as planning and other local issues. However that is all changing and the extent by which it will change depends very much on how much responsibility for service provision the local Town Council and the community they represent is willing and able to take on.

Due to the very severe cuts that have been imposed on all County Councils nationwide by central government, County Councils are all having to find means of dramatically cutting their expenditure. They are doing this in many ways but principally by cutting or reducing non statutory services and reducing the assets that the County Council provide and maintain where those services take place. These changes will impact substantially on the community of Presteigne and Norton if no action is taken.

It is important to understand that County Councils are no longer able to be benevolent in supporting local assets and services because they simply do not have the money. The choices available to communities who wish to preserve assets and services are very limited. Frequently the options are quite restricted and boil down to take it on or lose it. Powys County Council have produced a list of assets and services for potential transfer. Not all are yet under threat of closure but some are and this has resulted in a number of assets in our community becoming what the Town Council call threatened assets.

The Town Council has taken a proactive approach to this problem and has come up with a number of proposals. The purpose of my presentation this evening is to explain these proposals to you and their background. There will be an opportunity to ask questions and express your views when I have finished.

During the years since the creation of Unitary Authorities and the removal of assets and responsibility for service provision from Town Councils, Presteigne and Norton Town Council has not been sitting on its hands. It has been acquiring assets and providing and preserving services where it could within the very restricted funds available to it through the precept.

The Precept is the small percentage of your Council Tax that is given to the Town Council by the County Council each year. About 4% currently. The Town Council decides on the amount of the precept at its precept meeting in January each year. The amount, at the moment, is uncapped.

I thought it might help everyone to understand the background of the current proposals if I give a brief resume of the history of asset acquisition and provision of services by the Town Council.

The first assets the Town Council were involved with were the **Withy Beds** which were originally owned by the Rural District Council, and then passed to Powys County Council at Unification. In 1988 the Town Council negotiated a lease for the Radnorshire Wildlife Trust to manage the Withy Bed as a Nature Reserve. The Town Council raised £2,000 for materials and helped with the work involved. In 1990 the reserve won a Prince of Wales Award. The Radnorshire Wildlife Trust has managed the Withy Beds ever since. Currently Powys County Council is offering the Withy Beds as a potential transfer to the Town Council, but there is no immediate need to consider this as the current arrangement is working satisfactorily.

In 1992 following an approach from the Woodland Trust the Town Council raised £15,000 for the purchase and works at **Silia Woods X 2**. The woods were given by Deed of Gift to the Woodland Trust for them to manage them on the basis that if they ever wanted to dispose of them that the Town Council would have first refusal to have them back.

The first asset acquired by the Town Council itself was **Lower Wents Meadow**. About three acres of land adjacent to the River and next to the Withy Beds. £30,00 was raised for purchase and carry out improvement works. A lease was granted to Radnorshire Wildlife Trust to manage the ground alongside their existing management of the Withy Beds as one nature reserve.

The Warden which is adjacent to Silia Wood at the end of the ridge above the Town is owned and maintained by Powys County Council. It is on the list of assets for potential transfer to the Town Council but is not yet being considered as it is not considered a threatened asset.

In 1996 the 8 acres of **Upper Went's Meadow** was offered to the Town Council and it raised £36,000 for its purchase. The land was initially let for grazing, and then in 1999 public meetings were held to decide on how it should be used. The Town Council raised £26,000 for improvements and organised volunteers to provide, footpaths, a roadway,

Apple Orchards and to restore a **Barn** for community use. A community garden was created, now known as the **Ligne Garden**, to mark the Twinning of the Town with Ligne, in France.

To provide something for the younger generation a **Skateboard Park** and a Mountain Bike Track were created, again with an enormous input from volunteers.

Went's Meadow has been, and is still, entirely owned and managed by the Town Council to this day and provides a wonderful amenity for all in the Community to use for outdoor activities, community events and so on.

In 2005 Powys Council decided to close the **Wilson Terrace Toilets**. The Town Council felt they were too important to allow them to be closed so in 1996 they took a lease on them and it has kept them open ever since from April to October each year.

In 2009 the Town Council were asked to consider providing **Allotments** in Presteigne. A number of locations were considered, and eventually part of the land leased from the Town Council by Radnorshire Wildlife Trust was released back to the Town Council, and allotments

set up with their first occupiers taking over in 2010. The Allotments are administered by the Town Council and run on a day to day basis the Presteigne and Norton Allotment Owners Association.

In 2013 the north facing slope below the Warden was put up for sale by Powys County Council. It had originally been owned by Presteigne Urban District Council passing to the Rural District Council and thence to Powys County Council on Unification. The Town Council purchased part of the land naming it **Eddie's Meadow**, in memory of Eddie Taylor a lifelong pillar of the community. Funds of £20,000 were raised with part funding from Powys County Council itself. Eddie's Meadow is now owned and run by the Town Council as a hibernaculum and wild flower meadow.

About three years ago Powys County Council offered to refurbish the tennis courts, which they owned, and convert them into a **Multi Use Games Area, or MUGA**, if the Town Council would take them over, including the adjacent **Football Field**, which they also owned, and the ground where the **Scout Hut** stands, which is leased by Scouts. The tennis courts have now been refurbished and converted to a MUGA, and the land has been transferred to the Town Council. As part of this transfer the freehold of the Wilson Terrace Toilets, currently leased as mentioned already, have come to the Town Council also.

Now that this transfer is complete the Town Council own and maintain all the community land between the Warden and the River Lugg and Withybeds except the playground. Our own green belt on the Eastern edge of the Town.

About three years ago Powys County Council advised the Town Council that they would be closing the **Hereford Street Toilets** unless the Town Council agreed to take them on. The Town Council is currently running them for the Community on a licence, pending a more permanent arrangement subject to ongoing negotiations.

So that is a little about the history of asset acquisition by the Town Council. As you can see the Town Council has for many years been working to acquire and retain assets for the Community. I would now like to move on to more recent events.

About eight years ago Powys County Council closed the Youth Club which for many years had been run by Powys County Council at the **Old School** in Hereford Street. Powys County Council own the building and at that time planned to sell it for development. A concerned group in the community initiated the Presteigne Youth Project to reopen the **Youth Club** at the Old School. Presteigne Youth Project Ltd, was set up as a charity and it persuaded Powys County Council to lease it the Old School at a peppercorn rent. A youth Club has been run there since by Presteigne Youth Project using volunteer youth workers. There are a number of other users at the Old School most significantly the very popular Circle, which runs every Tuesday and is a drop in for the elderly.

The future of the Youth Club is currently at some risk as the lease has expired. It has been extended on a temporary basis, but Powys County Council could decide to terminate this arrangement and sell the building at any time, leaving the Youth Club and other users without a home. The Town Council has therefore submitted a proposal to Powys County Council to take over the building and run it for the Community, enabling all the users to remain there.

The **Drill Hall** where Community Support operate is owned by Powys County Council also and has been leased by the Army for the cadets. This lease has also expired and the Army are not going to be renewing it. Community Support remains in the building on a temporary lease. Powys County Council could terminate this arrangement and sell the building at any time,

leaving Community Support without a home. Therefore the Town Council has submitted a proposal to Powys County Council to take over the building and run it for the Community enabling Community Support to remain there and using the rest of the building as a Town Council Office and Council Chamber. This would provide better access for residents to Town Council services and Town Council meetings.

The Town Council has been aware for some time that the **Cemetery** currently owned and operated by PCC is running out of space. At current rate of usage it has about four years capacity left. The Town Council has been pressing Powys County Council to purchase additional land but they have no funds and are not willing to purchase any land. The Town Council has identified additional land and a willing vendor, and has applied successfully for planning permission. It is in the process of raising funding, on a low cost government mortgage to purchase additional land to ensure burial space for the community for about 75 years. The Town Council is considering submitting a proposal to Powys County Council to take over the existing cemetery as well as the Burial Board thus taking full responsibility for the running and maintenance of the entire Cemetery for the Community.

As many will be aware the two chapels at the Cemetery are in a very poor state of repair and Powys County Council have no funds to repair them. If the Town Council take over the Cemetery they would hope to raise funding for restoration of the chapels, which otherwise will never happen, and it is quite likely they will be pulled down for safety reasons in due course.

So that is the current situation on the three assets and services that the Town Council is currently hoping to take over to preserve them for the Community. I think it is also appropriate to mention some other assets and services that the Town Council is not proposing to take over, but is hoping to part support either financially or in other ways.

The **Playground** is on the list of assets for potential transfer to the Town Council, but is not yet a threatened asset. It is a big financial and liability responsibility, which the Town Council are unable to take on. For the time being the playground continues to be run by Powys County Council.

However the Town Council agrees with many in the community that the playground is in a very run down condition. They have therefore asked Powys County Council if they can seek funds for some new play equipment. Powys have agreed and the Town Council has made a successful application for grant funding £8000 to install a new piece of equipment aimed at younger children, and this should be installed this spring.

The Town Council have also been in negotiations with Powys County Council for the repair and replacement of other pieces of equipment in the playground and this is currently in hand.

Finally in respect of the playground a volunteer group has come together called the Playground Mums to raise funds for further equipment and the Town Council is working closely with them to that end. They have already had a donation of a new purpose made wooden shelter from a local firm, and I will be running my Mayors Fundraiser this year to support their efforts.

There has been ongoing negotiation with Powys County Council for about ten years in respect of the **Memorial Hall**, the ownership of which is in the hands of a Charitable Trust for the benefit of the Community of Presteigne and surrounding area. The Trustees are Powys County Council and the day to day management both practical and financial is by the Memorial Hall Committee. The trusteeship carries no financial responsibility and Powys County Council have been pressing Town Council to take it on for about ten years. The Town

Council has been unwilling to because of concerns about the long term viability of the building.

About five years ago a steering group including members from the Town Council and the Memorial Hall Committee, with funding from the Town Council, Powys County Council and Powys Association of Voluntary Organisations, applied for a big lottery grant to rebuild the hall but unfortunately it was not successful. About two years ago a private initiative, sourcing funds available from the Armed Services, topped up by Powys County Council funds, enabled refurbishment of the Hall with new roof, better insulation, new double glazed doors and windows refurbished toilets and, an increase in the size of the car park. As the viability of the building is now more certain, the Town Council is now considering taking on the Trusteeship of the Hall.

Moving on to the **Library**. Powys County Council have approached The Town Council saying that they have to make a 50% cut in expenditure on all Libraries in the County, except the three main ones in Newtown, Brecon and Llandrindod. The Town Council have been in negotiation with Powys County Council for some months about this, and it now looks as though arrangements can be made for the Library to remain where it is, run by Powys County Council subject to a reduction in opening hours, and a financial contribution from the Town Council. A group of volunteers has come forward and it is hoped they will be able to work alongside Powys to extend the opening hours to those currently enjoyed.

The library is on the ground floor of the **Assembly Rooms** which are owned by Powys County Council. The part excluding the Library is leased to the Mid Border Arts on a lease that has four years to run. It has been suggested to Powys County Council that a new Charitable Trust is formed and that the Assembly Rooms is transferred to this Trust, which would then operate the building for the benefit of the Community, continuing to provide a home for the Library and the MBA. Funding to run the building would come from rent from the users, ie the MBA and the Library, and the establishment of Friends of the MBA who would make ongoing contributions. This proposal if successful would ensure the retention of both the services provided in the building, whilst releasing Powys County Council entirely from any responsibility for the building itself.

The **Judges Lodging's** are owned by Powys County Council and leased to a Charitable Trust that runs the building and operates the Tourist Information Centre. Currently the Trust is in negotiations with Powys County Council to take over the building, and plans are in hand that if successful should ensure it a secure future.

The **East Radnor Day Centre Building** is also owned by Powys County Council, and run by a charitable Trust. The trust has secured a funding contract with Powys County Council to continue to provide day care until **31st March 2019**. However, the amount of funding has been cut significantly; by some 18%, this is on top of the previous 5% cut made in 2015/16. The effect in real terms may mean a reduction in the service currently offered, this is still in the discussion stage as any decision to reduce the service is not being taken lightly..

The final Assets I would like to mention are the Car Parks

The Car Parks, Bypass, High Street and Hereford Street are all owned by Powys County Council and although they originally listed them for transfer to Community Councils they have now decided that, as they are income earning, that they wish to retain them. They have also decided to charge on all of them including the Bypass car park that is currently free.

Despite Powys County Council intransigence on this matter the Town Council is continuing to press for transfer of the Hereford Street Car Park to the Town Council. It has been suggested that this Car Park could be a Pay If You Can car park which would provide an opportunity for users to contribute, by voluntary payment, to the running costs of their own Community. It

would also be possible for the Town Council to offer free parking in support of Community Events such as Street Fairs and Parties, and to provide a venue perhaps for an Open Air Market or other communal activities.

So that brings us right up to date and I hope gives you all a reasonably clear picture of the assets and services in Presteigne and what the Town Council, has done, is doing now or proposing to do to to preserve them.

I hope you will all manage to submit a response to the survey. The results will be posted on the Town Website, and there will be posters in the Library, on the two Community Development Group noticeboards, and elsewhere in the Town.

Thank you all for listening so attentively and I would be pleased to answer any questions.