

Minutes of the Friends of Crowborough CitA AGM

Tuesday 20th July 2021 at 2pm in the Community Centre

Present:

Chairman Bob Johnson

Secretary Rosemary Wilson

Treasurer John Coda

Friends Committee Members Richard Mann, Humphrey Skett, Jill Pardey (also as representative of Withyham Parish Council) and Phil Ronan

Wealden CitA Chief Executive Kate Davidson

Crowborough CitA Manager Pauline Townsend

Councillor Dave Neeves, Mayor, Crowborough Town Council

Rotherfield Parish Councillor Janice Richardson

Crowborough CitA Volunteers listed on the attached sheet

In attendance: Barbara Kingsford

Apologies: Peter Boorman, Di Phillips, Michael Hewens, Janie Hooper and Rosalyn Bucklitsch

Welcome: Bob Johnson opened the AGM by welcoming everyone particularly the Mayor of Crowborough Town Council, Dave Neeves, and the parish council representatives, Jill Pardey and Janice Richardson.

Due to Covid there were no events to report and no income received other than the prize draw. A garden party in a volunteer's garden has been scheduled for 22nd August and it was hoped there would be a good turnout.

Minutes: The Minutes of the last AGM on 21st July 2020 were approved unanimously – proposed by Rosemary and seconded by Jill.

Election: All office holders had agreed to stand again and, in the absence of any other nominations, were unanimously elected. However new general committee members were always welcome, bringing new ideas to the Friends.

Treasurer's report: John presented his report which, due to Covid and the enforced lack of activity for the financial year, was very short. Income was from the prize draw and from some donations and there had been a small amount of expenditure on the painting of the office kitchen. The balance was £12,000 and the committee would continue to consider suggestions on how it should be spent. John was thanked for his input.

Manager's Report: Pauline's report commented on the strange 18 months since the outbreak of Covid. Despite the difficulties, the

volunteers had embraced all the technology involved in working from home and all work had been carried out over the phone until the recent trial reopening of the office on two days per week with a limited staff. One of the unforeseen results of the new way of working had been that there had been regular team meetings via Zoom, both volunteers and management teams, and they had got to know each other personally with social meetings of up to six people taking place and providing support for each other. It had also been shown that there could be a reduction in paperwork as most volunteers worked from scanned documents and information was sent to clients via email links to the Citizens Advice website.-,

Pauline thanked the volunteers for their work and it was noted that in addition to giving their time they pay regularly to come to the fundraising events. She also thanked Friends and the committee members for their financial assistance and Crowborough Town Council who provided over £22,000pa in funding. Pauline also put in a plea for new committee members; the duties would not be onerous – one hour meetings a few times per year.

Bob thanked Pauline and her husband Keith whose band would be providing entertainment at the garden party in August.

Wealden CitA Chief Executive: Kate began by thanking the staff and volunteers without whose goodwill clients would not have been able to be helped. Wealden CitA were quick off the mark with the big decision to close offices before the official lockdown. Management team meetings to discuss the next steps were arranged on Zoom and have continued daily. Calls were being taken by day two of lockdown with volunteers answering phones at home. Adviceline was rerouted to volunteers' telephones and they worked brilliantly as a team. As a result free, confidential, independent and impartial advice continued to be provided throughout. No other organisation deals with residents of Wealden with so many different problems. The research and campaigning has continued, the most recent issue being the proposed ending of the additional £20 pw Universal Credit in September.

Between April 2020 and March 2021 across Wealden:

- 3,800 clients were assisted by phone or email
- 4,700 calls were taken by Adviceline by volunteers working at home
- £264 average fuel bill savings were made
- 1,015 food vouchers were issued
- 800 + received tailored debt advice

Between April 2020 and March 2021 in Crowborough:

- 1,591 clients were helped
- with 6,666 issues
- an average of 3 issues per client
- highest number of issues were benefits, tax credits, Universal Credit and housing followed by employment

- the average age of clients was now 30-34 down from 50 with fuel and council tax arrears debts

Client feedback:

- 8/10 clients reported that their issue had been solved
- 9/10 clients had been helped to find their own solution

As yet there had not been the expected rise in the number of debt cases but Wealden District Council has not been enforcing priority debts. Kate expressed her appreciation of the close working relationship with WDC who train their enforcers (bailiffs) to ask when pursuing a debt if the debtor is working with CitA. If the answer is yes they take no further action. If no they will be sent to CitA.

Calculations used in models by charities showed the considerable savings made by the government and the community by investing in CitA.

Bob then asked Kate where the main funding for Wealden CitA comes from. The majority comes from local councils and from grants. Kate's job included sourcing funding and she was due to apply for Service Level Agreement funding shortly. Covid grants have been available for the voluntary sector; Kate applied and some monies had been received. The funding helped towards IT equipment and the phone system. As a rule East Sussex County Council does not contribute but this year they will be working with the 5 CitAs across East Sussex on a money advice project. Wealden, as a predominantly rural area, deals with very different issues and receives less funding than larger towns like Hastings and Eastbourne..

Prize Draw

Bob thanked Richard for his hard work on the prize draw which was a time-consuming task and much appreciated. The prize draw was held.

1st Prize – Monica Birchell

2nd Prize – Jill Pardey

3rd Prize – Dr Tucker

AOB

Training: Pauline advised that new volunteers had been recruited and were receiving training throughout lockdown, two of whom, Cameron and Barbara were present. Six volunteers had just started, four were in training and they were now able to come into the office and listen in on speaker phone to interviews. The training was brilliant but nothing compares to hearing the client and the drawing out of information.

Dave Neeves, Mayor of Crowborough Town Council, confirmed that he would ensure the funding given by the Town Council would continue during his term of office and congratulated Crowborough CitA on a job well done, seamlessly helping clients during the last eighteen months. It was a testament to its ability to adapt. He then asked if amongst the staff

and volunteers there was a qualified mental health first aider. He had recently qualified after a free six week course with Learning Curve. Although there was no-one with that qualification, there was a large number of clients with mental health issues and the training provided ensured that volunteers were able to pick up when things were not right and refer and deal with clients appropriately. Previous attempts to arrange similar training had been either too expensive at £100 per person or oversubscribed. The Mayor undertook to email Kate the details of the course he was recommending.