

Chair report AEWRA AGM 22nd July 2019

I have served in the role of Acting Chair of the Association for the past year. It will of course be up to this meeting to decide whether it wishes me to continue in this role. I would like to thank my fellow committee members for their support throughout the year.

The Association has continued to represent residents of our 2 wards on issues of concern to them. In particular we have scrutinised and commented on planning proposals, and in particular the new Local Plan for East Hants and proposals to develop the site of Alton School in Anstey Lane. We remain particularly concerned about the traffic in Anstey Lane. We have liaised with the developers of Cadnams Farm to minimise inconvenience to existing residents.

Our meetings have become less frequent. This was mainly due to falling attendance at regular meetings, but also for financial reasons. While we have enjoyed very large and lively meetings when there have been urgent issues in our area, fewer people have been attending more routine meetings. After reducing the frequency from monthly to bi-monthly and experimenting with different evenings, we are currently in a stage of convening meetings according to demand. We may wish to discuss this.

I regret that the litter collection did not happen this year because the few volunteers could not find a mutually convenient date.

Financially I do not wish to pre-empt what the Treasurer has to say, but we do not enjoy a regular income. How many people would be prepared to pay an annual subscription? We belong to ADRA, the umbrella organisation that coordinates Alton's residents' associations. ADRA is funded by contributions from its constituent associations. John Field has recently moved its website to a free hosting platform and Alton Town Council has just given ADRA a grant to cover the cost of its meeting room hire for the next year, and so its financial needs for the next year should be minimal.

Most, but not all, of Alton is covered by a residents' association. We are one of the largest and probably rank quite high in terms of activity. Apart from our core activities, we have of course launched and commissioned a Community Bus service from Community First since late April. This is a major achievement – it is the first time that Community First has operated a frequent service in an urban area and it is unique among residents associations in our area. I would like to thank everyone who has given so much to make this happen:

- Community First and particularly Lynne Peters for organising all the legal processes and providing the service
- The members of AEWRA and the steering group for their time and effort
- John Geoghegan and his colleagues at EHDC for facilitating the return of the questionnaire
- Radian Housing for its very generous financial support
- Alton Lions, Alton Society, SpecSavers and Wildly Upbeat Printers, Robert Saunders (councillor support) and 3 individual donors from St Lawrence's Church and Alton Methodist Church for financial support

I will talk about this further later in the meeting.

Community bus service

We have established a useful and generally reliable service running on Tuesday afternoons and Saturday mornings since the end of April. It has carried over 250 passengers and it has built up a regular base of loyal customers. It is clearly a much appreciated service.

When I say reliable, I would have to admit that we did have 2 incidents in the same week on May 22nd and May 25th that meant that we provided very little service on these 2 days. Passenger numbers for June seem to show some continuing damage to passenger confidence. Three quarters of our passengers travelled on Saturdays, and one quarter on Tuesdays – while our costs are 2/3 on Saturdays and 1/3 on Tuesdays.

The project started after Robert Saunders talked to Community First and we held a very well attended meeting here in the spring of 2018. We organised a complete house-to-house survey of the 2 wards with a reply paid postal envelope. About 300 residents responded saying they wanted a local bus service and many said they would be travelling with a number of companions. Of course they wanted to go to a variety of destinations at different times. We analysed the replies and identified the greatest need, given that we had to supplement and not replace the existing Stagecoach service. We then set about fund raising. Community First kindly offered to handle the day-to-day finances and the handling of Gift Aid etc, so avoiding the need for us to register with the Charity Commission, HMRC and all the legal requirements of operating a bus service.

However I have to say that I am not happy with the level of financial reporting that we have had. The first statement I received, in late May, contained so many errors and omissions that it was virtually useless. The most serious failing was that it did not show any donations that had been paid by online bank transfer (BACS). Since then I have spent 6 weeks looking for information about our donations and sending this to Community First, along with requests for corrected accounts – which until last week went unanswered. I now have a statement that shows the correct charges and all the donations that I know about. Please talk to me if you have given money to Community First for the bus service, or if you know of anyone who has given. The fares income still does not agree with Lynne Peters' figures and I still lack the confidence that the donation list is complete, but equally I have no information that it is not. The accounts I have been given go to the end of June.

The accounts show an income of £2707. Expenditure was £1430, leaving a balance of £1277. In addition to this we will receive £200 in Gift Aid at some stage. Our operating costs for a full year are approaching £9000. If things continue as they are we have enough money to go on until the end of August. Sadly however the service is not viable in its current form. Following the interest shown at our inaugural meeting, and reinforced by the house-to-house survey, I hoped the service might be self supporting. I even worried about the bus being full! More realistically I thought that if we could cover half the operating costs we could present a convincing argument to town centre businesses, including supermarkets, that we were a valuable partner to them, worth some support. With passenger numbers only about 1/3 of this level this is not so credible. There is no source of funding available to cover shortfalls in day-to-day operating costs. There MAY be possibilities for funding for capital projects. We are covering 10% to 15% of our costs from "fares" and it is not realistic to expect donors to cover the shortfall for ever. Our options include abandoning the service, looking at car sharing/taxi sharing schemes, growing to a town-wide service based on a vehicle that we owned (and for which funding might be sought), or maybe finding a cheaper vehicle locally that is spare at the times we need it. If the answer is to look to an Alton town-wide operation the scheme must be split off to an independent charity as it is clearly beyond the remit of a single residents association.

My suggestion to the meeting is to ask the Steering Committee to urgently consider the options. If a way forward can be identified and agreed we should try to transition the current service into the new arrangements as smoothly as possible. If not then we should end the service on or shortly after 31st August.