

CONGLETON TOWN MEETING

Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 15th May 2025 Congleton Town Hall

Present - Mayor of Congleton, Councillor Kay Wesley (Chair)

Panellists – Chair of Committees: Cllr David Brown (Personnel), Cllr Robert Douglas (Finance & Policy), Cllr Suzy Firkin (Environment), Cllr Amanda Martin (Planning), David McGifford (Chief Officer) Cllr Richard Walton (Community).

Officers – Debbie Coxen, Cathy Dean & Ruth Burgess.

29 members of the public.

The meeting is convened under the provision of the Local Government Act 1972 SEC (1) and 13(1) and due notice has been given in the local press.

1. Welcome and Introduction

The Chief Officer opened the meeting at 7 pm and outlined the evening's procedures before handing over to Town Mayor Cllr Kay Wesley. Cllr Wesley welcomed dignitaries and the public, expressing what an honour it had been to serve as Congleton Town Mayor over the past year.

2. Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting

Noted that the Minutes of the 2024 Annual Town Meeting are on the Town Council website.

3. Neighbourhood Plan Update & Corporate Strategic Plan 2025-26

The Chief Officer gave an update on the Congleton Neighbourhood Plan, a community-led planning policy that will guide future planning decisions once adopted via referendum. The project is progressing well, with strong community engagement during the Regulation 14 consultation (10 Oct – 5 Dec 2024). Feedback is being used to revise the plan, which will next be submitted to Cheshire East Council for Examination and, if approved, a public referendum. If all goes well, the Neighbourhood Plan will be in effect by the end of 2025.

No Questions.

Corporate Strategic Plan 2025-2029

The Council's newly approved Corporate Strategic Plan serves as a key reference for all activities. While the Council generally operates within this plan, it may act outside it in response to unforeseen opportunities or issues that impact the community.

This plan strengthens the council's position when seeking grants or funding support. Developed through consultation with Councillors and officers, it builds on the 2019–2024 Business Plan and was formally adopted in May 2025. The plan remains flexible to adapt to changing circumstances and is reviewed annually to assess progress.

Q. Kevin Fitzgerald - Any items or issues outstanding from the previous plan, will these be carried forward?

In reality, we are facing many of the same issues, but yes anything that wasn't completed will be carried forward.

4. Town Centre Code of Conduct and CIL funding

Cllr Robert Douglas presented the Town Centre code of conduct which was endorsed by the community committee on the 14th of April 2025 which covers 7 specific areas:

1. Sound
2. Street Furniture and static items
3. Vehicles and the pedestrian area
4. Posters Stickers and Banners
5. Dog Control
6. Litter and Bins
7. Begging

An adopted code of conduct helps the police to have a reference point for standards within our town centre.

Cllr Douglas asked for a vote of all those in favour of having a code of conduct, all voted in favour.

CIL Funding

The Community Infrastructure Levy is a charge on developers when building a new development. Cheshire East collects the levy and transfers it to the relevant Town or Parish Council. The current balance of CIL monies available for Congleton Town Council is £ 21,683.

Councillors came up with three proposals ranked in the following order :

- Install three gates on Bridge Street and Little Street to safeguard pedestrians and cyclists between 10 am and 4 pm, and collaborate with Cheshire East on implementing cameras to enforce restrictions on unauthorised vehicles outside these hours.
- Public Realm – maintaining bins, benches, signage etc. They were originally installed by Cheshire East Council but Cheshire East has now advised us they will not be maintaining them in the future.
- Town Centre Public Toilets

Cllr Douglas asked by a show of hand to vote on each option:

Option 1 – 8 votes

Option 2 – 1 vote

Option 3 – 16 votes

A poll will also feature in the next issue of Bear Necessities to garner public support for the 3 options.

Q. Mike Wesley – Play area Kestrel Close still isn't open, what's been done about this?

Councillors not aware of the problem will look into it.

Q. Thersa Greystone – Regarding access to Bridge Street, would vehicles be allowed access for someone like me with accessibility issues?

Cllr Wesley stated that strictly speaking access should be for deliveries only, but for accessibility issues, it will be allowed, this is something we will look into to make it clear.

Q. Mike Fitzgerald – All excellent points but toilets need to be made a priority in Town, toilet facilities are a disaster, what is being done about it?

The Chief Officer provided an update on public toilet facilities, noting that access to the Capitol Walk toilets near the bus station was lost due to legal issues with the lease. The Council is working with Cheshire East to finalise a new agreement and has allocated reserves to invest in improved public toilet provision, which remains a priority.

5. Cleaner Greener Congleton.

Cllr Suzy Firkin - The Town Council remains committed to reducing its carbon footprint through improved energy and vehicle usage and a strategic approach to planting, while also enhancing local biodiversity through tree planting, effective site management, and collaboration with partners.

Decarbonising the Town Hall - *The Grade II* listed Town Hall is primarily heated by gas, with electricity used for lighting and water heating. To reduce energy-related carbon emissions, the Council has a long-term plan—advised by specialists—focusing on improving building fabric, heating, and lighting. A Public Sector Decarbonisation Grant has funded the design phase and provided £300k towards proposed measures.

The design phase of the Town Hall energy improvement project has been completed, with tenders received. The project includes an air-source heat pump, solar panels, thermally efficient glazing, insulation, and building upgrades to enhance energy efficiency. The total budget for Phase 2 was £380k (£300k grant and £80k from CTC). Revised estimates exceeded the budget by £120k, prompting a report to full Council. Councillors resolved to defer the project and reapply for funding in the next round of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Grant, which is expected to offer more favourable terms. Increased costs were attributed to a new DNO power supply, an acoustic enclosure for the ASHP, and higher contractor costs due to inflation and National Insurance. Planning permission has been granted; listed building consent is still pending.

Environmental Services -

Streetscape Team continue to look after Congleton's Green Spaces. Cheshire East are withdrawing from providing a number of services that affect the safety and cleanliness of our town. The Town Council are actively looking at ways to absorb these services and provide value to residents.

Some examples are:

- **Mobile Waste Service** – The council budgeted to provide a mobile community skip, Cheshire East said this contravenes their waste handling license. We are currently in discussions as we pick up the fly tipping costs.
- **Weed Control** – Cheshire East have confirmed that they will no longer operate a weed control service along highways of the town. We plan to invest in equipment that will allow the mini sweeper to also treat weeds and clean gullies.
- **Grit Bin Filling** – gritting routes have been reduced in Congleton and Cheshire East will only fill grit bins at the start of winter and after prolonged bad weather. Town Council have proposed that Street Scape take over filling grit bins in bad weather as we can be more responsive to local needs.

Cllr Firkin asked the room to take a vote on the 3 options:

Mobile Waste – 15 votes

Weed Control – 18 votes

Grit Bins – 15 votes

Cllr Sneddon shared an update that Congleton will be provided with a mobile waste disposal once a month provided via Cheshire East.

No Questions.

6. Congleton for Everyone

Cllr Wesley presented an update on the community activities the council has been involved in, from crime prevention to health and wellbeing initiatives.

- Town Hall Tours for youth groups – and adult groups
- Events for the elderly – Christmas Tea Dance and VE 80 Day
- Town Centre Playdays and Witchy Wednesday for children
- Pride in Leadership event – inclusion workshop with many towns represented

Health & Wellbeing –

- Supporting and promoting local mental health services including the new Wellbeing Hub on Worrall Street
- War Memorial Hospital 100th birthday celebration
- Hosting the Wellbeing Fayre
- Working on wellness days with local GPs and promoting the CEC Living Well Bus

Combat Crime –

- ‘Design out crime’ days working with Cheshire Police
 - Shoplifting focus
 - CCTV uploads to the Police system
- Police Community Cohesion sessions
- Draft ‘Code of Conduct’ for Town Centre

Action on Gender-based Violence –

- Ambassador talks - for adult and youth groups

- Public engagement- street stalls and pubs
- White Ribbon film- Used as part of a national campaign
- Combatting spiking - posters and test kits

Equal Access –

- Accessibility Action Plan developed with our residents' advisory group
- Events Accessibility – both CTC and 3rd party
- Improvements in our Communications and Website
- Disability Welcome Scheme for shops and businesses

Q. Thersa Greystone – I've lost access to a lot of places, where are the safe spaces?

A. To add a list of safe spaces to the CTC website.

7. Open Forum and Questions

Questions submitted before the meeting:

Q1. Norah Bourne - My Question is do with East Cheshire merging with Warrington and the creation of a paid Mayor.

What will be achieved for Congleton by this merger what do we have in common with Warrington and why are we not going to have a vote on it, I thought we were a democratic country. Likewise, what will we gain from having a paid Mayor, how much will they be paid and how much power will they have? After all, we already have a council to make decisions.

Mayor - Thank you for your question Norah

The Government did actively promote the creation of a Mayor for Cheshire and Warrington via a consultation which concluded on the 13th of April 2025.

The Mayor of Warrington and Cheshire, under a devolution agreement, is expected to have powers in several key areas including transport, skills, housing, economic development, environment, health, and public safety. Theoretically, this would give the Mayor a strong voice on the UK and world stage and allow the area to work more effectively with other devolved areas.

It is quite common for cities such as Manchester and Liverpool to have Mayors, if adopted the challenge will be for Congleton to have its voice heard.

Q2. Morris Walker – Could the Council acquaint us with the amount of money it holds in reserve funds and what would this amount be used for seeing that we had an increase in Council Rates for Congleton Town Council of over 11 % for the next twelve months?

Cllr Douglas - Thank you for your question, Maurice.

The Council holds £ 483,248 in Earmarked Reserves.

£ 354,434, equating to about 73% of the total, relates to Capital Reserves in respect of our property, assets or capital projects. We do foresee significant capital commitments occurring in the future.

£ 40,604 for legal and professional costs, training and ongoing projects relating to the Neighbourhood Plan and Website Development.

£ 25,500 for election costs. I should mention that in a twelve-month period, two nearby Town Councils have each been obliged to spend about £ 45,000 on by-elections.

£ 21,684 for the Community Infrastructure Levy on which I made a presentation earlier and which will be spent on projects following a consultation with our residents.

£ 15,000 in the event local organisations need additional support.

£ 26,026 for various sundry reserves.

Officers and councillors review the level of these earmarked reserves regularly.

I feel that I should address the question about the recent increase in our precept of 11.3%. This increase represents an increase of 23 pence per week or £ 11.92 per year for a Band D property.

Some of this increase was due to factors outside the control of our Town Council including the significant increase in Employers' National Insurance costs, the decision by Cheshire East Council to start charging Town and Parish Councils their share of "All Out" Elections and increases in Utility costs

Councillors were very mindful of the cost of living difficulties faced by our residents but were also concerned about the financial difficulties faced by Cheshire East Council and the necessity to protect our organisational structure.

In the event that Cheshire East Council is obliged to issue a Section 114 Notice, there is a real risk that Congleton Town Council would be called upon to take on additional services. In such an eventuality, we would consult our residents on which additional services they feel we should take over bearing in mind this would increase our Precept further.

Within Cheshire East, Congleton is the only town to have an excellent Streetscape Service, the only town providing the popular Paddling Pool during the Summer months and one of only two towns to provide an Information Centre.

Other towns within Cheshire East have also faced difficult decisions and increased costs when determining their precepts.

When I was first elected a Councillor in May 2019, Congleton was the town within Cheshire East with the second highest Precept.

In this current financial year, Congleton is the town with the sixth highest Precept meaning that over the last six years, our residents have seen lower increases in their Town Council Precept than residents in many of the other Towns within Cheshire East.

Q3. Lyn Walker - I have observed utterly reckless cycling in the town centre's so-called 'shared space'. I have also unfortunately been aware of a number of pedestrians injured by careless cycling. On Friday I noticed a lot of people, especially elderly people just walking and changing directions to visit different shops and cafes without thinking to look behind them for approaching cyclists, as they were busy shopping. It is time to reconsider and admit on reflection this is not a safe situation.

Cllr Kay Wesley - Thank You for your question, this subject has been discussed by the council previously and we share your concerns, we are looking at measures to make the Town Centre safer through our Town Centre Code of Conduct.

Within the code of conduct, we are stating that cyclists dismount from their bikes if they can – if this is not possible we are asking that they cycle at a walking pace which is circa 4mph to minimise the risk to people within the town centre.

We are also looking at ways to prevent vehicles from entering the shared space as per the traffic order which states that no vehicles should enter the area between 8.00 am and 4.00 pm.

Questions in the room:

Q4 Richard Wharfe – Active travel – why isn't there a defined or marked path for cyclists through the Town centre?

As a council, we are discussing all solutions as well as enforcement options.

Q5 As a new resident recently moved to North Street and experiencing ongoing problems with parking blocking the road, bins aren't been emptied, and emergency vehicles can't get past. What is being done about it?

Cllr Kay Wesley is aware of the problem, has spent time with residents and has spoken to both Cheshire East departments; waste management and highways. Double yellow lines could be an option but there is a delay in getting these scheduled. Please do keep complaining to CE highways department.

Q6 Richard Wharfe – We are paying rates to Cheshire East but they are not cleaning gullies or sweeping roads, Henshall Hall has never looked so bad. They don't collect grass clippings when they cut the grass, green space off Bridge Water Close looks like a meadow for cows. Why have residents been asked to contribute to keeping estates clean?

Cllr Suzy Firkin – We understand the frustration, all estates are suffering around the Town, Cheshire East has stated they won't be providing those services so we as a Town Council have proposed a solution as stated in the presentation.

If residents want to be actively involved in their local area or green space they should be enabled to do so.

A new system is due to replace 'Fix My Street' which we are told will be easier to use and should lead to faster results, please do keep reporting issues.

Q6 Diane – The paddle boat steamer on the River Dane is continuing to decline is anything going to be done about it? It's a danger as kids are continually breaking in.

Cllr Amanda Martin – An ongoing problem for over 10 years, the boat and carpark is privately owned, and planning permission was granted originally. There has been a notice served to the owner who is legally bound to keep the site 'tidy'. But with the current financial situation at Cheshire East enforcement is likely to be a low priority.

Q7 Kevin Fitzgerald – With the proposed extra level of government in the devolution plans will we be expected to pay more in rates in the coming years?

CO David McGifford - Congleton Town Council has been expected to take on extra services at the moment with no extra money coming from Cheshire East. If we look at places like Wiltshire the precept is around £400 per annum, compared to ours currently £112. We will continue to fight any proposed increases but it's a battle we aren't likely to win.

CE leader is due to meet with local town & parish councils to see what services they can pass on.

Q8 Cllr Dawn Allen – Weeds - Cheshire East Council avoids herbicides due to health and safety concerns, though alternatives are often less effective.

Cllr Suzy Firkin – A multi-layered approach is used: stronger treatments on highways, and natural methods in green spaces and play areas. CTC will continue to do research to find the most suitable solutions as needed.

Q9 – Why does Sandbach have free parking and Congleton doesn't?

There is one carpark in Sandbach that due to a by-law can't charge for parking, this is a unique anomaly, and all other carparks are charged.

Q10 Kevin Fitzgerald – Did we contribute to the multi-storey car park in Crewe, which has been a major financial loss?

No, Congleton Town Council did not contribute. The car park was funded by taxpayers through Cheshire East Council as part of a wider regeneration plan. Parking decisions fall under Cheshire East Council, not Congleton Town Council.

Q10 Richard Wharfe – The new building estates being built by the link road, are they contributing to Congleton Town Council?

Although Congleton is the main service area, strong opposition from parish councils kept the original boundary unchanged, despite proposals to extend it to the link road— a decision CTC strongly opposed.

Meeting ended at 8:38 pm