

CITIZENS ADVICE MAIDSTONE

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING HELD ON 28TH OCTOBER 2024 IN THE THOMAS VICARY ROOM AT MAIDSTONE INNOVATION CENTRE

PRESENT:

Trustees: A total of 8 trustees were present

Members: A total of 11 members were present

Non-members: A total of 38 non-members were present

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:

A total of 45 apologies had been received

Mr P Hardy, CEO of Citizens Advice Maidstone, welcomed everyone to our 2024 AGM.

Mr Hardy was particularly pleased to welcome our Honorary President of Citizens Advice Maidstone and Chair of today's meeting, the Worshipful, the Mayor of Maidstone, Cllr Mr John Perry.

A total of 45 apologies had been received for today's meeting, details of which were available to view upon request.

2. MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING HELD ON 23 OCTOBER 2023

It was proposed by the Chair, Mr Malhotra and seconded by our Honorary Treasurer, Mr Parrish that the minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on 23rd October 2023 be accepted as a true record and they will be signed as such by Mr Malhotra in due course.

3. MATTERS ARISING – None

4. REPORT OF THE TRUSTEE BOARD

The Chair, Mr Malhotra, has been a part of Citizens Advice Maidstone for the last 26 years, both as Chief Executive and Chair of Trustees. During which time, he has been on an interesting and rewarding journey with the good fortune of working together with many dedicated and committed people, both within the service and without.

Over the years he has been fortunate to enjoy the company of both volunteers and paid members of staff and feels humbled by the intensity of their drive to help each and every person who has contacted our Service for advice.

Occasionally, situations have been amusing and we can laugh about these but most often, our client's stories have been heart-rending, resulting in lasting memories. Together, the team has worked hard to lift such clients out of the situations that they find themselves in and give them as much help and support as needed.

There have been a few times however, when we have reluctantly been unable to help an individual and in such instances, volunteers and paid staff alike found it very difficult to process the situation and have required help and support to overcome their disappointment.

Citizens Advice Maidstone has a long history of working well with our main local funder, Maidstone Borough Council and relationships with Councillors and Officers has always been cordial. In instances when we have experienced differences of opinion, it has always been possible to repair fences and find common ground.

We have also always worked very closely with national Citizens Advice. Be it back in the day with the Regional Office or more recently with our National Office and our reputation as a “can do” LCA (Local Citizens Advice) has allowed us to bid successfully for a number of centrally funded projects. That said, it has not always been plain sailing as we missed out on some of the earlier projects through a lack of understanding or expertise at the time.

More recently, we have had the pleasure of welcoming a number of members of senior staff from Head Office who have wanted to observe first hand, how it works at the ‘coal face’ and we have also been asked to receive Officers from Central Government, who have wanted to understand how our Service operates.

In addition, we work very well with our partner LCAs in the County and have entered in to partnerships with one or another from time to time in order to deliver combined services. To that end, there are currently 8 LCAs in Kent whose managers regularly get together to share news and exchange ideas with each other and the camaraderie between colleagues is good.

Maidstone has always had an excellent reputation for delivering targets set by additional external funders and over the years, we have successfully secured funding from the Legal Services Commission, National Lottery, the Henry Smith Foundation, HMP Maidstone and Colyer Fergusson Charitable Trust to name but a few.

In summation, Mr Malhotra stated that during his time with Citizens Advice, he has been fortunate enough to benefit from a wonderful and supportive group of people on the various incarnations of the Trustee Board on which he has served, and he says this having experience of both sides of the divide, first as a Chief Executive and then as Chair.

Together, we have managed to keep Citizens Advice Maidstone on the map and fostered a stellar reputation as an organisation that exists to help all those who access it for help and assistance.

Mr Malhotra signed off by wishing all involved with Citizens Advice Maidstone the very best of luck and hoping that our Service continues to go from strength to strength. He also commended our 2023-24 Annual Report to all those present as a document that succinctly sums up what the organisation has achieved over the past year and congratulated all those involved with producing it.

There were no questions regarding the report of the Trustee Board.

5. ANNUAL ACCOUNTS AND REPORT OF THE AUDITORS

Our accounts for year ended 31st March 2024 have been signed-off by our statutory auditors, Azets and were now brought before this year’s Meeting for ratification – copies were available upon request.

Our Honorary Treasurer, Mr David Parrish, stated that the accounts demonstrate an income for the year of c.£833K and a total expenditure of c.£823K, equating to a relatively small surplus of c.£10K.

There has also been a small gain on our Pension Fund deficit and overall, we are in a healthy financial position. Indeed, we have been for some time and should the worst happen, our current level of reserves stands at 6 months’ worth of unrestricted funds + 10% which equates to c. £270K.

There were no questions from the floor relating to the Annual Accounts and report of the Auditors.

6. APPOINTMENT OF AUDITORS

Following a review of the competition, it has been decided that we will continue with our current accountants of long standing, Azets Audit Services Limited (formerly Messrs Wilkins Kennedy and prior to that Day, Smith & Hunter) for the coming year as their rates are relatively modest and the work that they carry out is conducted to a high standard.

There were no dissenters, so it was therefore agreed that we continue to employ the services of Azets Audit Services Limited for the coming year.

7. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no further business.

8. HAND OVER TO HONORARY CHAIR, HIS WORSHIP THE MAYOR

The Chair of Citizens Advice Maidstone's Trustee Board, Mr Bonny Malhotra, handed over the Chair of the AGM to His Worship, the Mayor of Maidstone, Cllr John Perry.

Cllr Perry is married with three sons and four grandchildren. He has lived in Kent for most of his life and moved to Staplehurst in 2006.

He is a Chartered Certified Accountant with an honours degree in History and Classics and an MBA from one of the UK's leading business schools. He has worked in both the private and public sectors and acted as an advisor to both the UK Government and Foreign Governments on the funding and financing of air navigation systems.

He currently runs a consultancy company, which continues to provide economic and financial advice in this field.

Cllr Perry joined Staplehurst Parish Council in 2007 and was appointed Chairman in 2010. In 2014 he was elected to Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) as one of the two Ward Members for Staplehurst and appointed to the Cabinet with responsibility for Community and Leisure Service.

He served as Chairman of the MBC Planning Committee for 2016/17 and as Chairman of the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee for 2021/22.

He was Leader of the Conservative Group at the Council from 2017 to 2021 and Deputy Leader of the Council from 2022 to 2023. He has been Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, which includes the Council's finances, from 2022 until 2024.

Cllr Perry continues to be an active Member of Staplehurst Parish Council and is currently its Vice-Chairman. He is also a Trustee of the Friends of All Saints Church Staplehurst.

He thanked Mr Malhotra and confirmed that he was happy to continue the tradition of the Mayor of Maidstone serving as Honorary Chair of our AGM.

9. PROPOSED ELECTION AND RE-ELECTION OF TRUSTEES

Those present were reminded that in accordance with our Memorandum and Articles of Association, it is only those who have agreed to become members of the Charity that have the right to vote on issues affecting Citizens Advice Maidstone such as the election and re-election of Trustees.

All such Members were given a voting card upon arrival at today's meeting and were requested to raise their voting cards above their heads at the appropriate time when they wish to register their vote.

Also as per our Memorandum and Articles of Association, all elected Trustees shall retire from office at the third Annual General Meeting following the Annual General Meeting at which they are elected.

Crucially however, they may then be re-elected and to that end, four Trustees were present at today's meeting, each of whom has come to the end of their third year as an elected member of our Trustee Board and consequently will be stepping down at this meeting.

They are also however, willing to allow us to continue to benefit from their skill and expertise by putting their names forward this afternoon for re-election to the Board.

The following (re)-elections were thus conducted:

1. After already having given over 40 years' service to Citizens Advice Maidstone, both as a volunteer, during which time she served as a Trustee and a paid member of staff, including as Deputy Manager, **Mrs Judith Woods** has once again agreed that her name be put forward to be re-elected as a Trustee.

Mr Judith Woods was unanimously re-elected as a Trustee of Citizens Advice Maidstone.

2. Upon retirement from a successful career in industry, Mr David Parrish originally joined our service as a generalist advisor in 2019 before becoming an elected member of our Trustee Board in 2021. He soon rose to the dizzy heights of Honorary Treasurer, an office that he has successfully executed for the last 3 years. He has now kindly agreed to stand for re-election to our Trustee Board once more.

Mr David Parrish was unanimously re-elected as a Trustee of Citizens Advice Maidstone.

3. Mr Divya Thapa Magar graduated from Cardiff University in 2023 with a degree in law and politics, commonly known as an LLB.

Since then, after being awarded two scholarships, he has commenced studying for a Bar Course to learn more about civil and criminal litigation and he is also a volunteer advocate at the Free Representation Unit.

Mr Thapa Magar joined our Trustee Board as a co-opted member in January this year and has now kindly agreed for us to be able to continue to benefit from his knowledge and expertise by putting his name forward to become an elected member of the Board.

Mr Divya Thapa Magar was unanimously elected as a Trustee of Citizens Advice Maidstone.

That concluded the voting.

10. PRESENTATION OF TRUSTEE BOARD MEMBERS

There being no further written nominations, in accordance with the Citizens Advice Maidstone's Memorandum and Articles of Association, the Trustee Board Elected Members for the year 2024/25 are: *Mr Rob Bird, Mr Andrew Breen, Mr John Cobbett, Ms Laura*

French, Mr Ivor Owen, Mr David Parrish, Mr Peter Stonely, Mrs Judith Woods and Mr Divya Thapa Magar.

Also in accordance with the Citizens Advice Maidstone's Memorandum and Articles of Association, the Staff representatives on the Trustee Board are as follows: *Ms T Weber (Paid Staff), Mr S Jones (Voluntary Staff) and Mr P Hardy (Chief Executive).*

11. PRESENTATION OF CHAIR OF CITIZENS ADVICE MAIDSTONE'S REPORT

Mr Malhotra thanked everyone for attending our AGM this year and announced that after 26 years of dedicated service, he is finally stepping back from Citizens Advice Maidstone.

During his time with Citizens Advice, Mr Malhotra has always made a positive and lasting impact on the lives of people he has come in to contact with - initially in Wokingham where he first joined the service and then Redbridge before joining Citizens Advice Maidstone in 1998, first as manager and then subsequently as CEO where, alongside our generalist advice service, he put in to place specialist services in welfare benefits, debt, Housing, domestic abuse and family law.

Mr Malhotra also led the development of the South-East financial capability forum as well our much-lauded prison advice outreach service which continues to produce excellent results right up to this very day (please see our 2023-24 Annual Report for further details!).

In addition, he laid the groundwork for the implementation of innovative telephone and web advice services and the extensive, high-quality services enjoyed by the residents of Maidstone today are testament to his hard work, dedication and impressive leadership over the last 20 plus years.

As well as playing an instrumental role in the setting up of strong local partnerships within Kent, Mr Malhotra has always encouraged collaboration and joint working across the whole of the Citizens Advice service, and we are all incredibly grateful to him for the contribution he has made to our Trustee Board both at a local and a national level.

He was also a source of sterling support for our current CEO, Mr Paul Hardy, during the Covid pandemic and helped to ensure that our Service was only unavailable for one day during the dark days of lockdown.

For his part, Mr Malhotra thanked all the members of both the paid and volunteer staff that he has worked with over the years and paid tribute to the fact that whilst many Local Citizens Advice's (LCAs) are currently struggling to attract volunteers, Citizens Advice Maidstone is maintaining a healthy level of new recruits.

He also thanked his fellow Trustees for their ongoing encouragement and support as well as those funders who have steadfastly stood by us as both we and they have attempted to maintain "business as usual", during some extremely challenging times.

Last but by no means least, he recognised the valuable contribution made by our stakeholders including Citizens Advice nationally, for their enduring sponsorship and patronage.

Maidstone is a relatively unique town where the vast majority of people genuinely want to help others less fortunate than themselves and whilst Mr Malhotra is going to miss the 'cut and thrust' of Citizens Advice life, he recognises the need for change, both personally and professionally.

He has enjoyed the journey from when he first joined the Service as a volunteer in Wokingham 30 years ago before joining Citizens Advice Maidstone in 1998 and wished all those who continue to be involved with our Service the very best of luck for the future and hoped that we continue to go from strength to strength.

In response, Mr Hardy commented that whilst it has been a team effort, Mr Malhotra has been a pleasure to work with and will indeed be a hard act to follow.

There were no questions relating to the report of the Chair of Citizens Advice Maidstone.

12. PRESENTATION OF CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT

Our 2022-23 Annual Report is available in both physical and electronic formats for all those who care to read it and not wishing to repeat what is written in his contribution to that Report, Mr Hardy kept his comments to a minimum.

He did however take the opportunity to extend his thanks and congratulations to everyone working within Citizens Advice Maidstone, be they Trustee, volunteer or a member of the paid staff for working together and enabling us to do what we do so successfully.

There were no questions relating to the Chief Executive's report.

13. PRESENTATION OF ANONYMISED "GOOD NEWS" CASE STUDIES

We were pleased to welcome to our AGM, from Maidstone Borough Council (MBC), Mrs Charlotte Featherstone who was our main point of contact when our successful Homelessness Prevention project, which we continue to deliver from Trinity in conjunction with MBC, was first set up.

Mrs Featherstone gave a wide-ranging presentation, touching on all aspects of the project from why it was set up, to the method of delivery and most tellingly of all, the overwhelmingly positive impact it has had on the lives of service users.

Mr Hardy is of the opinion that us working closely with the likes of MBC and the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) helps to build trust between our clients and such third-party organisations.

A number of anonymised "Good News" case studies were then presented to attendees by various paid members of Citizens Advice Maidstone's staff.

The case studies highlighted both the scope of our service as well as the positive effect it has on our community at large.

There were no questions relating to the client Case Studies.

14. CLOSING REMARKS BY HONORARY CHAIR

Cllr Perry thanked both Mr Malhotra and Mr Hardy for inviting him to Chair today's meeting and he also stated that he was impressed with the numbers in attendance.

Cllr Perry explained that when he was first elected, he spent a day with Citizens Advice to learn more about what we do and how we do it and was impressed then as now, with the depth of the knowledge we possess and the scope of the work that we conduct.

In summation the Mayor praised everyone connected with Citizens Advice Maidstone, particularly the volunteers as without them, our Service would not exist.

15. VOTES OF THANKS

Mr Paul Hardy thanked his Worship the Mayor of Maidstone for taking time out of his busy schedule to be with us today and for agreeing to continue the proud tradition of becoming honorary President of Citizens Advice Maidstone and presiding over this year's AGM.

The Mayor was then presented with a small token of our appreciation.

As well as thanking the Mayor, Mr Hardy also paid tribute to our outgoing Chair, Mr Malhotra who was also presented with a token of our appreciation for the 26 years of dedicated service that he has given to Citizens Advice Maidstone.

Finally, Mr Hardy stated that it would be remiss of him not to mention our friend and colleague, Ms Sally Smith, who was also stepping down after 26 years with our Service.

Ms Smith joined us as a volunteer Generalist Advisor in November 1998, before being welcomed in to the ranks of the paid staff in December 2002 where she has remained ever since mainly in the highly responsible position of Advice Manager.

Ms Smith has always been a vibrant and pro-active member of our team, and on behalf of the Trustees, Staff and volunteers of Citizens Advice Maidstone Mr Hardy thanked her for the commitment and dedication she has shown to our Service over the last 26 years.

Ms Smith was then presented with a token of our appreciation and all those present, wished her a well-deserved, long and happy retirement.

There being no further business, the meeting was closed at 3.05pm.