

The Wokingham Society

An Open Meeting held in Wokingham Town Hall on Tuesday 10 July 2018

A Presentation by Mrs Jan Nowecki, Clerk to the Wokingham Town Council

On a hot and muggy July evening in the Town Hall, Jan Nowecki, the Town Clerk, fully engaged the audience as she combatted the weather, external traffic noise and faulty microphones to communicate her views and reflections on her role as Town Clerk.

In introducing Mrs Nowecki Peter Must, Chairman of the Wokingham Society, told the audience that the first Town Clerk was appointed under the James I Charter of 1612. The post required 'an honest and discreet man' who, as 'the common clerk, had full powers and authority to carry out his office. The first Town Clerk was George Wellington, Gentleman.

Mrs Nowecki noted that she was only the second woman to hold the office. She then briefly provided details of her career prior to her appointment, notably as a teacher and education adviser, and she believed her work as an administrator and communicator had provided her with the skills and experience required to manage a staff of 16 and to serve a Parish Council consisting of 25 elected members. However, she had not appreciated the 'whirlwind of activity', that would greet her on taking up the office, a statutory post she said is 'rooted in legislation and history'.

Wishing to engage the audience directly, Mrs Nowecki invited them to respond to a short questionnaire asking them to identify the Town Clerk's main roles, responsibilities and activities. Unsurprisingly the first role identified was as a manager, but as the presentation progressed, it became apparent that for a Town Clerk management required a host of diverse skills and actions.

Describing herself as 'a cog in a wheel' she provided details of the statutory responsibilities and duties of a Town Clerk as recorded in the Local Government Act of 1972. As 'a proper officer and common clerk' she has to:

- ensure the Council works within the law
- show general powers of competency
- keep legal records
- record Council decisions and ensure their delivery
- give essentially non-political but balanced advice

- support Council employees in the execution of their duties

The Wokingham Town Clerk, she said, is a Chief Executive and Responsible Finance Officer, servicing a relatively small parish with a large council and a budget of £1,5000. She is responsible with her managers and staff for the keeping and maintenance of:

- the Town Hall
- parks and gardens
- allotments
- Woosehill Community Hall

At a future date responsibility for the park area of the new Elms Field development will be handed over to the Council for an as-yet unspecified number of years.

It was obvious that Mrs Nowecki takes great pride in the work of the Council and as she highlighted some of her personal achievements in her seven years as Town Clerk, it became increasingly clear that she acts decisively but fairly. With her negotiating and administration skills to the fore she relocated the Information Centre to its current location, using contemporary technology and modern designs to create a user-friendly centre. At the same time the former Information Centre was restored to its original condition and renamed the Jubilee Room, where the Council's silver is displayed and meetings and small wedding ceremonies are held.

One of her most memorable achievements was managing the events celebrating the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. Nobody involved will forget how the people of Wokingham responded on that wet weekend in June. Despite the hostile weather, all the hard work and preparations led to a triumphant celebration of the Queen's reign. In a different but equally successful way, Mrs Nowecki's leadership of the team commemorating the outbreak of WWI led to a memorable and moving tribute to the fallen in Wokingham. She was particularly pleased by the fact that she was able to involve other local parishes in displaying banners of commemoration in their churches.

A less known but challenging action in which she had become involved was legally enforcing the removal of travellers from the Langborough Road Recreational Park. In many ways, however, one event reflected most clearly her ability to empathise with people's feelings and needs when she felt it was essential that the Council should organise the funeral of a former Mayor who had died with no relatives to arrange it. To their credit the Council supported her and a suitable tribute was paid to a former colleague and Council leader.

Inevitably the biggest challenge of all, she said, has been the management of the regeneration of the Market Place, a project she strongly believes will bring new prosperity and success to the town, at the same time enhancing our wonderful Victorian Town Hall. Everybody knows the work has brought hardship and consternation to traders, residents and Council workers alike, but Mrs Nowecki has managed to keep people informed by releasing weekly Newsletters. It has needed all her skills as a communicator and organiser to deal with the delays and confusion as the project overran by some six months, but her reassurance that the project should be completed by the middle of August brought a feeling of relief to the audience and they welcomed her statement that by Heritage Day on 15 September Wokingham will be able to celebrate the completion of the redevelopment.

It was a memorable experience listening to Mrs Nowecki describing the complexity and multiplicity of the tasks she has to perform daily. Added to that she engages with and facilitates the work of the organisers of the May Faure and Winter Carnival and other charitable events. She liaises with the 17 Parish Clerks in the Borough's Clerks Network and she is the Chair of the Berkshire Branch of the National Society of Local Council Clerks.

It is difficult to understand how our dedicated Town Clerk manages to achieve all she does and remain positive, totally committed and loyal to the people she was appointed to serve, the Wokingham Town Council. Those who have worked with her are already aware of her patience, leadership and concern for the well-being and welfare of her team. All present at her presentation will now be fully aware of her achievements and accomplishment and will have realised how fortunate we were when she was appointed as our Town Clerk.