

Finance Committee Report

Our Council has come across its fair share of financial difficulties over the past 12 months – most of which have now been resolved or are being addressed. We've not had a great perception by members of the public as sadly bad news spreads and good news is simply business as usual – an example of this being the PIR report which reaffirmed the good work that we have been doing bringing our financial reporting and regulations back in to line after losing our previous Clerk and Deputy Clerk. Many of the recommendations of the PIR were already highlighted by this council and had already been addressed or are in the process of being addressed by our officers. It has therefore been a pointless and costly exercise which has cost the ratepayers more than £5,000 for what many might see as simple politicking.

We're very fortunate to have a full complement of staff after the appointment of a Clerk, deputy Clerk and Clerk's assistant – this will bring our financial due diligence to a high standard as we currently have two officers trained in using our accounting software and procedures. The council hopes to provide a further failsafe in the future by training up a third member of staff to use our financial software in the case of an emergency. Thank you to all our staff over the past year for what must have been very challenging circumstances at times, with new officers joining and stalwart employees leaving.

The Town Council is also undertaking several exercises to obtain best value for our ratepayers, one of these being to bring charges to the Carpark which will generate revenue and help reduce costs in other areas in the future. Although relationships in the past have not always been great, this council must look to renew ties with the management of the Beehive as this facilities success and survival is important to both parties.

Now, most of you will want to know about the precept and future budget. There has been much speculation that the precept increase is a reserve building exercise after the legal proceedings we had regarding the Judicial Review – this is just not the case and a quick look at our budget for the next financial year will clarify what areas have increased in forecasted expenditure. We have raised our precept after a lengthy debate in our finance committee regarding best value and what services the community want us to support. This council has reduced its costs in many areas in order to dampen the increase in contribution we are asking of our town. We have been just as much focussed on cost saving as we have on taking on new financial endeavours.

I will list some of the projects the council are precepting for; allotments – which after many months and years of hard work are finally being made a reality, the neighbourhood plan which gives our community some say in the future development of this town, our grant budget to local organisations which has doubled in the last year, and we have also set aside a provision to make renovations to the CUB if our bid to take over the freehold is successful. Let's just think about that last point for a moment, here is the opportunity for the council to take on the ownership of another community venue and use it to support the elderly in IT literacy, the youth in drug and domestic violence awareness, those with mental health issues by providing a place they can network and receive support and many other great activities.

This council is very progressive in its aims and I can only see our net widening for community outreach and networking with our many allies in the town. Thank you Councillors for all of your hard work in making these achievements a reality and working tirelessly to benefit our community.

Cllr. Henry Brown
Chair Finance Committee



Honiton

ANNUAL REPORT 2017 - 2018



Chairman's Report

I felt very privileged to be elected Mayor and Chairman of Honiton Town Council for 2017/18. I was fully aware that my term in office as Mayor would be a far from glamorous role. My first task was to work to unite the Council, so that it could move forward fulfilling the duties of elected public servants working for the good of the town and the council-tax payers of Honiton.

With the Town Council's support Devon Air Ambulance has secured a night landing site situated at Mountbatten Park sports field with work now in progress for the Council to secure funding for the installation of defibrillators for distribution at locations around Honiton. We are also working hard to finally bring new allotments to Honiton. The lease is in the process of being agreed ahead of signatures being added to it. Likewise, the Neighbourhood Plan is moving forward and this will need the support of both the Council and the residents alike if it is to be the success that we hope that it will be. Additional funds have been allocated this year to both grant funding and to making provision for Youth projects to take place during the course of the year.

The Council recognises it must do more to reconnect with the public and as such it is working towards making more use of social media. We will also be looking to restructure the Town Council's official website so that the public are kept better informed of how the Council works and what is being done for the good of our town. Councillors with special responsibilities have been working strenuously to safeguard the local NHS Hospital and to support vital services for our most vulnerable and disabled senior citizens.

The Council has been working hard to resolve outstanding business relating to Governance and Council finances. Acting in the best interests of transparency the Council appointed a Finance Working Group to carry out a full investigation into how the Council has spent taxpayers' money over the past 5 years. The Council has also appointed a Beehive Overview Committee to review the financial commitments to the Honiton Community Complex company. We are looking to ensure that best value for money is being obtained through the way in which this public asset is utilised. The Council is looking forward to publishing the Committee's reports once this work has been completed.

It was not a surprise when the external audit report came out stating that during the financial year 2016-2017 Honiton Town Council had failed to comply in a number of areas. Fortunately, from May 2017 onwards we had been putting in place strategies to resolve these and so were able to reassure both the internal and external auditors that as a council we are working to put our house in order. It will not happen overnight, but we will get there.

When I took up my term in office the Council was very much divided with much adverse and at times unjust criticism of the Council being sent to the local press and also posted on social media. Sadly these members of the public appeared ill-informed on certain matters and were supported by some former councillors.

A number of former councillors chose to tender their resignations which resulted in this Council having to fund a bi-election. In addition to newly elected councillors we were able to welcome two newly co-opted councillors. The Council was also faced with staffing shortages due to the former Town Clerk's absence on long term sick leave and the Deputy Town Clerk tendering her resignation for personal reasons. This left the Council needing to recruit locum staff to cover staffing shortages.

Our former Deputy Clerk Mrs Sarah Jenkins will be sadly missed and I wish to take this opportunity to thank her for her years of unquestionable commitment and loyalty. On behalf of the Council I wish Sarah much success for the future. I am pleased to say the council has now resolved these shortages and has welcomed Mr Mark Tredwin as Town Clerk and Mrs Heloise Marlow as Deputy Clerk. I am delighted to say that these two officers have brought a wealth of Local Authority experience to the Council. In addition we welcomed Sonia Hawkins to the council staff as a replacement for Michael Vernon.

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Sadly much of the good work that the Council has done has gone widely unrecognised. So as Chairman of the Council I take this opportunity to thank all councillors for their hard work and dedication that they have given throughout what started out as a very challenging year. I also wish to thank all councillors for the support I have received as Chairman throughout my term in office.

Cllr. John Zarczynski
Mayor

Policy & Resources Committee Report

As a result of our former Town Clerk being off on long-term sick leave, the Council has been in disarray and only one Policy Committee meeting has been held during this past year. Consequently, all policy decisions have been addressed at full Council meetings. The most important being the resolution of the Council to adopt the model standing orders issued by the National Association of Local Councils, with appropriate amendments having already been recommended by the Policy Committee during the previous year.

In my report last year, I spoke about the collaboration with Exmouth Town Council in relation to a Tourist Information website which is currently in progress, and there is good reason to be optimistic about a satisfactory outcome over the summer months.

The Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group has valiantly persevered with its remit throughout the year, but is currently suffering from a lack of community participants. So here is a plea for 5 good and faithful residents to offer to serve Honiton by committing to help produce a well-thought through and resilient Neighbourhood Plan for Honiton. The registration of a Neighbourhood Plan has legal consequences for any future proposed development in Honiton. It is the best safeguard a town can have against unacceptable developments. So please don't imagine this is a talking shop. A commitment to produce a Neighbourhood Plan for Honiton will resonate in Honiton's economic, social, health and wellbeing for decades to come.

The closure of the medical beds at Honiton Hospital causes great concern, not only because of the impact on patients, but also because of the perceived vulnerability of the hospital. Following a 'Working Together' Conference held at East Devon District Council in September, it seemed to me that a 'community conversation' would be a way forward to promote health and wellbeing in Honiton, and the surrounding parishes, and may well help us to protect our hospital from the threat of complete closure. These conversations arose from initial discussions between myself, June Brown from Senior Voice and Heather Penwarden, Chairman of Honiton Hospital League of Friends and Honiton Dementia Action Alliance. Between us, we knew of a huge variety of wellbeing work going on in Honiton, but we were concerned that not many people in the community were aware of this. The group wanted to find a way to identify and share all the good health and wellbeing work that is going on in and around Honiton and from that look at key areas for development. The Town Council passed a resolution in February "that members of Honiton Town Council be committed to continuing to support 'community conversations' to discuss challenges and collaborative working to improve the health and wellbeing of all the people in our communities...". This work is ongoing and will continue for as long as it takes, with key stakeholders, healthcare professionals, charities and all our local volunteer groups being asked to take part.

The Policy Committee will, hopefully, resume its proper remit in June. All policies will need to be reviewed and updated during 2018/19. In the meantime, I would urge Honiton electorate to take seriously the issue of Local Government and offer to serve in whatever capacity they can.

Cllr. Sheila Edwards
Chair Policy & Resources Committee

Planning Committee Report

Honiton Town Council is a consultee on planning applications and has delegated the responsibility for making comments on such applications to the Planning Committee.

This report is for the Council year from April 2017 to March 2018 inclusive during which there were 21 meetings of the Committee held to consider planning applications that had been submitted for possible comment by the Local Planning Authority, East Devon District Council.

Additional to acting as a consultee on planning applications, on applications for consent to carry out work on Listed Buildings, on trees covered by tree preservation orders and on trees in the conservation area, the Planning Committee has the responsibility for making decisions on advertisement consent applications as that role has been delegated by East Devon District Council to Honiton Town Council.

Applications refused by East Devon District Council or in the case of advertisements by Honiton Town Council can be appealed resulting in a decision being made by a planning inspector; within this reporting year appeals were dismissed for continuing the display of advertisements at the prominent junction of Langford Road and Monkton Road and for the residential use at a former farm last occupied in 1938 which if allowed would have increased vehicular use of an unlit narrow public footpath; both of these inspector's decisions were in line with a decision and a recommendation made by Honiton Town Council.

Regarding advertisements, the Committee seeks to ensure that new advertisements comply with Honiton Town Council's 'Design Statement and Policies for Fascia Boards and Hanging Signs Guidance Notes' including 'Policies for Advertisements in Honiton Town Centre Conservation Area'.

The proposed development of the Halse of Honiton site between the High Street and King Street provides an opportunity for a new section of the River Gissage Walk and could act as a catalyst for other new sections of that walk between the High Street and public open spaces to the north and between King Street and public open spaces to the south.

There have now been several presentations to the Committee by the developer regarding the housing development west of Hayne Lane in the neighbouring parish of Gittisham. The bringing forward of this reserve housing site by East Devon District Council has raised a number of infrastructure concerns affecting Honiton. One of the redeeming features, 40% affordable housing, has recently been reduced by East Devon District Council.

Development of the Clapper Lane allotments and proposed provision of replacement allotments less than half the size is being followed closely as there is an allotments waiting list maintained by Honiton Town Council as the local authority responsible for allotments in the Parish of Honiton.

The Committee was pleased to note that a proposed development that would have made more difficult future sports use of a former school sports field was refused by East Devon District Council though this was balanced by the District Council Committee allowing a style of upvc windows on a property in the conservation area against advice from planning and conservation officers and this Council's objection.

Enhanced pedestrian facilities including two informal pedestrian crossings have been provided at the BP and Marks and Spencer Turks Head Lane development following representations by this Council.

The Planning Committee has highlighted the tollgate rediscovered in 2003 but still not returned to Honiton, having been removed from Copper Castle in the 1920s and the footbridge that linked two cul de sac public open spaces near Oaklea required by a planning inspector but removed by East Devon District Council in 2010 and still not replaced.

Finally I would like to thank the office staff and the Committee members, in both cases current and former, for fulfilling the Town Council's role as a consultee on planning matters during the three years I have chaired the Committee since May 2015.

Cllr. Roy Coombs
Chair Planning Committee