

ANNUAL REPORT 2016 - 2017

Chairman's Report

I have been very honoured to have been selected for a second term as your Town Mayor leading a Council that remains democratically elected since the beginning of its term of office in May 2015. It was with regret and sadness that four Councillors resigned for personal reasons or career commitments during the latter half of our Council year and I wish to pay tribute to Clare Melbourne, Anne Mountjoy, Julia Lake and Kim Smith and I thank them for their hard work and commitment to the town during their time. Since November 2016 we have welcomed four new Councillors who have all been democratically elected: Cllr Terry Darrant, Cllr Michael Jones, Cllr Duncan Sheridan-Shaw who are new to Honiton Town Council and Cllr John Zarczynski who returns to the Council.

Whilst we continue to work hard to represent the town it has not been without challenge with a Judicial Review that has taken up a great deal of Councillors' and staff time. This is all but concluded and we strive to move forward. For this to happen, and for us to make the most of what we offer as individuals, we have accepted the offer of mediation from our parent authority East Devon District Council. I look forward to participating in this and working with all concerned to ensure we represent our community which we were all elected to do.

We continue to build on our improved links with the Chamber of Commerce and we work closely with the numerous charities and local organisations around the town. We liaise regularly with East Devon District Council and where possible our MP Mr Neil Parish to ensure Honiton remains a strong community and a popular choice for people to come to, to live, work, shop and socialise.

We as a council work closely with the various youth organisations and schools to ensure we engage with our youth and younger community members. It is a pleasure to have the Head Teacher Glenn Smith join the start of our Council meetings each school term so certificates, badges and tokens can be given to nominated students from Honiton Town Council in recognition of their hard work and efforts in their academic studies, artistic talents and community citizenship.

Over the course of this year we have regularly produced our newsletter 'Talk of the Town' and actively participated in events organised by numerous groups around the town. Our annual Hot Pennies event last summer was the best attended for many years with children, families, local people and visitors taking part. There was also interest from a historian researching historic fairs in Devon.

In June we held a street style party to celebrate the Queen's ninetieth birthday which was well attended by many children and their families from the town. As part of the birthday celebrations around the United Kingdom I was invited to a garden party held by East Devon District Council and was very honoured to receive an award on behalf of the Town Council. We won the Best Town Council Community Award for The Beehive project, which, as noted at the ceremony, serves the whole community and brings generations together. I wish to take this opportunity to thank all The Beehive volunteers who make this community centre such a success.

In July I was delighted to open the revamped and updated children's play areas: Davey Playing Field and Langford Avenue Play Park with East Devon District Councillors Iain Chubb and Stuart Hughes. Providing for our younger generation is something dear to my heart.

It was a pleasure to represent the Town Council when Her Royal Highness Princess Anne opened the new joint Cadet Centre. A purpose built facility in Honiton for our Air and Army Cadets and an important part of the provision for the younger generation in Honiton.

In September we finally saw the completion of a community owned solar installation on the roof of our purpose built Community Centre, The Beehive. This provides low-carbon solar energy for future years and demonstrates our commitment to improving our environment and reducing running costs of The Beehive.

The Town Council, having supported Honiton in becoming a Dementia Friendly town, is delighted that our community received Dementia Friendly Rural Community of the Year Award. We have supported the steering group since its inception with Councillors actively supporting and serving on this group.

As the Town Council's year draws to a close we are in the process of concluding an internal financial investigation into the Beehive build costs. I have fully supported this as Town Mayor, questions continue to be asked by a significant minority of local people and we are right to take time to provide a researched response and provide answers to those questions.

Sadly I conclude my report on the issue of our local hospital and the decision by the NEW Devon CCG to close our medical beds and by pledging support for this campaign. It is our duty to serve and stand up for what is right. Sometimes those decisions are unpopular or challenging but we move forward. I am not seeking re-election as Chairperson and Mayor, however I will give my full support to my successor and will continue to serve the town alongside my fellow seventeen Councillors in our best capacity.

Cllr Caroline Kolek - Mayor

Finance Committee Report

This has been my second term serving as Chair of Finance, and where I anticipated the role to become easier, it in fact uncovered new trials to overcome. During the course of the year some of the bigger changes our committee had to adapt to was the change in Bookkeeping/Accounting software from a general one size all 'Sage' to a more refined and specialist 'Rialtas' programme which is specifically designed for local government reporting. This new piece of software was welcomed by all members and the Clerk. The Council also faced the cost implications involved with fighting a Judicial Review, this was managed by the Finance Committee by securing funding for only essential and required services. This made me question the efficacy of our council as we are a group of elected representatives who, amongst other things, disperse public money to local good causes.

The inability to commit to all of our promised grants did not sit well with me as I felt redundant in duty, especially considering the futility of the politics behind the JR from both sides. Good news came later in the year though as we were able to satisfy the rest of the grants to the local organisations. There are so many great groups and community provisions in the town that it would be lovely to support them all, sadly, this just isn't possible as the Council only has a limited budget and it would be irresponsible for us to risk our financial solvency.

Much to the councils sadness and regret, the Clerk, who is our Responsible Financial Officer has gone on long term sick leave which we all wish her a full recovery. This did bring up some vulnerabilities in financial controls as without the RFO, we didn't have a substitution in-house to carry out the day to day book keeping and financial reporting for our quarterly meetings. This was quite concerning as the Finance Committee didn't know the financial position of the Council or what preparatory work we needed to carry out in order to produce our year ends Annual Return which is a legal requirement. The Council resolved this by appointing Councillor Perkins to temporarily adopt some of the responsibilities of the RFO in order to bring the reports up to date and also to produce our year end statements; this work was heavily supported by Councillor Edwards. Steps are being taken, such as the training of the Deputy Clerk to act as Deputy RFO so that she can carry out the essential inputting of data in the RFO's absence.

I'm grateful to my fellow Councillors for having sponsored my Chairmanship for the past two years as it has been an absolute pleasure to lead this committee as well as the education it brings with it; I've actually started spending nights reading books on accounting which a younger version of myself would have ridiculed me for. What started out as someone who was good at maths and interested in doing a Post-Grad in economics has led into an individual with much respect for accounting procedures of Local Government, and the inner workings of bookkeeping; for those reasons amongst others, I'm grateful for holding this office.

Cllr Henry Brown
Chair Finance Committee

Policy & Resources Committee Report

The Policy Committee's primary purpose is to give the Council a forum in which to consider issues in more detail than a full Town Council meeting would allow. It enables issues to be debated at length and take diverse points of view into consideration. Consequently, more time is given to prepare a detailed response to consultations or to review changes in regulations to ensure that the Town Council is compliant.

The Policy Committee is able to set up working groups, or sub-committees, to formulate responses based on discussions which have taken place during a Policy Committee Meeting. The Policy Committee does have delegated powers which are limited to responding to consultations and internal policies. For wider scoped matters once an item has been discussed, the Policy Committee can only make recommendations for ratification by a full Town Council meeting.

During the past year, the Policy Committee has been engaged in examining specific projects for Honiton:

- In terms of heritage, the Tollgate has been considered for repair work and re-siting.
- The closure of the Tourist Information Centre has precipitated an exercise in liaising with Exmouth Town Council to explore the possibility of a combined website. Both these projects are on-going and will be re-visited during 2017/18.

The Policy Committee reviewed:

- A new template for the Council's website together with the development of social media based on .gov.uk guideline.
- An amendment to the Action Plan to re-assign footpaths in line with future changes to the A30 route.
- The 4th Edition of the Good Councillor Guide.

On 12th May 2016, the Community Engagement Forum was inaugurated. This Committee is comprised of, and open to, all community groups, associations and institutions within Honiton. The purpose of this Committee is to discuss and provide feedback on projects being undertaken by Honiton Town Council.

The Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group has embarked on its Neighbourhood Plan for Honiton and the Policy Committee has been considering the consultation on the Heart of the South West's Plan for Devolution. This has to be a very bright spot in an otherwise dismal year. It cannot be emphasized enough that the Town Council serves Honiton, and the voices of the people of Honiton need to be included in any future planning for Honiton. However, the people of Honiton show little enthusiasm for engaging as evidenced by the 2 elections held during this year with a 13% and 15% turnout of electors. A strategy for a combined approach to public engagement needs to be examined within these 3 committees, so that any response to the consultation about Devolution cannot be discounted by the relevant authorities

The response by the Policy Committee to the consultation on the Council Tax Referendum proposed by the Government is another bright spot inasmuch as there was no mention of this in the Autumn Statement and no further mention in the Chancellor's Budget in March 2017.

The Policy Committee has embarked on a review of the Town Council's Standing Orders, in an effort to ensure that all Councillors, and indeed the Electorate, have an understanding of how the Town Council operates. Whilst the Policy Committee has endeavoured to review and recommend according to its remit throughout this year, the reality is that much of its work has been de-railed by the overriding consideration of the Judicial Review to which the Town Council has been subjected. This consideration will have to be carried forward until such time as the Town Council's finances are properly settled.

Cllr Sheila Edwards
Chair Policy & Resources Committee

Planning Committee Report

This report is for the Council year from April 2016 to March 2017 inclusive during which there were 23 meetings of the Committee held to consider planning applications that had been submitted to the Local Planning Authority, East Devon District Council.

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

As mentioned in the report last year, the Committee also has an opportunity to comment on planning applications sited close to the Honiton boundary in neighbouring parishes; at a meeting held in January, a presentation was made by a developer expecting to submit plans for a housing estate on land west of Hayne Lane, Gittisham, a reserve housing site brought forward for development by the District Council.

Planning applications have included two for change of use from antique shops to housing and one where two retail shops were to be replaced by a coffee shop in the prime shopping area.

Trees in the Conservation Area have a limited protection requiring advance notice of felling or pruning to allow time for considering whether tree preservation orders would be appropriate; it was disappointing that felling of silver birch trees in Chapel Street was allowed by the District Council.

The work of the Committee is largely reactive although the community of Honiton is able via the ongoing Neighbourhood Plan to influence future land development as neighbourhood plans, unlike previous consultations about Honiton's future, have legal backing.

The Greater Exeter Strategic Plan recently the subject of an exhibition in Honiton could have a considerable impact on planning in East Devon.

Finally I would like thank the office staff and the Committee members for fulfilling the Town Council's role as a consultee on planning matters.

Cllr Roy Coombs
Chair Planning Committee

TOWN CLERK: Mrs. Chetna Jones DEPUTY CLERK: Mrs. Sarah Jenkins
Town Council Offices, The Beehive, Dowell Street, Honiton, Honiton EX14 1LZ
Tel/Fax: 01404 42957 towncouncil@honiton.gov.uk www.honiton.gov.uk