



Honiton

ANNUAL REPORT 2020 -2021

Chairman's Report

Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen. I would like to welcome you to this Council's Town Meeting.

The two years 2019/20 and 2020/21 have been enormously challenging for us all with unusual, to say the least, problems to address. The largest of those problems being ongoing Council issues whilst trying to come to terms with the effects of the pandemic. I thank members of the public, and Councillors, for their forbearance while the Council has learnt to deal with holding its meetings remotely. Both Councillors and staff have had to work under very restrictive conditions, and it hasn't been easy while we have all watched Coronavirus and the Government lockdowns having an impact on all aspects of work and daily life. Hopefully we can all now see a light at the end of the tunnel.

I am delighted to say that during that time we appointed a new Clerk, Mr Stephen Hill. Stephen brought with him a wealth of experience, and since taking up his post in January this year he is proving an asset to this Council. I personally would like to take a moment to extend my sincere thanks to him for stepping in at such a difficult time. I would like especially to thank our Deputy Town Clerk, Mrs Heloise Marlow, Mrs Carolyn Bowles and Mrs Dawn Reed for all the work they have put in during the time when the Council had no Town Clerk and things were very difficult with the pandemic and zoom meetings.

I am pleased to confirm that this Council has finally resolved its dispute with HCC with both parties looking forward to a better working relationship to safeguard the future of The Beehive. I'm sure everyone will agree it is an asset to Honiton.

This Council has found itself subject to unjust accusations and criticism for, it is said, its lack of support to the community throughout the pandemic. HTC, unlike EDDC, has very limited financial resources, not to mention powers. However, despite criticism by some, the Council took steps to safely reopen the street market to stimulate trade in the High Street, something that was most welcomed by many members of the public.

Council quite deliberately provided additional grant funding from £15k to over £40k to help local groups through this pandemic. In addition, Councillors are working to deliver projects such as the long overdue allotments, ditching and drainage, public footpaths and additional Christmas lights. The lights were hard work, and I hope they gave you some pleasure during this dismal and worrying winter!

This Council is hoping to secure land from EDDC off Dowell Street for a Town Park with walks by the River Gissage. We are also hoping to upgrade the town's CCTV coverage, which I believe is a very necessary step.

Honiton Town Council looks forward to welcoming newly elected members to serve on the Council following the May elections. There is, as always, much to be done and I am sure that if all Councillors work together much can be achieved for the town and the community. The Chairs of our committees have been working exceptionally hard, and I now call on them to give you an overview of each of their committees and responsibilities.

Thank you.

Cllr J Zarczynski
Mayor of Honiton

Finance & Policy Committee Report

Our Council has incurred significant disruption in 2020/21 due to two issues. The Covid-19 pandemic, and the illness from February 2020, and subsequent resignation of the Town Clerk in September 2020. The Council commenced zoom meetings from July 2020 which enabled it to address urgent issues, particularly the appointment of Human Resources advisors and advisors on Freedom of Information Requests and Subject Access Requests. This resulted in the requirement to review and update, where required, several of the Council's policies. Working with Human Resources advisors, we now have comprehensive policies relating to this area.

Our financial situation is satisfactory, enabling the Council to provide a significant increase in grants in 2020/21 to local organisations in the hope this would provide them with some relief for costs and losses they incurred during the lockdown, and other Covid-19 restrictions. The Council also provided the Honiton Community Complex (HCC/The Beehive) with a grant of £15,000 to partially relieve costs incurred during the lockdown. The cost of the Public Works Loan is approximately £59k pa, and the recently agreed annual service charge payment of £10,000 results in approximately 20% of the Council's total income being utilised during the year to promote the Beehive. HCC is the largest beneficiary of Council subsidies/grants, receiving four times the amount of any other organisation. The Council also budgeted for no increase in their 2021/22 Precept, given the likely continuing financial pressures on Honiton ratepayers during the economic recovery phase. The first zoom meetings enabled the Council to address several issues, one of which resulted in the appointment of our new Town Clerk in January 2021, which has already resulted in the Council addressing several issues which were previously approved by Councillors, but no action taken to implement, for example, a new website for the Council. The new website will enable the Council to improve communications, and presentation of Council information to residents. Another indication of the progress of projects is the commencement of work on Monday, April 12th on the construction of the new allotments.

The major financial risks to the Council related to historical disputes regarding to construction of the Beehive and a legal dispute with the tenant of the Beehive. The Council decided not to proceed with initiating any further legal action regarding the construction of the Beehive building. Also the Council has come to an agreement with HCC where we believe both parties are satisfied with the outcome, and can work together in future for the benefit of the Town. As a result the Council has incurred minimal legal costs in 2020/21.

Two Council staff resigned citing constructive dismissal, and one was dismissed for cause. These resignations/dismissals may result in referrals to employment tribunals, and incurrence of related professional costs by the Council in defending itself, against what it believes will be unjustified claims. I would like to thank all Councillors for their efforts on the Finance Committee during a difficult period for everyone.

Finance & Policy Committee Chair - Cllr P Carrigan

Planning Committee Report

Thirty committee meetings were held during the years being reported on at this town meeting as there was no such meeting in 2020. The committee comments on planning applications on behalf of the Town Council however the comments are made as a consultee as, with the exception of advertisement applications, the local planning authority, East Devon District Council (EDDC), makes the final decision unless a refusal or lack of determination is appealed on behalf of or by an applicant.

Three planning applications were of particular interest due to having relevance to the Town Council's role as allotments authority for Honiton or maintaining Honiton's public rights of way. A quite recent application is for building retirement homes on the site used from 1910 until now as a livestock market. The committee has objected to the application and suggested that the site be nominated as an asset of community value. There are concerns regarding the application's impact on the local road network including the one-way system and the narrow Silver Street, almost entirely without even one pavement and also its impact on the conservation area. The suggestion by a member of the public that if built there should be accommodation provided for Swifts was supported. The applicants are appealing due to non-determination of the application by EDDC.

Another current application is for the Old Mill, a listed building due to a successful application for listing by this Council. The list of non-designated heritage assets needs to be reviewed. Last month the committee contributed towards the Issues and Options Consultation on EDDC's draft Local Plan.

The committee has suggested that the delegated power regarding advertisement applications be looked into and if the power continues to be held, the advertisement guidance needs updating, similarly, the subject of trees, tree wardens and Honiton as a tree charter branch be looked into, however the felling of protected trees has been referred to EDDC for investigation.

The committee's involvement with public rights of way particularly over land being offered for sale on ebay, the now removed footbridge over The Gissage that had been erected to comply with a planning inspector's appeal condition and the relocation of the tollgate formerly at Copper Castle have been taken on by other committees.

Planning Committee Chair- Cllr R Coombs

Town Management Committee Report

The first meeting of this committee was held in August 2018 with the second and third meetings held in 2019, no meetings in 2020 and one in March this year at which a Chair was elected for the meeting and to prepare this report.

The reason for the Neighbourhood Plan being put on hold was insufficient Steering Group members from the community (down to one community member) thereby making meetings inquorate as community members rather than Council members had to be in the majority at those meetings. The advice was to leave until after the 2019 elections but there was no relaunch later in 2019 or early 2020, however now with residents being seemingly more available for community matters such as safeguarding Honiton's future, relaunching presumably would no longer be difficult though would need to be sustained until all the plan processes have been completed - other East Devon towns have successfully produced Neighbourhood Plans so why not Honiton? There had been locally produced Honiton plans over the years however the steering group did stress in recruitment publicity that this locally produced plan would have some degree of legal standing and without a Neighbourhood Plan Honiton could become a target for developers. Dowell Street Corner - the Council owned land close to the High Street junction was a major preoccupation of the committee in 2019 taking on responsibility for the Copper Castle tollgate given to the Council in 2002 though probably now no longer available and seeking to provide new sites for Council owned Coronation Seats by the A35 and the A375. Ownership and maintenance of the retaining wall would need to be established and carried out before seats are sited nearby and as the A375 seat is on a Honiton part of Gittisham Common and Gittisham Common has been listed by the Wild Honiton Project it has been resolved to leave that seat in place, at least until the project's plans for that area are known.

The Council's tourism policy was to close down the purpose-built TIC in the Lace Walk car park and replace it with an online tourism service claimed to be fit for the 21st century though that is hardly the reality at present with the purpose-built TIC no longer used for that purpose and the replacement Visit Honiton website archived. Was the tourism presence in Lace Walk promoted by the committee and to be staffed by volunteers really feasible even in pre Covid times?

Town centre water channels need further preparatory work prior to restoring constantly flowing water for the first time since the 1970s. A pipe is needed under the Pottery Close junction as well as camera surveys initially between the top of the channel and the Kings Road spring, upstream from Pine Gardens and at Pine Park Road. Would the centres of Chard and Truro for example be as attractive without flowing water?

Bus shelters in Honiton with one exception are either Town Council property or provided by the Council's advertisement contractor. Residents have asked for shelters on new sites such as by Lidl, at Honiton Bottom Road and Weatherill Road, however not all are suitable for contractor's shelters and if provided would have to be funded by the Council. The substandard shelter near the Sidmouth Road pedestrian crossing and the damaged shelter in New Street are due to be considered by the Council following the committee meeting held last month.

Seats and Benches in Honiton are mostly Town Council owned. Seats at Church Hill and Queen Street have been repainted and refurbished during these two reporting years. Probably most if not all the historic seats, three of which date back to the 1860s, would have been removed if not taken on by this Council. The site for a new bench has been located at Northcote Road/Tunnel Lane. Where possible seats and benches are inspected during the footpath inspections.

Boundary Posts are also where possible inspected during the footpath inspections. Only three of the original posts remain standing. Replacement of the missing posts could be carried out with or without a resumption of the Beating the Bounds of Honiton.

Town Management Committee Chair - Cllr R Coombs

Green & Open Spaces Committee Report

Honiton has an acknowledged shortfall of public open spaces and opportunities for new public open spaces have been lost.

This committee was set up following the 2019 elections however only two committee meetings were held in 2019, one in 2020 and none so far this year though projects are progressing with the aim of protecting public access and securing new access and in addition there is the East Devon District Council (EDDC) Wild Honiton Project launched in late 2020 following that already under way at Exmouth.

Allotments at Battishorne Way on Combe Estate land leased to this Council should be available by the end of this year including diverting a permissive path over a new footbridge. The privately owned Clapper Lane Allotments have planning issues being dealt with by the Planning Committee. This Council is the allotment authority for the Parish of Honiton but despite best endeavours since 1974 has only provided allotments at one site (where Knowles Close now stands).

Roundball Wood leased by this Council from Combe Estate as community woodland includes paths in need of urgent repair as do the paths leading to and from the wood. The Woodhill View walkway requires research as to ownership and discussion with EDDC as well as the installation of handrails along the two steep sections. The wood has been mentioned in initial publicity by EDDC for the Wild Honiton Project.

The Parish Paths Partnership requirement by Devon County Council (DCC) for public rights of way inspections to be carried out has been complied with though without the presence of members of the public in 2020. Improvements were noted though there are six places where required public footpath signage is missing from junctions with metalled roads and two unsurfaced road signposts need replacing at two of the four lanes included in the partnership agreement and for one of which, Hutgate Lane, a capital grant has been applied for to replace a drainage channel that has deteriorated over the years.

Parishes Together funding has been used to investigate and improve longstanding drainage issues along minor public lanes.

Highway status of three roads covered by successful Honiton Borough Council court orders has been carried out with the help of DCC. Public way signs supplied by DCC can now be erected without which some members of the public would lack confidence in the public status of the routes even though marked on modern Ordnance Survey maps. Useful discussions have taken place with an adjoining landowner regarding re-opening one section and sites for a footbridge and signage have been assessed.

Public rights of way are being claimed over eight routes, the first of which between Sidmouth Road and Whitmore Way seems to be nearing success and if so will tend to protect the open space through which it runs. That route was decided by DCC as a result of a successful appeal by this council due to non-determination and the same process can be used for the claimed path between Kings Road and Springfield Road. An appeal can be made for users of the former footbridge on the path between Dowell Street and Oaklea to complete evidence forms. The other routes being claimed are awaiting the result of searches to confirm land ownership. It is recommended that several other routes should be claimed before the 1st January 2026 cut-off date for claims that rely on pre 1949 historic evidence.

The River Gissage Walk has been an objective partly secured of this Council since the 1970s. Three new sections of the riverside walk now appear achievable due to promising approaches to one landowner and from another landowner. Apart from negotiations regarding development of the Halses site including a pocket park, there had been little progress regarding this project for several years.

The Glen is also included in the advance publicity for the Wild Honiton Project so it is hoped that will be sufficient to provide public access via Lilley Walk.

Invasive alien plants Himalayan Balsam and Japanese Knotweed have been controlled by this council for several years though not in 2020 or in 2021 due to Coronavirus restrictions.

Suggestions for the Wild Honiton Project included Battishorne Ponds, the Manor Mill Leat and a permissive pedestrian link to Ring in the Mire via the open access Gittisham Common with a branch to opposite the Sidmouth Road junction with Gittisham Lane (Beech Walk).

Green and Open Spaces Committee Chair - Cllr J Taylor

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