



# Honiton

## ANNUAL REPORT 2023 -2024

### Chairman's Report

I did not expect to be writing this report this year, but our elected Chair/Mayor had a greater calling before completing the full year. However, it's given me great pleasure to finish the year as Chairman and Interim Mayor. As we entered 2023 it was election time again and it was nice to welcome some new Councillors and those who have returned for another term. This Council for the first time in many years, had a fully elected Council by the people of Honiton which is working very hard to rebuild its reputation within the community. We have updated all our policies and ensured all Councillors get the training they need to take on the important role of a Councillor. We are now a Council which has achieved the Foundation Award from the National Association of Local Councils.

During the last year this Council has continued to take part in many civic events and as we enter 2024 will reach the milestone of fifty years as a Town Council, shared with most towns in East Devon when the Borough Council became a District Council. Also celebrating a fifty years anniversary, are our twin towns Mezidon-Canon in France and Gronau in Germany. I will have the pleasure of visiting Mezidon-Canon in May where we will be also joined by representatives of Gronau.

The Honiton Community Complex financial support continues as agreed, following the public consultation carried out last year which overwhelmingly voted to support until the end of the lease in 2025 and is financially possible by the Council.

We carried out public consultations during 2023 to get your views on the following points.

- Honiton town financial budget for 2024/25 - which was supported by those who took part in the consultation.
- Parking meters in several towns including on our High Street which was proposed by Devon County Council. This was rejected by the residents and retailers within all the towns and thankfully Devon County Council decided not to pursue this project.

After the first offer for us to take on the King Street toilets was rejected by us, East Devon District Council returned with an improved offer which we have now accepted to ensure these toilets remain open.

There is so much more that goes on, some of which will be reported by the Chairs of the Committees.

One very important thank you I must not forget and that is to the Council staff. Without them we could not carry out our role as Councillors and achieve the Council's goals. There is a special thanks to one member of our staff, Carolyn Bowles who has served Honiton Council for thirty years and has decided that it is now time to retire. We wish her a very happy retirement.

**Cllr Tony McCollum**  
**Chair of Honiton Town Council**

### Human Resources Committee Report

Like any organisation things change, people move on, new ones join and this year we have had a few changes. As we work towards making our town somewhere to enjoy living in, we welcomed a new member of staff Mark Regan who will carry out town maintenance and will work with our Market Superintendent Bertie Rawlings and other partners as required. I know that he will be kept very busy.

Our longest serving member of staff, Carolyn Bowles, has decided to retire after 30 years of service. We wish Carolyn a long and enjoyable retirement and thank her for her loyal service. Caroline Kolek has recently been appointed to the new volunteer role of Deputy Town Crier. Caroline will work alongside and learn from the present Town Crier Dave Retter who is so passionate about our town in his role as Town Crier of all things ceremonial, cultural and historical regarding Honiton. For anyone following his footsteps, Dave will be a tough act to follow.

**Cllr Tony McCollum**  
**Chair of Human Resources Committee**

## Finance & Policy Committee Report

Elections for all Council seats were held in May 2023, at a cost to the Council of £8,000. A full set of Councillors were elected and a strategy meeting was held for them to identify what projects each would like to see fulfilled. These were then apportioned to the relevant Committees, who set their priorities and determined the potential cost of the undertakings selected. This information was used to set the budget for the forthcoming year, along with other fiscal responsibilities. Additionally, the Council initiated a public consultation on the budget 24/25, but a disappointingly small number of responses were received, resulting in no additional calls on the budget.

In order for the work programme to be fully funded it was considered necessary for the precept to be raised from £112.81 per annum to £148.81 per Band D house per annum. This is still relatively low compared to other local authorities within East Devon. Our reserves are also comparatively low, but in checking earmarked reserves we are able to cover four months of Council expenditure and must be sufficient for all other potential financial risks to the Council.

As agreed by Council in August 2023, a major item of expenditure during the year was the support provided to Honiton Community Complex, the charity which runs the Beehive. Following a public consultation exercise it was clear that Honiton residents wanted the Council to continue to support the Beehive and an underwriting agreement was consequently agreed, whereby the Council would cover a proportion of any losses incurred each month. A total of £48,400 was paid during the financial year to the end of January 2024, which is considerably less than many other similar venues in the region. However, this did result in the recasting of the budget and reworking of some projects and the use of some reserves. An amount has been included in the budget 24/25 to cover any potential call on the Council's finances, should an extension to the underwriting agreement be supported by Councillors.

Some other significant costs incurred by the Council have included £27,000 for the creation of a crossing outside Honiton Primary School, which was paid for through funding from the Community Infrastructure Levy (which is paid by builders when constructing new developments), legal advice for checking policies, procedural issues etc, and of course salaries for our two part-time Clerks, two admin staff, Market Superintendent and the newly recruited Maintenance person. Salaries have in fact increased by over £9,000 this year, partly due to the new post.

We have awarded a record amount in grants this year of £50,000 towards the support of various charities, groups and organisations in the Honiton area, of which £14,000 was towards youth support. We were able to give an emergency grant of £4,200 to Honiton Museum for urgent roof repairs. Awards were made to groups who were providing cost of living services, such as Warm Spaces for people who could not afford to heat their homes. During the awarding process it became apparent that some anomalies existed within the current policy and as a consequence it has now been amended, meaning that a maximum of £5,000 will be awarded to any one group in future.

Further funds of £14,000 were expended on the installation of a hearing loop in the Beehive in order to make the Council compliant with equal opportunities legislation.

Currently, earmarked reserves include one and a half months running costs, and may in future include town entrance welcome signs, notice boards upgrades, street art and High Street regeneration. The Council has also entered into new contracts, including Gate to Plate and plans an upgrade to the CCTV monitoring.

The Council took action to question the initiative to introduce parking charges on the High Street by Devon County Council (which could have impacted upon retailers' revenue), organising a public consultation in collaboration with the Honiton Chamber of Commerce, to which over 1,200 residents responded. We also liaised with other towns affected, who took similar action, and together we managed to persuade DCC to abandon the idea.

A significant cost pressure which will arise in the next financial year and in following years will be to maintain the toilets in King Street. East Devon District Council were unable to continue to afford to keep them open and HTC has consequently decided to accept their offer to sell the site for £1 leasehold, but with responsibility for their upkeep, which when upgrading etc is taken into account, will be an expensive addition to the budget. The Council also continues to pay £59,000 per annum for the public works loan taken out to cover the cost of building the Beehive, which belongs to the Council and is its biggest asset. There was a small increase in the service charge paid to Honiton Community Complex from £10,000 to £11,000 per annum - this includes payment for the provision of 3 offices, heating, lighting and reception/security services. The internal audit 2023/2024 has commenced, with the interim report having been published in December 2023, which gave the Council a clean bill of health.

As a final comment, whilst the precept has increased appreciably for 2024/2025, the new work programme which has been created by Councillors will bring significant benefits to the town.

**Cllr Serena Sexton—Chair of the Finance and Policy Committee**

## **Town Management Committee Report**

We continue to work at making Honiton Town a better place to live in or visit, making improvements or working with our partners to get things done. This covers many challenges, and some take longer to achieve.

Our Maintenance staff continue to catch up with many of the jobs around the town like Roundball Wood, the Battishorne Way Allotments, with a lot more in the pipeline.

Our allotments are still very much in demand with a long waiting list, we only wish we had more to allocate. The state of the pavements on the High Street have been poorly reinstated and maintained with this being the responsibility of Devon County Council. We see this as an urgent matter and are in communication with Devon County Council to try and resolve the issues.

The Honiton Primary School crossing in Clapper Lane has now been completed which we hope will help our children cross safely.

Hopefully, we will see our CCTV system finally move to Exeter Control Centre for twenty-four hour monitoring along with a new camera covering the Lacewalk Car Park new toilet block area, when installed. We have seen too much vandalism in this area over the past year, which has cost a lot of money to put right, and we do not want to possibly see the final closure of these toilets due to continued cost of damages.

We now carry out regular walks around the town with our partners from East Devon StreetScene and the local Police. The aim is to highlight and if possible, deal with issues or put plans in place for a joint approach.

Dowell Street corner by the traffic lights has required restoration work for many years. We are now moving forward to tidy up this area which is very much an eyesore at the entrance of our town.

Our street art project has turned out not to be that easy to put in place, but we are still working on it. Our aim is to promote the history of Honiton and what it has to offer, attracting visitors and increasing footfall. We now have a new Deputy Town Crier, Caroline Kolek, who is under the wing of Dave Retter our long-standing Town Crier. Caroline will, as time passes start to take on some events from Dave, providing him with the support he needs for the numerous events he attends.

**Cllr Tony McCollum**

**Chair of the Town Management Committee**

## **Green & Open Spaces Committee Report**

The Footpath Working Group met in January, and it was noted that nearly all of the footpaths had been inspected for the 23/24 period. Four new footpaths were requested to be added to the P3 agreement with Devon County Council: Hutgate Lane, Tunnel Lane, Northcote Lane and Wadmore Lane. Devon County Council has noted that one of these, Hutgate Lane, is in need of some work and advised Honiton Town Council to call in a Devon County Council contractor for advice.

We are putting together an application for trees from the Woodland Trust with a view to planting them on East Devon District Council land off Battishorne Way. We are still pursuing the asset transfer from East Devon District Council of the front area of Allhallows Playing Field so that we are able to keep the bamboo at a manageable level and look after the planters. Lots of work has been carried out in Roundball Wood by the Town Maintenance person including repairing of steps, walkways and fences. Bark chippings have also been placed at the Allotments.

Honiton Town Council is still liaising with a local landowner and the Environment Agency to provide extensions to the existing riverside walk. At the same time, full Council agreed to set up a working group to explore the replacement of the bridge over the river at Oaklea. This would be a nice addition to the riverside walk and would also provide a secondary exit to the green space where the bridge once was.

Public Spaces Protection Orders banning dogs from both of the rugby pitches in Allhallows Playing Fields were introduced in May 2023. Honiton Town Council was made aware of this in December 2023. East Devon District Council will be providing permanent signage, and their dog enforcement officer will regularly patrol the area.

**Cllr Lauren Passmore-Smart**

**Deputy Chair of the Green & Open Spaces Committee**

## Strategy Committee Report

The Strategy Committee was formed in September 2021 with the objective to develop strategies and increase public engagement.

In his report last year, the outgoing Chair of the Committee, Cllr Jake Bonetta, wrote that he hoped that the incoming Council would use the previous work of the Committee "to inform the Council strategy for the next electoral term".

We have taken a hybrid approach using both the action plan that we inherited from the previous Council as well as encouraging all Councillors, especially those newly elected in May 2023, to take part in an informal process to generate ideas for the future.

This informal process has generated a wide range of ideas including the possible creation of Youth Council, improving sports facilities, suggestions to improve the local economy and tourism (for example by creating a specific Economy and Tourism Committee), better community engagement, the possible creation of a Honiton Pride festival and many many others. Individual committees will now formally consider which proposals to take forward.

However, in the short term, the Council faces acute financial pressures, not least from the ongoing requirement to provide significant financial support to Honiton Community Complex (the current lessees of the Beehive) until at least the end of the current lease in September 2025. Given this, it is likely that some suggested projects will need to be deferred to future years.

To reduce costs the Council now uses Canva for Teams to produce newsletters, leaflets, questionnaires and other documents.

For example, posters and questionnaires for the recent on-street parking survey (undertaken in conjunction with the Honiton Chamber of Commerce) were produced in house by Councillors and Council staff. The contract with Breakthrough Communications has been terminated. In September 2023, we issued the first "new" quarterly newsletter - not a new idea of course but one that many Councillors felt it was important to reinstate - however, given the sad demise of the Honiton Village News we now need to find new outlets for printed versions of the newsletter.

I would like to thank all the members of the Strategy Committee for their enthusiasm and willingness to embrace the "no idea is too stupid" approach that we adopted this year and the Council staff for helping us to achieve this.

**Cllr Nick Ingham**  
**Chair of the Strategy Committee**

## Planning Committee Report

I would like to start by thanking the members of the Planning Committee for fulfilling the Town Council's role as a consultee on the planning applications for Honiton Parish. As well, I would like to thank the office staff for all their support to Councillors, their research and liaising with EDDC, the public and developers. During this year we have had around 90 planning applications in and around Honiton. Which consist of:-

17 tree applications, 23 extensions, 4 new homes, 3 High Street shop signage, 35 other applications which include 3 large sites; Youth Football Facilities & Pitches, 115 Homes - Middle Northcote Farm and 21 Homes - Ottery Moor Lane.

All Town Councillors are able to attend and speak at the meetings, but only Planning Committee members may vote on an application. Members of the public also have the opportunity to attend and participate in the meetings, this is welcomed and appreciated. You are able to view the meeting online live via the Honiton Town Council website.

The Planning Committee will continue to work with applicants, the public and East Devon District Council to deliver our considered responses to all planning applications.

**Cllr Andrew Pearsall**  
**Chair of the Planning Committee**