

## **For consideration of the Strategy Committee**

### **PLANNING FOR UNITARY AUTHORITIES**

We have been asked to consider the likely impact of the introduction of unitary authorities, which is projected to result in the demise of East Devon District Council, with either Devon County Council taking on a greater role, or the creation of a unitary authority covering both Devon and Cornwall. In either case all the functions currently undertaken by EDDC will need to be reallocated. This could mean that HTC will be expected to take responsibility for certain services, providing opportunities as well as obligations. However, those opportunities can only be realised if sufficient funding is provided to allow services to be run efficiently and effectively.

In putting together this paper we have reviewed two papers that have been produced previously to create a blueprint for the future of Honiton, 'Vision of Honiton 2030' (undated, but believed to be prior to 2007) and the Community Strategy 2022-2023. The former was a comprehensive attempt at developing an action plan for improving all elements of life in Honiton, to be completed by 2030, (albeit a rather fanciful projection of what might be possible), which took 2 years of work and cost £57,000 to produce. Unfortunately this seems not to have been implemented, even though a Honiton Development Trust was supposed to have been formed for that specific purpose.

The second document presented philosophies as to what the Council might do, but there were no constructive actions to support them and it would appear that this strategy also fell on stony ground. However, both papers combined have provided ideas and concepts that are still pertinent today and prompted conceptions which could be adopted to make Honiton a more pleasant town in which to live.

#### **Transition to a Unitary Authority**

It appears, from recent developments, that Devon and Cornwall will only be considered as a foundation authority initially, which means they will not have a Mayor and will only have a limited number of responsibilities devolved to them. It is not clear what will happen to EDDC at this early stage, but at some point it is assumed they will be dissolved and their areas of responsibility reallocated. We believe that the new unitary authority will consider what services they will undertake and what will be devolved to whatever stratum of local government is left at a local level.

It is possible that some additional restructuring could occur, for example returning to some form of Borough Council, which were abolished in 1974 (?). This would likely mean that HTC would cover a wider geographical area, possibly covering all the outlying parishes and villages to Honiton. We have considered what services could possibly be devolved to this new authority and these might be:

- Waste collection and recycling
- Grass cutting and grounds maintenance
- Parking enforcement
- Car parks

- Toilets
- Street signs
- Planning
- Playing fields and open spaces
- Leisure facilities
- Tourist information centres
- Condition of pavements and footpaths
- CCTV
- Certain legal functions, e.g. Section 215, Town and Country Planning Act, 1990

Should these be devolved to HTC or its successor this will provide us with opportunities to improve services, facilities and the environment and to take control of elements of town management that have been frustrating Councillors due to lack of action from EDDC. We will then be able to set our own priorities, develop strategies and work specifically for our own electorate.

We would wish to provide those services to a particular standard, but it is unlikely that sufficient funding will accompany any devolution to make that a reality, and as a consequence some difficult decisions will probably be necessary. Another potential implication could be that a cap may be placed on our ability to raise the precept in order to meet our obligations. Currently we have no restrictions, whereas EDDC are limited to a percentage increase each year, and this may become our reality once they have been abolished.

The 'Vision for Honiton' document identifies that the population of the town has ballooned from 5,000 to 12,000 in just 35 years. Unfortunately essential services and facilities have not kept up with this rate of increase, which means that services are oversubscribed and facilities are inaccessible to some people. It is possible that devolution will provide us with the chance to correct these deficiencies and plan improved facilities for our local populace, especially if CIL and S.106 monies come within our purview.

We are not, at this stage, clear as to whether our lowest level of local authority will have any choice regarding which services are devolved, but it is felt probable that the new unitary authority will not wish to take on those which are difficult or expensive to run. The adoption of new services will mean that the number of staff being employed by HTC will need to be increased significantly and that some will probably be recruited from EDDC, especially those with particular skills or experience in the areas we are taking on. This will also mean that alternative office space will need to be arranged in order to accommodate them, although not as extensive as Blackdown House. However, a proportion of that particular office block might be viable, with the remainder being rented out to private companies. This would leave the current offices at the Beehive available for HCC to hire out, as even taking over the entire first floor of the Beehive is unlikely to be sufficient for our new purposes.

We will now deal with the various elements of life in Honiton and how we believe they could be improved under a new regime.

## **Tourism**

The town used to have a Tourist Information Centre based in Lace Walk car park, but that was closed and has never been replaced. If we are to make Honiton an attractive destination for visitors we need to have somewhere immediately accessible for them to obtain information about the area on arrival. The best option would be for this to be located in the High Street, although this would be costly as there would be a need to rent premises. The current plan to place a TIC at the museum could potentially be viable, especially if the coach stop is located outside St Paul's Church, but the alternative / additional locations at the library and the Beehive are too remote for people to find.

We believe firstly that we need to scotch the myth that Honiton is the 'acknowledged antiques capital of the South West', with a market that is 'worth attending', as described for instance on the 'Visit Devon' website. It is regrettable that many of our antiques shops and centres have now closed and the market is a shadow of the attraction that it used to be, despite efforts to improve it. If we continue to be advertised in these veins tourists and visitors will be disappointed and we will develop an undesirable reputation.

However, we do have an opportunity to publicise ourselves as the 'Gateway to the South West' and as a stopping off point on the way to other parts of Devon and Cornwall. We do have a significant number of good quality cafeterias and coffee shops to cater for the need for refreshments, but if a tourism strategy is to be successful we will need much better signage, especially for car parks, the coach park and dropping off points, tourist information centres and local attractions. Despite requests to EDDC these have not been forthcoming, so devolution might enable us to make such improvements.

There are also other means of providing better services to visitors, many of which we could begin to fulfil prior to devolution. For example, we should have a list of local beauty spots, walks and cycle routes, with maps, to promote the area. This will require an improvement in the quality of our footpaths, such as through Honiton Bottom and to Roundball Hill, and better access to locations such as Dumpdon Hill, where car parking is inadequate.

In the same vein we have a number of historic sites and events which are not obvious to the casual visitor, so we should compile a walkthrough of all our historic venues, with information about each one. We can also increase publicity for some of our more niche attractions, such as the golf club, which has an excellent reputation within the local area, but which might not be so well known to golfers further abroad.

In order to become more attractive to visitors the town centre will need to be improved significantly. As the decorative condition of shops deteriorates so local residents will avoid using them and more will close due to lack of footfall and inability to make a profit. Delegation of Section 215 (above) would enable HTC to require landlords to make essential improvements. If we can encourage them to bring their properties up to a decent standard this should result in fewer empty shops, locals using them more regularly and visitors providing positive feedback to others, making Honiton a worthwhile town to use as a stopping off point, or even an attraction in its own right.

We might also consider what other improvements could be made to the town, enabling us to attract more visitors. It has been suggested within the 'Vision for Honiton' that we could create a 'town

square', possibly north and south of Chapel Lane; whether or not that is viable, it is reasonable to suggest that the town does need a focal point, where we can organise various events and use it to provide a variety of different entertainments. There are also locations of historic interest that are not entirely obvious, such as the small entrances between shops that would have been access for horse-drawn coaches, and the inns that had coach stops to change horses. More should be made of these, with plaques or notices containing information for visitors.

There are probably a number of initiatives we could introduce which would make Honiton a worthwhile location for coach parties to visit. Honiton already has a plethora of independent shops and we could make more of the attractions that already exist, such as the carnival, Hot Pennies, Gate2Plate, the Beehive and Thelma Hulbert Gallery, possibly adding tours of the town. We could also add enhanced themed markets, additional green spaces within the town, street entertainment and a regular festival. Importantly we need to make the town a vibrant hub of activity that people want to visit.

In order to support tourism we have a number of hotels and there are many excellent B&Bs in the area. It would be helpful if we had a high profile hotel locally, in addition to the Premier Inn, but in order to attract a major company there needs to be a demand for their services, which an improved tourist offering might achieve. In the meantime any digital publicity of the town should include lists of available accommodation.

## **Business**

The reports mentioned above identify that the great proportion of businesses within Honiton employ less than 5 people, and that most are therefore small businesses, with few being major national companies bringing sizeable employment opportunities. Our main business centre is Heath Park and most, if not all, units there are occupied; however, the town needs an area such as Matford in Exeter, set aside for major business to consider setting up here.

The limited area covered by Honiton Town Council makes it difficult to find options for expansion. The 'Vision for Honiton' identifies an area to the west of Heath Park that could potentially be used for this purpose, but this is within the boundary of Gittisham parish council, who would potentially object, so an expanded town/borough council would cover a much wider area and enable more influence over local planning, possibly facilitating the required expansion.

Another issue is that the existence of local businesses are not necessarily known to the general population. Heath Park has a vast array of different businesses, but how many people know they exist or what they do? As a council we need to support those businesses and promote them, so that local people know where to obtain their services. There are a number of potential options to achieve this, for example by producing a directory of businesses, both in hard copy and on our website, and assisting those businesses to organise trade fairs, possibly at the Beehive or some other local venue.

We also need to make Honiton an attractive location for traders to rent shop premises. Currently we have too many empty shops and this trend is accelerating. The problem is that new shopkeepers set up in the town, but find their rent and business rates mean that income from trading (due to lack of footfall) is insufficient to make a living. If all shops are in good condition the footfall could be improved, but we could assist traders by providing guidance on what might be considered

to be a reasonable rent for their premises, possibly based on square metreage. In this way rents can be standardised, landlords will receive reasonable recompense and traders can be profitable. Clearly there will be no legal basis for this initiative and landlords will still be able to charge what they wish, but it would give traders a negotiating tool.

There are several other potential initiatives we could explore. For example, could part of the town be pedestrianised, allowing freedom for visitors to stroll through the town, cafes to set up with tables outside and for the market to thrive?

The main reason that High Streets around the country are falling into decline is that people are now shopping more online. If our shops are to survive in the current business environment we need to assist them to take advantage of modern shopping trends by enhancing their own presence online and thereby making their existence on the High Street more viable.

The closure of banks elsewhere is an opportunity for Honiton, as we currently still have a number of banks operating in the town, and recent discussions with visitors have revealed that quite a few visit in order to use our banks' services. However, that situation may change and we have to fight hard to retain what we have, not only for visitors but also for our own local businesses.

### **Employment**

Most of the jobs within the Honiton area are low-skilled and low paid, within the manufacturing, retail and care sectors. Within the 'Vision for Honiton' report they quoted a survey that indicated most young people do not envisage taking up such employment and are therefore unlikely to remain in the area.

In order to meet the aspirations of younger people we need to attract businesses that provide a higher skill base and the opportunity to make a decent living. Given the way in which the world of business is progressing it would be ideal if we could attract a significant number of businesses into Honiton which have a highly skilled, technological element to their work, possibly through the development of a new business park.

### **Environment and Open Spaces**

As previously stated some work needs to be done to make a number of our open spaces more accessible and pleasant to use, whether that be through improved maintenance of grassed areas and hedgerows, improving the condition and quality of pathways, or the creation of new structures, facilities or attractions within them.

Currently some of our open spaces suffer from lack of maintenance, including the appalling condition of some pathways, which are a sea of mud during the winter and difficult, even dangerous, to negotiate. As and when improvements to our local walks are made we should be publicising the fact that they are available to use and developing lists and maps for newcomers and visitors to the area.

It may also be possible to develop new open spaces which people can use for a variety of pursuits, especially around the town centre. This vision might include the development of a multi-storey car park, possibly managed by a private company, at Lace Walk, with the remainder of the current car park being converted into parkland.

We need to ensure that our verges, roundabouts and open spaces are properly maintained by setting up a maintenance schedule and having an annual plan for planting and upkeep of the flower beds and roundabouts. Not only will this result in a more pleasant environment within which to live, but it will encourage visitors to the town by giving the impression of an area that is well maintained, cared for and in which local people take pride.

We also need to have a schedule of maintenance for weeding areas around the town, in particular the High Street and New Street. We should be encouraging shopkeepers to take responsibility for that portion of the town centre immediately outside their properties, keeping them weed and litter free, whilst engaging either volunteers or paid personnel to maintain those parts of the town which are not being covered by such a scheme.

We want our environment to be clean and environmentally friendly. We already have good facilities for drivers of electric vehicles and if the purchase of these can be encouraged this will ensure the air we breathe is not so contaminated with toxins from petrol and diesel vehicles.

### **Leisure and Recreation**

For a relatively small town Honiton is reasonably well served with leisure opportunities, but there are some significant shortfalls. In respect of entertainment we are fortunate to have a notable venue in the Beehive, which provides a diverse range of acts at affordable prices, along with a couple of other venues in the Conservative Club and Volunteer pub, which also feature live performances. However, these are now the only spots where regular entertainment is provided and these tend to be clustered around the weekends. The Beehive does also provide opportunities for a wide variety of different activities, such as cinema, dance and theatre classes, music, education, talks and discussion groups.

There is a complete range of sports in which to participate, with clubs including rugby, football, cricket, hockey, running and golf. However, there is a woeful lack of available pitches, both for playing and for practice, and whilst this is to a certain extent being addressed the need is urgent and wide-ranging. Currently several of the clubs are significantly over-subscribed and cannot cater for all those who wish to join, along with the difficulties in accessing practice areas, some of which are a long distance out of town. This requires early resolution so that everyone can participate in whichever sport they choose within a reasonable distance from the town.

We are fortunate also to have a leisure centre, which caters for many indoor sports and physical activities, but again it is over-subscribed and, due to the demographic make-up of our populace, out of reach to many due to cost. The swimming pool is relatively small and does not provide an entertainment element for children, such as slides, wave machines etc., and consequently for many it does not feature as a potential option for school holiday entertainment.

Many of our older residents enjoy walking and there are some attractive areas in which to undertake this pastime, but, as previously stated, many of the footpaths are impassable in the winter and require significant investment to make them usable throughout the year. It would be helpful to both residents and visitors if a list of walks and beauty spots to visit could be compiled, together with maps, and made available in both hard copy and on our website.

We are blessed with a variety of restaurants, cafes and bars, both within and outside the town, but, like the shops in the High Street, they can only survive if they have a regular clientele. We would wish them to thrive and improve, together with additional outlets, offering more options and choices in terms of where to go.

One glaring deficiency is the lack of facilities for young people in the town. Apart from the sports clubs mentioned above, there is painfully little for them to do. The Den has recently opened as a youth café, giving young people from the ages of 11-18 to meet up on 2 days a week, but they can only cater for small numbers. Other than that there is a skate park and virtually nothing else available. One would hope that in 10 years time we would have identified what they would like to have provided, possibly through the planned Youth Council, and that plans for provision were either completed or at least close to realisation.

### **Services**

We only have one surgery serving the whole of Honiton, with no satellite surgeries or additional services. The surgery is becoming increasingly stretched, with increasing wait times for appointments, and we would wish to see significant improvements in that respect. However, the surgery does provide a wide range of services, supported by the local hospital, and we would hope these will continue.

We have recently lost one pharmacy in the town and we now have just three, Clarepharm, Boots and Tesco's, with rumours abounding that Boots may be closing. If true, this will bring pressure upon the other pharmacies and it must be of concern that others could follow. We need to have sufficient pharmaceutical services in the town to cater for the population, so that residents can obtain whatever medications they need in a timely manner.

The library is now run by a charity and we need to ensure they are provided with whatever support and funding they need to remain open.

As mentioned previously there is a dearth of opportunities for youth within the town to socialise and undertake activities. Apart from the Den and Cubb youth club, young people can engage in sports, such as football, rugby, hockey and cricket, as well as joining air, army or police cadets, but this caters for a narrow range of interest. We need to ensure there is sufficient opportunity in the town for young people, with a broader offering, otherwise they will leave once they have left school, meaning the town is devoid of younger generation.

The provision of good quality care services in a town with an elderly population is particularly important. A number of properties providing managed accommodation have sprung up in the town during the recent past, and generally the residents should be well cared for. But the concern must be for those others who live alone and/or remotely, so they do not become isolated and unable to access any services that are available. Regular involvement with care agencies and the surgery will ensure the Council has its finger on the pulse of care service provision and take action where services are inadequate.

Recently TRIP has had financial difficulties and it will also be important for the Council to ensure their survival, as they provide a critical lifeline for the elderly and disabled.

Currently transport through the town is adequate. There are hourly trains to and from Exeter and London, and there are sufficient bus services covering Exeter, Taunton, our local coastal towns and most villages in the vicinity, providing a regular timetable.

Policing within the town has been a matter of concern over recent years and it should be a priority for the Council to bring pressure to bear on senior management to ensure there is sufficient police cover and visible presence. Our difficulty is that Honiton is not seen by the police authorities as a hotbed of crime or antisocial behaviour and as a consequence they prioritise other areas when considering dispersal of personnel. We could, however, have a better, more regular engagement with local senior management, possibly through quarterly meetings, in order to discuss priorities and the allocation of the resources they do have available.

### **Facilities**

We are blessed with an adequate number of accountants, solicitors, estate agents and other professional services. However, there are other facilities that are precarious, with banks closing nationally, more shops becoming empty and a key supermarket in the town disappearing. WHSmiths will be shutting its doors soon, with the potential loss of postal services, so with additional devolved responsibilities it may be necessary for the Council to check the gradual decline. It will very much depend on what capability the Council will be given to achieve such an objective, but in the meantime we can create an action plan with a view to reversing the trend.

Other deficiencies within Honiton are the lack of shops that cater for music, mens clothes and to a certain extent hardware materials and home furnishings since the demise of Homebase. Whilst Home Bargains are planning to take over the previous Homebase premises there is still an opening for a similar operation to the previous occupiers. The Council could encourage the introduction of these facilities.

The town now has plenty of choice in respect of takeaway outlets. However, there is a limited supply of quality restaurants within the town, with the need to travel to local villages for such facilities. Most of those which did exist have closed and it seems unlikely at this point in time that restaurateurs will choose Honiton in which to open a new premises. That could change if we can achieve the objective of making Honiton an attractive location to visit.

There are, however, a reasonable number of cafeterias and coffee houses with good offerings and we can use these as a positive opportunity for visitors to the town. We are also blessed with sufficient major supermarkets, albeit out of town, although extending their services to become hypermarkets selling a wider range of goods would be advantageous.

Public toilets are always a key issue within any town centre and we are fortunate enough to have two in Honiton. These need to be maintained to a high standard and properly signposted, so that visitors can take away a positive impression.

We have a broad range of churches within the town, including Roman Catholic, Church of England, United Reform Church, Methodist and a family church. There is only a small ethnic population and currently there is no demand for religious buildings other than those for the Christian population, but as the demography of the town changes there is a possibility that other

religions may require premises in which to worship, and this should be a consideration in any forward planning.

### **Education**

We have sufficient primary and junior education facilities in Honiton.

The community college is our main secondary school, but it has recently decided to dispense with providing sixth form education. This is most regrettable, meaning that students wishing to take A levels need to travel outside the town to study, so we hope that within a short period of time this decision will be reversed.

In respect of adult education there is precious little in the town and again this situation needs to be resolved.

### **Housing**

East Devon are currently developing their own local plan, to which we have had some input. However, if that authority was to disappear and the town council was to be enlarged, covering many of the responsibilities that East Devon currently assume, it may be possible for Honiton to be more in control of the areas which are developed, and the type of development that is sanctioned.

There is clearly a need for more reasonably priced housing, as replicated across the country, and if we were able to address this issue we would slow the leakage of talent that leaves the town due to lack of affordable accommodation.

It would also mean that we could better protect our open spaces and the areas that are valued by local residents as places they can walk and take pleasure from, local politicians being better placed to know which areas need to be safeguarded. We will also be in a better position to argue for the inclusion of open spaces as part of the planning process and for additional resources if larger developments are initiated.

### **Events**

Honiton is famous for its lace and pottery, but we do not celebrate this in any meaningful fashion, so an event(s) based on these industries might be worthwhile.

Our history is celebrated through other annual events i.e. Charter Day and Hot Pennies, and we have a regular street market, although this has declined in recent years. The extent of traffic through the town makes holding a street market difficult and it would be ideal if a permanent, off-street home could be found.

Additional events include Gate2Plate and the Honiton Show, which we hope will continue, as both put the town on the map. Discussions are currently taking place to determine whether an annual festival might be possible, with a view to heightening the town's profile, bringing business and providing a focal point for local residents.

### **Summary**

To summarise, what do we want Honiton to look like in 10 years time? We suggest the following:

1) Local Government:

- a. As a Borough Council, or similar, covering the 17 local parishes, thereby allowing ability to plan for the wider area.
- b. Devolved responsibilities which provide enhanced control, allowing improvements to services, facilities and the environment
- c. Ability to set key priorities for the town and wider area
- d. A local plan to match services, such as surgery, schools etc, to population size
- e. A well established Youth Council

2) Town Centre:

- a. All shops well decorated and in good condition
- b. No empty shops
- c. More specialist shops, e.g. mens clothing, music
- d. Number of banks still on the High Street
- e. More quality restaurants, providing a wide range of cuisine
- f. Weed free environment, with repairs to all pavements
- g. Pedestrianised area, for ease of moving around the shops and market
- h. A vibrant market, possibly under cover, with regular themes
- i. A focal point for the town, e.g. town square
- j. Multi storey car park

3) Tourism:

- a. Visible Tourist Information Centre in the town
- b. Coach stops for ease of access to the town
- c. Publicising the town as the 'Gateway to the South West'
- d. Signage for car parks, local attractions etc
- e. Signage / plaques for places of historical interest
- f. Digital walkthrough, maps and list of local beauty spots, historical sites, walks etc
- g. Enhanced footpaths and facilities at beauty spots
- h. Digital list of local hotels and B&Bs
- i. Prestigious hotel to service the town
- j. Maintenance of all traditional events
- k. A well established Honiton Festival

4) Leisure facilities and the environment:

- a. Improvements to current green and open spaces to make them more pleasurable to use
- b. Use of open spaces to provide entertainment and attractions
- c. New green / open spaces within the town itself
- d. Regular maintenance of verges, flower beds etc
- e. Designed and maintained roundabouts at Tescos and Sidmouth Road as an attractive entrance to the town
- f. Sufficient sports facilities for all who wish to use them
- g. Improved sports centre and development of a leisure pool
- h. Greater range of leisure opportunities and facilities for young people

5) Business and employment:

- a. A new business park designed exclusively for major industry / national companies
- b. Support for local businesses through a comprehensive directory and trade fairs
- c. Help for local businesses to trade online
- d. More businesses with a higher skill base, providing higher wages, e.g. technology companies
- e. More retail outlets, giving provision of everything needed by local residents, avoiding the need to travel

6) Services:

- a. Sufficient pharmacies within the town to cater for all our needs
- b. Banks, as above
- c. A thriving, well-run library
- d. Good care provision for the sick, disabled and elderly
- e. More visible police presence, with enhanced police personnel and better engagement with HTC by senior management
- f. Satellite doctors' surgeries for greater ease of access
- g. A larger supermarket
- h. Greater opportunities for adult education
- i. Sixth form education available within the town

7) Housing:

- a. Enough affordable homes to cater for demand
- b. Assurance that housing developments will be accompanied by increases in essential services and green spaces
- c. Planned development that accords with local demand and support

Rob Sexton

Serena Sexton