



Halstead Town Council Annual report by Town Clerk May 2018- April 2019

Members and officers

This year has been the first year when the Council has been chaired by Cllr Andy Munday with Cllr Mick Radley as Deputy Chairman. The Finance Committee has been chaired for a third year by Cllr Mick Radley with Cllr Dave Gronland as deputy. The Planning Committee is chaired by Cllr David Hume, with Cllr Jackie Pell as deputy. Cllr Hume has been unable to attend many meetings this year through serious ill health, but has remained fully informed and active in the background. The next Full election of all Town Councillors will be on 2 May 2019.

The Council is now embarking on the journey through the Local Council awards scheme, starting with Foundation level. This scheme has been set up to encourage councils to aspire to and maintain the highest standards. Halstead Town Council is very happy to report that it has achieved the Foundation level of the Local Councils Award scheme in January 2019, and is now setting forth to achieve the Quality level award.

During the year there have been no staff changes. We have a very stable team of 11 employees, who work very well as a team, particularly in the new and more appropriate environment of the offices at Queens Hall.

Council offices

The team has continued to enjoy the new, more convenient and warm office at Queens Hall. It is proving to be a huge advantage that the office is next door to the Hall for hire, as prospective hirers can be shown around at any time during office hours. This is resulting in an increase in regular bookings for various kinds of dance and exercise classes, and the public appear to have been pleasantly surprised by the refurbishment.

Finance

HTC endeavours to keep the precept for Halstead (the part of the Council tax collected by BDC and given to HTC to run the council) at a modest level, with a very moderate increase each year to keep in line with inflation. It was agreed at the Council meeting in January 2019 to raise the council tax in the financial year 2019/2020 by 2% in line with inflation which is equal to an increase of 0.90p per household in Band D Council Tax.

The Council has over the past 12 months continued to strive to obtain economies in all aspects of its services, in order to allow the build-up of reserves to manage forthcoming large projects. Savings in this financial year will, once agreed, enable the complete refurbishment of the public toilets, the purchase of a tipping trailer for the groundsmen, and the prudent reduction of a large number of trees within both churchyards in the next financial year. They also allowed for repairs to the churchyard paths.

The internal and external audits in spring and summer 2018 passed without incident, and the external had no comments, indicating that all procedures had been properly followed.

For the management of its finances, the Council uses SAGE 50c professional. This programme has been more thoroughly explored over the past year, and is now being used for all aspects of managing day-to-day finance, following further training. All invoices are now produced from SAGE and assets are also managed on the SAGE database. The Council also agreed to introduce online secure payments from its account, to improve efficiency and save on costs.

Activities

In February 2019 it held a very successful concert with the Beavers, to raise money for the Halstead Day care centre. HTC has continued its programme of activities for local residents of different ages. These include the Easter quiz during the school holidays, 5 senior citizen outings, 3 bands in the park, summer fun activities for children, Guys in the park competition, Christmas lights, Torchlight procession and senior citizen parties. New motifs were bought this year to hang on the lamp posts in the High Street, and these contributed well to the overall magical effect.

In addition, the newly refurbished Queens Hall is proving to be a more popular venue for those wishing to add to the range of activities available in Halstead, including yoga, Latin American dance and aerobics. It has also been used in the winter months of 2019 to run boot camps and Flying club evenings. In February 2019, there was a record number of 43 bookings for the Queens Hall.

Halstead Town Council also produces an annual events leaflet to advertise not only its own events but also events put on by other organisations in the town. The leaflet printed for 2019 includes a much wider range of organisations, all of whom are very pleased to have their events advertised. This is available in printed form and also electronically on the Council website.

HTC has also begun a collaboration with the Tourism department at Braintree District Council in order to advertise the events it puts on more widely.

Communication and digitisation

The Council has over the past 3 years pursued a policy of using email communication wherever possible, both when communicating with residents and between officers and members of the Council. This has resulted in significant savings in expenditure on postage and paper. Most of the business of the Council is now carried out by email, through the use of a range of databases. In addition, paper files are kept to a minimum, with most information stored on the networked office system, and backed up daily offsite.

Planning

HTC considers all planning applications made for Halstead through BDC. HTC is a consultee and therefore cannot make decisions, but can make recommendations. All sites destined for large developments have been handled with particular care for detail, and HTC has welcomed developers to make presentations at several Council meetings. Local residents

have been given time to speak passionately about these large developments, and their opinions have been taken into account when making recommendations.

Car Parks

The 4 carparks in the town which are owned and managed by HTC, are well used, and the opportunity to buy permits is greatly appreciated by both residents and local businesses. These cost approximately half the cost of a daily ticket for the year. Permits were offered in the Chapel Street car park for the first time in 2018, and all 9 offered were taken up. A further 6 permits are on offer at the Chapel Street car park from April 2019. HTC has recently applied to become a member of the Park Mark scheme, in order to ensure that its car parks meet the highest standards. It remains free to park in pay-and-display car parks after 15.00

Allotments

There are over 100 allotments for rent in Halstead. There are just 2 viable plots available for rent by local people. Other plots which have recently been cleared of overgrowth and rubbish have recently been taken on by residents. We have a new warden at the Colchester Road (stat) allotments. Some of these allotments are also on the judges' route for Halstead in Bloom, and thus contribute to the general passion in Halstead for green growth. The Council has also been able to improve the state of the allotments at Colne Road through S106 monies released through housing development. This has so far been used to install new fencing and a gate, and there will still be some of the funds to use for further improvements over the next 10 years.

Staff Review Group

The staff review group meets when needed to discuss HR matters. They provide useful support to the Clerk when making difficult decisions on staff, and form the interview panel for all new recruitment.

Churchyard trees

It was agreed in the budget at the January Council meeting that funds would be set aside to manage the trees in the churchyards at Holy Trinity and St Andrews churches. A Faculty has been applied for and it is planned that this work will be carried out in the spring.

Footbridge

The footbridge which has been closed since 2012 has caused much heartache to local residents, and a greater effort has been made this year to resolve the issue of the closure and to get the bridge re-opened. The Council has a working group of councillors working on the project.

Town Plan and report

The Council carried out a survey of local opinion through a survey in 2016. A working group of Councillors worked on analysing and presenting the results of this survey. Several meetings were held in 2018 to finalise content and presentation. With a huge amount of help

from staff and students at Colchester Institute on the design, and much input from Cllrs Gronland and Radley, the report eventually came out in printed form in February 2019. Copies are available from the Council offices, or it can be viewed electronically on the HTC website.

Infrastructure

The Council has been working with members of BDC, ECC and the local surgery to explore and contribute to the changing infrastructure needs of the town, in terms of schools, roads and health. This work on infrastructure forms part of the Action plan for the Council, which can be viewed on the HTC website. This work is ongoing, and will need the dogged determination of future councillors, and their understanding of the processes in order for them to be able to assist in preparing the town for its growing population.

Crime and Policing

Aware as it is of the significant levels of crime in Halstead, and the concern at the closure of the police station, the Council has been continuing its collaboration with the police in order to be able to take on Special Constables. These specials have all the powers of a full police officer, wear uniform, but are paid only their expenses. It is good to be able to announce that Halstead now has 1 Special Constable, SPC Michael Mihalyfi, who attended the February Council meeting in order to introduce himself. There is a second SPC awaiting a date of appointment. In addition, a Braintree officer, PC Craig Wheeler, has been assigned to monitor criminal activity in Halstead. PC Wheeler has been active in arranging contact with local residents, and has so far held two public meetings in Queens Hall with local residents and members of the council, in order to explore sympathetically the issues on people's minds. These meetings have been well supported, and more so than some "Coffee with cops" events arranged at local cafés. It is now much easier for the council to alert officers to incidents going on in Halstead, and there has been a considerable reduction in activity in the evenings in Butler Road car park, and a number of arrests have been made.

In addition, HTC collaborated with Essex Highways and the police on a Surround-a-town exercise. This resulted in several arrests, the recovery of 3 stolen vehicles, and the discovery of considerable number of driving offences – no seatbelt, driving while on mobile phone, no insurance.

Halstead and District Local History Society

The History Society and Museum has settled well into the old kitchen at Queens Hall, which provides more space than at Mill house, and has alongside it a convenient store for the archive. They have recently bought a large document scanner, thanks to a grant from HTC, and have been able to scan a large number of vellum documents relating to the Courtaulds family. They will be having an exhibition on Geoff Root at Queens Hall in September.

The River

Discussions have been held on several occasions with the Environment Agency and with the new owner of Mill House over the state of the river. It is evident that the residents of Halstead are very concerned about the state of the river, and would like it to be returned to a

higher level of water as it used to be before the flood barrier was built. At present the sewage pipe is visible above the level of the water, and there is a great deal of growth of shrubs and weeds in the river. The new owner is pressing to have the gates under Mill House repaired and the control of the gates in his hands. At present this argument is between the new owner and the Environment Agency, and the assessment of the risk of flooding. A new group has been formed by residents to discuss the issue, and it has also been raised by the Chairman and Vice Chairman with the MP James Cleverly.

Community Hub

The Council is continuing to maintain a dialogue with the Trustees for the Community hub, to work together on this project.

Fundraising for local primary schools

The staff of HTC and the Chairman volunteered to tour large areas of Halstead with Santa's sleigh on 2 evenings in December, and raised over £300 for each of the 3 primary schools in Halstead.

Grants

In the 2018/19 financial year, HTC implemented for the first time its policy on awarding grants. The intention of this policy was to be able to review all applications for grants at the same time of the year, and to consider fairly the merits of each one. This year grants were made to 7 local organisations to help with the funding of their activities. The process worked well, and the same procedure will be adopted going forward, with applications opening at the beginning of April and closing at the end of June, to be considered at the July Council meeting.