

Halstead Town Council

Annual report

May 2017- April 2018

Members and officers

This year has been the second year when the Council has been chaired by Cllr Shirley Diver with Cllr Andy Munday as Deputy Chair. The Finance Committee has been chaired for a second 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. During the year the resignation of Cllr Martin Day forced a by-election, and Cllr Garry Warren was elected to the Council. The next Full election of all Town Councillors will be on 2 May 2019.

As the Clerk was new to her post in July 2016, much of the past year has been spent in reviewing and re-establishing the systems needed to run the Council efficiently, in compliance with regulations and good practice. Policies and regulations are now in place to cover both the conduct of Council business, management of staff such as sickness and absence policy, disciplinary procedure and complaints procedure, and also proper systems for the recruitment of staff and the management of their performance. Risk assessments have been reviewed and signed by all staff where appropriate to their particular job. Health and Safety and Fire risk have also been reviewed and new policies and procedures written.

In order to ensure that the council was following good practice, the Clerk embarked on the Certificate in Local Council Administration, and became a qualified clerk at the beginning of November 2017. It is recommended that for a council of this size, the clerk should be qualified on appointment or should seek qualification within a year of appointment.

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.

During the year there have been 2 staff changes. Our caretaker moved away, and we have appointed a new caretaker, who lives very close to the Queens Hall, and takes great pride in looking after our newly refurbished hall. We have also appointed a new and very experienced car park attendant.

Boundary changes

Under the Community Governance Review carried out by Braintree District Council, HTC requested that the areas of the Oak Road and East of Sudbury Road developments be included within the boundaries of Halstead Town Council. This has been supported by Greenstead Green Parish Council. Permission has been granted for the developments to be built, and Halstead should therefore benefit from the Open Spaces monies which are linked to the development, and from the precept which will arise from the extra houses. Braintree has approved subject to further public consultation at the end of February 2018.

Council offices

The biggest project and preoccupation for the council this year has been the search for suitable premises. Mill House, where the council had been a tenant for 12 years, was sold to businessman John de Bruyne on 31 March 2017, and he served notice to quit by March 2018. As no suitable premises could be found to rent, the council made a decision in spring 2017 to convert the stage area of Queens Hall, which is council property, into offices for the council. Much of the cost of the conversion was covered by the sale of the public toilets in Chapel Street. As the new offices had to be separated from Queens Hall by a new wall, the opportunity was taken to refurbish the hall, where necessary. Building work started at the end of July, and Queens Hall, repainted, and with newly sanded floor, new kitchen and new disabled toilet, was reopened for public use at the beginning of September. All the work was done by local contractors, and team of Community service volunteers did the painting. The council moved into its new offices at the beginning of November. The move has been a great success, and staff are entirely happy to be in warm, airy purpose-built offices, filled with sunshine in good weather. The design of the offices has also helped communication and strengthened relationships. Bookings for the hall are increasing, 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 2018 to raise the council tax in the financial year 2018/2019 by 2% in line with inflation which is equal to an increase of 0.89p per household in Band D Council Tax.

One of the reasons in favour of HTC investing in Queens Hall was financial. Since there had been a pattern over previous years of expenditure unrelated to budget, there was a need to rebuild both reserves and the revenue account. This was the largest major expenditure for the year. In addition, 2 new car park ticket machines were bought for Chapel Street and Butler Road car parks, as the previous machines had become very unreliable.

The internal and external audits in spring and summer 2017 passed without incident, and the external had no comments, indicating that all procedures had been properly followed.

The much lower cost of running offices for which no rent is paid, together with the efficient heating systems which came with the conversion is resulting in considerable savings. This will enable the council to embark on other capital projects in the coming years, and it has developed a long-term financial plan to manage this.

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, including the writing of cheques, monthly reports and reconciliation and recording the assets of the Council.

Activities

HTC has continued its programme of free activities for local residents of different ages. These include the Easter quiz during the school holidays, May Day celebrations, 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.

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 and aerobics. A modular stage, a data projector and a laptop have been purchased to provide greater versatility for hirers.

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 year 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. This opportunity has recently been extended to Chapel Street, where 10 new permits have been released, of which 5 have been taken up.

Allotments

There are over 100 allotments for rent in Halstead, and all but 8 of these are currently rented by local people. Some of these are also on the judges' route for Halstead in Bloom, and thus contribute to the general passion in Halstead for green growth.

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.

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 and they will report back in June.

Town Survey and report

The Council carried out a survey of local opinion through a survey in 2016. A working group of Councillors are bringing the report on their findings to its final stage.

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.

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 exploring in some depth the possibility of taking on 2 Special Constables. The whole scheme has been suspended for a few weeks due to changes in leadership at the top of the police and fire service. A final decision will be made once the police have reconsidered the scheme.

Halstead and District Local History Society

The History Society has over a number of years now been housed within the council offices. When the Council decided to build offices at Queens Hall, space was made for the History Society and its Museum to move as well, and the Museum has been housed in the old kitchen, which provides more space than at Mill house, and has alongside it a convenient store for the archive.

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.

Community Hub

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

Sarah Greatorex

Town Clerk

May 2018