



Halstead Town Council Annual report by Town Clerk May 2019- May 2020

Members and officers

This year has been the second 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 fourth 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. After the Full election of all Town Councillors on 2 May 2019, five new councillors, Cllrs Janet Atkinson, Linda Smith, Peter Claydon, Peter Caulfield and Malcolm Fincken were elected, and all received full councillor training at the Essex Association of Local Councils, and a briefing from the Clerk.

Champions

Immediately after the elections, the Chairman introduced a new concept, in order to get new councillors involved in the work of the council, and to tackle issues which are at the forefront of the public's mind. These issues are reported on at each monthly meeting; police, river and open spaces, surgery, education and tourism. Each issue has been shared between two councillors, mostly an experienced councillor working with one who is newly elected. They have made contacts in their field and are providing support and assistance in many areas.

Award scheme

Halstead Town Council achieved the Foundation level of the Local Councils Award scheme in January 2019, and is happy to report that it achieved the Quality level award in December 2019. The Quality award was presented at Braintree District Council on 23 March 2020. The Council has registered to work for the Gold award.

Council offices

The team has continued to enjoy the new, more convenient and warm offices 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. The ladies' toilets at Queens Hall have been refurbished.

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 2020 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 have enabled the Council to embark on some further improvements in the town and in Council premises. Queens Hall has been fitted with spotlights, to enhance performances and presentations, and Council has also invested in a very powerful PA system, which can produce up to 600 watts of sound. This will be used for events in Queens Hall, as well as outside events such as the Torchlight procession and bands in the park.

A new internal auditor was appointed in autumn 2019 and she carried out an interim audit in December 2019, where all was found to be satisfactory. The internal and external audits in spring and summer 2019 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 50 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. The online payments will be made from the Council's recently opened Lloyds accounts, as batch payments can be made from that account.

Activities

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.

A 600-watt PA system was bought in January 2020 to provide better sound for events in Queens Hall and for outside events.

Councillors planned to hold their first open surgery at Coffee Kavern on 18 March, to encourage residents to bring issues that they would like the council to tackle. This event had to be cancelled due to the spread of the virus.

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. The overall number of bookings has continued to rise.

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 2020 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. This leaflet is produced with the help of Braintree District Council.

In the current financial year, HTC has also produced a new town map with essential information included on the back, to replace the old Guide to Halstead.

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 4 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.

In order to be compliant with new legislation on the accessibility of websites to those with disabilities, it has also taken the opportunity to completely rebuild its website, giving it a more modern image and installing up-to-date features.

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.

In connection with Planning, Halstead Town Council has done considerable research this year into the benefits and the demands of preparing a Neighbourhood plan.

Car Parks

The 4 car parks 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 were offered at the Chapel Street car park from April 2019, and all have been taken up. It remains free to park in pay-and-display car parks after 15.00. The Hedingham Road permit carpark has recently been partially resurfaced.

As part of its policy on working to combat the effects of climate change, HTC has taken the decision to install 2 rapid-charging Electric Vehicle charging points in the Chapel Street car park. These will allow both local residents who cannot charge at home to charge their vehicles within 45 minutes, and passing traffic to stop for a short time on their journey to fully recharge their vehicles. Further charging points are planned depending on the take-up from this initiative.

Allotments

There are over 100 allotments for rent in Halstead. There are just 2 viable plots which have not been taken up. 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.

Two large water tanks have been provided on the Upper Fenn Road allotments.

In March 2020 12 allotments created in association with the Oak Road development by David Wilson Homes were due to be handed over to Halstead Town Council, and these are now available to hire. The hand-over to HTC and the taking over of the allotments by individuals have been delayed by the virus, but will be done as soon as possible after the lockdown is eased.

Staff Advisory Committee

The Staff Advisory Committee 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 2019 Council meeting that funds would be set aside to manage the trees in the churchyards at Holy Trinity and St Andrews churches. The churchyard tree surgery work was carried out in September 2019 and February 2020, and has done a lot to assist in displaying the features of Holy Trinity church, and ensuring that trees which present a danger to the public or to the church buildings have been removed.

Holy Trinity churchyard wall has become a matter of concern for the council during the year, in particular because children walk beside the wall to and fro from school on a daily basis and there is a visible risk to their safety. The matter has been assessed, and it is planned that repairs will be made to remove the risk, during 2020. The building work is now out to tender.

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. Braintree District Council generously offered to pay for a structural survey and report to clarify exactly what needed to be done to bring the bridge back into action. An FOI request resulted in the revelation that a report was available from ECC and that there was very little structurally wrong with the bridge. The working group is hopeful that the bridge will be reopened in 2020.

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. The work now is being carried out by pairs of Champions working on different aspects of the infrastructure, and updating the Action Plan as progress is achieved.

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. Halstead now has 2 Special police officers, and one in waiting. 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 holds regular community policing meetings in Queens Hall in collaboration with HTC, and is displaying a regular police presence in town at Butler Road and Courtaulds Sports ground, and elsewhere. HTC has seen fit to install CCTV at both Courtaulds Sports Ground and Butler Road car park, in an attempt to crack down on antisocial behaviour and illegal parking. The Butler Road installation has been temporarily delayed by the lockdown.

Halstead and District Local History Society

The History Society and Museum continue to enjoy the more appropriate accommodation provided for them by HTC at Queens Hall.

The River

Two of the councillor champions have taken on responsibility for improvements to the river, and they liaise frequently with the River clean group. While the Environment Agency will not allow the raising of the level of the river to cover the sewage pipe, a lot of work has been allowed to remove overgrowth and trees in the river.

Community Hub

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

Grants

In the 2019/20 financial year, HTC continued 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 8 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. Recipients of the grant are expected to report at the Annual Town meeting the following year on how the grant was used. This year their reports will be in writing and will be displayed on the website.

Footnote on the impact of Covid 19

The spread of the virus worldwide and the subsequent lockdown in the UK will inevitably impact on Halstead Town Council. HTC is still operating, carrying out most of its functions as normal. Some office staff are working at a distance from each other in the office and some are working from home. The groundsmen are continuing to keep the town and the Courtaulds sportsground tidy, free from rubbish and with grass cut regularly. The car parks are continuing to operate as normal, key workers being allowed free parking. Council has decided to cancel the first 3 outings for the over 60s, and the Queens Hall is closed for hire. Halstead in Bloom will not be entering the Anglia in Bloom competition this year, as it has been cancelled. There will be some loss of income and some savings as a result of these changes. Council meetings are being conducted virtually using Zoom. The Council is running a volunteer group in association with the Essex Welfare Service, and has so far provided a service to over 80 residents in need of prescriptions and shopping, through a group of 40 local volunteers.

Sarah Greatorex
Town Clerk
May 2020