



**Halstead Town Council
Annual report by Town Clerk
May 2020 - May 2021**

The most important news of this report is that, in spite of all the encumbrances and difficulties put in its way, Halstead Town Council has continued to do its work and carry out its duties as a council. Councillors have been meeting remotely not only for all Full Council meetings, but also for all committees and working groups. Normal business has carried on. Officers have been working in whatever way they can, from home, from the office, a mixture of the two, or out in the field. There has been an officer in the office every working day, and the phone has been answered throughout.

Members and officers

At the virtual Annual Town Council meeting in May, Cllr Mick Radley was elected Chairman of Halstead Town Council for the first time, with Cllr Dave Gronland as Deputy Chairman. Finance has been managed this year by Cllr Peter Claydon with Cllr Dave Gronland as deputy. Planning has been managed by Cllr David Hume, with Cllr Jackie Pell as deputy. As a result of the ruling that council meetings should be carried out remotely, under the Coronavirus regulations, it has been possible for more councillors to attend meetings regularly, as those who may otherwise have not felt well enough to attend, or have been shielding, have been able to participate fully from the safety and comfort of their own homes. Residents have been able to submit written questions to Full Council meetings, which have been fully answered at meetings. However, at present the government has ruled that meetings may no longer be held remotely from 7 May 2021, so the next Full Council meeting will be held on 17 May 2021 in Queens Hall, with a limited number of members of the public attending, everyone appropriately socially distanced. This is unless the challenge to the decision is successful.

Champions

It has been almost impossible for most of the champions to engage with their topics this year, except for those involved with Open Spaces, and the police. The Open Spaces Action Plan has been fully considered and updated. In addition, the Open Spaces Champions have joined the EC2K cycle group, which is planning a cycle route from Kelvedon to Earls Colne, and now beyond to Halstead. They have also been very active in addressing the climate crisis. The Police Champions are planning to revive speedwatch in Halstead in 2021, and have been active in liaising with the police of incidents in Halstead.

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 Council registered to work for the Gold award, and submitted its application in January 2021. It learnt in March that it had been awarded the Gold award.

Council offices and Queens Hall

The team has continued to enjoy the new, more convenient and warm offices at Queens Hall. The Queens Hall has opened sporadically with some of its old clients and some new. When possible, Little City, adventure role play for pre-school children, brings its activities to Queens Hall once a month, and has proved very popular. TLC care homes have managed to continue with some of their training, even during lockdown, as they are training essential workers. Queens Hall was also used as a test centre for those who had had the virus. In addition, it has been used by Community 360 as a distribution centre for meals for children needing meals during half term. Even though the usual array of social activities, such as parties, dance, exercise, meetings of various social groups, has not been possible, the hall has proven to be a very useful and adaptable community asset.

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 2021 to raise the council tax in the financial year 2021/22 by 2% in line with inflation which is equal to an increase of 0.93p per household in Band D Council Tax. In spite of the financial difficulties caused to all by the pandemic, it is felt prudent to maintain the practice of a small increase each year to enable the council to maintain its programme of activities and services for the coming year.

HTC has suffered considerable loss of income in the financial year 20/21, firstly through loss of car park income during lockdowns when few people went out, then through lack of hiring of Queens Hall, and also through rent holidays for some of our tenants who were unable to operate.

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. It has on some occasions had to decide to delay expenditure.

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 2020 passed without incident, and the external had no comments, indicating that all procedures had been properly followed.

HTC has continued to explore the opportunities offered by direct credit online payments. Almost all payments approved at Council meetings are now paid through direct credit, and this is not only much more efficient than writing a cheque and posting it, but it is also a much cheaper way to pay our suppliers.

Activities

As the year progressed, every one of the activities planned for the year has had to be cancelled. A fundraising evening planned for February, 3 band in the park dates, the Easter Egg hunt, the over 60s outings, the lights switch on event and the Torchlight procession – all were reluctantly cancelled due to the threat of infection. The past Mayor Cllr Andy Munday managed eventually to present a cheque at a safe distance to V Harman at Halstead Day

Centre. The current Mayor, Cllr Mick Radley gave a donation of £1000 from his civic funds to the Foodbank, but this was carried out by a bank transfer, and could not be physically marked by a gathering, presentation or photo. Cllr Radley has attended a few events online, and Halstead switch-on event was included in a video made by BDC.

None of the events advertised in HTC's leaflet could take place, and the Council has decided not to produce a leaflet in 2021, but is hoping to return to events and activities in 2022, and to produce a leaflet to advertise events put on by local organisations.

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.

Being already digitally advanced has helped the Council to continue to operate virtually during the pandemic. Many of the office staff have worked from home during the lockdowns. This has allowed them to be protected from the virus but also to be able to continue to work efficiently through remote access to office systems, CCTV footage and all databases.

Councillors and officers also moved seamlessly into conducting all meetings over zoom, which provides an accessible, reliable and digitally easy alternative to face-to-face meetings. This has also allowed meetings between councillors, officers, and outside bodies, such as BDC, ECC and other groups to go ahead without disruption.

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.

HTC considered the changes to be made to the Scheme of Delegation for planning decisions, which removed the power of a parish/town council to object to smaller developments of fewer than 9 houses. They felt that this change would be an erosion of the powers of the town council, but BDC agreed to the change.

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

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 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 council has not increased the costs of parking in pay and display car parks or of parking permits in

its budget for 2021, sympathetic as it is to the difficulties experienced by residents during the pandemic. In line with other local councils, HTC offered free parking to keyworkers during the first lockdown.

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. It is very much hoped that this project will come to fruition in 2021. It has been held up while HTC has endeavoured to get from Land Registry the title to the car park, which it has owned since 1983.

Allotments

There are approximately 200 allotments for rent in Halstead. There has been increased demand for these during recent lockdowns.

In September 2020, HTC installed a new ramp at Parsonage Street allotments to assist allotment holders in bringing materials onto the allotment site, and to improve access for disabled users.

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 eventually took place in June 2020, and there has been good take-up of the new allotments which have become available.

Staff Advisory Committee

The Staff Advisory Committee meets 4 times a year, to focus on staff matters. In the last year it has conducted a review of salaries, contracts, job descriptions and performance management, and with the Clerk managed the impact of the pandemic on working patterns in the Council.

Churchyard walls

Holy Trinity churchyard wall had become a matter of concern for the council, 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 Council is very pleased to be able to report that the matter of the leaning churchyard wall at Holy Trinity churchyard has now been dealt with. During the summer holidays in August 2020 the wall was made safe by preventing it from leaning further.

In early 2020, an unknown vehicle drove into the wall at St Andrews churchyard, knocking a row of specialised bricks off the top. These have eventually been replaced with like for like, and it is hoped that drivers with trailers in particular will now take more care.

Empire Theatre

During the year, HTC repainted the outside steps at the Empire Theatre, made some minor repairs to the roof and made internal structural repairs to allow the installation of a new screen. It is planning to replace the roof within the next year.

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. Since then, great progress has been made with repairs being made both to the concrete structures under the water and to the railings on the top of the bridge, with considerable help from local contractors. The ownership of the bridge had fallen to the Crown through the bankruptcy of the original developer. The Crown were only too pleased to transfer ownership of the bridge to the Town Council, who will now be responsible in future for the maintenance and upkeep of the bridge. It is very likely that the Riverside bridge will be able to reopen in 2021, thanks to the efforts of the working group, volunteers and the generosity of local contractors.

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.

In addition, a working group has been set up in 2021 to work with BDC on planned improvements to the Town Centre, along with representatives of Halstead in Bloom, 21st Century group and the Halstead Chamber of commerce and trade.

Discussion on the strategic lorry routes through Halstead and Sudbury has been revived, and a meeting held between Halstead and Sudbury Councillors and Town Clerks along with ECC Cllrs David Finch and Jo Beavis.

Crime and Policing

Despite the pandemic HTC has continued its collaboration with the community policing team and the specials. CCTV now installed at Courtaulds and Butler Road car park has assisted the police on several occasions in tracking down criminals.

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. More permanent equipment to carry out this work will be bought thanks to community grants given by 2 Braintree District Councillors.

Community Hub

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

Grants

In the 2020/21 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. However, in this year of the pandemic, it was felt inappropriate to award any grants as it would not be possible for any of the organisations to carry out any activities. It was decided to suspend the grant awarding for 1 year, but double the usual amount, £4000, will be made available in 2021/22 for local organisations. Applications must be with the Town Clerk by 30 June 2021.

Footnote on the impact of Covid 19

The Council continued to operate throughout the past year, as near to normal as possible. There has been some loss of income and some savings as a result of the impact suffered by the Council, but HTC is prepared to reopen all of its activities as soon as it is safe to do so.

Soon after the start of the pandemic in March 2020, the Council began to get requests for help from residents who were shielding, vulnerable, elderly or unable to leave their homes for any other reason. This led to the establishment of a volunteer group in association with the Essex Welfare Service, firstly on a temporary basis, but then as a permanent volunteer force. This service has so far provided support to 150 residents in need of prescriptions and shopping, and Blue badges through a group of 50 local volunteers. The council is frequently contacted by the surgery and the pharmacy to help with delivery of prescriptions.

Another community activity which has been much used during the pandemic is the community fridge. This was set up in August 2018 to prevent food waste. It has continued throughout the pandemic and continues to grow. There are now daily donations from M&S Colchester, and Lidl Halstead. Tesco, Milk and More, Sainsburys, the Coop, Costa and local bakers also contribute. A request for more help has resulted in a new band of eager volunteers who push erratic trolleys from Lidl every day, clean the building and the fridge, open and lock the building. In addition, a local painter and decorator has painted the inside of the building which has given it a much cleaner, bright look. The number of people using the fridge has risen dramatically during the pandemic. They, the volunteers and the generous stores have ensured that so much more food does not go to waste.

Sarah Greatorex
Town Clerk
May 2021

