



**Halstead Town Council
Annual report by Town Clerk
May 2022 - April 2023**

This year has for the first time in 3 years not been disrupted by the pandemic and almost everything has returned to normal. Meetings with outside bodies are almost always held on Zoom or using Teams, and this is one good outcome from the pandemic, as it saves time and travel for everyone.

Councillor David Hume died on 14 February 2023

David was an integral part of the Town Council in Halstead. He served as Mayor for 8 consecutive years from 2008 – 2016, and served as a Town Councillor for 20 years, in addition to being a District Councillor. His earlier professional life had included many years as a teacher and Headteacher in the primary sector. He was also a member of most charitable groups in Halstead, and made an enormous contribution to the life of the community. He will be greatly missed by all those who worked with him. It is hoped that a fitting memorial can be erected in the High Street.

Members and officers

At the Annual Town Council meeting in May, Cllr Jackie Pell was elected Chairman of Halstead Town Council, with Cllr Peter Caulfield as Deputy Chairman. During the year, Cllr Pell was presented with a crystal award to mark her 40 years as a Halstead Town Councillor. Finance has been managed this year by Cllr Janet Atkinson with Cllr Andy Munday as deputy. Planning has been managed by Cllr David Hume, with Cllr Jackie Pell as deputy. Cllrs Radley, Gronland and Claydon resigned from the Council in December 2022. Caretaking at the hall is now managed by 2 part-time caretakers working alternate months. The finances at HTC have this year been managed by a freelance bookkeeper, who has brought efficiency and considerable experience to the job.

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 continue to work with 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 have been active in liaising with the police on incidents in Halstead. New champions will be appointed at the Annual Town Council meeting on 15 May 2023.

Award scheme

Halstead Town Council now holds the Foundation, Quality and Gold awards in the Local Council award scheme. Halstead is one of only 6 councils in the whole of Essex to hold the gold award. The Gold award lasts until 2025, which means that in 2024/5 we will need to

think about updating all our policies and practices again. They are of course regularly reviewed, but at that time it would be good to introduce innovation again.

Council offices and Queens Hall

The team has continued to enjoy the new, more convenient, spacious and warm offices at Queens Hall. The Queens Hall has blossomed since the lifting of lockdown restrictions. Bookings are flooding in for all sorts of groups. The Flower club, Little City, the U3A, the model flying club, the Wine and social club have all returned, along with new clients such as The Big Sing, the Crafty ladies. TLC care homes have managed to continue with their training, and Provide, part of the NHS, regularly holds sessions. Queens Hall now hosts 3 sessions of yoga per week, as well as seated exercise and a Tea Dance. In addition, the regular parties for young and old are returning. The hall is busier than ever, proving its value as a community asset. It is now 5 years since the refurbishment of the hall and the building of the offices. The hall has therefore been partially rewired, repainted and the floor resanded, and many clients have commented on the fresh look and the excellent facilities offered by the hall.

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 2023 to raise the council tax in the financial year 2023/24 by 2%, equal to an increase of 0.97p per household per year in Band D Council Tax. This is sadly no longer in line with inflation. In spite of the financial difficulties caused to all by the pandemic and by current inflation, 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 continued to achieve a financial recovery over the past year. Once the hall reopened permanently, and other businesses in the town were able to open again, income has returned.

A new internal auditor was appointed in autumn 2019 and she has carried out all internal audits since then. External audits have been returned satisfactorily with no comment.

HTC has continued to explore the opportunities offered by direct credit online payments. 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.

A decision has been taken this year to transfer the management of the council's finances to a much more suitable accounting package, designed specifically for councils, named Rialtas. This is a tried and tested package recommended by many other councils of a similar size to HTC, and will be of particular assistance to the clerk in budgeting and managing the end of the financial year.

Activities

An Easter Egg hunt was organised by the Council for the first time since the pandemic hit. Events surrounding the Queen's Jubilee were a triumph, including an outdoor screening of 2 films, a Caribbean steel band, stalls and children's activities, a community choir and a performance by the Beavers. All events were accompanied by the provision of teas or food vans. In addition, 2 further bands played later in the summer.

In this year, HTC was able once again to run a full programme of 5 excursions, which were much enjoyed by all who went on them and followed by a Christmas party for those who had taken part. In addition, the traditional Christmas Fayre and Lights switch-on took place, followed by the torchlight procession. As a proper roadblock had been organised, the procession spread across the road, a magnificent sight, and one which used every wax torch available. The torchlight procession was this year run with the help of volunteers from Braintree District Council, and HTC staff. This was followed by the civic reception. The civic service will be on 30 April 23. Cllr Smith has agreed to continue the management of the Christmas Fayre.

Communication and digitisation

The Council continues to make use on a daily basis of the huge advantages offered by 21st century technology. Almost all communication is carried out by email, and councillors and staff have been able to attend many meetings, and training sessions via zoom or Microsoft teams, which has allowed them to be present at a wide range of events without any travel being involved. Training for the new car park machines, and for the use of MiPermit has all been carried out remotely but with good visual access. Training for Rialtas will also be carried out on zoom, with some face to face as well..

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. The Council is sympathetic to the views of local residents where a development can be seen to overload the local infrastructure in schools, health care provision and parking, and on many occasions objects to such developments.

HTC achieved success this year in warding off a proposed boundary change which would have seen Halstead and Haverhill combined into one constituency. The council made a strong objection to this, followed up by Cllr Fincken's attendance at the meeting to discuss boundary changes.

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. There is no plan to increase carparking charges in the coming financial year. The charges are now all multiples of £1, and this makes it easier for those who still would like to pay by cash.

There has been increasing takeup of the possibility of paying for parking by card or phone, and there is now greater income from these methods than from cash payment. There are correspondingly slightly fewer penalty tickets being issued, as the different ways of paying remove any opportunity for an excuse.

The big news on car parks is the agreement finally reached with Instavolt to install 2 double EV charging points in Chapel Street carpark. The lease was signed just before Christmas 2022, and the installation should be complete by the end of April 2023. This is part of the action against climate change which the council is taking, and the intention is to install further EV points in future, as drivers will not come to a destination to charge their vehicles unless there are a substantial number of charging points. There will always be some which are occupied and others which are out of order.

Allotments

There are approximately 200 allotments for rent in Halstead. There has been increased demand for these during recent lockdowns. Rent for the allotments has been increased for the coming financial year by 50p per rod to £4.50.

Churchyard walls

The wall in St Andrews churchyard, which runs from Colchester Road to Parsonage Street behind the church has now been sympathetically repaired. A further minor repair to the wall running beside Head Street will be carried out in spring 2023.

Empire Theatre

HTC and the Empire Theatre Trust are working together to replace the Empire Theatre roof, and a National Lottery application was made to cover the cost. Unfortunately no funding was provided for the project, and the Council has recently decided to do the work using funds earmarked for this project. The reroofing will start by the beginning of May 2023.

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.

There has been some delay in BDC's plans for the regeneration of the Town Centre, but it is now hoped that the improvements to the town centre, and the refurbishment of Ramsey Road recreation ground will all take place before the end of 2023.

Discussion on the strategic lorry routes through Halstead and Sudbury was revived and it was agreed with Essex Highways that the recommended route for heavy traffic from the A12 would be changed so that heavy traffic would continue up as far as Colchester and then go to Sudbury from there. These discussions are still ongoing as there has been no agreement to use a different route for heavy traffic coming south from Sudbury through Halstead.

Plans for the tennis courts at Courtaulds Sports Ground are now going forward, funded by S106 developer contributions. The exact design is now under discussion.

HTC councillors now regularly attend meetings of the EC2K group which is attempting to establish a cycle route from Kelvedon to Halstead.

Climate Change Action Group

HTC recently established a Climate change working group, and has produced a draft action plan in an attempt to combat the effects of climate change. This is not a grandiose plan but a list of practical actions we can all take to make our contribution to preventing the worst effects of climate change.

Halstead in Bloom

Halstead in Bloom's plea for help in 2022 has finally been resolved. After much discussion between ECC, BDC, HTC and HiB, it has been agreed that HTC will provide the extra labour needed to do the heavier work which the HiB volunteers can no longer manage.

Due to the ongoing work over the Town Centre Regeneration, it is unlikely that HiB will enter any in Bloom competitions in 2023.

Crime and Policing

HTC has continued its collaboration with the community policing team and the specials. More police have been present at all events put on by the council in 22/23. It has also encouraged the public to report all incidents online so that the police are aware of incidents taking place. A spate of antisocial behaviour in the town in the early autumn was successfully interrupted by HTC coordinating a whatsapp group for the businesses affected and constantly reporting every incident. In addition, a meeting was arranged between Chief Inspector Martin Richards and councillors to request more policing in Halstead. Since the meeting it has been agreed that a Community Police officer will hold a surgery at the Council offices once a month for residents to bring their questions.

Community Hub

The Community hub trustees have recently reapplied for the £600,000 funding that was ringfenced for them for 10 years. BDC requested a full business plan in asking for the Trust to reapply to the fund, which is also open to other charities and voluntary organisations in Halstead.

Grants

In 2022, the amount available for grants was increased to £6000, in compensation for the fact that grants were not awarded during the pandemic. The whole amount was awarded to a wide range of organisations. The amount to be awarded in 2023 is £4000. Applications must be with the Town Clerk by 30 June 2023.

Volunteer groups

The volunteer group in association with the Essex Welfare Service, has continued as a permanent volunteer force. The council is still frequently contacted by the surgery and the pharmacy to help with delivery of prescriptions.

The community fridge has gone from strength to strength. Volunteers continue to come forward to make the daily collections of food from supermarkets, to clean and to sort. The fridge has benefited from a number of grants from supermarkets which donate to us regularly. The fridge has become a permanent feature of the town, helping to prevent food waste, and providing a steady supply of wholesome food to anyone who would like it.

Sarah Greateorex Town Clerk April 2023