



**Halstead Town Council
Annual report by Town Clerk
May 2023- April 2024**

This has been a year when activities and events have returned to normal levels, and when the council has been able to pursue its goals without restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

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. In summer 2023, a tree was planted in his memory in the Public Gardens, and this ceremony was attended by councillors and Members of HTC staff, alongside David's family.

Members and officers

At the Annual Town Council meeting in May, Cllr Jackie Pell was elected Chairman of Halstead Town Council, with Cllr Andy Munday as Deputy Chairman. At the elections in May, the council welcomed 6 new councillors, Cllr Jim Bond, Cllr Felix Preston, Cllr Linda Hilton, Cllr Paul Nunn, Cllr Grahame McCoyd and Cllr Gemma McAndrews. All have undergone full councillor training. In August Cllr Pell became very unwell and had to step back from duties for several months. Following surgery, she was able to resume her duties at the December meeting. Her absence was covered by Deputy Chairman Cllr Andy Munday. Finance has been managed this year by Cllr Janet Atkinson with Cllr Andy Munday as deputy. Planning has been managed by Cllr Jackie Pell, with Cllr Paul Nunn as deputy.

There were this year 2 staff resignations, firstly Laila McIlveen, our car park attendant, decided to pursue a different career, and was replaced by Chris Summers. Secondly Jeannette Moorhouse, who had re-established the caretaking role at Queens Hall as one concerned with customer care and careful presentation of the hall, decided to retire. She has been replaced by Rick Dilliway. Both new appointments have been very successful additions to the team. In addition, a relief caretaker, Karen Piper, has been appointed to allow caretakers to take holiday but not to interrupt their colleague who is not working in that month. Our freelance bookkeeper, Wendy Ogilvie, has continued to provide an excellent service in finance.

Champions

There has been little activity from Champions this year, following the election of a new council in May. Those involved with Open Spaces, and the police have continued with their previous work. 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 are now working on an LCWIP (Local council walking and cycling infrastructure plan, which will applications for funding towards the cycle tracks. The Police Champions have been active in liaising with the police on incidents in Halstead.

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 averaging 50 bookings per month. The hall is busier than ever, proving its value as a community asset. It is now 6 years since the refurbishment of the hall and the building of the offices. The hall has now been completely rewired, repainted and the floor resanded, as well as a hearing loop being installed, and many clients have commented on 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 2024 to raise the council tax in the financial year 2024/25 by 3.7%, equal to an increase of £1.84 per household per year in Band D Council Tax. This is essential in order to allow for unavoidable increases in the cost of energy, and other rising costs.

HTC has continued to perform well financially this year, largely due to car park income and the popularity of Queens Hall as a venue.

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 was taken in April 23 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. Following training for the clerk and the bookkeeper, our bookkeeper Wendy has battled through the long process of transferring all transactions from Sage to Rialtas, running them side by side from July to January, and finally giving up Sage at the end

of January 2024. The budgeting process was much easier for the clerk using Rialtas, and it is hoped that the year-end will be similarly easier.

Activities

An Easter Egg hunt was organised by the Council and a screening of the Coronation in the public gardens – unfortunately terrible wet weather put a dampener on the Coronation events. 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, the Fire Service, the Rugby club and HTC staff. This was followed by the civic reception. The civic service will be on 5 May 2024. Cllr Smith has agreed to continue the management of the Christmas Fayre.

In autumn, when the Haubourdin twinning group visited Halstead, the town gave them a print of Malcolm Root's Market Day painting, which was very well received.

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 was also carried out on zoom.

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. This is particularly important in cases such as the Land east of the High Street which came up for discussion in 2023.

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. 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 EV charging points installed in Chapel Street carpark in 2023 are well used, and HTC hope to increase the number of charging points in the town to encourage visitors, and to help those who cannot charge at home.

It is clear that there is now a need for more parking places in the centre of Halstead, as the Chapel Street and Butler Road car parks are frequently full at most times of the day, due to the influx of population arising from the developments on the outskirts of Halstead.

Allotments

There are approximately 200 allotments for rent in Halstead. There has been increased demand for these during recent lockdowns. Rent for the allotments remains at £4.50 per rod for the coming year.

New stock fencing was installed in January 2024 at the Colchester Road stat allotments, using S106 developer contributions. There will also be a shed installed using the remainder of the S106 contributions for those allotments.

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 was carried out in 2023.

Empire Theatre

HTC successfully replaced the entire roof of the Empire Theatre with new slates in May 2023. This was made possible through the careful setting aside of funds over several years for this purpose.

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 2024.

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. The only option now available to redirect traffic coming from Sudbury would be a weight restriction. This is now being considered at Suffolk County Council.

Plans for the tennis courts at Courtaulds Sports Ground are now going forward, funded by S106 developer contributions. Contractors have been appointed, and there will be funds left over to implement other sports related improvements to the Sports Grounds.

Safer Streets

Halstead made a bid for funds for the Safer Streets project, and was fortunate to be awarded £300,000 from the Home Office and Police and Crime Commissioner. This project is managed by BDC but HTC is responsible for procuring CCTV in Chapel Street car park and other areas, and for employing a Streetwarden to prevent antisocial behaviour. Other areas being funded are counselling for victims of rape, and extra sport for teenagers from troubled homes.

The role of Streetwarden has been successfully filled by Matthew Farmer, who patrols the streets for 30 hours per week, and is liaising with police officers visiting the town. The police have requested and been granted use of the council offices if they need to remain in Halstead for any reason rather than returning to Braintree. CCTV will be installed in Chapel Street Carpark, Butler Road and Rosemary Lane car parks, the Causeway and King's Road. The cameras will be very high specification, and it will be possible to identify those caught on camera

Climate Change Action Group

HTC recently established a Climate change working group, and produced a draft action plan in an attempt to combat the effects of climate change. This group has grown in importance over the past year and after full discussion at Council it was agreed to incorporate the Climate Action Plan into the council's Action Plan. Two speakers addressed the September council meeting on the Colne Valley community energy project. From this action has grown, in that a publicly advertised event was held in January to sound out the Halstead community on their interest in a community energy project. Other action is also being considered.

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 2024.

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. 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. This was shortlived, but negotiations are now proceeding to allow Essex police for them to use rooms at HTC.

A meeting, and tour of the town was arranged in August with Chief Inspector Martin Richards to discuss those areas of the town which need particular attention from the police

Grants

The amount to be awarded in 2023 was £4000, and this has been increased to £5000 for 2024. Applications must be with the Town Clerk by 30 June 2024.

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 2024