



Halstead Town Council Annual report by Town Clerk May 2024- April 2025

Focus on safety

It could be said that this has been a year where the focus has been on safety. As described in more detail below, the town won a bid for funds for a Safer Streets project, which provided sports activities for children with different needs, counselling for women and girls who had been sexually harassed, as well as CCTV and the efforts of the Street Warden,

The council has also installed a bleedkit in the High Street in case of accidents. In addition, there has been a closer relationship with the police which has been growing over the past year. This has involved 2 meetings with Chief Inspector Martin Richards, attendance by PC James Draper at 2 council meetings, and frequent contact with the specials.

Members and officers

At the Annual Town Council meeting in May, Cllr Andy Munday was elected Chairman of Halstead Town Council, with Cllr Jim Bond as Deputy Chairman. 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.

Cllr Pell's 40 years of service to Halstead Town Council was recognised when she was awarded the British Empire Medal in the autumn of 2024.

There have been 2 staff changes this year at HTC. Firstly, HTC was lucky enough to win a bid for funds from the PFCC, for a project entitled Safer Streets. This involved the recruitment and training of a Street Warden, Matthew Farmer to walk the streets, engage with businesses, monitor antisocial behaviour and apprehend shoplifters. The Safer streets project has had an immense effect on the town, coming with an additional 29 CCTV cameras, which have been installed in places previously known as trouble spots. There are now many cameras in Chapel Street carpark, which monitor activity by teenagers who may think of running across the roofs at the back of the High Street, and also on the Causeway and outside the public toilets, where they deter antisocial behaviour. The Street Warden's post is funded currently until March 2026, and the council will then consider making the post permanent.

Our Administrator/Receptionist, Lorraine Dover, who had been with the Council for 11 years, decided to leave in late November. Ed Merry was appointed to take over her post in January 2025, and has already displayed extremely useful digital skills.

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 allow 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 council is in the process of reapplying for the Gold award.

Council offices and Queens Hall

The team has continued to enjoy the new, more convenient, spacious and warm offices at Queens Hall. Bookings are very steady for all kinds of groups. Little City, the U3A, the model flying club, the Wine and social club, the Horticultural society, have all returned, along with new clients such as SOUL. 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 7 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 December 2024 to raise the council tax in the financial year 2025/26 by 5%, equal to an increase of £2.59 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.

Since finally giving up Sage in January 2024, HTC has made full use of Rialtas, the accounts package designed specifically for Councils. The budgeting and year-end processes were much easier for the clerk using Rialtas. In early 2025, great strides have been made, in adopting 2 new modules from Rialtas, which allow us to record all bookings and produce all invoices directly from Rialtas, as well as to manage all the allotments and their invoicing.

Activities

An Easter Egg hunt was organised by the Council and provided much fun for children of primary school age. All events were accompanied by the provision of teas or food vans. In addition, 2 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. Cllr Warren and the Town Clerk had attended training in Traffic Management for Community Events which helped them to better organise 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 11 May 2025. Cllr Smith has agreed to continue the management of the Christmas and Summer Fayres.

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Communication and digitisation

Over the past year the Council has begun to explore the Rialtas accounts package for all its offers. It is now used to produce the budgets and year-end figures. In addition, the Allotment management and bookings management modules have been taken on, and staff have been trained in their use. Now all bookings at the Queens Hall and at Courtaulds sports ground can be managed through this system and invoices easily generated and delivered by email. Similarly allotment invoices and agreements can be generated en bloc rather than individually.

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

considered in detail this year all sites which may possibly be considered for development under the new Local 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. 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 take-up 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 carparks 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. It is planned to complete the fencing at this site in 2025. There will also be a shed installed using the remainder of the S106 contributions for those allotments.

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. Since there was a break in at the Empire in late 2024, the Council has agreed to install a roller shutter at the front of the building in early 2025, and has a police security check done in order to establish if there are any points of weakness in the security system.

Infrastructure

One particular success this year has been the achievement of the painting of a single yellow line outside the public gardens in Trinity Street. This prevents parking in normal working hours, and has thus prevented the congestion which used to build up behind the parked cars in Trinity Street, and did not allow 2 vehicles to pass in the street.

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 will take place in 2025. The Ramsey Road recreation ground Skate park was completed in summer 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.

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. An extra groundsman was employed in 2024 for 4 months to carry out the watering, and will continue to do the same work in 2025.

Due to the ongoing work over the Town Centre Regeneration, it is unlikely that HiB will enter any In Bloom competitions in 2025.

Courtaulds Sportsground

Discussions have been taking place in 2024/5 over the management of the sports ground on Colchester Road. This land was given to HTC, but has been managed in some aspects by a

Courtaulds sport ground management committee for the past 40 years. The groundsman is a member of HTC staff and the activities and grounds management are funded by HTC. HTC will from 1 April 2025 manage all aspects of the sports ground, including its finances.

Grants

The amount to be awarded in 2025 is £4000. Applications must be with the Town Clerk by 30 June 2025.

Focus on the community

2024-25 has seen a shift in focus to engaging more with the community. This began by changing the format of the Annual Town meeting, and inviting as many voluntary and charitable groups as possible to attend the meeting in April and talk about what their charities do, and to encourage communication between them. There were 13 presentations from charitable and voluntary organisations of many different kinds, and apologies were received from others who could not attend but would have liked to.

This meeting triggered contact and collaboration between a number of groups, in particular between HTC, the URC, the Citizens' Advice Bureau and the Community Shed and the Library. This group is now meeting regularly to coordinate and enhance the voluntary and charitable activities in the town, and is working on ways of making them more accessible to all. The current Mayor is also supporting the activities of many to raise the profile of Halstead being dementia friendly, and working with the care homes and the Empire theatre to provide activities.

The aim is for the Annual Town meeting in 2025 to extend the scope of last year's meeting and for HTC to engage further with the community and create networks between the organisations.

Sarah Greateorex Town Clerk April 2025