



Halstead Town Council Annual report by Town Clerk May 2025- April 2026

Community engagement

This year has been one of increased engagement with the community on many levels. The Mayor has with great determination focused on raising funds for dementia awareness in Halstead, through events he has organised, and the traditional lights switch-on and torchlight procession, and through personal efforts at the Maldon Mud Run.

Support for those with dementia has been provided by the council in the form of a monthly free drop in morning at Queens Hall. There is no charge made by HTC to those organising the drop in.

The initiative to create a network of local voluntary and charitable organisations has continued, and there will have been 3 meetings of Halstead Community Connections over the year, each one with a speaker on a topic relevant to the groups, and a chance to network as well. The Community Shed, the Rotary, and Wendy Pickess, formerly of Halstead Library, have been key organisations in establishing this, along with the Clerk and the Administrator at HTC.

The third area for community engagement has been the possibility of preserving the historic Empire Theatre building and at the same time extending it to provide a Community Arts Centre which will offer the opportunity of access for all abilities, all ages and all interests to state of the art facilities for meeting, sharing a coffee or a glass of wine, going to an exhibition, taking part in a rehearsal, singing or watching a live show or a film. This project has moved from an idea to the point where there has been a public survey, meetings with the public, the formation of a trust, an application for a charity to manage the project, agreement from the Council to go forward with the project, pre-planning approval, the appointment of an architect, and now, the search for funding.

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, and then by Cllr Andy Munday with Cllr McCoyd. Planning has been managed by Cllr Jackie Pell, with Cllr Paul Nunn as deputy.

The Streetwarden's post is funded currently by the PFCC until March 2026, and the council has decided to make the post permanent, as it is felt by all that having a streetwarden is a good thing for the town. There has been less antisocial behaviour in general, and Matthew keeps a sharp eye open for anything out of the ordinary taking place in the town, from shoplifting to abandoned cars, to accidents. He assists our car park attendant with 2-person jobs, as the other car park attendant left in August 2025.

Our Administrator Ed Merry was appointed in January 2025, and has settled well into the job, showing many useful skills for a 21st century council. He is currently undergoing CILCA training.

In September 2025, HTC took on an apprentice groundsman, Frankie Couling, who is undergoing training at Writtle College once a week, and is otherwise being trained by our groundsman, in particular by Tim. The college is sending good reports of his work and he is gradually learning the skills needed for the job. He is learning to drive, and says he would like to stay with the council after his training.

Champions

Of the Champions chosen to represent particular areas of interest in the town, regular reports on the doctors' surgery are received, and also from the Open spaces representatives, who assist in deciding what areas of the town should be on what is now called the Potential Open Spaces Improvement plan (POSI).

Local Council Award scheme

Halstead Town Council attained the Gold award in 2021. This lasts only 4 years, and in spring 2025 the Clerk reapplied. HTC was fortunate to be re-awarded the Gold status in July 2025, and the certificate was presented at the November meeting.

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. The U3A, the model flying club, the Wine and social club, the Horticultural society, and The Big Sing are regular clients. Provide, part of the NHS, regularly holds sessions. Queens Hall hosts yoga, as well as seated exercise and a Tea Dance. In addition, there are regular parties for young and old. The hall is averaging 47 bookings per month, having lost a few regular bookings, but others appear constantly, proving its value as a community asset. The hall has now been completely rewired, repainted and the floor resanded, as well as a state-of-the-art microphone system 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 2025 to raise the council tax in the financial year 2026/27 by 9%, equal to an increase of £4.89 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 staff 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. The council also made the decision not to accept cheques in payment after 31 March 2026.

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. Now, all office staff are using Rialtas, to take all bookings and produce associated invoices, and to manage allotments and their invoices. This package has recently become web-based, and moving to this package will allow HTC to take advantage of all upgrades and improvements carried out.

Activities

An Easter Egg hunt was organised by the Council and provided much fun for children of primary school age, this time exceptionally with a grant from the Essex Growth hub..There were 3 bands in the park, and an outdoor screen showing 2 films and international rugby. All events were accompanied by the provision of teas or food vans. Bands are always a great success, but the films were poorly attended so are unlikely to be repeated.

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. This year we were extremely lucky to have the support of the Halstead Young Farmers club with their tractors, and we hope this support will be repeated. 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 3 May 2026. Cllr Smith has stated that the 2026 Summer Fair will be her last, and that she will not run the Christmas Fair in 2026.

Communication and digitisation

Over the past year the Council has begun to explore the Rialtas accounts package for all it 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. In addition HTC now has the Cloudbased version of Rialtas, where all the updates are made.

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, and held a public meeting in Queens Hall to discuss the possible consequences of the developments, and this was extremely well attended by the public.

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. There are also some permits in the other pay and display carpark at Butler Road. 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. The council has recently taken on the Parksmarter app offered by IPS, who provide the parking machines. This app offers increased income to HTC, unlike Mipermit which costs the council.

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 hopes to increase the number of charging points in the town in collaboration with Essex County Council, 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. This is an issue which must be thoroughly addressed over the next few years. With a likely increase in population of around 7000 in the next 15 years, more parking is essential.

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.

BDC has promised to pass ownership of the allotments over to HTC as part of the changes in local government, along with other possible asset transfer.

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.

Most of the planned action to regenerate the town centre has now taken place, apart from the area outside what was WH Smith, and the possible installation of an island at the top of

the High Street, to ensure safer crossing for pedestrians. This is under discussion between HTC, BDC and ECC.

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. Linemarkings are due to be painted at the end of April. It is planned that they will open to the public in summer 2026.

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 continued to do the same work in 2025. This work may well be done by the apprentice groundsman in 2026.

Courtaulds Sportsground

HTC from 1 April 2025 has managed all aspects of the sports ground, including its finances, and all bookings for the pavilion and pitches. A new user Committee has been formed, managed by HTC, and the users are keen to work together with the council on planned improvements.

Grants

The amount to be awarded in 2026 is £4000. Applications must be with the Town Clerk by 30 June 2026.

Sarah Greateorex Town Clerk April 2026