

## Annual Town Report 2017/18

by

Councillor Tom Gillanders, Mayor of Hexham.

It has been just a year since I took over the position of Mayor of Hexham from Councillor Trevor Cessford. A lot has happened since then and I pay tribute to Cllr Cessford for laying the foundations from which these successes have emerged. During the past year the bus station has moved from the centre of the town and is now fully at home in Loosing Hill. I acknowledge that there was a certain amount of scepticism about the benefits this move would bring but overall the move has been widely regarded as a success. The move to develop the old bus station site is still shrouded in mystery but the good news is that it has opened up almost thirty additional car parking spaces right in the town centre.

The town has had to endure the aspect of many of its historic buildings standing empty while the owners, Northumberland County Council, have tried to find buyers for them. These have included Prospect House, Hexham House; the old swimming pool and lately Hadrian House. Some notable success has been achieved with the development of Hexham House as a wedding venue with its associated letting apartments. However, there is still work to be done in converting these historic buildings to modern use. The move to convert the Queen's Hall into a modern County Council hub has received critical acclaim and this has freed up the old Tourist Information Centre for sale on the open market.

However, not all empty buildings have been developed. There are still examples around the town of empty hotels and shops awaiting refurbishment. The long running concern regarding the future of the old Workhouse has still not been resolved despite the efforts of both the Civic Society and an active pressure group. While these vacancies are regrettable it must be remembered that any developments must satisfy the market forces that drive any commercial venture. Frequently these forces take time to emerge and patience can often be the best attitude.

The refurbishment of the Market Place continues to attract criticism and praise in almost equal measure. The Planning Consultants retained by both the Town Council and the County Council have brought forward some ideas. These ideas included closing certain thoroughfares for trial periods but unfortunately these plans were affected by a number of events outside our control, including the elections in May 2017. However, they will continue and the results will be subject to analysis. I am aware that many residents and business owners feel that these trial closures will have an adverse impact on town centre trading and will negatively affect the flow of traffic. However, if we don't pursue the trials then we will never know for certain what the positives and negatives are going to be. On the same topic I acknowledge the concerns expressed about the difficulties in parking within the town. This continues to be a matter of discussion with the County Council and it is hoped that there will be a positive announcement in the near future.

Over the last three years a small group of volunteers have been working under the guidance of the Town Council to write a Neighbourhood Plan. This plan will shape the types and locations of future housing within the town. It is currently out to

consultation with each household having an opportunity to comment. This is very much a local plan but will have a legally empowering ability if and when approved.

Over this past year the Town Council has made a considerable effort to improve the lighting around the town at the Christmas season. The display lights received a considerable financial boost last year and there are plans for further improvements for 2018. Many congratulatory remarks have been received from residents as to the improvement in the Christmas lights in 2017.

While the Town Council provide the lighting it would be churlish not to acknowledge the efforts of the volunteer group known as Hexham in Bloom and their associates Edible Hexham. This group supply and maintain hanging baskets to offices and shops around the town and encourage retail outlets to brighten their shop fronts with floral displays. In addition they support the railway station platform displays and coordinate the work carried out by care homes and other establishments. The Edible Hexham planters brighten up the town and provide a taste of spring and summer to passers-by. This year they contributed to the town receiving four gold awards and four silver gilt awards from Northumbria in Bloom. Supporting the Hexham in Bloom volunteers are the unsung heroes of the Town Council's own staff who spend many hours each year maintaining the flower beds, grass verges and planters around the town in tip-top condition.

Volunteers are the key players in Hexham's lifeblood. They organise so many activities from social clubs to sporting outlets and from artistic groups to youth groups. Volunteers are also integral to assisting in running the various festivals organised by the Hexham Community Partnership. We have the Spring Festival, Spook night and the Christmas Market - all needing volunteers. In addition we have music festivals, an eating festival and a book festival. These are just a few of the many activities on offer and where volunteers are essential.

It is often forgotten that all the Town Councillors are volunteers and receive no financial reward for the work they do serving on Committees, attending Council meetings, sitting on Working Groups and participating in other events. I pay tribute to their selflessness and can assure the residents that while we Councillors may not always see eye-to-eye on certain aspects of policy, all of us serve for the public good.

Hexham can take pride in being an inclusive town and the recently refurbished children's play area at the Sele can bear witness to this. Efforts have been made to make the equipment disabled friendly so that they can be accessed by children of all abilities.

Finally, as we approach the move to leave the European Union we remember our friends in our twin towns of Noyon and Metzingen. The politicians and bureaucrats may argue about the future but all parties involved with Town Twinning are agreed that our close relationships, one with another, will continue.