

# ***Annual Town Report***

***Robert Hull Chair of Hexham Town Council and Town Mayor***

***11 May 2020***

One year ago in my statement of acceptance on being elected mayor, I said I wanted the town council to help move the town forward over the following two years and to be ambitious for its future. I said I was excited by the prospects for the town and in a talk to the Civic Society soon afterwards I talked of “great expectations” for the town. Until the present worldwide crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic Hexham was moving in the right direction. This was shown in December last year when Hexham was declared to be the happiest place to live in the country. Now we are not sure what faces us in the coming months and years.

That December ‘happiest’ honour for the town reflected, amongst other qualities, Hexham’s strong community spirit and its good neighbourliness. Those qualities have been demonstrated again and again at the present time and we celebrate the way in which the residents of Hexham have come together to support not only each other but the young, the elderly and the vulnerable. Strong community networks have sprouted throughout the town. We will continue to need that spirit as the coming year unveils itself.

Before the crisis began we had seen development plans finally being brought to fruition which will mean a flood of new investment into the future prosperity of the town. Planning permission had been given and construction has begun on a number of sites which had stood empty for too long, including the bunker site, the old swimming pool, Prospect House, and the former Workhouse as well as new buildings for the high school and middle school. On some of these work has continued despite the crisis, on others the situation may change. The fact remains that over £100 million of new investment is foreseen to fund these developments as well as others like the upgrade to the Wentworth Leisure Centre and new outdoor gym equipment at Tyne Green. In addition, work has begun to improve the A69 roundabout entrance to the town.

On all of these the town council has worked with the County Council, the Community Partnership and other bodies in the town in the informal Hexham Hub, to guide development in the right direction. The Hub has focused particular attention on the changing nature of Hexham’s central shopping area, accentuated by the recent closure of the Beales/Robb department store. It has succeeded in attracting Historic England funding for a project based on heritage-led regeneration in the town centre including the main Priestpopple – Battle Hill east- west axis, which is due to be designated a High Street Heritage Action Zone when the crisis moves on. In a similar vein, together with NCC, the council is looking at further possibilities to strengthen the position of the town centre through other redevelopment action, including the Market Place, where last year the results of a survey of residents on possible improvements was inconclusive. The County Council has included funding of £5 million in its 2020–2021 budget for Hexham’s town centre. All of this is likely to need further examination when we see the outcome of the Covid-19 crisis on the town’s economy.

These developments were underpinned by the work on the future planning horizon for the town, carried out over the last few years to produce Hexham's Neighbourhood Plan which was due to have gone to a town-wide referendum on 23 April. This will not now take place for 12 months but as a plan which has been approved not only by the town council and the County Council but also by an independent examiner, it will be given full weight in new planning procedures as if it had already been approved by referendum. This is particularly important for new housing developments in the town. I would like to pay tribute to the Steering Group which has guided the plan to this stage.

The Neighbourhood Plan's main core approach is based on ensuring a sustainable approach to planning. This has been behind the town council's own approach in developing a sustainability action plan which aims to ensure the council is operating on a carbon neutral basis by 2030, minimising the use of fossil fuels, increasing energy efficiency, reducing waste and encouraging businesses and organisations in the town to go down the same route. The town council has welcomed the Hexham Community Partnership's Clean and Green actions, has declared a climate emergency and has encouraged biodiversity plans, including wildlife planting, for a number of sites around the town.

The effectiveness of the work of the town council itself was recognised in January by the announcement that the inaugural Northumberland and Newcastle Local Council of the Year award was being made to Hexham Town Council. Our work has been strengthened by the appointment of an administrative officer to work alongside the town clerk. Part of that work is to develop new projects which will enhance the prospects of the town as well as to improve communication with residents. The last year has seen the inauguration of a new, more accessible, town council website, the use of social media and in working together with the Community Partnership, a revamp of *Hexpress*, the town's newsletter. I also want to pay tribute to the town council's operations manager and his team who manage the Cemetery and a number of open spaces and play areas in the town. Their efforts were rewarded by another Green Flag award and a Northumbria in Bloom gold award for the Cemetery. They have also done great service in the last few months in preserving a sense of normality in the town through cutting grass and flower planting as well as ensuring the Cemetery has operated efficiently in difficult circumstances.

The Northumbria in Bloom award for the Cemetery was one of a number achieved by Hexham in 2019 through the continuing work of Hexham in Bloom volunteers working with the town council, the County Council, Edible Hexham and others resulting in the town receiving 5 gold awards and 4 silver gilt awards for various sites in the town. In a similar vein, the town was once again lit up with improved Christmas lighting provided by the town council. The switching on ceremony was followed by a new Festival of Flame organised by the Abbey in conjunction with the Queens Hall.

In the present crisis situation the council has proved to be flexible and adaptable using new methods to allow its operations to continue. Staff have worked at home wherever possible and meetings have been held by video conferencing in a very effective way. I want to thank my fellow councillors for their contribution in the last 12 months serving on committees and working groups to ensure the smooth running of

the town. We need to be reminded that they too are unpaid volunteers whose main concern is to ensure Hexham's continuing vitality.

Over the last few months as the Covid-19 situation developed we have worked closely with a number of organisations in the town and the County Council, in the framework of Hexham Community Together, to ensure that no one falls through a gap in the network of assistance available. Now as at other times volunteers are the lifeblood of the town and I want to pay tribute to those who are helping us to get through the present crisis. Even before the current situation it is the volunteers in the framework of bodies like the Community Partnership, the Youth Initiative, the Community Centre, Hexham Abbey and others who have ensured the success of the wide range of events and activities , including the Spring Festival, Hexham Hidden Gardens , Spook Night, the Christmas market, music festivals, Bonfire Night, the Book Festival and others.

Over the last year I have had the opportunity to engage with the wide range of voluntary organisations, clubs and charities which help to make the town what it is and which as mayor I have been proud to visit. As a result of the of their work the town's future is in good hands and we can be proud of its strong social, cultural and sporting offer.

The council itself has had to postpone or cancel a number of planned events including the Mayor's annual reception with the award of the honorary steward and bailiff and a new Mayor's environmental award, the VE Day celebration which should have happened yesterday and Armed Forces Day event in June. We hope we can come back to these in the not too distant future.

I want to underline to the importance to the town of cultural facilities such as the Forum Cinema and the Queens Hall as well as the Book Festival, which are key components of the town's vitality and attractiveness. They will be badly affected by the current crisis and we all need to support them in due course as we emerge from it.

As we know this year has seen the adoption of legislation which means the UK exiting the European Union. This does not mean that we are turning our backs on our European friends in our twin towns of Metzingen and Noyon. The past year saw the visit of a strong group from Noyon and in October I went to visit Metzingen as part of a visiting group. In both cases I made clear that Hexham was not turning its back on Europe and that we needed town twinning as a means of bringing about a better understanding of our respective cultures. Once the present crisis is over I look forward to us re-engaging with our twin towns.

In conclusion the council can be proud of its achievements over the last twelve months. It now faces a future which is uncertain and which will almost certainly involve a different kind of 'normal'. We have already begun to consider what a recovery plan for the town, in the context of a county-wide plan, might look like. I am by nature an optimist and I believe we will be able to build on elements which already exist to ensure that, post Covid-19, Hexham is able to demonstrate that it continues to be strong, vibrant and adaptable town. My expectations and those of the council as a whole, continue to be great.