

Annual Town Report

Robert Hull, Chair of Hexham Town Council and Town Mayor

8 March 2021

For the second year in succession it will not be possible to hold the Annual Town Meeting this year and so I am taking the opportunity to present the Mayor's Annual Town Report to this meeting of the Town Council.

My report in the spring of last year said that the town faced a future which was uncertain and that the pandemic would almost certainly result in a new kind of normal. We could not have predicted that the normal would be further long periods of lockdown. This has meant that a lot of the regular activities of the Town Council organises or supports have had to be postponed or cancelled. Nevertheless throughout the past year Hexham Town Council has continued to operate on a business as usual basis carrying out all of its statutory functions. The annex I am attaching to this report sets out the achievements of this Council over the period of its term of office and is a reminder of the kind of functions the town council undertakes on behalf of the residents of the town.

Lockdown and social distancing rules have meant that councillors have not met face to face for twelve months and all Council and committee meetings, as well as meetings with the County Council and other bodies, have taken place online with all the perils this has entailed. Councillors and staff have adapted well and Zoom calls have allowed the public to observe the Council at work.

That the services the Council provides have continued to run smoothly in the past year is thanks to the way its staff have adapted to home working most of the time. I want to pay tribute to the Clerk and the Administrative Officer for the flexible way in which they have approached Council work. This is true as well of the Operations Manager and his colleagues who have had a lot of difficulties to surmount in maintaining the Cemetery and the town's open spaces and play areas in a way which has helped to preserve a sense of normality. This work was rewarded by another Green Flag award for the Town Council's cemetery.

At the start of the pandemic the Council worked closely with organisations in the town (Hexham Community Partnership (HCP), Adapt, Foodbank etc) together with the County Council in the framework of Hexham Community Together to ensure that those who needed assistance were able to obtain it. Volunteers emerged and provided invaluable aid to those who needed it. This is now being continued in new volunteer caring arrangements coordinated by HCP. Later the Council set up a Covid Emergency Fund which has provided financial assistance to a range of community organisations in the town badly affected by the pandemic allowing them to get through a difficult period. This included for example support for one of Hexham's key assets the Forum Cinema. The council also provided funding for school meal vouchers in October.

Scope for the Council to develop new initiatives has been limited and a clearer picture of the post-Covid situation has yet to emerge despite the success of the most recent lockdown and the successful vaccination programme in which Hexham has been ahead of the game. The council has however looked to the future and a

number of actions are under way which will provide a way forward for the coming months and years:

- The postponed referendum on the draft Hexham Neighbourhood Plan agreed by the Council and approved by the County Council and an independent examiner will now take place on 6 May. It is already being used by planners looking at planning applications in anticipation of its adoption and if approved will have full statutory basis and will be a key tool to ensure the town develops in the way its residents wish it to and in particular on new housing developments and the regeneration of the town centre;
- In the case of the latter the £2.4m High Street Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) to boost the town centre and enhance the conservation area, managed by Historic England, was finally approved in the summer and got under way on 1 October. The Town Council together with the County Council and HCP are part of the Steering Group of the project;
- A caring strategy , working with HCP and a range of other organisations in the town to build on the town's strong community spirit and extend assistance more widely where needed;
- A tourism strategy for the town to provide a framework and an action plan to develop and improve key visitor and tourism activities, encouraging more cooperation in the short and medium term so that Hexham can compete more effectively in a very competitive economic sector;
- Working closely with the County Council in the informal framework of the Hexham Hub to monitor and encourage economic regeneration developments in the town including the temporary social distancing arrangements and traffic management during the pandemic. There is the potential to work more closely with business groups in the town.

During the last year construction work has continued or started on a number of sites which have stood empty for too long including the bunker site, the old swimming pool, prospect House, Hadrian House, the Workhouse site and a number of other smaller developments. Work on the new High School and Middle School is advancing rapidly as is the new A69 junction. All of this demonstrates strong confidence in the future of the town. Whilst the title of the Happiest Place to live in the UK from the previous year passed to another town Hexham was 12th in the most recent listings and remained the happiest place to live in the North East.

In line with the sustainability and climate change policy the Council has adopted it has continued to implement its Sustainability Action Plan and has worked closely with other bodies in the town to reduce its own carbon footprint and improve biodiversity.

Unfortunately it was not possible for me to engage face to face with the town's wide range of voluntary organisations, clubs and charities which are the lifeblood of the town but I have kept in contact with many of them remotely. We were not able to hold the Mayor's Annual Reception at which the title of Honorary Steward and Bailiff is awarded but that has been corrected tonight. I also made the inaugural Mayor's Environment Award for 2020 last November and tonight I have made the 2021 award. Contacts have continued at a distance with Hexham's twin towns of Noyon and Metzingen and hopefully face to face contacts can be resumed soon. The

Council was able to organise two of its annual events on a restricted, social distancing basis at Remembrance Weekend and at the end of November when the town's Christmas lights were inaugurated. Despite the absence of the usual crowds the simple ceremony of Remembrance was a very emotional experience whilst the Christmas lights event I carried out alone with a senior Egger representative and a TV camera was slightly surreal. In both cases a lot of residents were able to live the experience online.

To conclude: over the last twelve months the Council has continued to effectively provide and maintain its services to the town thanks to the efforts of my fellow councillors and the staff of the council. I offer them my grateful thanks. The town is now entering a period of change, a period of adjustment and recovery. The new Council to be elected on 6 May will have to ensure these challenges are met and will have an important role to play in managing that process working alongside a new County Council. I remain optimistic about the town's future and I am excited about the developments already taking place and new opportunities opening up. The need is for greater cooperation and involvement of everyone in the town to make a success of those opportunities, working together towards the common interests of the town adapting to new and changed circumstances.

The annex to this report sets out a list of the achievements of the Town Council over its period of office since the last local elections. There is a tendency to underestimate the scope and range of the actions carried out by the Council and its elected representatives.

HTC Achievements 2017 – 2021

- Hexham Neighbourhood Plan completed for referendum.
- Annual Action Plans introduced.
- Adopted Training Policy.
- Adopted the General Power of Competence.
- Adopted a Business Continuity Plan.
- Examined all planning applications affecting the town.
- Created new post of Administrative Officer.
- Grant funding for a range of community organisations in the town
- Achieved the Green Flag Award and Northumbria in Bloom Gold Award for St Andrew's Cemetery.
- New agreement with Northumberland County Council resulting in a street cleaning machine being dedicated to Hexham, its operation funded by Town Council.
- Deep cleaning of town centre pavements
- In 2018 arranged an Armed Forces Day celebration event, attended by more than 5000 people.
- With the assistance of a grant from the War Memorials Trust, carried out the refurbishment of Hexham's War Memorial.
- Successfully applied for S106 funding and refurbished the Sele play area, with the introduction of many accessible types of play equipment including a wheelchair trampoline.
- Achieved the Local Council Award Scheme Foundation Award (one of only two Councils in Northumberland to achieve this) and working towards Quality status.
- Invited and had presentations from/on the following at Full Council meetings: West Northumberland Food Bank, Network Rail, Sport England Project on Mental Health, Advance Northumberland, the local Police Inspector; the Chair of the Hexham Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group; the Head of Marketing Communications at Egger (UK) Limited; the Director of Local Services on the Waste Management Strategy, and the Head of Neighbourhood Services and Market Manager on the Markets Strategy; Tynedale Hospice at Home, Queen's Hall, Adapt North East, Head of Planning Services, Markets Manager and Northumbria Healthcare's Executive Medical Director at the Annual Town Meeting.
- Mayor represented the Council at a variety of events including welcoming Charles, Prince of Wales, to Hexham; town twinning visits; local school and other concerts; school prize-givings, cadet force dinners, judging Armed Forces Day themed window displays; litter picks; speaking at Hexham Middle School's local democracy week etc.
- Involved in preparing bid for the successful Hexham High Streets Heritage Action Zone. Involved in its strategic planning and implementation making a financial commitment and staff resource commitment to the HSHAZ.

- Launched a new website which is accessible, modern, simplified and more user friendly.
- Provided outdoor gym equipment at Tyne Green.
- Carried out risk assessment of the potential for groundwater pollution at the Cemetery, as the first stage towards considering a future extension of both the traditional and woodland burial areas.
- Provided new bus shelter at Southlands.
- Adopted and started implementation of a Sustainability Action Plan for Council.
- Arranged the annual Christmas lights and switch-on events.
- Worked with Hexham Abbey and Queen's Hall Arts on an inaugural Festival of Flame in 2019.
- Introduced of "winter lights" in the Sele between late October and late February.
- Won the inaugural Newcastle and Northumberland Council of the Year award in 2019.
- Celebrated Hexham being voted the happiest place to live in Britain in 2019
- Increased Council's social media profile, following set up of Facebook and Twitter accounts. Social media training for councillors and staff.
- Adopted a Social Media policy.
- With the County Council, coordinated local organisations including Karbon Homes, Adapt NE, Hexham Community Partnership and Hexham Community Centre to form Hexham Community Together to coordinate assistance for vulnerable residents in Hexham during Covid-19 lockdown.
- "Business as normal" in response to Covid-19. Full Council and Committee meetings have been held online since 23 March 2020.
- Working on a caring plan and tourism strategy post-Covid.
- Funded new Hexham tourism app developed by Community Partnership.
- Staff and Councillor training on dementia issues and becoming a dementia friendly organisation.
- Regular news and information updates on the website. Subjects have included the Mayor's inaugural environmental award, Covid-19 (including information on Government advice, play areas, allotments, and County Council plans to safely reopen Hexham), Great Northumberland Day, A69 Bridge End roundabout work, and "Activities and Support in West Northumberland" for people living with dementia or memory loss.
- Provided updated "Welcome to Hexham" signs and map panels in the town centre.
- Inaugural Mayors' environmental award presented.
- Covid-19 emergency fund for local community organisations created.
- Preparatory work for the appointment of a Hexham Town Crier/Bellman