

ANNUAL TOWNS' MEETING - 2023/24

Annual Report of the Town Council

Cllr David Hawkins, Chairman / Mayor

Welcome to the 44th Annual Towns' Meeting since inception of the Town Council in 1979, noting we could not hold an Annual Towns' Meeting in 2020 due to Covid.

The Annual Towns' Meeting is a public meeting required by statute to be held in the period between 1 March to 1 June (inclusive) each year, but it is not a Town Council meeting. It is in effect a local residents' meeting at which any elector for the town area may speak, at the discretion of the Chairman, on matters of direct concern to the town.

Following local elections on 4 May, I became Chairman / Mayor from 15 May 2023.

Over the years, the Annual Towns' meeting has evolved from one where the Chairman presented his Annual Report about the Town Council looking back, into one that looks forward, recognising the hard work of both local organisations and charities, particularly the efforts of individuals with the Award of Citizen of the Year.

As Chairman, my report covers the work of the Town Council in general, plus some wider reaching matters in our community.

At our 15th May Annual Meeting, the Town Clerk referred to the Coronation Event on the Recreation Ground on Saturday 6 May. Despite the rain, it was a memorable occasion, and it was amazing to see the event unfold live on the large TV screen hired. By the time of the Red Arrows fly-past, it ceased raining and many people attended. The Chairman announced that he and many others attended the farewell party for Reverend Andrew Bailey at St Mary Magdalene's church hall on Saturday 13 May where he presented Andrew with a piece of commemorative glassware to thank him for 30 years' service to the local community. Another very memorable event.

At our 26th June meeting, Bryan Byrne, NFDC Service Manager for Housing, Community Safety, CCTV & Safeguarding updated us on work undertaken by the Safer New Forest Partnership (Police, Fire, Probation, Adult & Childrens services). Inspector Darren Ord presented a quarterly report from the neighbourhood Policing team stating the Police were aware of the unauthorised encampment on the cliff top and had attended together with Bryan Byrne who had undertaken a welfare assessment. A section 77 notice had been issued and a court hearing was scheduled for 29 June, but the encampment ended on 28th June, all persons vacating.

We received a petition from local residents about overnight parking on the cliff top. In response, HCC Cllr Mel Kendal said the petition document from residents in relation to Marine Drive West requesting no overnight parking restriction signage. Cllr Kendal had himself last year offered to pay for signage from his budget and the response from NFDC had been that with limited funds works were prioritised on the basis of road safety and therefore this would not be a priority. Cllr G Blunden asked how any parking restrictions placed on Marine Drive West would be enforced. HCC Cllr Kendal reported that prior to April 2023 NFDC was responsible for enforcement and this would have been on a 9 to 5 basis. More recently HCC had taken over responsibility for enforcement and sub-contracted this to a private firm. This matter remains unresolved.

Following the local elections in May, several Town Cllrs were also elected to NFDC:

Cllr S Clarke had been appointed Chair of the Housing and Community Scrutiny Panel and remained a member of the Licensing Panel.

Cllr S Davies was given responsibility for the Housing and Homelessness portfolio.

Cllr A O'Sullivan was appointed Chair of the Resources Transformation Committee.

Cllr G Blunden reported had been given the Environmental and Sustainability portfolio.

Cllr K Craze had been appointed Chair of the Employment Appeals Panel.

Cllr N Tungate had been appointed Chair of the General Purposes and Licencing Committee and was a member of the Housing and Community Scrutiny Panel.

In the Democratic Half Hour, a member of the public and her partner, who had attended the previous Town Council meeting to raise problems with drinking and anti-social behaviour in the town, advised that since then, meetings had taken place with Cllr S Clarke, the Police and Safer New Forest Partnership. But they wanted to know why the Council had not pursued the introduction of a Public Space Protection Order (PSPO). Cllr S Clarke informed the residents that it was the responsibility of the District Council to issue PSPO's and not the Town Council.

At our 7th August meeting, we heard more about ASB affecting the town. Addressing antisocial behaviour, Cllr Clarke made the point ASB is committed not only by youths, but the majority nationally is committed by adults over 25. Having said that, ASBOC has helped tremendously in reducing youth ASB in the town over many years with their work on the Rec, but it will cease year end. We also heard the Town Clerk had written to Donna Jones, Police Crime Commissioner & Scott Chilton, Chief Constable, on 3 July 2023 inviting them to attend one of our meetings, as follows:

"I wondered if you and / or the new Chief Constable Scott Chilton could come along and speak to the Town Council about the latest initiatives to drive down crime rates, referred to in the June Monthly Newsletter following introduction of a new Police Force operating model. It sounds promising and could well allay fears locally as to how ASB is tackled."

At our 2nd October meeting, the Chairman led the Council in observing a minute's silence in memory of Cllr Charles Baker who had recently passed away.

PS Arron Wood reported that he was pleased to be back as the head of both the New Milton and Lymington beat teams. A new Neighbourhood Enforcement Team (NET) had been established covering the New Forest and Eastleigh and a 24-hour response team continued to be operational based in Lyndhurst. PS Wood was asked to provide data on crime trends etc at future meetings. The Chairman requested a meeting with Inspector D Ord and PS Wood and the Town Clerk to discuss the most pressing concerns within the Town and how these could best be addressed.

District Cllrs S Clarke and S Davies recently met on 12 September with New Forest District Commander - Chief Inspector Nick Marsden, together with the Town Clerk and Brian Byrne from NFDC to discuss ASB locally, in Albert Road especially.

An e-mail from Patricia Salami, Interim Programme Manager at NFDC for the UK Shared Prosperity Funding confirming that New Milton had been awarded £15,000 to be spent on town centre improvements. The money would need to be spent before March 2025, and was earmarked for improvements to the Ashley Shopping Parade.

At our 13th November meeting, Town Clerk referred to the following correspondence:

- An e-mail from Insp Darren Ord updating the Council that a request had been made to the Police Crime Commissioner for a Police Station Enquiry Officer (SEO) at the Town Hall. He undertook to keep the Council updated on progress.
- An e-mail from Goff Beck, former Cllr, upon his retirement as the Parade Marshall for Remembrance Sunday events. He expressed his sincere appreciation to the Council and in particular the officers and ground staff for all their support over the last 12 years.

Hampshire County Councillor Fran Carpenter reported that the County Council had met to debate and vote on balancing future budget options. HCC financial position remained precarious a number of budget reductions had been identified including:

- A reduction in planned resurfacing works.
- A reduction in opening hours of Household waste recycling centres
- Cut grant funding to Hampshire Cultural Trust (incl. Forest Arts Centre)
- Cut funding for non-statutory transport including the CANGO service (unless local sources of funding can be found)
- Street lighting to be dimmed earlier.
- Cut funding on social care resulting in more reliance on volunteers, family and community organisations - the County Council would only continue to support the most vulnerable younger and older adults.

District-wise, Cllrs S Clarke and S Davies had met with Deputy Police & Crime Commissioner on 27 October in the company of the Town Clerk. They had discussed ASB issues across the town and visited the Recreation Ground, the proposed site of the new Family Hub at Gore Road and the new youth facility at Ashley.

Cllr O'Sullivan reported that following discussions with Hampshire Cultural Trust (HCT) and the Forest Arts Centre he was optimistic about the future of the Centre despite rumours of its demise. He was aware that the HCC was considering reducing its grant to HCT as one of its budget reduction proposals, and whilst a budget reduction would likely impact the running of the Arts Centre it would not likely result in its closure. The Centre was in fact looking at internal refurbishment of the main performance area next year. He hoped to be visiting the Centre for many years to come.

A member of the public, praised the Council on its floral displays and the overall upkeep of the town. In particular, he wished to raise the issue of gulley drainage in the town and commented that they had not been emptied by the County Council for a number of years resulting in flooding and erosion of road surfaces. The Chairman thanked the resident for his comments, and it was agreed that the Town Clerk would write to Hampshire Highways regarding potholes, and the state of roads generally, especially Station Road. This remains an on-going problem, as we all know!

At our 2nd January 2024 meeting, in response to a request from the Town Clerk, the County Council had repaired potholes on the road to Sammy Millers. An article from the Advertiser & Times was circulated to members regarding the allocation of a new 10-year £132 million funding package from the government to fix potholes, maintain roads and invest in 'longer term, proactive' highway maintenance. HS2 money would be repurposed to repair roads throughout Hampshire, HCC Universal Services spokesperson said.

While reviewing the work of the Amenities Committee, Cllr Blunden said he was pleased to work with the Police to identify locations for additional CCTV based on need across the town. This would need to be considered by NFDC however Cllr Blunden was hopeful that the proposed locations would be approved and address the lack of CCTV coverage in New Milton compared with other large towns across the district.

I am pleased to say that following exhaustive discussions, the Town Council approved next years' budget and precept showing an overall increase of 6.3% as follows:

The 2024/25 budget of £1,358,929 was accepted and a precept of £1,325,429 was approved - using £33,500 from Reserves. The Town Council element of Council Tax will be £124.81 next year for average Band "D", an increase of £7.50 pa.

Hampshire County Council's future services consultation was discussed again, with HCC inviting views on proposals to change some services delivered after April 2025:

- Road Maintenance and winter gritting
- Public Transport
- Streetlights
- School Crossing Patrols
- Parking charges at rural countryside car parks
- Homelessness support
- Library stock levels
- Adult social care contributions
- Grants for voluntary and community organisations
- Funding to Hampshire Cultural Trust
- Household Waste Recycling Centres

Following discussion, it was agreed that local residents would be encouraged to respond to the HCC Future Services Consultation.

Awards for former Cllrs were discussed. Members agreed to the nomination of former Cllr Goff Beck as the third recipient of the prestigious award of Honorary Freeman of New Milton, that the Town Council is entitled to bestow upon those who have rendered eminent service to the Town. Also, it was agreed former Cllrs John Ward and Christine Ward each receive a plaque in recognition of their public service to New Milton.

Additionally, in regard to Co-option for the Ballard Ward, 3 candidates had expressed an interest and Kani Trehorn was duly appointed.

At our meeting held on 12 February 2024, I presented Long Service Award plaques to former Cllrs Christine Ward and John Ward in recognition of their public service to the people of New Milton. Christine Ward had served two terms as a New Milton Town Councillor from May 2011 to May 2015 and May 2019 to May 2023. John Ward had served four terms as a New Milton Town Councillor from May 2007 to May 2023 a total of 16 years. Members applauded them both for long and loyal service to the Council.

We heard from Elaine Ramsdale confirming that the ASBOC charity had formally closed down and she thanked the Town Council for its support over the years both financially and vocally. The charity was founded in 2009 (prior to that operating as CJ's) and had provided an essential resource for young people aged 11 to 25 years in the Town. The Town Clerk would forward the e-mail to all Councillors and would respond accordingly. Members thanked them for 20 years' service to the town.

The Town Clerk read out a proposal for members of ASBOC to receive an award of a Council Certificate. It was agreed that the award be made to the three lead officers being Charlie Taylor, Stuart Plummer and Elaine Ramsdale. It was proposed and agreed that the Awards be presented at the Annual Towns Meeting on 29 April 2024.

At our meeting on 25 March 2024, PS Arron Wood reported that he continued to lead both the Lymington and New Milton teams however he planned to relinquish responsibility for Lymington in the next few months enabling him to focus on the New Milton area. The Team was now the biggest Beat Team in the New Forest comprising 1 PS, five PC's, 2 PCSO's and one non-deployable PCSO. Discussion then centred on whether the Police would have a public presence at the Town Hall.

Following a Teams-type meeting with Hampshire Police Crime Commissioner Donna Jones, she pointed out this was not something decided by her. There is a big difference between having a desk at a town hall and a police front counter" a spokesperson said. "If the local neighbourhood policing team wish to use a space in a building like the town hall at a set time every week as part of the patrol or visibility plans, this is something within their gift to arrange." So, positive news on that front at last.

Hampshire County Councillor Kendal raised 2 matters, one being the County Council's consultation on future service provision which ends on 31 March 2024 and the second being the possible introduction of parking meters on the seafront at Barton on Sea. He said that the introduction of parking meters was a money-making scheme to pay for the private firm employed to manage parking enforcement and he would be attending HCC Cllr Nick Adams-King's Decision Day to put forward his opposition.

Details regarding a Special Town Council meeting on 3 April 2024 for the purpose of conferring Honorary Freedom of the town upon Godfrey Charles Beck were discussed, and it was recommended that the Town Council confer upon Godfrey Charles Beck the rights, privileges and advantages attaching to the style, rank and title of Honorary Freeman of New Milton and present him with an illuminated scroll so inscribed.

At the Special Town Council on 3 April 2024, Cllr David Rice-Mundy introduced this item, saying he was delighted to be asked to speak on this auspicious occasion, the evening's meeting being one of those rare and unusual events in the life of a Council, stating he was honoured and privileged to contribute to these proceedings.

The conferment of Honorary Freedom was first bestowed by this Town Council some 10 years ago, on his uncle Cllr Alan William Rice. David said it meant a lot to Alan and the award of Honorary Freeman is the highest award a Town can bestow. David said Goff Beck was someone who gave freely of his time in various voluntary capacities. Overwhelming messages of support had been received from various bodies, individuals and organisations across New Milton, Goff Beck having rendered eminent and distinguished service over many years to the people of this town.

Cllr Rice-Mundy proposed that the Honorary Freedom of New Milton be conferred on Godfrey Charles Beck, and this was seconded and supported by myself as Mayor. The title of Honorary Freeman of New Milton was duly conferred by the Town Council on Godfrey Charles Beck in recognition of his eminent and distinguished service.

In conclusion, it has been a privilege and a pleasure to be Mayor and Chairman of this Council, and I would like to thank my Councillor colleagues and staff for all their hard work and support throughout the last year. I look forward to working with you all again.