

Axminster Town Council – Chairman’s Annual report March 2017

Since being elected as Mayor in May 2016, the months have flown past with alarming rapidity. I have been honoured to represent the Town Council, and the Town, on a wide variety of occasions from Family Fun days, to Festive Friday, from Chard’s Civic Ceremony to Costa Coffee launches; every event a delight and a wonderful opportunity to promote the name of Axminster far and wide and to meet those who make our town such a fantastic place to work, rest and play (please excuse an old Slough expression).

My Mayoral year started with the arrival of two new town councillors, Sara and Ian, but has sadly ended with the loss of the longest serving member of our Council, Cllr. Joy Hull, who passed away in February. It would take far more than half a page to adequately convey all that Joy did for the town during her many years of public service but her memory will live on in our hearts and minds as we remember her outstanding contribution to the fabric, and history, of Axminster. Our condolences to her husband, Douglas, and their family.

Your Town Council exists to represent everyone in the town and strives to provide the very best facilities for all our residents; each Councillor is a unpaid volunteer, working together with others as a single body, and ably supported by the staff at the Guildhall and other Council buildings around town.

We have a new Town Council website (www.axminstertowncouncil.gov.uk) which I would encourage all parishioners to visit, and bookmark, which aims to be a single-point of access for all council services and facilities. That said, the Councils main offices at the Guildhall are open as per published hours and you are guaranteed a warm welcome if the answer you seek cannot be found “online”.

In terms of development matters, the planning committee, our clerk and other members of Council, spent an inordinate amount of time considering applications submitted throughout the parish catchment area, month in, month out. From reviewing replacement bay windows to assessing entire housing estates, your Council acts as the town’s gatekeeper and watchdog; attempting to balance the need for additional housing to accommodate local need, and allowing sensible, reasonable growth, against the sometimes overwhelming urge of applicants to build on every acre, every square foot of land, often to the detriment of the town’s unique geography and aging infrastructure. It is perhaps the aspect of council business that frustrates councillors, staff and public alike; whatever the decision we make, someone will always disagree with our views!

Axminster does face a sustained period of developmental growth – one of the largest in the district - which must be matched by a commensurate increase in infrastructure provision to ensure that all the new people coming to live in Axminster (but also those already living here) have affordable and sustainable access to healthcare, social care, education, employment and retail opportunities, not to mention a transport system able to cope with this seemingly endless rise in population and vehicles, of every shape and size. The Town Council has been working with EDDC to create a Neighbourhood Plan, a policy document that will take on board all of the challenges that the town faces over the next 10-20 years and match these with the needs of our residents, both old and new.

In terms of finances, Axminster is no different to every other small local authority in this part of the world, be that large town, or small parish council. Historically underfunded in relation to other parts of the country, Devon County Council is being obliged to constantly review the services it can provide within the limits of the funding it receives from national government. The same applies to East Devon District Council. Both of these higher authorities deliver different services, and you will shortly be receiving your annual Council Tax statements through the post which will contain an explanatory booklet outlining how much they intend to spend and highlighting where service provision is to be reduced or withdrawn.

Axminster Town Council has been assessing the financial forecasts sent down from above since Autumn last year and councillors agreed in January, by a large majority, to make allowance within our own budget and precept figures for the coming year so that we can both maintain the services that the Town Council provides presently but also deliver more for our residents in terms of facilities, amenities and projects throughout the entire parish. However, like your own household financial budgets, these extra things do not come free, and the council has therefore decided to raise our part of the council tax bill - known as the "precept" - by just under £16 per year or 30pence per week for a Band "D" property. We appreciate that any increase is hard felt by those whose budgets are already squeezed but we have a duty to provide certain services and we would not want to fall short or fail to deliver in these areas.

However, mindful of this fiscal increase at a time when household finances are stretched throughout the town, councillors recognised that the Town Council does hold a significant sum in reserve, accrued after many years of prudent spending, and so it was further agreed by councillors that a programme of works be undertaken throughout the coming years to modernise and upgrade a large number of our publicly owned buildings, to provide new amenities around the town for all to enjoy but also to create a rolling "5 year" Town Improvement Fund which can be drawn upon as and when required in the future, so as to limit further potential local council tax increases. Our town is growing. It is getting bigger every day and so the demands on your council will grow too. We have planned sensibly, budgeted prudently and invested wisely. My thanks go to all members of the relevant committees who gave up a huge amount of time to prepare our financial budget and to all the staff of the council who will put these plans into action.

The world is a far different place, even to that of a mere 10 years ago. Axminster is no exception. Technology moves along at an astonishing rate and all of us, including the Council, must follow suit or be left behind, possibly missing out. You may not agree or approve, but that is the harsh reality of modern life. Your council is adapting to changes in the way people work, how we spend our leisure time and how we interact with the world around us. From websites, to emails; from Dropboxes to The Cloud, the manner in which we communicate constantly evolves. Your council meets regularly, on the second Monday of each month at the Guildhall, and members of the public are actively encouraged to come along, to see who represents you, to see how we are spending your tax pound in the way we believe provides maximum benefit for each and every citizen of the town; young and old, rich and poor, from "here" or from "away". Your council serves you all equally and we welcome you to come along and see for yourself what we do in your name.

Please have a browse around our website. Read the minutes of our meetings. Participate, ask questions, challenge what we do. The more we know about what you – the people who ultimately foot the bill – want, the better we can deliver the services that you demand, that you need and that you all benefit from. If I can help in any way possible, please get in touch. My details, along with all other councillors, are on the website but also available via the Town Council offices.

Finally, may I invite you all to come along next Monday (20th March) to the Guildhall for the Annual Parish Meeting where reports on the last year will be provided by a number of local representatives, and the public will, as always, have a chance to ask questions of your Council and Councillors. I hope to see a great many of you there.

Cllr. Paul Hayward
Mayor of Axminster