

**AXMINSTER TOWN COUNCIL
PARISH MEETING MONDAY 18TH MARCH 2019
TOWN MAYOR'S REPORT**

As I come to my fourth year as your Mayor, I reflect that the past 12 months has offered its own unique challenges, but also some wonderful achievements by many in the town which have shown the high level of community spirit in Axminster. Another Cherry Fair, and Yarty Party, along with Light up Axminster being a particular success, and the town looking better than ever over the festive period.

The overarching issue throughout has been housing and the relief road. At 2 meetings, each attended by over 100 people, the issue of the relief road and its route were fully discussed. I will not shy away from the fact that the growth of the town is controversial. Some years ago it was realised that with the loss of our cattle market and the demographic changes, we needed to take a strategic look at how our town would develop and not stagnate. We knew we needed more houses both to enable young people to stay here when they had completed their education, and to encourage more employment. However accommodating more people within a town centre designed for the horse and cart meant also that we needed to remove more vehicles from the town centre. A relief road was required running from Chard Road to Lyme Road, with housing and employment land around it. This was over 20 years ago. As part of the Coastal and Market Towns initiative we developed a town plan which was incorporated into the then Local Plan. This was adapted for the now current local plan and forms much of the basis for the emerging neighbourhood plan.

In July 2017 the government announced a Housing Infrastructure Fund in order to release land that was either marginal economically or to unlock hitherto difficult to develop sites. This was announced as a grant, indeed only last September in the budget a further £500 m was added to this fund to assist in speeding up housebuilding. EDDC applied for monies and was granted £10m from this fund to enable the relief road to be built. EDDC cabinet also agreed in principle to borrow a further £7m to be paid back by developers with interest in order for this road to be delivered in a timely fashion. Much work was done by EDDC, DCC the developers and this town council to produce a Strategic Master Plan for the site. The public were consulted, and eventually, last month this was approved by EDDC. At the same time Persimmon Homes submitted planning applications for the northern and eastern sections, and Crown Estates is, as I speak, finalising planning applications for the central part of the site.

Then, last Monday Housing England announced that the £10m award would not be a grant but a loan, repayable by developers upon completion of homes. I do not know whether this is just for our site or is for the whole £7bn award under this scheme. This puts the whole development in jeopardy, and will require much rethinking. The waste of time and money so far is enormous, and represents gross abdication of responsibility by Government, not merely to this town but to the housing targets nationally. It is a betrayal, nothing less, and shows just what the metro centric establishment thinks of places outside their bubble. Councillors Hall and Moulding condemned it as such, and I

have, as your Mayor made a FOI request to see all the papers that EDDC have to ascertain whether responsibility for this betrayal can be laid at the District Council's feet or if it remains with the incompetents in Whitehall. On a more positive note, I continue to be amazed at the community spirit that exists in the town. It is something Axminster should be very proud of. To list just a few, the community came together again for the Christmas Day Lunch, dozens were involved in the recent litter pick, the number of special events that have been organised to support ARC, the various quiz nights at the football club for various charities, and the Care Service continues to provide an invaluable service to our town in so many ways. I would also encourage you to get involved with various Light Up Axminster consultations that are taking place over the next 2 weeks to determine what the people of the town really want and how they can get involved.

I started this year of being Mayor by attending Exeter Pride on your behalf, and will again in May as my last official duty. This town supports diversity in so many ways, and in light of the tragic events in Christchurch last Friday, long may it do so. We must as a town face up to and challenge intolerance, however it presents itself. People should be defined by what they say and what they do; anything else is at best a distraction and at worst a recipe for anarchy and hate. We are all Axminster.

May I finish by thanking my fellow councillors for the support I have received over the past year, without them we would be nothing. Some of our councillors are not seeking re-election, and to them I offer a special thank you, but more of that at our April meeting. May I also thank our staff who put up with my interjections so often they I am sure will be glad to get a new Mayor.

J Walden
Axminster Town Mayor