

Town Mayor's Report 4 March 2024

The work of the Town Council continued at pace throughout the year. As well as the monthly full Town Council meetings, your councillors remain busy with the various committee meetings – Strategy and Finance, Operations, Employment, Planning and Guildhall Sub-Committee, all of which require agendas and minutes prepared by our hard-working Town Clerk. There are also various projects underway, such as the Neighbourhood Plan, Axminster Climate Action Group as well as supporting the Axminster Regeneration Forum in conjunction with EDDC and DCC. The Council also has representatives on the Axminster Chamber of Commerce and the Twinning Association.

Since our last Annual Parish Meeting on 27 March 2023, we've undergone elections. Twelve town councillors were elected unopposed, and the further three seats were later filled by co-option. Although some personal circumstances changed, leading to resignations, we have been fortunate to have well-qualified and hardworking people volunteering to be coopted, and thus apart from brief periods the Council has remained at full strength. Two ATC employees, Paul and Sarah, were elected in May to serve as EDDC Councillors, thus serving Axminster at yet another level.

The biggest challenges facing our town stand outside the scope and power of the Town Council to address. So, we write letters to those who can do something about it. Our attempt to engage with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in respect of flooding resilience has yet to receive a response. Our thanks go to DCC for repairing the pedestrian crossing outside the Post Office on West Street. The challenge DCC faces in repairing potholes throughout the county is massive, as the resource available to it does not meet the need.

The cost-of-living crisis has had a hard impact. You will hear from the Responsible Financial Officer shortly about the budget for next year. The cost of maintenance of the buildings and areas for which we hold responsibility has risen greatly, as has the cost of services which we need, such as auditing.

We had to reduce the sum available for grant funding from £25K in FY 22/23 to £10K in FY 23/24. ATC scrutinises grant applications carefully, to ensure that council taxpayers' money is well spent. Over the year we've been able to give some support to, amongst others, Nourish, which provides food for vulnerable people in the town, the Trident Swim Club for specialist training and teaching apparatus, Axe Valley Ring and Ride and the Community Shed.

Last summer we finally resolved the standing of the Guildhall, and it formally became Town Council property. Rather than relying on outdated covenants, its management and operation is now on clear terms. But it's been a massive amount of work for staff. We now have solar panels and a battery storage on the GH which generates a significant proportion of the electricity the venue needs.

Other items which stand out in this year's activity:

- Axminster Climate Action Group established a Community Orchard in the lower cemetery field, had an Eco-Display in the former River Cottage building, planted wild flowers in Jubilee Field and are working with Tesco on plans for their land holding in West Street.
- Martin Spurway, having served the Council and the community for over 40 years, was granted the Freedom of the Parish (10/23).

- Councillor Bernie Steadman took over the chair of the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group and coordinated the work on the draft and community consultation.
- The Council supported the Gate To Plate event on 7 October and is part-funding this year's event in the summer.

As ever, I'm grateful to my fellow councillors for the hard work they put in and the hours of time they give up in support of this community. I'm immensely proud of the hard work of ATC paid staff, both those in the office and those who work outside. Without exception they go above and beyond what they are paid to do in support of the residents of the town. And I'd like to thank those members of the public who take the time to come to Council meetings. Their support and comments, positive and negative, are valued by all of us.

Jill Farrow
Axminster Town Mayor
4 March 2024