

Town Mayor's Report 3 March 2025

Reviewing the minutes of meetings to write this report, I'm conscious of the enormous amount of work carried out over the year by Axminster Town Council's paid staff and the volunteer councillors. Over the last twelve months there has been a total of 24 meetings of the full Town Council, Strategy and Finance, Operations and Employment Committees, all of which take a great deal of preparatory and follow up work. Most of the meetings start at 7pm and last for at least two hours, but some have gone over the three-hour mark.

Since last March we've welcomed as co-opted councillors Jenny Bull, Roy Osborn, Jack Price, Trish Warwick, Richard Dunsbury, James Keen and Martin Thew, and said farewell to Dianne Bruce, Andrew Bourne, Bernie Steadman, Jenny Bull, Terry Langdon and Alfie Brooker.

A former member of the Council, Martin Mynard, died in June. He was a great railway enthusiast, and we placed a bench in his honour on the "green wedge" outside the station.

Financial issues are, as ever, challenging. The many debates about this year's precept demand have been vigorous and lengthy. We took the decision last March to suspend the Grant Scheme pending review, and in January decided to close it, on the grounds that there are many other sources of grant funding available and that our resources are insufficient to make a significant difference. We now have better accounting software, SCRIBE, in the office, and review in detail expenditure and financial data at every full Council and Strategy and Finance meeting. The Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) was approved in June, signed off by the Internal Auditor and is available on the website.

The work of Axminster Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group continued in 2024. It needs to be aligned with EDDC's local plan, on which councillors responded to EDDC in June. Devolution and local government reorganisation will undoubtedly be problematic, not least because town and parish councils seem not to hold a place in national government's thinking.

A successful application for an EDDC Carbon Action Grant of £43,000 has enabled us to use solar power, rather than gas, to heat (and in summer to cool) the Guildhall. Work on insulating the ceiling continues. This is a huge step forward in implementing the decision to reduce the Council's carbon footprint in the light of the climate/environmental emergency, which we quote at the beginning of every meeting. After considerable discussion we agreed to a significant upgrade of sound and lighting equipment, another investment in the future of the building. Staffing needed review in the light of the increased activity within the building, and three further posts (all part-time) have been created and filled.

The Guildhall cinema project was successfully launched last summer. The intruder and fire alarm systems were upgraded last spring, and further security improvements were made in November. We made it available free of charge for General Election hustings in June and have offered it to community groups in support of the VE and VJ day celebrations this year. After multiple debates about the refurbishment of the kitchen, the costs involved and other storage issues in the building the kitchen is being decommissioned and the tea and coffee area adjacent to the bar improved.

Representations made to the Council, either in writing or in Public Forum at the beginning of every meeting are heard with interest. In July, we had a presentation by Clearstone Energy Group about the proposed 150MW Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) at Blackpool Corner (24/0096/MFUL). After debate, we decided to support the application. At a Planning Committee meeting last month, we received multiple representations from the Hawkchurch Action Group (following their detailed written submissions) about a second 80MW BESS proposal (24/2650/MFUL) in the immediate vicinity of the first and, as a result, the Town Council lodged an objection to that latter application on several different grounds.

Following the unlawful occupation of Jubilee Field and the cost of repairing the damage we took out a contract with a specialist firm for the protection of our sites and installed additional security measures.

Cemetery and allotment matters are a routine part of our work. We have amended the policy on the terms of exclusive rights of burial and the erection and maintenance of memorials, and in consultation with Axminster Allotment Association made amendments to allotment rules and regulations.

Ongoing projects include the Millwey Rise Play Extension, providing equipment for children with additional accessibility needs, funded by Section 106 development contributions in conjunction with EDDC. We're exploring whether it might be possible to use other 106 money to develop a play area on the Cloakham Lawns estate. The Council has agreed to support the Rail200 initiative later this year.

Without doubt the nicest task we undertake each year is the selection of the recipient of the Robin Cross Award for Axminster's Citizen of the Year. We decided in December that Council members and staff should not be eligible candidates even if nominated for activities outside those roles. It was a privilege to present the award to Barrie Hedges in the presence of Lin Cross, Robin's widow.

I hope this summary of activity has been of interest. Further information appears in Council newsletters and the Website. I'd like to thank all of our staff and my fellow councillors for their continuing hard work and commitment, and to those stalwart supporters who take the time to attend our meetings.

Jill Farrow

27 February 2025