

Church Stretton Town Council Annual Report: April 2019 to March 2020

For probably the first time in its history, the Town Council was forced this year to cancel its Annual Assembly in April, when Council accounts to constituents for its performance over the last year. By way of compensation, this Report summarises what would have been shared at that Assembly.

Year's Events:

Even before the current Covid-19 emergency, this has been a very challenging year for the Town Council. In September, our long service former Town Clerk, Christine Harvey, retired from her role as part-time Finance Officer, having generously delayed her retirement to allow us more time to recruit a replacement, Beverley Clarke.

In October, our Town Clerk, Danny Chetwood, suffered a stroke and remains on long-term sick leave, determinedly pursuing his rehabilitation. It has not been possible to recruit a full-time locum replacement, but we are grateful to the Rushbury Parish Clerk, Chris Maclean, who continues to provide the Council with some part-time locum cover.

Later that same month, Councillors were stunned by the sudden death of Eileen Roberts, after a short illness. She was a long-serving and highly respected member of the Council. The packed church at her memorial service bore testimony to how much she meant to this community. The Community Messaging Service, which she did so much to develop, remains her legacy.

To complete this *anus horribilis*, we have all been hit by this Covid-19 emergency. In mid-March, this required the Council to delegate its functions to the Town Clerk, to enable Council business to continue to be conducted. The Council remains in lock-down, completely reliant on digital means to communicate between ourselves.

New Councillors

After bye-elections in the course of the year, the Council has been pleased to welcome three new Councillors; Cllr. Lyn Antill for the Church Stretton South Ward, who has become our Energy champion, developing plans for addressing the climate emergency; Cllr. Colin Carson, representing Little Stretton has taken on emergency planning and, our most recent recruit, Cllr. Nicola Carter, represents Church Stretton North Ward.

To help constituents raise issues with the Council, for an experimental six-month period, a monthly Community Advice Surgery has been set up at which Town and Shropshire Councillors join with the Police, so constituents can speak directly to the appropriate authority.

Amenities, Finance & General Purposes Committee:

This Committee, under the Chairmanship of the Deputy Mayor, Cllr. Mike Walker, has had a busy year. With a new Finance Officer, the Council is required to appoint a new Internal Auditor. He has required the Council to undertake a comprehensive review of its Financial Regulations, in order to satisfy stringent accountability requirements. The Council has also had to re-assess its VAT entitlements, relating to the three Charities, for which it is responsible, the Silvester Horne Institute, the Sandford Avenue Park and Richard Robinson Field. This comprehensive overhaul has greatly simplified the presentation of the accounts, giving Councillors an improved grasp of how to make best use of the available monies.

This financial re-appraisal has enabled the Council, for the current financial year, to set the lowest rate of increase in the Council Tax for many years, at just 2% to cover inflation. For a Band D Property, that raises the local Council Tax by 31p per month.

The other major work stream has been to review the management of Council's properties and assets. Councillors have visited all of these land holdings and prioritised spending on upgrading, as necessary, including the cemeteries, War Memorials, All Stretton play area and assorted verges.

Sandford Avenue Park:

The Park poses a particular challenge. The Council knows the community, especially young families, value this facility, but it is used by so few that the Council has difficulty in justifying a more than a tenth of its new annual budget of £408,000 on its upkeep. The Council is confident that more residents would use the Park, if there were better access on foot and by car. Accordingly, the Council continues to press Highways England to allow access off the A49 and for Shropshire Council Planning to approve such access. If their agreement is secured, the Council will need to find substantial funding to cover the cost of building that access and car park, as well as upgrading the Park's facilities.

Silvester Horne Institute

Cllr. Walker's initiative some years ago in developing a Friday Night at the Horne Programme of Events through the Spring and Autumn, in collaboration with Arts Alive, is proving increasingly popular and has just enjoyed its most successful season so far. Unfortunately, this wet winter has caused serious damage to the roofing of the extension and the full cost of the repair has yet to be determined.

Russells Meadow & Richard Robinson Field

Providing a hard standing at the entrance to Russells Meaadow has proved more expensive than anticipated, because of drainage issues. However, it now means the new Pavilion is fully accessible for disabled people and opens up the possibility of renting it out for other non-sporting activities.

Rectory Wood and Field & Coppice Leasowes Nature Reserve

The Council is seeking to have Rectory Wood and Field registered as a second Nature Reserve after Coppice Leasowes, becoming the first Town Council to have two such assets. These land assets have significant management costs. For example, trees on all our property holdings need to be reviewed every three years for safety reasons, accompanied by an ongoing management programme. The Council is grateful for the growing number of volunteers, now helping to maintain these assets. We are also seeking to involve local schools in doing some of this conservation work. In addition, the Council is supporting local volunteers who plan to acquire part of the wetlands to the south of the town to preserve and enhance its unique bio-diversity, as well as increasing its contribution to flood management. In combination, these initiatives not only help the planet but also the town's green tourism appeal.

Street Lighting

The Town Council is responsible for most of the streetlighting in the town. Some of the lampposts are now in need of replacement. So, for safety reasons, they are all being re-assessed and a replacement programme set in place. This will include a conversion to LED lighting, both to save money and also to reduce carbon emissions.

Planning, Conservation & Heritage Committee:

Under the Chairmanship of Cllr. Hilary Claytonsmith, this Committee has dealt with 160 planning applications over the year. Shropshire Council is undertaking a Partial Review of its Local Development Programme for the period 2020-2036. Possible sites for building development have been reviewed. The Council strongly favours development of needed housing on small sites within the development boundary or small exception sites. Shropshire Council's draft recommendations of two large scale developments on the eastern slopes of the valley generated 350 detailed responses from Church Stretton residents in opposition to those recommendations. Consultation on Shropshire Council's final recommendations will take place later this year.

Cllr. Claytonsmith has been actively engaging with Agents, Architects, Housing Associations and Developers in seeking, with some success, to influence the design of developments such as on Burway Road, Lutwyche Road and in All Stretton. The Committee has also been looking at future provision of housing, ranging from open market homes, to affordable/social housing and extra care housing for our specific demographic requirements. Discussions are under way with a potential developer of affordable houses. The Council is promoting, together with the AONB Partnership, the possibility of Shropshire Council producing a Development Plan Document, to better protect the AONB landscape from major developments.

Housing Needs Survey

In order to evidence local housing need, to inform on-going discussions with Shropshire Council, the Council undertook a Housing Needs Survey, sent to all households. 963 responses were received and are now being analysed. This represents a response rate of nearly 40%, so it has statistical significance. A companion survey of the housing needs of key workers in the town, not resident here, had a much lower response rate, but still identified a housing need.

Community-Led Plan

The Housing Needs Survey was issued alongside a Community-Led Plan Survey, the results of which are set out elsewhere in this edition. To complete this Plan, the Council recruited a volunteer Steering Group, which has been hard at work for nearly a year. The intelligence from the Survey will now inform more detailed work in specialist sub-groups to produce recommendations of how best to meet the community's aspirations over the next 16 years.

Economic Development Committee:

Cllr. Bob Welch chairs this Committee, which is primarily concerned with the marketing of the town, working in collaboration with the Chamber of Trade. However, it also encompasses working with Schools and developing the Council's programme to deliver on its climate emergency resolution. Cllr. Richard Hickman has done sterling work, over many years, in almost single-handedly, maintaining both the Town Council's website, www.churchstretton-tc.gov.uk and the website of the Church Stretton Community Interest Company www.churchstretton.co.uk. So as to be able to focus on upgrading the Council's website, providing information for residents, the Council is backing the re-formation of the Church Stretton Area Tourism Group to take over the other website as the main vehicle for attracting visitors to the town.

Tourism

The Council has continued its promotion of the town primarily through the production of the annual brochure, produced in collaboration with local traders. This has proved popular, drawing in not only day visitors but also short-stay visitors from further afield, taking advantage of the increasing number of accommodation providers.

The Council is an active member of the Visit Shropshire Hills Community Interest Company, which, among other initiatives, is promoting more coach tourism into the area. Congratulations to Jemima's Kitchen, who won their Best Shropshire Cream Tea Award this year!. The Council also values its association with the AONB Partnership and the National Trust in promoting local conservation work.

Business Survey

The Council wants to have a better understanding of the needs of local businesses, mindful of how important they are to the well-being of the community, especially after the current Covid-19 emergency -see below To that end, earlier in the year, the Council commissioned a Business Survey from the Business School at Chester University. Unfortunately, the University had difficulty in resourcing the Survey, as it wished, so the Council will have to pursue other means to develop this work.

Schools

Our two schools are an important and integral part of our community. So, it was most welcome that pupils at the schools were so much a part of two community events of StrettFest in July and the Christmas Lights Switch-On in November, with Santa's Grotto again proving popular, organised by Councillors Sandra Baker and Hilary Luff. It was regretted that flooding in the Park caused the cancellation of the Family Day in the Spring. However, quite unexpectedly, in August, a group of local school leavers ran a Family Fun Day, as part of their engagement with the National Citizen Service, to raise funds for upgrading play equipment on Richard Robinson Field. This event raised over £600.

Although the town has flourishing groups of Brownies, Guides, Scouts and cadets, it was clear from a Youth Survey some eighteen months ago that more provision is needed. The Council is now giving financial support to the recently-started Youth Drama Group, the Loft Arts, at the Mayfair Centre. The Council is also contributing funding to enable a Youth Club to be re-started at the Mayfair Centre, as soon as circumstances permit.

Music and drama productions, not just at the schools but at the Arts Festival and many other organisations, experienced a great loss in September with the sudden death of Richard Yeoman-Clark. He was a renowned sound and lighting engineer who had given stalwart support to them all for over a decade and more. It was typical of the man that he bequeathed his recording studio equipment to Church Stretton School, so younger generations can develop the skills he spent a life-time refining.

Climate Emergency

Like many others, the Council declared a climate emergency last summer and is committed to reducing its carbon emissions. It is embarked on an audit of its current emissions and building this commitment into all of its procurement procedures and all of its Standing Orders. The Council recognises that this programme of work will have to be sustained over many years, supporting community action on this agenda.

Covid-19 Emergency

Regrettably, this emergency has brought a halt to much of the Council's activities. The Council has sought to act in a co-ordinating role in bringing together all of the many services, organisations, businesses and voluntary groups, supporting their tremendous collective effort, in which the Mayfair Centre has played an outstanding part. The Village Societies in All Stretton and Little Stretton were quick off the mark in establishing local volunteer support systems. Cllr. Hickman has been assiduously updating relevant information, relating to the Emergency, on the Council's website as well as feeding local social media, helpfully further circulated by Community Messaging.

After unacceptable crowding at the Thursday Market in mid-March, the Council took the difficult decision to suspend the Market, in the interests of community safety. It secured the agreement of Shropshire Council to re-locate the two traders of essential supplies from the Town Square to the much larger Easthope Road car park. In addition, the Council has sought to encourage and publicise more home delivery services, printing and distributing a leaflet, collating together all the current local home delivery services.

The Council is acutely aware of the need to encourage residents to "Think Local" - - to purchase from local businesses, rather than buying on-line from further afield. This is particularly necessary here in Church Stretton, where the local economy is so reliant on income from visitors and that income has been abruptly interrupted. The survival of some businesses may depend on the level of resident support through this crisis.

The Council is proud to represent a community, which is demonstrating once again that it has an amazing community spirit, with abundant selfless volunteering to help the more vulnerable. It is on that collective community spirit that we will have to draw as we re-build together, after this unprecedented emergency.

Cllr. Bob Welch, Town Mayor

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