

Supporting Documentation
Annual Assembly
Meeting

Tuesday 14th May 2024



Agenda item 4 - **Mayor's / Chairman Report**

Mayor's Report

From Reluctance to Passion

Councillors it was a position I was reluctant to accept, not as in Coriolanus style but purely as, 'it's not really me!' However it did not take long to change my mind.

Statistics first. I undertook around 37 mayoral invitations. I made 26 speeches. I met with mayors from Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and BANES. I delighted in compering the Christmas Light Switch On and look forward eagerly to the May Day Market, so expertly organised by Claire and her team.

Some events: The happiest were at the Deanery when Elias Performing Arts presented their summer show in front of a packed audience. What a fantastic outpouring of talent from four years olds to 20+. It was also great fun to do the school visits. The children were so responsive. An unusual visit was to RAF Fairford, to witness a 'Change of Command' ceremony. A second unusual event was the naming of the new road sweeper, named in honour of a former road sweeper of the town, Robin Clark. The most emotional, by far, was the Remembrance Day Service, closely followed by the installation of the white post box 'Letter to Loved One' at the cemetery, donated by Hillers Funeral Service.

Suffice it to say I have tried to present Highworth as a town with lots of potential, a town that historically is worthy of a visit, a town full of vibrancy and enthusiasm and above all a town and a Town Council that cares.

Chairmans Report of Full Council 2023/2024

This was the first year of a new Council following the elections in May 2023. We were delighted to welcome seven new councillors who had never stood before. This, of necessity involved ongoing explanations of how the council conducts its business and the importance of Standing Orders. There is much to learn in a very short time, but the Clerk has produced a comprehensive induction pack to provide expert guidance.

Some of the successes this first year include the restoration of the bell in the cemetery chapel and the installation of speed indicator signs around the town. The first Volunteer Expo was a huge success with over 30 organisations attending and a steady stream of potential volunteers throughout the session. The new Swindon Borough Council cabinet has appointed a lead member for parishes and communities. Councillor Jim Grant attended Full Council in September and shared a way in which a partnership could work.

The council has now taken ownership of the listed telephone kiosk at the top of Grove Hill. Thanks to the British Heart Foundation and generosity of Harman Electricals a defibrillator has been installed.

It has been an exciting time for our younger residents with designs put forward to re-furbish our three play areas, so that the equipment is modern, safe and fully inclusive. As well as a number of consultations with parents and local residents, the Mayor, Councillor Natalie Key and the Clerk

visited the infant junior and primary schools, to explain about the play areas and seek the views of all the primary schoolchildren. It was a delightful couple of days. The first play area we hope will be in place by the summer holidays.

Discussions around the Old Golf Course are ongoing, but progress has been slow.

Finally, the three main events organised by the council, the May Day Market, the Fireworks Night and the Turning On of the Christmas Lights were hugely successful and once again well supported by our residents. Although it is a lot of hard work for Claire and the staff, it is so worthwhile to see so many happy faces. Thank you.

Agenda item 5 – **Committee Reports**

a. Planning

Chair of Planning: Councillor (Ms) J Murphy – verbatim

The Planning Committee have seen a vast variety of applications this year, from the normal house extensions, quite a few conversions, a large housing estate and car home application, reserved matters applications on two major sites and our very own planning application to install 3 flag poles on the podium.

On the 3rd of June 2023 we were invited to comment on an application for outline planning for 95 houses and a care home next to Aldi on the Blackworth Industrial estate. At full Council Councillors recommended refusal on several points. The main points being it is outside of the settlement boundary; the site is located on land designated for light industrial use and it is too far from facilities. Its proximity to the town centre being the same reason that the Wrag Barn Development on Shrivvenham Road was not allowed at appeal. This application is still pending decision; however, it appears other crucial consultees are of the same opinion as our comments. We will eagerly await the outcome of this application as the area is classed as a primary employment area in Swindon Boroughs Local plan and therefore this would undermine its designation.

In July 2023 we were asked to review the Redlands phase 2 reserved matters for 42 houses of which further amendments came back in December. This is still pending decision after numerous amendments. Amendments to large sites can be challenging for the committee to establish what has changed and requires a lot of research of documents on the planning portal.

Following comments from HTC in January of 2023 where we strongly objected to the reserved matters to the 250 houses on Shrivvenham Road we were reconsulted on the 5th March 2024. We were pleased to see that the site has been reduced to 238 houses now and the layout, designs and materials had been changed and are more in keeping with the area. The social housing breakdown

was questioned along with other information and this has now been provided. The reserved matters have now been approved so we need to ensure the s106 monies are paid to Highworth Town Council as per the section 106 legal agreement. It is encouraging that the planning department at Swindon Borough Council are considering our comments as valid planning reasons.

This council year we have seen a few applications for conversions of redundant public houses like the Plough and the Globe. The Plough has gained permission; however, the Globe is still pending decision after amendments to the scheme. Highworth Town Council were of the opinion that it should remain a commercial property on the ground floor to protect the future of the high street amongst other material planning considerations. This is also in line with the neighbourhood plan.

Following a decision at full council to erect 3 flag poles on the podium as Chair of Planning I was tasked with gaining the necessary consent. An advertisement application was submitted some weeks ago and I can now confirm we have just received permission and can go ahead with the works to replace the existing 8 m flagpole and erect two further 6 m flagpoles, all of which will have internal lanyards to enable the flags to be raised and lowered with ease. We are hoping to get this work completed by D Day if possible.

Going forward when our draft Neighbourhood Plan is made the Planning Committee will be responsible for reviewing the success of the policies in our plan against planning applications and this will be carried out on a quarterly basis. This will be a new task for the committee, a very important one to ensure our newly made Neighbourhood Plan is effective.

When reviewing planning applications, particularly the large applications there are generally hundreds of documents and comments. In order to prepare for planning meetings properly documents need to be reviewed to come to a decision of whether the application should be allowed. This takes Councillors a lot of time and is an important responsibility of Councillors as Highworth Town Council is a statutory consultee. I want to thank the planning committee for their hard work and special thanks to the deputy chair Councillor Ken Saunders who has done a fantastic job, particularly supporting me after numerous cancelled operation dates and when it finally happened where he has had to step up as Chair whilst I recovered. Also, thanks to all the Councillors that have commented on applications in full council. As a planning committee we strive to provide a consistent, policy led approach to planning.

I have enjoyed another year as Chair of Planning and I look forward to continuing to work with the committee going forward. I am in no doubt planning will be high on the agenda of priorities with the emerging local plan progressing and it is going to be another busy year.

b. Environment & Leisure

Environment and Leisure Annual Report

Chair of Environment & Leisure : Councillor K Saunders– verbatim

Allotment Sites:

During the course of the year together with a member of staff, quarterly inspections of all allotment sites were carried out, and where issues were found the plot holders were contacted, issues discussed and, in most instances, resolved. Some plots were surrendered and subsequently issued to those on the waiting list.

Renewal of plot letters were sent out to all tenants in January 2024, the summary is as follows:

24 tenants surrendered their allotments

As of 13th February 2024, only 2 plots had not been paid for

Offers were made to those on the waiting list

16 allotments have now been allocated to new tenants

4 plots are available at Park Ave site, 1 at Swindon Road site and 3 at Old Golf Course site

The waiting list has now been cleared.

Due to available plots and no waiting list, it was agreed in council that we would offer the remaining plots to current tenants if they wished to take on a second allotment

Going forward, we will continue to monitor all allotment plots and inspections are scheduled for May and September this year

Skate Park

The Skate-park continues to be popular and well used.

A summer Skate-park event has been approved by council financed through the youth budget.

Wiltshire and Swindon Local Nature Recovery Strategy:

My thanks go to Graeme Olley who attended this summit.

The project is nationwide and emanates from the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and is sponsored by Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA).

Other significant actors are: Natural England, The Forestry Commission, and The Wildlife Trust.

Funding for the project comes from the Bio-Diversity Net Gain Fund.

This area is as important for the Neighbourhood Plan Committee as it is for the Environment & Leisure Committee.

Wiltshire has been divided into 11 areas of bio-diversity clusters and Highworth is in the “North”.

Graeme has agreed to be our representative for Highworth and will keep us updated as the strategy progresses.

Play Areas

During the course of the year the play area working party have worked exceedingly hard on developing a play park strategy, public consultations have been held, costs explored and a program of replacement equipment drawn up.

This will be in three stages 1. Redevelopment of the Northview Play area scheduled to commence in June 2024. This will be followed by redevelopment of the Barra Close play area and finally the redevelopment of the Rec play park.

3G Pitch

A lot of work and negotiation by The Town Council, both the Highworth Senior and Junior football clubs, the FA and other agencies has gone into achieving a 3G football pitch for Highworth. There is a way to go yet, and a number of hoops to go through but if the bid is successful Highworth could have its own 3g pitch in the near future.

Letters to love ones Post Box

On 17th October a 'Letter to Loved Ones' post box was erected at the cemetery for those who wished to place letters to loved ones in. A big thank you to Hillier Funeral Service for donating the letter box.

Road Sweeper

The new road sweeper was officially named Robin following a public survey on a name for the vehicle.

Wildflowers

There were hundreds of favourable comments regarding the display of wildflowers on the banks surrounding the Lower REC playing field. Approval was given for the purchase of seed for the banks for the 2024 season.

Cemetery Bell

The bell at the Cemetery Chapel was inspected and found to be in a dangerous condition and work was approved to replace the supporting timbers and refurbish the bell; This work has now been carried out.

The Old Golf Course

A great deal of work, effort, anguish and negotiations have been put into securing the Old Golf course; This has been a long haul with frequent disappointments. The new administration has been more receptive to the idea but this is far from a done deal.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank, The Clerk, councillors, and The Save the Old Golf Course group for everything you have done so far to try and secure this special area of land not only for Highworth but the Borough as a whole.

Grounds Maintenance

The grounds team work extremely hard to keep the town looking the way it does. The team is small with four full time, and one part time employees; Yet their work ethic is extremely high. I would like to extend my thanks to each and every one of them, especially Liam, the Grounds Manager for his inspirational leadership.

c. Finance & General Purpose

Report of Finance and General Purpose Committee 2024

The following actions were taken by the Finance and General Purpose committee over the past year.

In addition to the monthly overview of accounts the committee also discussed or recommended the following:

In June the internal audit was approved. The committee congratulated the Clerk on maintaining consistently high standards of financial management and governance since taking on the role.

In July the grant to Visit Highworth limited was duly approved.

In September Highworth Charter Market was discussed, including improved signage to deter parking on a Saturday. It was also resolved to extend internet coverage to the Market Square. This has proved successful and much welcomed by stall holders. Concerns were raised about a lack of communication with Swindon Library Services. The Clerk has investigated and matters have improved slightly.

In October the committee agreed to recommend the installation of three flagpoles on the podium. Discussions were also held to investigate the funding of a self-lead town tour app through s106 monies. It was also approved to spend s106 monies related to Pentylands Country Park, as the area needed an uplift. The committee also supported Environment and Leisure in their request to purchase wild flower seed. In November the draft precept request for 2024/2025 was recommended unanimously to be sent to Full Council. It also approved the transfer of £250k to the Public Sector Deposit Fund. This sum will help to strengthen our reserves. Discussion in January centred on installing a card payment facility in the public toilets. As there is no budget and the cost would far outweigh the income generated it was agreed to bring the matter back at later date if there was an appetite to proceed.

March proved to be busy agenda. Councillors were delighted to receive a report on hedgehogs within the town from a work experience pupil from Warneford School. Among other resolutions were agreements for additional solar powered indicator devices, a request to Full Council to approve a new footpath in the cemetery and to recommend assisting Wrde Up Festival with promotion and volunteers.

d. Neighbourhood Plan

Chair of Neighbourhood Plan: Councillor (Ms) J Murphy – verbatim

The objectives of the Neighbourhood Plan Committee are to: -

- **Update the current Neighbourhood Plan so that it carries more weight in planning decisions**
- **Move the High Street/Swindon Street project forward**
- **Keep up to date with the emerging Swindon Local Plan to ensure Highworth' s Neighbourhood Plan is in line with its policies**

Reflecting on how we have met the objectives as a committee this year we have made considerable ground on updating the current neighbourhood plan which I will go into more detail below.

The High Street/Swindon Street project

The High Street/Swindon Street project will start to move forward once our public consultation of the draft updated neighbourhood plan has been carried out and the committee review feedback from residents and any necessary changes are made. This will leave some breathing space when our draft plan is sent to Swindon Borough Council to carry out their 6 week consultation. The speed and extent of delivery of the High Street/Swindon Street project will be very much based on available S106 funding and extensive grant funding, which will need to be sourced.

Keep up to date with the emerging Swindon Local Plan

In terms of progress of the emerging Swindon Local Plan although Swindon has been working on gathering evidence to establish which sites they wish to bring forward this has not been shared publicly yet. We are watching this closely so that we can be prepared for any future changes required to our plan. The current timing of knowing which sites in our area will be consulted on is the autumn of this year so we should know more then.

Updating the current Neighbourhood Plan so that it carries more weight in planning decisions

I am pleased to report that additional grant funding of £5,000 was successful this year.

This year the committee have been working really hard to finalise the draft updated Neighbourhood Plan ready for public consultation and I am pleased to report our first public consultation (regulation 14) will be held on the 11th May 2024. The consultation has to run for a minimum of 6 weeks and will run from the 11th May 2024 – 24th June 2024 inclusive.

This year we have been gathering all the evidence from previous public consultations, workshops, focus groups and surveys and summarising them in order to identify what policies are required to shape the growth of the town when development comes forward. All previous policies have been reviewed and where necessary amended and new policies have been included to accommodate change. One of the major messages that came out of the consultations was how demonstrably special the Old Golf Course is to residents and the borough wide and as such the draft plan has designated the accessible area of the Old Golf course as local green space, which affords the same level of protection as the green belt. The remainder of the Old Golf Course is still designated as open space as in the previous plan. The draft plan as it has evolved has had to be checked over and over to ensure information is accurate.

In order to get to this public consultation stage, we have had to satisfy Swindon Borough Council that our draft plan is compliant and in line with the current Swindon Borough Local Plan and we required written authority that we did not need a strategic environment assessment carried out. This is based on the draft plan not allocating any further development as we await the outcome of the Swindon Local Plan and that we are just carrying forward a site in our previous plan that has not been built out and awaits planning permission. We have recently got this approval, which has allowed us to move forward to this important public consultation stage.

As a committee this year we have also agreed the final draft of the design code document, which will also need to be taken in to consideration with all future development. This will also accompany a housing needs assessment which we commissioned.

The last couple of weeks we have been delivering leaflets to every house in Highworth, Sevenhampton and Hampton, preparing for the consultations, online surveys, updating the website and will have carried out our first consultation on the 11th May.

I would like to thank the Neighbourhood Plan Committee and Deanne for all your hard work on this project this year and to Deanne's team for supporting us. Thank you to Councillors who have supported the draft plan and those that have helped to deliver all the leaflets. Thanks to all the residents who have given their feedback and shown their support over the last couple of years and have already attended our first public consultation and completed the online survey.

As Chair of the Neighbourhood Plan, I am really pleased we are able to share the draft plan with the public following extensive community engagement and are another step forward to the draft Neighbourhood Plan being made and the Design code document and housing need assessment being adopted.

I look forward to working with the neighbourhood plan committee again next year and seeing residents soon at the other public consultations. I am excited to think next year we should have a robust plan and design code strategy so we can have more say on development in Highworth, Sevenhampton and Hampton and will have already started looking at our next big project. Not forgetting to keep an eye on developments with the Swindon Local Plan and how it will impact us. Another busy year is a definite.

Agenda item 6 - Swindon Borough Councillor Reports

- a. N Gardiner – Awaiting report
- b. V Manro – Awaiting report
- c. S Weisinger - Awaiting report

Agenda item 7 - Representative Reports

- a. Highworth Twinning Association – Councillor R Williams – Awaiting report
- b. Highworth Community Partnership Group – Councillor N Gardiner – Awaiting report
- c. Highworth Action for Fair Trade – Councillor K Smith – Awaiting report
- d. Visit Highworth Limited – Councillor K Smith

Report on Visit Highworth Limited

As councillor representative I attended a number of meetings of Visit Highworth Limited (VHL). My key report was a description of the activities reported in the AGM. These detailed the workshops, the town trail, the Arts and Literary Festival and two highly successful craft markets held in the church, together with the total footfall and the close collaboration with Lechlade, Faringdon and the National Trust. The centre itself which hosts the works of local artisans, meaning revenue stays in the town thus supporting the local economy. Thanks also to Highworth Historical Society for their displays in the museum. All of this work is possible through the inspiration of one paid manager and several enthusiastic volunteers.

The centre was established after the previous council set out in a Tourism policy that one should be established. Highworth Community Partnership Group were invited to explore the possibility. The tourism policy which is integral to Neighbourhood Plan is now being developed at arms' length and on a shoe-string budget by VHL. For as little as £200 per week the council has the co-operation of a

skilled manager/curator, a team of enthusiastic volunteers, a presence on Visit Wiltshire, Visit Swindon, Visit Highworth and Great West Way websites. It is also seeking discussions with SBC following a recent visit by the Chief Executive. VHL is also preparing to host the new app which is currently in Beta form.

A true success story of a co-operative set up by the people of Highworth for the benefit of Highworth.