

# **Chair's Report to Annual Town Meeting**

**Monday 4<sup>th</sup> March 2019**

## **Your councillors**

There have been two changes to membership of the Council in the past year. In March, councillors Cathy McKenna and Jeff Smith resigned from the Council for personal reasons and I would like to place on record our thanks to both of them for the service they have provided to our parish over the years.

It was Cathy McKenna who pioneered the display of Remembrance Poppies on the lampposts in the town centre and drove the campaign to get rid of the plague of cable ties which adorned various road sign posts. I understand that there are several people now who regularly carry clippers to remove any new ones which get left there after adverts have been taken down.

Jeff Smith had served on the Town Council for 27 years, providing an enthusiastic and energetic approach throughout that time. Never afraid to say what he thought needed saying, his departure is a great loss to the council. Sadly, just four months after retiring Jeff suffered a massive stroke whilst on a family holiday in Italy. Thankfully the health authorities in Italy did a great job in saving his life, but I'm sorry to say that to this day Jeff has not regained his ability to speak, or the use of the right hand side of his body. Our thoughts go out to Jeff and his family.

By-elections were called for the two vacancies, sadly not until after the deadline for them to be held on the same day as the Hart elections. The two by-elections were therefore held a few weeks later on 7<sup>th</sup> June when we were delighted to welcome Alex Drage and Trish Monks onto the Town Council, where they have both already made a very positive impact.

So your town councillors are: Margaret Cook, Bob Harward and Rachel Mogg representing the Blackwater ward north of the A30, and Brian Blewett, Alex Drage, Terry Hunt, Trish Monks and me representing the Hawley & Minley ward, which is everywhere this side of the A30. All of our current terms of office come to an end in May and there will be elections on May 2<sup>nd</sup> to choose our councillors for the next four years. So make sure you mark that date in your diary!

There was also the routine Hart District Council election in May, when Alex Drage was elected to represent Blackwater & Hawley ward, replacing me after I decided to step down from Hart.

So, our parish is represented by three Hart Councillors, all of whom are members of this Council. They are Brian Blewett, Bob Harward and Alex, and I am your County Councillor. Having all our district and county councillors on the Town Council helps make us a tightly-knit group, working together as a team for the needs of the parish.

## **So, what does the Town Council provide?**

We have an information point at the Blackwater Centre, on the A30. You can phone, walk in or contact the Town Council on-line during office hours and our staff will provide you with information or point you in the right direction. We also publish contact details for all of your councillors on our newsletters and on the council website.

Here at Hawley Green, community leisure activities include, in no particular order: Tai Chi classes, Karate, Kung Fu, Diet and Exercise groups, Pilates, Rock Fit, Zumba, Self Defence, Tap Dancing, Cardio Rehabilitation, Junior Football, Children's Dance Classes, Cricket, Bridge Club, University of the Third Age (U3A), Holistic Therapy, Physiotherapy, Women's Institute, 50+ Dancercise, Parent and Baby Classes and much, much more. The list seems to grow longer every year!

Our community leisure halls, either this room or the Leisure Centre Hall, are available for hire on a one-off or a regular basis and are licensed for function hire. We have squash courts and a small gym, sports pitches, and an outdoor floodlit hard court for netball and football. We also have a Conference & Meeting Room, which we use as our Council Chamber, that can accommodate up to 30 people and we provide free car parking on site for our customers.

We also manage the Hawley Cemetery. The Hawley Bowling Club is responsible for their outdoor facility and the Disabled Action Self Help group (known as DASH) hires a building here, too. The Scouts, Cubs, Brownies and Guides also meet regularly on site. And we have a welcoming bar - which is open tonight for those who would like a drink after this meeting!

At the nearby Hawley Meadows and Shepherd Meadows on the Blackwater River, there are recreational areas for walking which are owned by the Town Council. The Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership maintains these nature and recreational areas as well as Blackwater Common (known by various names including Sawpit Lane and the Monkey Woods). We are pleased to support the Blackwater Valley Partnership in various ways. They maintain public access along almost the whole length of the Blackwater River from its source in Aldershot and encourage lots of leisure activities whilst working hard to maximise nature conservation.

The small remnant of land at Blackwater Common lies on what was once the boundary to Frogmore Park Estate, long since gone. The lovely pond on Frogmore Park Drive with its plentiful wildfowl is a small reminder of the landscaped grounds that existed here. For those who enjoyed the BBC dramatisation of "The Woman in White" last year, the house known as Blackwater Park in that book is in fact the former Frogmore Park, where Wilkie Collins was staying when he wrote the book.

Users of the Memorial Hall and the Conference & Meeting Room will have noticed the significant improvements that have been made to these buildings over recent years, with old wooden windows replaced plus redecoration and refurbishment. By carefully carrying out these improvements, as we can afford them, our buildings are being improved without the need for major increases in council tax.

We have the children's play area on Hawley Green and the Hawley Fayre takes place on the Green on the second Saturday in July each year. Each November, on Remembrance Sunday, we meet at the Memorial Hall to remember those residents of the parish who made the ultimate sacrifice in the two World Wars and all are very welcome to join us at this important annual event.

2018 was, of course, the Centenary of the Armistice which ended the First World War and our Remembrance services were very different, to recognise the significance of this. Starting with a service in Holy Trinity Church and then a march across the Green for our usual service here at the Memorial Hall, including the laying of wreaths and crosses, followed by the very welcome teas and coffees kindly provided by the WI.

I must place on record our appreciation of the wonderful service organised by Father Glyn. It couldn't have been more appropriate, with two of today's young people reading out letters written from the trenches by people from this area who were the same young age then as they were now. As usual, of course, the names of all of those from this parish who perished were read out.

2018 also saw the large Remembrance Poppies displayed on lampposts in Blackwater Town Centre for the second time. Pioneered, as I have already mentioned, by Cllr Cathy McKenna and picked up for 2018 by Cllr Margaret Cook.

### **Planning Applications**

I will now ask the Chair of our Planning and Payments Committee, Cllr Rachel Mogg, to tell you about activity on the planning front during the past year.

Rachel chairs our Planning and Payments Committee. Her Vice Chair is Margaret Cook.

### **Planning Applications**

The Town Council is consulted by Hart District Council on all planning applications within our parish. Our 'Planning and Payments Committee' is comprised of all eight Town Councillors. The Committee meets roughly fortnightly to consider and make comment on planning applications and appeals within the parish, as appropriate.

Since the last Annual Town Meeting we have been consulted on 48 planning applications (including applications for planning permission, amendment of planning conditions, advertising and listed building consent). This is an increase on the 30 applications considered in the previous year.

The majority of these applications were for minor extensions to residential properties, although there were some major issues as well, as many parishioners will be aware.

38 of these applications have been decided by Hart District Council to date. Eight of the remaining applications are yet to be determined and two others were withdrawn. Of the 38 applications in our parish which have been decided by Hart District Council, they granted permission in 27 cases and refused permission in the other 11. Hart District Council were in agreement with us in 29 of these 38 cases. In some cases where we raised objections to planning applications, the applicants revised their plans and concerns we raised were addressed in the revised applications which were then granted permission. We have addressed Hart District Council's 'Planning Committee' on three occasions this year in relation to two planning applications.

### **Significant developments**

At the last Annual Town Meeting we reported that planning permission had been granted for developments at White Hart House on London Road in the town centre and Guillemont Park on Minley Road. Since that time development of White Hart House has been completed to form 'Bridgewater Apartments' and development at Guillemont Park (which has been renamed Helios Park) is underway.

Development of Hawley Park Farm remains an important issue for residents in our parish and those in the neighbouring area of Rushmoor. Planning permission for 126 houses on this site was approved in 2015. We reported at the last Annual Town Meeting that the developers intended to

seek planning permission to build 158 houses on this site. Since that time they have submitted a planning application for 158 houses (including some flats). We have raised a number of concerns with the plans and we have made a strong case of these objections to Hart District Council's 'Planning Committee' and 'Planning (Major Sites) Sub-Committee'. This planning application is still under review by Hart District Council. As your Town Council we continue our efforts to try to ensure that the development is high quality and does the least damage possible to our environment and community.

### **Neighbourhood Plan**

One way that we, as a local community, can influence planning decisions for our parish is by creating our own Neighbourhood Plan. The Town Council, in collaboration with a group of interested residents, are developing a Neighbourhood Plan for our parish. This is an opportunity to address planning matters within our parish and promote a better town and country environment.

Further information can be found on the Neighbourhood Plan website:

[www.blackwaterhawleyplan.org.uk](http://www.blackwaterhawleyplan.org.uk).

Later this evening, Tim Ellis, who is a member of the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group, will present more on this and how you can get involved.

### **Floral Sponsorship**

Once again, we are grateful to the local businesses which sponsored the floral displays in the Town Centre including:

- B&K Boiler Services
- Blackwater Pharmacy
- DD Hire Services
- Foresight Opticians
- Mr Bumble Public House, who do so much else to brighten up the town centre
- Seymours Estate Agents

We are very grateful to every one of these. Each business was given a certificate to display in their premises so that their customers knew they helped make this project happen. We hope you will return the favour by supporting these businesses. I would also like to thank Cllrs Bob Harward and Rachel Mogg who called around the businesses in Blackwater in order to find these sponsors.

### **Blackwater Railway Station**

We are very fortunate to have Blackwater Railway Station on our doorstep. Regular trains to Reading one direction and Guildford or Gatwick in the other give us great connections with many destinations, even holidays abroad from Gatwick Airport. Many people also use this line (known as the North Downs Line) to get to Guildford or Reading to change for fast trains to London, rather than battle their way through traffic to Fleet or Farnborough Stations. So how can we support and improve this valuable facility?

Well, we will hear from David Daniels of the Community Rail Partnership, which now covers this line, in a while. But there are other options being pursued as well.

The Government has an “Access for All” programme to help fund improvements like those seen at Farnborough and Fleet Stations, where new lifts and footbridges have been built. Together with Hart District Council we have made a bid for Blackwater to be added to the next stage of this programme. There’s no guarantee that we will succeed, but it’s worth trying to save people having to climb the slippery wooden stairs up to the A30 in all weathers, and often in darkness, just to change platforms. For others it will open up the ability to use the railway, which current arrangements make physically impossible.

Another idea is to create physical improvements, such as new planting in appropriate places to bring colour to the environment of the station, or even a lick of paint. Great Western Railways, who run the trains on this line have a fund for such improvements and the Town Council will be putting together a bid to this fund later this year to see what can be done. They would welcome any thoughts you have on what you would like to see happen.

I won’t steal David’s thunder on the work of the Community Rail Partnership, so perhaps we can cover all of these possibilities later on.

There are still many other ideas being looked at for the town centre and we are always open to helpful suggestions. It was a blow to lose Lloyds Bank in January, but we are not alone in this. The number of banks on Britain’s high streets has declined from over 20,000 thirty years ago to barely 7,500 now!

### **The Meadows Gyrotory**

Two years ago we heard from Surrey County Council about proposals for The Meadows Gyrotory. There were many questions and comments from concerned residents, which we pursued. As a result changes were made to the proposals, the most significant of which has been to do most of the work at night and not during the rush-hours.

As a result, the impact of the works has not been anywhere near as bad as we feared. I’m sure we all remember how bad it was when the footway to Watchmoor Park Industrial Estate was constructed, when much of the area was trapped in gridlock. That doesn’t mean there haven’t been problems. In particular, the temporary traffic lights they are using have malfunctioned on several occasions, always seeming to inconvenience traffic from Hampshire going over the bridge into Surrey! I’m sure that’s not intentional, but we now have the contact details of the person who can get this sorted out if it happens again.

I would like to thank everyone who came to those meetings with Kevin Ratnasingam and who wrote to and emailed Surrey County Council expressing your fears. I would also like to thank Surrey for listening and for choosing to go for night-time working, which is costing them quite a lot more, but is certainly making a massive difference.

### **Yelabus**

The Council has continued to support the popular Yelabus with a modest grant, meaning that residents of this parish are entitled to make full use of this service.

**Finance**

I will now pass over to the Chair of our Finance Committee, Cllr Brian Blewett, to tell you about our finances.

Brian chairs our Finance Committee. His Vice Chair is Terry Hunt.

The Council's forecast expenditure for the current financial year is £300,573. Approximately half of this is funded through the council tax and the other half through other income, such as from hiring out the council facilities and so on. It also includes an expected £5,795 draw on our balances, which will stand at a very healthy £193,146.

For the coming year the proposed budget is £306,422 and includes a modest 3% increase in our council tax, similar to other bodies such as the County Council and the Fire & Rescue Authority, which are also levying 3% increases.

This will result in the band D council tax for the Town Council of £82.32 for the coming year, which is still £1.35 less in cash terms than 12 years ago, when the band D council tax was £83.67 and very much lower in real terms when you consider how much other taxes have gone up. For example, the band D County Council levy has gone up from £955.62 for a band D property 12 years ago to £1,236.87, an increase of 29% or £281.25.

This increase is necessary in order to ensure that we are able to continue to provide good services whilst ensuring that our balances remain healthy so that the Council can withstand any emergencies that may come our way. Indeed, our Finance Regulations state that the reserves in each year shall be maintained within the range of three to twelve months of gross expenditure. As our balances are projected to stand at £193,146 at 1<sup>st</sup> April, this is comfortably within the required range.

Like any other organisation, we have to cope with a number of increased costs, including the welcome introduction and subsequent increase in the National Living Wage, which has increased our staffing costs by several thousand pounds. These costs have all been absorbed within the budget.

The tremendous achievement of keeping our council tax at reasonable a level whilst maintaining all of our services is the result of working hard to reduce costs in every way we reasonably can without cutting those services, whilst increasing income by getting more people to use our facilities.

**Another busy year!**

So, as you have heard, it has been yet another busy year for your Town Council. There is much more I could tell you about, but I have already spoken for long enough. We will be happy to answer questions on any of these issues, or on anything else that I've not covered, when we get to item 6.

**For the Future**

The Town Council consistently opposed the development at Hawley Park Farm, but permission has been granted for 126 houses and will almost certainly be granted for the 158 house proposal once the details have been sorted out. Developments of this nature have a big impact on the communities that surround them, so developers are required to pay for mitigation works to reduce this impact. Among these will be minor highway improvements and also contributions to improve leisure facilities in the area. The Town Council plan to use those leisure funds to provide new facilities at

the leisure centre and to find other sources of funding such as grants and even a modest contribution from our reserves to achieve a refresh of our facilities. There's a lot of work to do on this before you will see any changes, but if anyone would like to suggest leisure facilities that we don't already have, that you would like to see, please let us know.

We also hope to refresh the bar and maybe look at providing refreshments during the day if that is feasible. Again, no decisions have been made yet, but any suggestions would be welcome.

Another area which we are looking into is Sawpit Lane, or the Monkey Woods, between Parkhill Road and Frogmore Park Drive. It's a wonderful walk here through from the A30 to Rosemary Lane, but only a small proportion of the land is in Town Council ownership and care. In recent years there have been several encroachments onto the rest of the land, so we need to look at getting it into public ownership before it is lost forever.

And, of course, there is still a lot to do in the Town Centre. The flowers will be there again this summer and we are looking for a contractor to maintain the four planters with colour all year round.

### **Our Staff**

Finally, the councillors would like to place on record our on-going appreciation of the tremendous work done by Tom Gahagan and all of the Council's staff. Without their efforts people would really notice the difference.

I am sad to report, however, that we will be losing Tom this summer, as he has decided to take retirement. We wish Tom well for a long, healthy and happy retirement. He has been the Executive Officer here for 17 years and during that time he has worked hard to help us get the Council's finances onto a sound footing following the loss of half the parish to Rushmoor, all of the support grant for the leisure centre from Hart and, more recently, another large chunk of the parish at Ancells Farm which, quite rightly, is now part of the Fleet parish. He leaves us with very healthy balances in the bank, facilities which have seen a significant number of improvements in recent years and council tax at a level which is substantially lower in real terms than it was twelve years ago. He will be a very hard act to follow!

**Adrian Collett**  
**Chair of the Council**