

## NEW MILTON TOWN COUNCIL

### Annual Report of the Town Council – 2016/17

#### Cllr David Hawkins, Chairman / Mayor

Welcome to our 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Town's meeting since the Town Council formed in 1979.

As Chairman, my report covers the work of the Town Council in general, plus some wider reaching matters in our community. I signed the Declaration of Acceptance of Office on 9 May 2016 thanking Councillors for re-electing me for an unprecedented third term of office. Cllr David Rice-Mundy was elected Vice-Chair / Deputy Mayor.

My chosen charity this year was **Pilgrim Bandits**, a local charity established in 2007 by a small group of Special Forces veterans with the sole aim of using their unique training and experience to help inspire wounded soldiers to live life to the full. Some view Pilgrim Bandits as a forces charity, but it is a Charitable Force, bringing support, help and adventure to injured personnel from both Armed & Emergency services.

At our June meeting we heard about a few items of continuing interest, as follows:

- a) The Town Clerk referred to the outcome of the joint NABMA / NMTC business rates appeal which was unsuccessful, but at least clarified operator liability.
- b) The Town Clerk referred to a press release from NFDC regarding a review of local government in Hampshire in conjunction with advisors PwC.
- c) The Town Clerk referred to a letter forwarded by Cllr Clarke to Keith Mans at HCC regarding future provision of children's services in the town.

At our August meeting we heard details from HCC regarding the launch of a **Devolution Consultation** entitled **Serving Hampshire**. Councils still seem unable to agree a way forward and consequently nothing has been decided.

In September, it was the turn of **Virgin Media** to tell us about bringing **Ultrafast Broadband** to our town, grey boxes and all. We also heard from Ashley Infant School about details of the **Ashley Family Hub**, an exciting new initiative offering support and signposting for local families in a drop-in environment following the closure of Children's Services locally. Members were told of a DCLG consultation on Precepts and the Government's warning that Parish Councils could in future be "capped". The Government subsequently deferred any decision.

At our November meeting, we heard from Sir Desmond Swayne our local MP regarding the recent **DCLG Precept Consultation** and threatened capping of local councils, stating he had made representations to the Secretary of State. The Chairman informed members that New Milton Police were unable to attend this meeting because they are committed to **Operation Swift**, dealing with crime on the rail route from Bournemouth to Southampton.

Members suggested inviting the **Police Crime Commissioner** to speak at a future Town Council meeting, or Annual Towns' Meeting, but he recently declined.

In December, Town Council approved the **2017/18 Precept** in the sum of £715,564.

The Council also agreed to write to the Rt Hon Sir Desmond Swayne MP, regarding the future of the **Post Office** in Sea Road, Barton-on-Sea. Suffice to say at our last Town Council meeting we heard from Cllr Craze that this could be a long-drawn out affair. In particular, the proposed post office at Marine Drive in Barton was part of a long consultation process possibly taking 6-8 months.

We received an update regarding plans to extend the Memorial Centre from Peter Marsh of PM Consultancy acting on behalf of HCC who presented an update on the **Community Hub** vision highlighting various options and referring to the discussions required to resolve governance issues between the various partners, as well as financing and investment considerations. Cllr Kendal is enthusiastic about the project and sought town councillor feedback with all present indicating support.

In January 2017, we heard from HCC about the future of **Phoenix Centre** as follows:

*"We are in a position that once the Education Funding Agency (EFA) / Eaglewood Academy have secured planning permission for works to the Phoenix Centre the sale of the site will be complete. In early discussions with the EFA and academy a completion of the sale was envisaged before April 2017, based on this the County Council quite rightly protected the youth provision use of the building up until that point. As you make mention of and we have advised in the past, once the sale is complete future use of the site by the youth provision or any other community focused group must be negotiated directly with the academy, as it would be on any school site. In this instance it is directly with Eaglewood Academy who are sponsored by the Gryphon Multi Academy Trust.*

*It is highly likely that the completion of the sale to the EFA will not conclude by the end of March, meaning that the existing or alternate arrangements around the management of the site will need to be considered. It may be the case that this does provide an opportunity for some further use of the site for youth activities, if agreed between the provider, County Council and Eaglewood. Officers will contact you on this point in due course to advise further. I am also aware that discussions are underway regards the development of a local hub in New Milton and the Town Council is directly involved. It would seem a sensible, if not already occurring, for the Town Council and youth providers to consider collectively how such a development might provide future opportunity...*

*It is pleasing to see the passion and commitment the Town Council has for the provision of youth facilities in the town. It is a commitment the County Council shares and one I hope we can both keep seeking to support from the limited resources we have available to do so.*

*One of the key reasons the County Council choose to develop part of the Phoenix Centre to provide accommodation for the children's centre in 2009 was to help sustain the future of the building and in doing so allow a continued youth offer in the area which, at the time, was already significantly reduced due to funding constraints. This investment of over £400,000 clearly achieved that ambition.*

*Significant cuts to local government funding continue and many difficult decisions around the shape of the future public service offer still need to be made. However, the decision to allow the conversion of the Centre from 2017 was not simply made as a "cost cutting" measure in direct response to this situation. Over the past two years the County Council has reshaped the way it provides services for 0 to 19 year olds, bringing together the work of children's centres, Early Help Hubs and Youth Support Services to form a single Family Support Service.*

*During this period we have ensured the security of youth services running out of the Phoenix Centre, allowing them to continue while the building remains in our ownership, something we will seek to continue should there be a need beyond the original March 2017 date for disposal to the Education Funding Agency (EFA).*

*As we are all aware, the Government has a commitment to deliver 500 Free Schools including academies within their current term of office. The purchase of the site by the EFA for the purposes of an academy was strongly challenged and only finally agreed to once the case for such a provision was fully evidenced and supported by the Regional Schools Commissioner.*

*The youth facility recently developed in Ringwood was the result of a successful bid to the 'Investing in Hampshire Fund' with funding also being contributed by the District Council, Town Council and Ringwood School. A clear example of where a strong local desire coupled with a collaborative approach can lead to a positive outcome.*

*The County Council is fully committed to the provision and support of youth services. It will however ensure that this is done within the financial constraints that it must operate within. The decision to allow the Phoenix Centre to become a school was taken only once all the facts had been considered. At no point was our decision based around the need to cut costs – our priority is to support the development of a well evidenced educational facility.”*

At our last Town Council meeting in March 2017, reference was made to an email received via Cllr Mel Kendall, from a New Milton resident asking about the proposal for the community arts hub and library on the recreation ground and the interest of the Recreation Ground Charity Trustees. The Town Clerk responded confirming that any redevelopment is subject to agreement on terms and conditions, Charity Commission approval and public consultation. The Town Clerk also replied below to an email from the same person, who had queried the rise in our Precept for 2017/18:

“Over the last 4 years, we lost £47k funding because of a much reduced council tax support grant from New Forest District Council following changes arising from the Council Tax Reduction scheme.

With the withdrawal of youth service provision by Hampshire County Council over the last year, a decision was made by Town Council to help the youth of the town by appointing a Youth Co-ordinator at a cost of £18k per annum.

In addition, the Town Council is undertaking Neighbourhood Planning exercise to help influence future development of the Town over the next 20 years, and as a local resident you should recently have received a survey form explaining this. With this in mind, the Town Council appointed a Town Development Manager last year at a cost of £33k pa to help regenerate the town and influence the Neighbourhood Plan. Subsequently, the Town Council agreed a budget next year of £25k to help expedite this plan, together with a Communications & Media budget of £20k.

Despite much reduced grant funding, plus additional investment in the town, its youth and future generally our average Band "D" element of Council Tax remains 10th competitive with other towns.”

It is interesting to note how my 2016 report concluded: ***The Town Clerk has written to HCC twice in no uncertain terms detailing this Council's concerns regarding the Phoenix Centre and was assured of an early reply. I will keep you posted.***

In conclusion, it has been a privilege and a pleasure to be Mayor and Chairman once more of this Town Council, and I would like to thank my Councillor colleagues and staff for all their hard work and support throughout my last year.