

Nailsea Town Council Annual Report 2010/11

What has the Town Council been doing?

It has been another busy year. A significant achievement was being reaccredited for Quality Council status which we originally achieved in 2006. This confirms that our administration and governance is of a high standard, but there is always much more that we can do.

The Council's activities are guided by the full Town Council and its respective committees. The Council's Vice-Chairman is Clare Hunt. The committees are Finance and General Purposes (chairman David Packham), Leisure Facilities (Val Smith), Planning and Environmental (James Tonkin), Policy (Anita Heapey) and Tithe Barn Management (Liz Frappell). I would like to thank these councillors for their efforts.

The Parish Plan sets out the priorities for the Town Council in the following areas: the future of Nailsea, green belt land, town centre, heritage, open spaces (amenity space and public rights of way), leisure facilities and community safety. During this year the Council has been focused on a wide variety of matters, with the major ones described below.

The Future of Nailsea

The Town Council has a major financial challenge to address in deciding whether to fill gaps in services created by district council cutbacks. The danger is that the Town Council has to take on more responsibility, but with no funds being transferred to take over these services. The only way it could do this would be by raising the Precept, in the knowledge that North Somerset will not be reducing its tax burden on residents even though it is significantly reducing its expenditure, mainly as a result of the loss of central government funding. In this respect decisions about grant funding will become increasingly important.

The coalition government initiated its Localism Bill in December 2010. Localism is a new word for an old idea, namely the involvement of community groups in managing local services. Unfortunately, the cutbacks made by North Somerset Council and the impact of the recession means that community groups are being expected to take on more responsibility with even fewer resources available to them.

The Town Council has an annual Community Award for people who have given long and exceptional service to the community and I am pleased to congratulate this year's winner, Mrs Sue Haggio.

Green Belt land

North Somerset Council has produced its Core Strategy for planning. This forms the basis for planning decisions until 2026. The Strategy assumes some small scale additions to housing, but the Town Council is more concerned by the mix of housing, so that the town continues to be attractive to people of all ages. The demographic challenge facing Nailsea during the period of the Core Strategy are the consequences of an ageing population and the pressures on younger families to afford suitable properties.

The Town Council supports most of the goals of the Core Strategy, but has consistently opposed the refusal by North Somerset Council to discuss adjustments and extensions to the Green Belt, and continues to do so.

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Town Centre

The Town Council is keen to support the development of the retail and commercial activities of businesses in the Town. Waitrose opening its store has been a vote of confidence in the Town, and the Farmers' and Craft Markets, as well as the Tuesday market increase footfall in the town centre. We are all concerned by the proliferation of charity shops but the Council has taken the approach that within reason it is better for shops to be occupied rather than left empty.

Heritage

The restoration and extension of the Tithe Barn started, and the Nailsea Baptist Church purchased Church House. This resulted in the Town Council office relocating to the High Street for around 9 months. A requirement of the £500,000 grant from Heritage Lottery Fund was recruiting a part-time Heritage Development Officer for two years. Dr Katherine Hann was appointed to this role and we are excited by the opportunities this will create for education and research, relating to the Tithe Barn, and to Nailsea as a whole.

In conjunction with English Heritage and North Somerset Council the Town Council is trying to initiate a scheme to develop the glassworks site, which was identified as the number one problem area in the Town in the parish plan consultation. We have identified that the costs of opening up the archaeology are not affordable, but a scheme to turn the site from a wasteland into a public open space could be achievable and negotiations with landscape architects have been undertaken. However, even the most basic scheme will require grant funding, so there remains much to do to make any scheme a reality.

Open Spaces

In response to new legislation we have asked North Somerset Council to initiate a consultation on implementing Dog Control Orders in some areas. This would require dogs to be kept on leads in these areas, with the objective of reducing the incidence of dog mess not being picked up. This is an issue which continues to be a problem on public sports pitches in the Town.

The Council employs a Town Orderly to pick up litter and feedback from residents continues to be positive about the benefit of this significant expenditure. The work of the Orderly also supports the superb efforts of the Nailsea in Bloom group, who achieved another gold award this year and who provide such an important service to the town, with financial help from the Council. The Council is keen to assist the work of community groups involved in the management of open spaces such as Nowhere Wood and the surrounding area, Stockway North Nature Reserve and the Moorend Spout environmental improvements. The Council is also committing more resources to the maintenance of the Golden Valley bridleway.

National Grid's proposals for additional pylons as part of the Hinkley to Seabank link pose a great threat to the countryside around the town. The Town Council has worked closely with the two local pressure groups and Wraxall and Failand Parish Council to oppose National Grid's flawed consultation process, and to work in conjunction with groups along the entire route to lobby at national level for the planning of extra electricity capacity to focus on underground and undersea options rather than continue to rely on pylons.

Leisure Facilities

North Somerset Council has contracted out the management of its cemetery and crematoria services. This has had an impact on our Garden of Rest, although we continue to directly manage the maintenance contract for the site.

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It has been agreed to set up a Working Party to look at the long term management of the allotments, with self management by the allotment association being one of the options. There is at present a three year waiting list for allotments and the Council is endeavouring to find a suitable site for more allotments but this is proving difficult.

This year we have replaced fencing at the Hannah More Road play area along with improvements to both the swing units and a new multi toddler unit once the old unit had been removed. As the fencing had been installed about 15 years ago this was replaced with galvanised fencing which will hopefully last even longer.

We have been working with Nailsea School to set up an organisation to manage some of the school's superb facilities so that the community can benefit from using them.

Community Safety

This encompasses a number of areas from road and pedestrian safety to anti-social behaviour. The Council works closely with the police, Youth House, the Town Centre owners, Churches and community groups to assist in dealing with these issues. The Council's grant-giving focuses on trying to help group's working in this area. The Council is currently considering the installation of a multi-use games area (MUGA) in Millennium Park in response to a suggestion from young people at Youth House.

Promoting Disability Equality

The Town Council has a continuous process for trying to understand and respond to the needs of people with disabilities. During this year we have worked with Backwell Access Group in support of its objective to improve access to Backwell Lake. Access to public rights of way is being improved by a programme of replacing stiles with kissing gates which was started this year.

The Council web-site has been in need of improvement for some time, and we expect to relaunch our site in May 2011. The new web-site will incorporate improvements for people with visual impairment. The Tithe Barn restoration has involved taking professional advice on features to improve the building for people with disabilities: this includes working with the Royal National Institute for the Deaf to try and ensure the hearing loop system operates to a high standard.

Planning

The review of planning applications is one of the most important aspects of the Town Council's work. It makes recommendations to the District Council on planning applications but the final decision is made by North Somerset Council. Residents are welcome to make comments on any application that the council are considering.

The Planning and Environmental Committee have considered 176 planning applications and made representations at site meetings of the North Somerset Central Area Committee during this council year. The Town Council still has issues with North Somerset Council procedures which mean that in some instances the Council is informed of planning applications some time before residents have been notified in writing by North Somerset Council. This is unacceptable as it means the Planning Committee is making decisions without knowing the views of affected residents. Where this has created problems the Council has either deferred applications or reconsidered them. This matter has been regularly addressed with North Somerset Council but unfortunately the problem persists.

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How has the Council spent your money?

The Town Council element of the total Council tax bill is called the Precept. In 2010-11 Nailsea Town Council had a precept of £399,762. This represents £63.42 for a band D property. The Council's precept has increased 1.4% in total since 2007-08, and the precept for 2011-12 has been set at the same level as the current and previous year. In addition to the precept the Council generates income from some of its activities, such as room hiring, allotments, grazing on its land at Gaulacre and market canopy hire. I would like to point out that Town Councillors do **not** receive any allowances for the work they do.

The total expenditure budget of the Council in the year was £405,275. The major items of revenue expenditure are:

Staff, office and administration costs: £151,100 (37% of the total budget)

(this includes: office staff, caretakers, handyman, Town Orderly and Markets' Manager, office sundries, audit and insurance)

Grants: £76,681 (19%)

This year the Council has agreed clearer criteria for assessing applications and awarding grants. The purpose of this is to ensure greater accountability and focus on getting the greatest benefit from the grants awarded.

Leisure and open spaces: £58,950 (15%)

(this includes: maintenance and improvement of sports fields, public rights of way, woodlands, open spaces, Nailsea in Bloom, Garden of Rest, bus shelters, high street, litter and dog bins, allotments, play equipment, Farmers and Craft markets, Christmas lights and street lighting)

Property maintenance and insurance: £46,944 (12%)

Legal and banking: £35,750 (9%)

(this includes legal and professional fees, banking costs, loans and audit)

Car parks and CCTV: £21,850 (5%)

Other: £14,000 (3%)

The major capital project for the Council has been the Tithe Barn restoration and extension. The total budget for the scheme is £1.2m. This includes the appointment of a Heritage Development Officer on a part-time two year contract. The Heritage Lottery Fund has granted £500,000 to the project and the remainder of the funds has been made up of grants and fund raising by the Tithe Barn Trust, who I would like to congratulate for their outstanding efforts. The Town Council's financial commitment is a £150,000 loan and the £320,000 proceeds of selling Church House. Holy Trinity Church has donated £50,000 and the Tithe Barn Trust continues its fund raising efforts. I am pleased to say that the project is within budget.

Cllr Rod Lees, Town Council Chairman

May 2011