

Nailsea Town Council Annual Report 2012-13

What has the Town Council been doing?

This year we welcomed John Phillips as a councillor following the resignation of Robin Bell, who I would like to thank for his time as a councillor.

Much of the Town Council's work has once again been affected by the impact of the savings which North Somerset Council (NSC) is making to its budget. The Town Council has a major challenge to address in deciding whether to fill gaps in services created by district council cutbacks and additional charges.

The Town Council element of the total Council tax bill is called the Precept. In 2011-12 Nailsea Town Council had a precept of £399,762 and in 2012-13 this increased to £444,261, an apparent increase of 11%. However, included in this figure was Special Expenses, a separate tax levied by North Somerset Council which previously did not show in the Band D calculation. Therefore the actual increase in the Precept and the Band D calculation was 3%, accounted for by the Town Council taking over responsibility for services at Youth House, and funds being put into reserves to cover the cost of expected reductions in other services by NSC. The Council's precept increased 1.4% in total from 2007-08 to 2011-12.

The Precept increase in 2013-14 is 3.0% but because of changes in the calculation of Council Tax Bands, this has translated into a Band D increase of 11%. Further details of expenditure are highlighted at the end of this report.

Nailsea has a wealth of **volunteer activity**, a situation that the town should take pride in. However, voluntary activity without resources, especially funding, can be very fragile, and the Town Council continues to see a key part of its role as supporting voluntary activity through grant funding. The work of the organisations requesting grants is important, but resources are limited and difficult decisions about priorities have to be made.

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 winners: Mrs Rita Booth, Mr Bryan Irwin and Mr Philip Woolcock. The Council also has an award for young people: the very worthy recipient this year is the 2467 (Nailsea) Squadron Air Training Corps.

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, as ever, been focused on a wide variety of matters, with the major ones described below under the parish plan headings.

The Future of Nailsea

The 2011 census highlighted a number of issues of major significance for the future of the Town:

- The total population is declining: it is now 15,630, down from 17,230 in 1991 and 16,546 in 2001.
- The population age profile is rapidly shifting toward older age groups, giving concern about the balance of our population. This has an impact on all the facilities and services in the Town.
- The average number of people occupying each home is reducing, meaning that a static number of properties ensures a continued population decline.
- Compared to North Somerset and the South West region Nailsea has an oversupply of 4-bed properties and an undersupply of 1 and 2-bed properties.

The Town Council made its formal response to NSC's **Core Strategy** in 2011, which sets out planning policies until 2026. The Council objected to NSC's refusal to conduct a review of the green belt and made representations to the Planning Inspector who reviewed the Core Strategy, but his decision supported NSC's position. The Council has, for a number of years, requested that the green belt around the north east boundary of the town be relaxed in order to support the development of the

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industrial and commercial sites and promote jobs, whilst supporting the extension of the green belt south of the town.

The Council's response to the **Site Allocations consultation** has been completed: NSC's document identifies, among many other things, where new residential development is proposed, and also areas where green spaces need to be protected. The Town Council is more concerned by the mix of housing than new housing numbers per se, so that the Town continues to be attractive to people of all ages. The demographic challenge facing Nailsea is compounded by the pressures on younger families to afford suitable properties.

The Town Council has regularly considered whether or not to develop a **Neighbourhood Plan**, which must be approved in a referendum by residents. The current position is not to start the Neighbourhood Plan process, but this will be kept under review, as we learn from the experience of places that have embarked on one. A Neighbourhood Plan could, for example, be used as an opportunity to consider options for residential sites.

The Town Council had a lease on land at Whitesfield Road, which it surrendered in order for Alliance Housing (formerly NS Housing) to develop **affordable housing** in what is now called Brooking's Meadow. The standard of the housing is excellent and is a benchmark for future developments.

The Town Council works closely with the Nailsea Against Pylons Group (which includes Wraxall and Failand Parish Council) and Dr Liam Fox to oppose **National Grid's** plans for pylons and its flawed consultation process. National Grid has conceded the undersea option is technically feasible and the underground option is nothing like as costly as they first claimed but they are still pursuing a predominantly overground route. Some concessions have been made but the campaign continues.

The review of **planning applications** is one of the most important aspects of the Town Council's work. It makes recommendations but the final decision is made by North Somerset Council. Residents are welcome to make comments on any application and to attend our fortnightly Planning Committee meetings.

Town Centre

Our major campaign this year has been to fight NSC's proposal to impose charges in the Town's **car parks**. The Town Council, the Chamber of Trade and Commerce, Waitrose and the shopping centre owners are convinced that the impact of parking charges on the town's economy is potentially disastrous, and takes no account of Nailsea's role as a retail and employment hub for nearby villages. **The Council has offered to take on a 25 year lease from NSC to manage the car parks which are badly in need of improvement and on-going maintenance.**

The Town Council is keen to support the development of the retail and commercial activities of businesses in the Town, being only too aware of how difficult trading conditions are. The monthly **Farmers and Craft Markets** continue to be an important part of the life of the town, and the Council continues to support them financially: the Council has obtained grant funding to develop a **Community Market**, which is planned to be launched in September 2013.

Open Spaces

The Council employs a Town Orderly to pick up litter, and feedback from residents continues to be positive about the benefits. The work of the Orderly also supports the superb efforts of the volunteers who plant flowers around the town, with financial help from the Council. Other initiatives include the following:

- A proposal for a new public right of way from North Drove to Clevedon: this is dependent on obtaining grant funding.
- The Grounds Maintenance contracts for land owned or leased by the Council have been re-tendered and three year contracts awarded.

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- The Council has agreed a 5 year lease with Nailsea and Backwell Rugby Club for land on Engine Lane. The agreement creates a permissive path across the land and a new pedestrian gate has been installed making it easier for all users to access the local footpaths.
- The Council has agreed that Nailsea Cricket Club can have a sub-lease with Nailsea Playing Fields Association for land they have used for many years at the Grove Playing Field.

Leisure Facilities

It was decided this year not to develop Gaulacre for specific recreational uses, such as **allotments**, but this decision will be regularly reviewed. The allotment waiting list is over three years but additional allotments have been created by reducing the size of existing ones as they become available. We now have approx 200 allotments. The Council owns the **Grove Playing Field** and has been working with the Nailsea Playing Fields Association and the sports clubs to consider the long term drainage issues for the site, following major flooding problems in August and November 2012. Nailsea United FC has been granted planning and owners's permission to build permanent changing rooms at the Playing Field.

The **Tithe Barn** has gone from strength to strength: the restoration and extension was a major success in itself, coming in £50,000 less than the £1.2m budget. As for the usage of the Barn the range of activities carried out there is remarkable. The events organised by the Tithe Barn Trust are diverse and ambitious and are a credit to everyone involved. The business plan when the Barn opened in 2011 was that it would break-even in 3 years and we are ahead of that target. This means that soon there will be no tax payer subsidy for the operation of the Barn. The Town Council's previous home, Church House, had an annual shortfall of over £20,000 so our relocation has resulted in reduced costs, as well as helping to finance the creation of a superb community facility.

Heritage

The Parish Plan consultation highlighted the former **Glassworks site** as our biggest 'grotspot'. Various plans for development have been put forward over the years but all have foundered due to the constraints of the site and related costs. As a scheduled ancient monument, English Heritage has the final say in what can happen, and their primary concern is the protection of the archaeological remains. The Town Council has made improvement of the site one of its major priorities and in the last year a lot of work has been done behind the scenes to find workable solutions: we are developing a landscaping scheme which we believe is acceptable to English Heritage. We plan to publicise a proposed scheme shortly, but inevitably cost will be the biggest consideration.

The national cycle route known as the Festival Way runs from Bristol to Nailsea. In conjunction with Sustrans the Council has agreed the installation of a '**portrait bench**' in Millennium Park, which commemorates three people of historical significance in the town, namely Redvers Coate, Adge Cutler and Hannah More.

Community Safety

This encompasses a number of areas from road and pedestrian safety to anti-social behaviour. The Council works closely with the police, Nailsea Youth House, the Town Centre owners, Churches and community groups to assist in dealing with these issues. A comprehensive analysis of the costs and benefits of **CCTV** has been on-going. Improvements to the existing system will be made by utilising wireless technology.

Promoting Disability Equality

The Town Council has a continuous process for trying to understand and respond to the needs of people with disabilities. It has made a financial contribution to the new accessible path at **Backwell Lake** which will benefit people with and without disabilities, and making this important resource available throughout the year. Access to **public rights of way** is being improved by a programme of replacing stiles with kissing gates. The Council has set up a Public Rights of Way Working Party and is discussing the potential for routes which are accessible to people with disabilities.

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In addition to the full Town Council there are committees dealing with council business i.e. Finance and General Purposes (chairman David Packham), Leisure Facilities (Val Smith), Planning and Environmental (James Tonkin) and Policy (Anita Heappey). The Council's Vice-Chairman is Clare Hunt. I would like to thank these councillors for their efforts. Finally, I would like to thank the staff of the Town Council, Ian Morrell (Town Clerk), Sue Walker (Assistant Town Clerk), Liz Fey (Finance Officer), Gina Provis (Markets' Manager), Mandy Langham (Town Orderly) and our caretakers Frank Taylor and Pete Charman.

How has the Council spent your money?

The total expenditure budget of the Council in the year was £392,061 (down 3% on the previous year). The major items of revenue expenditure are:

Staff, office and administration costs: £156,220 (32% of the total budget) - this includes: office staff, caretakers, handyman, Town Orderly and Markets' Manager, office costs and web-site.

Grants: £49,233 (10%) - the Council has implemented clearer criteria for assessing applications and awarding grants so as to ensure greater accountability and focus on getting the greatest benefit from the grants awarded.

Leisure and open spaces: £98,658 (20%) - this includes: youth services, maintenance and improvement of sports fields, public rights of way, woodlands, open spaces, Nailsea in Bloom, planting and watering, Garden of Rest, bus shelters, litter and dog bins, allotments, play equipment, Farmers and Craft markets, Christmas lights and street lighting.

Property maintenance and insurance: £27,600 (6%)

Legal and banking: £67,050 (14%) - legal and professional fees, banking costs, loans and audit.

Car parks and CCTV: £36,800 (8%)

Other: £50,000 (10%)

The Town Council's budgeted expenditure is higher than the Precept because of income generated from some of its activities, such as hiring the Tithe Barn, allotments, grazing on its land at Gaulacre and market canopy hire. The income from hiring the Tithe Barn has increased significantly since it opened in 2011, and the Barn is expected to reach operational break-even in 2013-14. As already reported, the Precept increase in 2013-14 is 3%. I would like to point out that Town Councillors do **not** receive any allowances for the work they do.

The decision-making for the 2013-14 budget was particularly difficult. NSC is under a great deal of pressure regarding its financial position: it has cut back on services and has been asking town and parish councils to take on more of the responsibilities which it previously undertook.

The Town Council's planned routine expenditure in 2013-14 is less than expenditure in 2012-13. However, £146,653 has been added to reserves as a result of uncertainty surrounding three key areas. Over the next 2 years or so the position on each of these will be clearer and will inform future decisions about the level of Precept:

- Recalculation of the council tax bands: £29,553
- Car parks: £50,000
- Potential service reductions by North Somerset Council: £67,100

This money has been found from a 3% increase in the Precept, a contribution from general reserves, an increase in income from the Tithe Barn and a payment from NSC in relation to the recalculation of Council Tax. In summary, revenue expenditure has been reduced by 5% but reserves increased to cover future risks, resulting in an increase in Precept broadly in line with inflation at 3%. Nationally determined changes meant this translated into a parish rate increase of 10.8%.

Cllr Rod Lees, Town Council Chairman
April 2013