



# NORTH WALSHAM TOWN COUNCIL

## Town Mayor's Report - 5 April 2016

North Walsham has continued to evolve since the last Town Meeting, on 7 April last year.

The election in May last year, and subsequent filling of vacancies by co-option, brought new blood onto the Council. We still have vacancies that need to be filled, so if you are interested in seeing first-hand how local government works please consider putting yourself forward for consideration. Parish and Town Council's, rightly or wrongly, often have a reputation for being old fuddy-duddies who are out of touch with important parts of the community. Wouldn't it be a boon, then, if some of the town's younger generation came forward?

The big story continues to be the ongoing saga of J D Wetherspoon. We are a little further forward now than at this time last year. Following unsuccessful efforts to acquire the former surgery on Northfield Road as a community hub to house a number of local organisations (including the Council, North Norfolk Community Transport, the CAB and others) in one place, the District Council turned its attention to other potential sites. It is currently in negotiation with Norfolk Property Services (a wing of Norfolk County Council) about a new site for the Council – much closer to the town centre than Northfield Road. We expect to move during the course of this year, subject to satisfactory agreements and the completion of necessary work.

Our markets continue to be a success. As things stand, the Thursday market has no available pitches, although we are looking to expand into the newly paved area at the top of Market Street. Unfortunately the precinct is not an option at this time due to the state of the footway – the Council would be neglecting its duty of care under health and safety legislation in running an event where accidents are quite clearly waiting to happen. But this is an issue that could be resolved over the coming year. The Sunday markets continue to raise funds for local charities – at 50% of the pitch fee of £20. We have started a three month trial of markets on the second Sunday of each month (running from April to June). And we are looking at other, more specialised markets, fairs and events. Please submit any views or ideas to either the Town Clerk or Market Manager.

The Council voted in January to increase its Council Tax precept by 42.6%. In percentage terms this is a large increase. Unfortunately this large number is overshadowing the actual increase of £19.87 per household per year, which equates to £1.66 a month. The primary reasons for the increase are

- A partnership project with the Norfolk Community Foundation to upgrade the Council's street-lighting assets to LED operation. We received confirmation in March that we had successfully bid for a grant £14,974 towards the total cost of a project that in the longer term will reduce the Council's energy usage and therefore costs.
- The need (following a thorough health & safety and security review) for new, more secure storage for maintenance equipment and materials used by Council grounds staff.
- Essential upgrades to the Council's IT system.
- Essential repair/renovation work on the Market Cross, which the Council be discussing with Historic England.

- A third successful bid to the Norfolk County Council Parish Partnership Scheme (for 2016/17), which is designed to enable small highways improvements such as speed warning signs. Those of you driving along Happisburgh and Acorn Roads will have seen the first two signs in operation; this bid will bring a third sign, providing greater coverage and quicker evidence of hotspots to pass on to the police.
- Although it has yet to make a decision about this, as we await a forthcoming series of meetings with the District Council on its Local Plan, the Council felt it prudent to set aside funds to support the production of a Neighbourhood Plan. Our aim is to have as much influence as we can over the Local Plan, which would mean a Neighbourhood Plan could more easily work alongside this document and support what we as a community want to see in the town. The Council will consider the wider views of local groups and residents before committing to this path and the expense (and risk) it entails.
- NNDC has agreed in principal to cover all reasonable costs associated with a move imposed on the Council by the sale of the New Road offices. But we felt it was prudent to ensure there was cover for unexpected costs that could arise from this. Relocating our offices is – contrary to the comments made by some – not quite as simple a task as it seems. For example, the CCTV system requires a considerable amount of work re-wiring the base unit and re-aligning the various communication nodes around the town so that the cameras send to a new location.

It is important to know that we could have sought a larger precept, as other projects were on the table. Some have been set aside for now. Others will be funded from Council reserves, which means that the increase is kept to a minimum. And as we have said previously, the Council could have declined to increase the precept, but then we would not have been able to support projects which we see as vital to the town and community.

The footway in St Nicholas Court precinct remains an unsightly problem. There have been discussions between Norfolk County Council and NNDC to seek a way forward, but these have yet to produce any results. And the complex legal position on ownership and liability means that it would be potentially very expensive for any one organisation to carry out any remedial work. We all agree, though, that the precinct should be a priority.

Last year, then Mayor Richard Sims reported that NNDC was in the process of completing a compulsory purchase on the 4/4a Market Street site. We can now see the final outcome of that process in the paved area and view of the Church Tower from Market Street. It does however also provide a view of the eyesore of the precinct footway!

We have made significant progress on our Woodville Park project, with the arrival of Matt Smith (more from him later) to drive the fundraising effort to much higher levels than we originally thought possible. Matt is in the process of establishing a charity, and the original view of improving the play area on a single park has developed into a project with a much broader focus on play in all three of the Council's parks. Woodville is just the first piece in a much bigger puzzle.

I would like to thank the grounds staff for continuing to do an admirable job looking after the Cemetery, Churchyard and Parks. And now also siting our SAM2 speed warning signs. This is not always an easy job, as they are often outside in poor weather. They are more visible now – please do feel free to approach them if you see them around our sites; they are happy to get feedback on what they are doing, even advice on hedge trimming. Or just to say hello. They are an important cog in the machine that is your Town Council.

The Christmas Lights Group continues to produce the goods, and Great Yarmouth College should receive some credit for the work its students have produced – lighting displays and the entrance tunnel for the new Grotto among them. The Group's work has seen attendance over the last couple

of years increase dramatically. The Council is particularly grateful for the time these volunteers give freely through the year (not just for the few weeks either side of the big day) to ensure that the town is prepared and lit for Christmas, and to the local businesses who continue to support their work in whatever way they are able. Similarly, the Fun Day Committee works very hard to organise the annual event in the War Memorial Park, and is again working alongside Arts North Norfolk on some very interesting plans. Who would have thought that dancers and rugby players would work together ..... ?

Finally some dates for your diaries

- North Walsham Festival – 19-26 June
- Civic Service – Sunday 19 June
- Fun Day – Sunday 26 June
- Fun Fair – Wed/Sun 27-30 July
- Circus Tyanna – Wed/Sun 10-14 August
- Markets – every Thursday and the final Sunday of each month except December STOP PRESS: don't forget the three month trial of additional markets on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of each month, starting on 10 April
- Christmas market – Sunday 18 December (100% of stall fees to annual Town Mayor's charity)

On behalf of Members of the Town, District and County Council, may I thank you all for attending this evening and move onto further reports, before turning the meeting over to you to address any queries you have to us as your representatives.