



# NORTH WALSHAM TOWN COUNCIL

## Town Mayor's Report - 4 April 2017

Good evening everyone, and thank you for attending this, the annual town meeting for North Walsham. As some of you here already know, this is not a meeting of the Town Council, but rather the meeting at which the Town Council, through the Town Mayor, reports to you and at which you get an opportunity to pose questions directly to Members of the three Councils which operate within North Walsham.

Three new Members have joined the Town Council since last year's annual meeting: Cllrs Robert Murphy, Peter Edge and Richard Harris. I am sure that residents in the East, West and North Wards respectively will get to know all three over time. Hopefully we can move forward to the next local government elections in May 2019 with a settled team of Councillors to represent your interests within the town.

The JD Wetherspoon saga continues to loom large on the horizon, fast approaching epic scale in terms of time and coverage. Almost weekly rumours appear on Facebook, none of which have any basis in fact. These rumours cover the full range of possibilities, from "not coming at all" to "open by Christmas". But such is life, especially when a big project for the town is involved. You can rest assured that the Town Council will be among the first to be informed by North Norfolk District Council, and as soon as we have something to share you will know about it.

The Town Council, as part of its contribution to the project, finally quit the New Road offices in September last year to move into shared accommodation with the North Walsham Registration Office at 18 Kings Arms Street. The necessary building work that makes this work is (finally!) coming to a conclusion, and the two organisations will share comfortable and fully provisioned offices thanks to NNDC. Although visitors may need to bring a skateboard if they wish to use our new kitchen! The move does, however, accomplish one of the key "must haves" in agreeing to move – that the Town Council remain accessible in or near to the town centre.

The Information Office had moved out of New Road earlier last year as part of this process, to be incorporated into the services offered by Arts North Norfolk operating from No 1 Market Place. This ultimately did not prove to be an ideal arrangement, and the partnership with ANN was ended late last year. However, thanks to Martin Miles, landlord at the Kings Arms Hotel, I am pleased to confirm that the Information Office will shortly be reopening at **Bubby's Little Shop** in Kings Arms Loke – the small shop attached to Club KA. I am also very pleased to say that some of the original volunteers at the Information Office have come forward to help us run it.

Our markets continue to be a success, and our Market Manager Nigel Clarke will say a few words later on. The improving weather is, as always, increasing the market footfall. 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 remains a health and safety concern 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. Rob Scammell will say a few words about the project – which will see the Town Council and Regenerate North Walsham working in partnership with other groups – to try and turn this around. The Sunday markets continue to raise funds for local charities – at 50% of the pitch fee of £20.

The Council voted in December to increase its Council Tax precept by 16%. A much smaller percentage increase than last year, but still (in percentage terms at least) a relatively large number. Once again this large percentage figure is overshadowing the actual increase of £10.84 per household per year. The Council's precept of £77.29 equates to £1.48 per household per month. The primary reasons for the increase are

- A contribution of £15,000 towards a local project to renew St Nicholas Court, aka "the precinct". The main problem – as everyone knows – is the state of the footway, with badly cracked and crumbling slabs and sunken drains causing severe trip hazards. We know there have been several accidents, some requiring ambulance attendance. But the footway area is under the ownership of the Crown Estate, which has no legal responsibility other than to sell it. And this is where the problem starts, as the Crown Estate has also stated that anyone can repair the area ... as long as it is prepared to take on all legal liability associated with it – something that is beyond a town council's ability. However, with RNW we hope a way forward has been found, based on a negotiated agreement with Crown Estate, grant funding and supported by further funding through the precept.
- Essential upgrades to the Council's IT system to take account of the District Council's move to an electronic planning system, amounting to £2,000. NNDC is ceasing the circulation of planning documentation on paper, and we need a way of displaying plans to Members at Planning Committee meetings. A laptop and projector are being purchased to allow this, and also to provide facilities for members of the public to view plans locally.
- £14,500 has been set aside towards the cost of employing an additional groundsman, possibly an apprentice. The need for this has arisen as a direct result of calls by residents for more, and better, grass verge maintenance. The Town Council has entered into an agreement with Norfolk County Council to take on this task in the urban area, but will need additional staff to take on the extra work. The County Council itself is providing a little over £10,000 towards the cost (it's calculation of the cost of carrying out the absolute minimum work), which will go towards essential equipment including a heavy-duty mower.
- £8,000 has been set aside towards the cost of a CCTV camera and lighting at the War Memorial Park, again answering calls from residents for something to be done not only to provide a safer park but also to help address perceived anti-social behaviour there.
- The first joint project between the Town Council and North Walsham Play, for Woodville Park, proved successful, raising the £40,000 needed in less than a year – and leading to NWP's Chairman, Matt Smith being nominated for a NNDC Big Society Awards category, ultimately being a finalist in the Contribution to a Big Society Funded Project award category. The Town Council has set aside £10,000 for NWP's second project, which will be a complete overhaul of the young children's play area behind the Community Centre.
- Discussions about a bus interchange in the town – removing the horrendous tailbacks at the Yarmouth Road, New Road and Church Street junction and easing some of the pressure in the town centre – have been given a new lease of life recently, and the Town Council has agreed to make a contribution (amounting to £5,000 a year over three years) towards the cost of providing bus shelters. These aren't cheap, but will be a much-needed part of the project if it finally goes ahead as we hope.
- With the new equipment our grounds staff have taken on (a new tractor, truck and digger alongside smaller ride-on mowers) and the need for new items such as a heavy-duty mower for grass verge maintenance, we also need to have a secure space for these to be stored and maintained. The Council has set aside £10,000 for this in the precept.

- New dog waste bins have recently been sited around the town, some at what we all think are silly heights – but apparently there is a health and safety reason for this! It all has to do with the weight of a full bin and the post on which it is mounted ..... To support this, we will also be adding some general litter bins at various locations, and £2,000 has been added to the precept to allow us to do this.
- Finally, our staff need to be properly trained to carry out their jobs. Our grounds staff need proper certification before they can drive the digger, or operate a chainsaw. Our office staff need to be trained to support the Council in an ever-changing world in which more and more work is passed down from the centre. For this reason an additional £5,000 is being added to the precept.

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 Next Big Thing is to start a conversation across the town about what we want North Walsham to look like 10, 15 or 20 years from now. NNDC is developing the new Local Plan, and the Town Council is working closely with the Local Plan team to lever in what we consider to be important points about where development (which could be several thousand new homes over twenty years) should be and what the town needs in essential infrastructure to be able to cope with such growth. We are now at a point where we can't keep seeing small developments of 80, 100, or 400 new homes which fall below the thresholds needed to trigger major infrastructure investment such as roads, schools, GP surgeries, etc. The town needs these as part of an integrated development plan. NNDC seems sympathetic to this need, so we will continue to work with them. But at the same time we need a clear vision of what the town should look like, and for this we need your input. We'll move on to this shortly.

I would like to thank the grounds staff for continuing to do an admirable job looking after the Cemetery, Churchyard, Parks and siting our SAM2 speed warning signs. This is not always an easy job, as they are often outside in poor weather. 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 students have again given their support in producing some of the new structures. Attendance at the annual switch-on continues to increase. 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 Funday Committee works very hard to organise the annual event in the War Memorial Park, and this year increases to a four-day event starting at the Atrium on Thursday 22 June followed by three days on the Park. The two groups will soon be separating from the Town Council, after an ongoing discussion about the practicalities. This will free them to establish as a single charity eligible for grant funding that isn't available to them as Town Council sub-committees.

Finally some dates for your diaries

- Civic Service – Sunday 18 June
- Fun Day – Thursday 22 to Sunday 25 June
- Fun Fair – Wednesday 26 to Saturday 29 July

- 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Westover Vets Charity Dog Show – Sunday 13 August
- Markets – every Thursday and the final Sunday of each month except December
- Christmas market – Sunday 17 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.