

Review of the Year 2018

Introduction

1. I have been in post as Town Clerk of Blyth Council since taking up my position in November 2016. A review of the achievements of the past year is due to acquaint members of the main issues that have arisen in a busy year for the staff and yourselves.
2. An approach that I have used in my career has been to build up confidence of the members and staff in my organisational abilities, experience of complex situations and problem-solving capability as well as encouraging open and transparent teamwork. The first three skills are a matter for my annual appraisal.
3. The teamwork aspect of the organisation is a more difficult matter and requires building trust with the staff and encouraging the exchange of ideas. It also includes having confidence that the staff views and problems are properly brought to the attention of members. A great number of the achievements that this review mentions are down to team effort. My stance is that every member of staff is an important part of the team and any congratulations on a job well done should be shared accordingly although there are times when an individual has made a major contribution to the success of a project. It should be remembered however that the individual needs support of other staff to achieve their major contribution.
4. I am extremely pleased with how the staff have responded over the past year. They continue to work more effectively as a unit and seem happy with their working environment and how they are treated. I must thank them for their effort to support my philosophy and the help the Deputy Clerk has given in building the morale of the office.
5. I have picked out below some of the milestones during the last 12 months which taken together amount to some of the achievements the council members and staff can be proud of and proving that teamwork and hard work bring rewards.

New Governance Arrangements

The arrangements relating to how the Council conducts its affairs have been reviewed and the committee system slimmed down to enable like issues to come under the control of three new committees. The new committees deal with the environment, community development and governance. The Governance Committee coordinates the work of the Council and cross cutting issues are better dealt with under the new arrangements. Some sub committees have been formed to deal with Planning and Community Grants and in addition several working groups are convened on a task and finish approach to deal with, for example events, Remembrance Day etc. The Chairs are members of all the main committees to ensure continuity of decision making and all members can attend working groups. Delegation arrangements have been reviewed and changed to accommodate the larger committees' meetings.

Members of the Council and staff have worked tirelessly to develop the new arrangements. Some minor teething problems have been rectified during the year.

Tree Sculpture at Twelfth Avenue

Following the success of the sculpture of a miner at the junction of Hodgson Road and Cowpen Road the Council decided to add another very different work at Twelfth Avenue. This depicts a Spartan Warrior and is situated near the Town's well-known football team Blyth Spartans.

The warrior is an imposing piece of work by Bill Pierce, Self Exploding Arts, and has been well received by residents.



Audit of Council Assets and Monitoring Programme

An audit of the Council's "outside" assets was undertaken during the year. This involved giving unique reference numbers with appropriate labels fixed to each for operational purposes. This exercise resulted in, for example, the rescheduling of litter bin collections and to determine the extent of any repairs and planned maintenance programmes. A revised monitoring programme has also been introduced for us as well as to cover the work carried out by Northumberland County Council.

Speed Sensors

The Council felt the need to consider the introduction of speed sensors because of accidents and near accidents in the area. Various residents have come forward and mentioned the irresponsible speeding of some motorists. As a result, the Council agreed a programme for the installation of speed sensors that can be moved to different locations. The police are closely involved with this project and give advice on locations and any corrective action that is needed. Hopefully these sensors will alert drivers that they are exceeding the speed limit and help with road safety.



War Memorials

An extensive programme of restoration on the war memorials at Ridley Park, Cowpen and Newsham was approved by the Council in 2017 and completed in 2018 in time for the Remembrance Ceremonies for the end of the First World War and other conflicts. Many compliments





have been received from members of the public on the work and the Duke of Gloucester was impressed with the work at Ridley Park when he visited the area. The townspeople, council, staff and contractors should be proud of this achievement.

Poppy Carpet Bedding Display

The theme of this year's carpet bedding at the beach was to commemorate the centenary of the end of World War I. The poppy carpet bedding was flanked by two art installations. The Town Council had these designed and made by the team at Northumberland County Council's Print Shop. The design incorporated the drawing that was done for the replacement soldier at the Cowpen War Memorial. Two more were installed at the Cenotaph in Ridley Park.



New Water Systems

During the last year the council agreed to provide a new water supply to control the use of water on various allotment sites. This initiative by councillors has enabled savings of approximately £3,000 in the first year. The General Services Officer and his Assistant are currently monitoring the level of water consumption as a result of this initiative.

Bus Shelter Repainting/Repairs

The Council agreed a repainting programme of all bus shelters in the Town whereby a common uniform scheme was adopted. During this process several repairs were needed on some of



the older shelters and this work along with the repainting programme was coordinated by the General Services Assistant. This is in addition to the continual repairs and maintenance, mainly due to vandalism, that the Town Council is responsible for.

Blue Plaque Scheme



A Blue Plaque initiative commenced in 2017 and funds have been approved by Council to continue with this successful scheme. Several additional topics have been identified and researched by the Committee Clerk responsible for the work. This initiative will continue to record some of the rich history of Blyth Town and former inhabitants. The

Council intend to develop a Town Trail that incorporates these plaques and other useful pieces of history that will be supplemented by web site information.

New Play Areas

The Council policy is to refurbish one play area a year and the refurbishment at the North Farm play area started in late April. This involved the removal of the outdated wooden equipment and the installation of brand-new equipment with the inclusion of a basket swing for those with special needs. This play area has proved to be very popular and is being used by children in the vicinity and the wider community and special need groups.



Good Citizen Award

A good citizen award scheme was established during the year by the council to recognise acts of public service and other worthy contributions to Blyth society. To date the Council has made awards to



two townspeople - Graham Short, RNLI (Individual) and Ian Herron, Engage (Business). They were presented with their awards at a Council Meeting.

CCTV and Anti-Social Behaviour

Some anti-social behaviour has taken place in the market area that has caused problems and deterred townspeople from going about their daily lives. Shops have also been affected by vandalism and flower displays have been destroyed. There has been cooperation between the police, Northumberland County Council and the Town Council which has resulted in a reduction of this activity and the installation of CCTV to monitor the situation. The County Council had agreed to install CCTV on the market place for a 6-month trial period which has now come to an end. The Town Council is installing new cameras to replace these. The Town Council is investing in more cameras to protect assets and provide a safer environment for people to enjoy life.



Blyth in Bloom

We were delighted to have 20 entrants in the second year of the competition building on the 13 entrants in the first year. This year we awarded 1st, 2nd and 3rd prizes in four categories. The winners were



presented with a trophy, certificate and a £20 gift voucher for Perennial Favourites who sponsor the competition. A certificate and voucher for £15 and £10 respectively was presented to the 2nd and 3rd place winners. Everyone who entered the competition received a certificate and a voucher for 10% off at Perennial Favourites.

We hope the competition will grow and we can welcome more gardeners of Blyth next year!

Northumbria in Bloom

The Town Council enters this competition run by the Royal Horticultural Society every year. There are various categories where we can have Special Entries. The results for our Special Entries in 2018 were as follows:

Ridley Park - Gold

Bebside Allotment Site - Gold

St Cuthbert's Church 'Holy Weeds' - Silver

St Cuthbert's Court - Silver

Tynedale House Care Home Sensory

Garden - Silver

This year we were happy to receive a Silver Gilt overall for Blyth which was an improvement on last year's Silver award although we have achieved Silver Gilt in the past.



Litter

Litter is a huge problem and despite all the efforts of the Partnership Team we are fighting a constant battle, but the Town Council will continue to try ways to control the amount of litter in our streets.

An audit of litter bins was undertaken by Town Council Officers during April/May 2018. All bins have been re-numbered with a ward-specific ID number to make identification of problem areas easier and for residents to report any problems. Where constant reports of full or overflowing bins have been received these have been replaced with higher capacity models. Officers have met with colleagues in the Northumberland County Council Neighbourhood Team to look at the route for emptying bins and changes have been made to accommodate areas where bins require emptying more frequently.

A problem that frequently occurs is that cigarettes are stubbed out on top of a bin and left there as people may be worried that they set rubbish on

fire in the bin if they put their cigarette butt in there. This means that the butts get blown off the bin and this causes a problem. Any new stock of bins that is ordered is a model fitted with an ashtray. Enquires have been made to see if an ashtray can be fitted to existing older bins but, unfortunately, this isn't possible. We would like to encourage people to put their cigarettes out properly and use the bin. New stickers will go on bins and on seats where people tend to drop their cigarettes.

The Town Council, through Northumberland County Council, continues to employ a Local Environmental Enforcement Officer who works 2.5 days per week in Blyth. He deals with any issues that affect the environment such as litter, dog fouling, fly tipping, accumulations of waste and abandoned vehicles. He can issue notices to offenders and follow up with prosecution if required.



Litter Picking

In 2018 two litter picks were organised and staff and Councillors were joined by volunteers. It was decided to concentrate on the Town Centre as other areas, such as the beach, are picked by other volunteer groups on a regular basis. The first 'pick' was in March 2018 for the Great British Spring Clean campaign and this led to another being organised in June 2018 when we were joined by more volunteers. There are plans to organise more litter picks in 2019 and the Town Council, as part of the Partnership Agreement with the County Council, have agreed to pay for additional street cleansing on Saturdays and Sundays.



Bowes Street Development

The Town Council recognise the need to make the town centre more appealing to shoppers and reinvigorate the area. Bowes Street is an important area that needs some investment. Although Town Centre redevelopment is not strictly a Town Council financial responsibility it does have an interest in Blyth having a vibrant economy for the good of all inhabitants. Northumberland County Council were approached by Blyth Town Council over 12 months ago to develop a scheme for Bowes Street and a presentation of initial plans was made to Councillors in November.

The Environment Committee recognise the need to invest in Bowes Street's outdated infrastructure and have put a significant sum in next year's budget (2019/20) to carry out suitable work. Plans are still being developed by the County Council and will be subject to consultation when available.

Market Initiative

Members of the Council have recognised the deteriorating market trader's presence over several years. Although the market and its infrastructure are a County Council responsibility the Town Council feel it is an important part of Blyth and for the last two years have supported a discount scheme as well as other initiatives on the market. A sum of £130,000 was set aside in the last two financial years to try to improve market attendance but sadly markets seem to be out of favour. Niche markets appear to be rather more successful than the traditional one seen in many towns.

Reluctantly, after spending considerable sums in the last two years and following feedback and consultation with the County Council, it was decided that further expenditure on this initiative could not be justified. Other ways will need to be explored to rejuvenate this important area of the Town. Hopefully the new Town Forum can bring new ideas and the Town Council, as a member, will participate fully.



Town Forum

As mentioned in the Market Initiative, a Town Forum has been formed which will:

- ◆ bring together strategic partners in Blyth to ensure a cohesive approach to the development, prosperity and community of the Town.
- ◆ Strive for a thriving retail, business, living, tourist and evening economy.
- ◆ Respect and uphold the town's history and heritage.

The first meeting of the Town Forum was on 1 February 2019 and hopefully will bring new ideas and stakeholders to help regenerate the area.

Events

The Town Council organises a variety of free events for the residents of Blyth and, hopefully, to attract more people to visit our Town.



We also support events organised by others, an example of which is our entry in this year's Christmas Tree Festival at St Cuthbert's Church!



Negative Issues

Some of the work of the councillors and staff involve issues that deflect them from carrying out more visible improvements in the Town. For example, some complaints have been received about the various events carried out by the Council. The Council has a Complaints Committee that gathers evidence on the issue concerned and adjudicates based on the facts presented. This process is necessary for transparency but very time consuming on resources.

Other issues come to light from time to time that require investigation by officers and involvement by members of the council that do not produce a tangible benefit.