

# Huntingdon Town Council's Finance Committee Annual Report 2020/21

Mr Mayor, Ladies and Gentlemen. I am Councillor Phil Pearce and was appointed by Members for a third continuous term of office as Chair of the Finance Committee.

The Finance Committee comprises of the main Finance Committee itself including the following Sub Committees: -

- 1) **Finance Sub Committee** – responsible for overseeing and recommending the following year's budget for the Town Council. This Committee works hard with Officers in relation to the budget, which informs the precept level for the next financial year. I am indebted to the Chair of this Committee Cllr Luckham, who was appointed for his third term of office. This year, the precept has been agreed upon an 8p per week increase for a band D property as opposed to 7p per week last year. Thus, increasing our precept figure from £1,313,630 for 2020/2021 to £1,382,976 for 2021/2022
- 2) **Grants Sub Committee** – responsible for awarding grants to qualifying applicants of up to £500 from an eligibility criteria matrix, this Committee meets twice yearly. Again, I am indebted to the Chair of this Committee, Cllr Sir Peter Brown who was also appointed for a third term of office. In year 2020/2021 the total amount awarded was £1,840.00 to 4 local organisations.
- 3) **Lettings Sub Committee** – This Committee reviews our lease agreements, tenancies and hire rates for our buildings and prices for allotments and burial plots. Typically, business includes increasing charges in line with inflation and benchmarking with other local authorities.
- 4) **Staffing Committee** – This Committee makes recommendations to full Council on all matters relating to our staff – This Chair is again Cllr Tom Sanderson
- 5) **Twinning Sub Committee** – This is a long-established committee responsible for the ties between Huntingdon's Twin towns of Gubbio in Italy, Wertheim in Germany and Szentendre in Hungary and Salon de Provence in France. The Twinning Association's Chairman is Mr Malcolm Lyons and I applaud him and the Twinning Committee for all their hard work.

The Finance Committee has worked exceptionally hard this year to overcome challenges and to oversee the Town Council Finances. I must applaud Councillors and Officers alike for the very swift response to revise our budget due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Our budget adjustment was agreed in June which saw us influence the budgets by just under £430,000, with the provision of a 50% rent reduction for a year offered to all our sports club tenants.

The focus of the Town's financial commitments over the last year and the planning for our forthcoming projects include:

- 1) The new Coneygear Centre was opened in February 2020 and received some great reviews. Although its doors had to close to the public shortly after opening due to the pandemic, it has been a hub for outstanding work carried out behind the scenes to support our community. I can now announce that the overall project has been confirmed as having no cost to residents, as the sale of the former Medway Centre and the asset swap with Huntingdonshire District Council exceeded the cost of the build. We are indebted and grateful to all organisations who have grant funded the internal fixtures and fittings and to all those involved we extend our sincere thanks:
  - Huntingdon Freeman's Trust
  - National Lottery
  - Mick George
  - FCC Communities Foundation

- 2) Cemetery Wall Maintenance - Our work continues with maintaining and restoring our Grade II Listed cemetery walls at Priory Road for which we have a statutory obligation. We have spent some £100,000 so far and the £50,000 per year budget will continue to ensure the safety and preservation of the vast structure.
- 3) Crematorium and Cemetery – This work started early last year and is nearing completion. Kier Construction was awarded the contract for the project and the team has worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic in very difficult conditions. The project is now close to handover and we have recruited a team of staff to run it. I am delighted to welcome Samantha Smith our new Crematorium Manager and her team and wish them every success when we open later in the Spring.
- 4) Plant Nursery & Depot – This new facility is currently being built adjacent to the crematorium, with the heat recovered from the cremators being used to heat the glasshouses.  
Installation of vehicle charging points as well as Solar panels will complement our existing green energy supply efforts, in line with our Corporate Plan to create a more sustainable environment. The Depot and Nursery should be fully operational by early Summer, after the transfer of equipment from our existing Depot. The facility will provide a fantastic space to grow all the plants and shrubs for our town. Our long-term programme is to replace the Council's vehicle fleet and equipment to battery and electric powered alternatives, thus furthering our ambitions of becoming carbon neutral.

The success of any Council is dependent on team effort between Councillors and Officers. For us, the safety and wellbeing of all our staff is of paramount importance. At the start of the pandemic, we sent our office staff home 10 days before the initial lockdown and very quickly equipped them to work safely from their homes where required. The Estates Services team has continuously monitored and adapted its way of working to ensure all in the team are kept safe while keeping our town clean, tidy and looking its best.

Throughout the pandemic, staff at the Coneygear Centre have been working tirelessly to prepare, cook and distribute hot meals once a week to some of our most vulnerable residents using funding from successful grant awards, particularly over the Christmas period, selflessly giving up their holiday time to fulfil this support, as well as delivering over 130 Christmas hampers to those in need of support over the festive season. On behalf of every Councillor, I would like to extend our thanks and admiration to all those staff involved.

Finally, I would like to commend all Members of the Finance Committee and the associated Sub committees for their support and excellent meeting attendance. This year has seen some extraordinary times and I am proud of every Councillor and every member of our staff for the manner in which we have all faced up to the day-to-day problems and challenges this last year has presented us.

It is a great honour to hold public office within this Historic Town Council and to be part of a team which is so forward thinking and patient, with a determination to succeed. I thank every Member for their support and each member of staff for their engagement.