

ROYSTON TOWN COUNCIL ANNUAL TOWN MEETING AND NHDC ROYSTON & DISTRICT AREA COMMITTEE ANNUAL PUBLIC MEETING

Held virtually by Zoom, on Thursday 11th March 2021 at 7.30pm

Present:

Mayor of Royston and Town Councillor Rob Inwood (Chairman).

Royston Town Councillors:

Ruth Brown, Brian Bylett, Ian Coll, John Davison, Mike Harrison, Mark Hughes, Iain Leggett, Tom Perry, Marguerite Phillips, F John Smith, Phil Smith, Emma Squire-Smith, Carol Stanier.

RTC Officer:

Caroline Mills - Town Clerk.

North Hertfordshire District Councillors Jean Green & Tony Hunter.

Hertfordshire County Councillors Fiona Hill and Steve Jarvis.

Royston First Bid Company – David Smyth.

Hertfordshire Police – Sgt Jon Vine.

30 electors of the town.

The Chairman advised that the meeting would be recorded and welcomed everyone to the meeting.

1. APOLOGIES:

There were no apologies.

2. MINUTES:

The minutes of the Annual Town Meeting held on Thursday 21st March 2019 were signed by the Mayor as a correct record.

3. ANNUAL STATEMENT FROM THE TOWN MAYOR, COUNCILLOR ROB INWOOD.

As many of you know, I have been lucky enough to serve as Mayor for two years.

The COVID pandemic has brought the town together in many ways. We have a great and wonderful community in Royston and I am so proud of all of the organisations that have helped, of which there are too many to name, with the latest being the volunteers who are helping with the vaccine rollout at the Health Centre.

Lots more people are using our wonderful market and that is thanks to the hard work of our Town Clerk and the Market Manager to allow it to open safely. A lot of work went into that and it allowed residents and other people from nearby to see just what a great town we have. I hope that it will continue and that people will continue to think local and shop local wherever possible.

Although I would love to carry on speaking as Mayor, with the pandemic I have not been to as many functions as I would like to have been. But what I have been able to do is to tell people about Royston and how great our town is, how great our market is and about our great businesses here in Royston. We have so many businesses and often people are surprised at just what there is in the town.

4. PRESENTATION OF THE MAYOR'S COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARDS AND COMMUNITY TRUST FUND AWARDS:

Community Trust Fund Grants: These awards help local organisations with funding for particular projects within the Town.

ORGANISATION	PURPOSE OF GRANT	AMOUNT AWARDED
National Childbirth Trust	To establish a breast feeding drop in support group in Royston.	£500.00
Royston and District Community Transport	Contribution towards the running costs of the wheelchair accessible vehicles.	£500.00
Royston Arts Society	To assist with the cost of hiring the Heritage Hall for the annual autumn art exhibition which forms part of the Royston Arts Festival.	£265.00
Royston Photographic Society	To assist with the cost of hiring the Town Hall for the Royston Arts Festival Exhibition.	£250.00
Royston Rockets BMX Racing Club	For a technology upgrade.	£500.00
Royston Twinning Association	To fund the costs of twinning civic receptions	£250.00

The Town Mayor, Councillor Rob Inwood, then presented Community Service Awards to:

Brian Norwood – in recognition of his many years of dedication to the Royston Methodist Church and the wider community of Royston.

Andy & Viv Williams – in recognition of their immeasurable contribution to our local community for the past 20 years beginning with setting up and running the Open House Project and later the Royston Foodbank.

Mike Lawrence – in recognition of his hard work and continuing support for the Royston & District Museum.

5. REPORT FROM SGT JON VINE FROM HERTS POLICE:

I have been away for 7 years but the lure of Royston has drawn me back and I am very pleased to be here. Royston is a wonderful town. You will have seen that we have started some work on the Police Station, making it look more up to date and professional.

It is hard not to talk about COVID and we have seen enormous changes over the last 12 months and we have a great community that has supported each other and has supported us. They have done what the government has asked them to do and we have seen very few COVID breaches in Royston and that goes to show what a kind, considerate town we all live in. Thanks to everyone for that because it has made our lives much easier and this hasn't been the case for other parts of the county. COVID initially was strange, we had less demands on us in the areas of night time economy issues but we did see a rise in domestic violence and domestic incidents. Thankfully these levelled off quite quickly. When we see financial problems, certain crime types increase such as shoplifting and making off without payment for petrol. This is what we would expect in times of financial crisis. Burglary dwelling crimes have nose-dived and I can't remember when we last had a burglary in Royston itself.

The figures I will give you today are for a larger area, from Baldock services to the Essex border at Nuthampstead, about 80 square miles. We have had a continuation in cross-border crimes which involves people coming across from Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire, normally in the rural areas targeting the farms etc. Interestingly, one of the biggest issues that has affected the town in the last year was caused by a group of young men. We have targeted them and this problem has now been resolved.

Crime figures – last year we had a total of 77 burglaries across the whole of Royston, that figure has now dropped to 27 this year, a reduction of nearly 65%. In Royston town alone, we are down to 7. When I take out the ones that get recorded as burglaries but are domestic/technical e.g. someone breaking into an ex-partners home to get their property back, there are hardly any. Other burglaries e.g. from sheds or farm buildings have dropped from 114 down to 58 across the whole of the Royston area. Criminal damage has not changed much at 112 cases and neither has theft from motor vehicles. Vans are particularly targeted. We are going to target this and give an information pack to van owners and talks about security, to reduce that figure. Shoplifting has gone up by about 4 or 5 offences, not massive. Violence with injury is down from 124 to 83 which I think is down to the pubs not being open. Theft from person is just beginning to creep up. It is normally at Tesco where people may get their cards stolen or card information compromised. The elderly are often targeted and I am going to be doing some work with the Tesco management on reducing this.

All in all, overall crime from 2019 to this year is down by 17.6% which is phenomenal. We are down to 888 offences which sounds a lot but many of these are very minor and when you think that is about 2½ per day in Royston and the rural area around it, you still live in one of the safest places in one of the safest counties.

In the coming year, I want to work with Fiona Hill and Rob Inwood to increase the provision for young people in the town. This is really important for our relationship so they know who we are and we know them. Thank you Viv and Andy for all the work you have done to support us which has been wonderful. I would like to see the cinema come on board and provide a youth night for the young people perhaps once a fortnight. We would be happy to provide staff for that so they have somewhere to go regularly. I would like to see some opportunities at some of the sports venues too which we would support and try to get funding for.

We would like to increase our visibility. Even though we have a small team, they get out as much as possible. I would like to do more public engagement events such as we used to do on the Heath, as well as crime prevention days. I would like to get back into the care homes to do some crime prevention with the elderly to stop them from being the victims of crime such as at Tesco or the banking frauds. Barclays are very good at phoning us if they suspect someone is withdrawing cash for the wrong reasons and we will get over there and make an arrest if necessary or support the victim of the scam. I would also like to increase the visibility of the police over on the industrial estate and I am working with Royston First to try and do that.

I have just been given support from the Police and Crime Commissioner who have given us a speed enforcement ban to trial here. This used to be called Community Speed Watch – a PCSO will record speeds and feed back to the Commissioner.

My main aim is to make the town even safer and be more visible. I am very proud of the work I do here.

6. DAVID SMYTH, ROYSTON FIRST BID CO LTD:

At the beginning of the year we had a change in the board make-up after the retirement of David Campbell, Finance Director at Sartorius and John Gourd from Johnson Matthey, as they both moved away from their positions in Royston. They had done a lot of work in the town for the BID. We have now increased the size of the board. We now have myself, Cath Boughton from The Listing, Steve Jackson from Enfield Electrical, Nigel Reader from Borders & Bows and until recently, Councillor Bill Davidson who has just moved away in retirement.

As the first full year of our third term as a Business Improvement District drew to a close, we found ourselves in the middle of a pandemic. This, together with the uncertainty of the country's future relationship with Europe, the national economy has suffered, having an obvious impact on many local businesses. The UK has been badly hit, the education programme decimated and thousands of people made redundant, some businesses closing never to reopen. As a small town, lacking many of the major retailing names but with a strong offering of niche independent businesses, several Royston businesses have adapted and managed to survive, with some commercial organisations prospering due to changing their offering or the way they carry out business on a day to day basis. Many of our industrial companies have kept going throughout the pandemic, providing essential components to the manufacturing and building sectors. The BID money, standing at around £140,000, together with support from NHDC has allowed us to offer tangible support to local businesses.

The COVID support mechanisms have included hand sanitizers around the centre, downloadable signage, planters for social distancing, a COVID support hub on the website, online town trails and information about government funding opportunities. Royston businesses have had the opportunity to promote their current opening hours online and in the local press, free of charge. The launch of the new Facebook page and Royston Revival Guide has been widely shared online together with the Royston Come Together campaign.

As a company, looking forward we will continue to support items which we call 'Business as Usual', such as 'Free after 3' parking in conjunction with the NHDC area committee, town parking scratch cards for use by the industrial businesses and, as Jon Vine has already mentioned, a joint venture with a PCSO to have more officers on the streets, in addition to operation Artemis which has not been run due to pubs not being open. We continue to support the Royston Information Centre in the library as well as town centre events and trails which we have 4 or 5 times a year. It has been a challenging year for our support team - Julia Brooks from C4B to run the trails online, but she has done a fantastic job

and received much praise from those who take part. In the past, we have been criticised for our communication to the town but have tried to put this right by giving more regular updates, including in the Crow. We will continue to communicate and support businesses particularly regarding COVID and as we come out of lockdown.

The industrial estate. We are looking at a signage project and we are hoping to get funding from the LEP in April. We will continue with the town trails. The Christmas lights were a great success this year and we will continue to provide support and funding for this project. From a town wide perspective, the 'Renewal Prospectus' indicated that we would look at a shuttle bus and although this is still on the agenda, we felt it wasn't the right time now. I have been in negotiations with Richmonds Coaches to look at the costs. This would allow people to go from the industrial estate into town and back to do their shopping and then get back to their offices.

As everyone has said so far, Royston has some great businesses and as a Roystonian myself, I am very committed to this town.

6. REPORTS FROM THE CHAIRMEN OF ROYSTON TOWN COUNCIL COMMITTEES

CLlr J Davison, Leader of the Council and Chairman of the Finance Committee:

I can remember preparing for the last Town Meeting that didn't happen. March was the start of the first lockdown – at that time we had no idea of what was ahead of us.

The last 12 months has been difficult and disruptive for everybody, and very desperate for some of us.

I'm sure you will want to add your thanks to mine, to all the essential workers who have kept the fabric of our society going with everything we rely on to live, and a special thanks to all the local people, volunteers and organisations who have helped the vulnerable and needy in Royston.

I'm going to talk about our staff and what has happened in the last year, a brief word on our Councillors and look forward to the coming year.

You will all remember the incident in the middle of last year that became a media feeding frenzy. I mention it only because of the appalling behaviour of some individuals towards our office staff. It was not of our their making but they were plagued with daily silent phone calls, venomous social media, emails and abuse, and what the police considered to be credible death threats.

It caused our staff great distress and was totally unacceptable. Our first responsibility as Councillors is the safety and wellbeing of our staff – I'm afraid we failed them on that occasion. I hope nothing like it ever happens again.

The pandemic has disrupted hall hiring and the cinema. Some events such as the May Fayre had to be cancelled, others like Remembrance Day were scaled down.

The museum remains closed, its narrow staircase and walkways make social distancing impossible. But I'm pleased that online outreach to schools and has been continued.

The Cave has not opened to the public at all this season. Conservation work has continued, and thanks to our cave manager, we now have a virtual reality tour in which you can move round the cave, see all the carvings in great detail with popup explanations. I've been told that viewing it with a headset is quite fantastic and I look forward to doing that.

Our staff have developed a new Town Council website - I hope you find it easier to use than the old one.

And, at last, working closely with Royston First, our Clerk has arranged for new Christmas lights to be installed in the town. We've had lots of positive comments and I would like to thank Royston First for their input and contribution to the costs.

Our Market Manager, has attracted many new stalls to our market. During the lockdown the market has actually been busier than ever. If you don't already use it – do give it a try - you can pick fresh fruit and veg and buy meat, bread and fish in the quantities you want and the more you use the market the more stall holders are going to keep coming.

Saffron Screen now run our cinema. They have many years of experience of running their own and a wide range of technical and other skills. Last year, they installed a satellite dish to bring live streaming shows to our cinema. At this point, I shall take up Jon Vine's request, and see if they can arrange a youth night or something similar.

I do think our cinema is a great asset for our town. However, its operation wouldn't be possible without the many volunteers who work at each performance and I'd like to thank them all. I do look forward to it reopening.

You can see we continue to have a very strong team. I'd like to thank all our staff for the services they provide for our community, and for our Councillors, and for keeping everything going through all the disruption and lockdowns. Thank you all.

Moving on to Councillors. We've learnt some new skills. Council meetings like this one are now held virtually. It did take us a while to set them up – we had our first Zoom meeting on 6th July 2020 and we were actually only a few weeks behind NHDC going online.

Just to remind you, we are all unpaid volunteers, giving our time for public service. I'd like to thank all the Councillors, especially those with the demands of full time jobs and young families.

Looking forward. First of all, finances - we have never had a year like last year.

In normal years, around one third of our expenditure is covered by our income, the rest comes from our part of Council Tax. Without this income, our Council Tax would have to increase by a third to maintain the current services.

Last year, hiring of rooms and halls was much reduced and of course completely stopped during national lockdowns. The Royston Cave has not opened, the cinema is shut, parking has reduced and only essential stalls can attend the market, and so our income has fallen significantly.

We have made, and continue to make, every effort to reduce our expenditure including cancelling planned projects and are very grateful for the Government grants we have received.

In setting the budget for the coming year we have taken out discretionary spending and made the assumption that our income will start to recover from the middle of this year. We don't really know where it will end up as behaviours may well have changed.

The Royston Town Council Tax for a “Band D” property will rise from £48.49 to £50.90 per year, an increase of £2.41 per year.

What do we have in plan for the coming year? We are going to promote the Plastic Free Royston initiative and comply with our new Environmental Policy.

There are some new community facilities that are going to be funded by Section 106 Money. This money is agreed with developers when they get Planning Permission. For large developments it can include sums for transport, schools, NHS, sports facilities and other defined projects.

There is some S106 money in the pot from previous years that can only be used for the Town Hall. We plan to open up and refurbish the bar area and kitchen to make the property fully accessible to all, and at the same time provide better facilities for hirers, charities and the cinema.

You will already have seen some simple bicycle stands installed in the pavements in and around the town. In the near future we will be hopefully installing a covered bicycle rack at the top of the Market Hill car park – this will also be paid for out of S106 money ring-fenced for sustainable travel.

We have a working party looking at new community facilities for Royston. It favours a new Victorian style covered bandstand in the Priory Memorial Gardens. Many of you will recall the public enthusiasm for the well-attended annual May Fayre and the “Street Food Heroes” events in the Park in 2018.

We think a bandstand, funded from S106 monies, would be another great asset for Royston and could be used for many events throughout the year including the May Fayre, Town Band music afternoons or evenings, community events, Christmas carols and even small groups wanting an outdoor covered space with lights – all sorts of uses.

There is lots of work to be done to make this happen including, most importantly, being sure this is something that you, the people of Royston, want.

Finally, our overriding priority remains the health and protection of our staff and the public during this pandemic. At the request of the Health Centre Practice, we have set up the Town Hall as part of the Royston vaccination centre. Some of you will have spent 15 minutes there after your Pfizer vaccine. The Council will continue to do our very best to provide our services and will reopen as fast as the Government allows.

I think Royston is a great place to live. We in the Town Council can make small improvements ourselves and work with the District and County Councils to secure the bigger projects to benefit all our residents.

Let us hope that 2021 will be a better year for us all. Thank you.

Cllr Marguerite Phillips, Chairman, Planning Committee:

Mr Mayor, fellow councillors and members of the public, may I present to you the report from the Planning Committee.

Firstly, I should like to thank our Town Clerk, Caroline Mills and all the office staff for their invaluable support and expertise over what has been a very difficult year.

As you know, decisions on planning applications are made by North Herts District Council's Planning Committee. The Town Council is a consultee. We examine every Royston Planning application and we make our views known to NHDC. It is our local knowledge and our care for our town and its infrastructure that makes our input important.

The committee was concerned at the recent government proposals to radically change the planning process, as local opinion really does matter.

This year we have carried out online 'Zoom' meetings, which have worked very well. One hundred and nine applications have been considered, consisting of home improvements, residential developments and some commercial applications. We had no objection to the vast majority of these.

Sometimes we request conditions be applied to planning applications. For example proposed outbuildings on garden plots that should not be converted to dwellings in the future, or another example would be operating hours for construction work where it may impact on neighbouring properties. On occasion we have objected to sub division of properties where it would be overdevelopment and would set an undesirable precedent in the area.

I would mention a few of the applications that we consulted on:

We commented on phase 3 of the Linden site on the A505 (19/02865/RM and 19/02866/RM). Although we did not object to this application, we suggested traffic calming measures and insisted on the crucial requirement of flood mitigation being implemented prior to any construction work. We had been most concerned about the flooding that had affected several houses in Hawthorn Way in 2019.

The planning committee once again made a very strong objection to the outline application by Gladman (20/00744/OP) for development on the land at Heath Farm. Our comments to NHDC were very detailed:

- Land not included in the Local Plan for planned development.
- Negative impact on Therfield Heath.
- Site not close to schools, shops or the station.
- Unacceptable impact on the street scene of Echo Hill and neighbouring properties.
- Traffic safety and risks to pedestrians.
- Planned use of the Bridleway as emergency access.
- We stipulated that the negative impacts would significantly outweigh the benefits in the area and would result in the loss of high quality agricultural land.

It was good that so many people attended this online meeting, showing their concern for the future of the town's rural setting. The application was subsequently refused by NHDC.

We objected on the following points in the latest application for the Burloes land (20/01138/RM):

- Plans for the whole site and provision of affordable housing were not included.
- Buildings on the boundary with Bury Plantation were too close to the trees.
- Access to high-density flats was across a shared surface road, which would not be safe for pedestrians.
- There was no agreement or funding for burying the power line underground, and
- There was no provision for a pedestrian pavement on the south side of Newmarket Road.

Many people in Royston were most concerned about Redrow Homes felling the line of mature trees along the Baldock Road (20/02014/NMA). This committee had previously stipulated that the line of

trees should be retained to protect the habitat of the Heath and the existing scene. The felling was contrary to what had been mandated by NHDC when permission for this development was granted. As soon as NHDC was alerted they instructed Redrow to stop, and subsequently this re-planting scheme was submitted. The committee had no objection to the plans to manage the trees under the supervision of arboricultural consultants.

We considered the revised application by Gillings Planning for a 73-bed care home to be situated on the Linden development. The committee supported this application but it was again refused by NHDC because of the location and the existing topography of the land. An appeal has now been lodged and we await the outcome.

This concludes my report.

Cllr Mike Harrison, Chairman, General Purposes and Highways Committee:

It is now 2 years since my last report, due to the COVID 19 crisis. While I have to shield, I have done my best to keep in touch with events. We do have meetings on Zoom, and still get reports from our County and District colleagues.

Bus Routes and Services.

Two years ago, I reported the 'A' Route had replaced the old 26 route to Cambridge, but this has changed again to the 915 service. No bus service now goes to Addenbrooke's Hospital, as the hospital authorities stopped them because of COVID. You can now only go to the Rosie, and have to make your own way round the hospital from there. You are not allowed to walk through the hospital. The change of the 91/127 service has been delayed because of the pandemic, and news on the merger of these two services is awaited in the future. Because of the current situation, there have not been any meetings of the North Herts Users Bus Group for a year now.

Some time ago we did submit a report to County on improving bus services, and another on the Royston to Granta Park Corridor, but await results, as I suspect these are held up for the same reasons as everything else. The bus shelter that was to have been installed by the shop in Icknield Walk is delayed for the same reason, although I am told it has been ordered.

Reports from working parties.

We do receive reports from the Naturally Royston, and Town Centre working parties, but due to the present crisis we have not been able to make any school visits to speak to the students or answer any questions they may have for us. We have agreed to support a project for a Plastic Free Royston, and have authorised the use of facilities for the campaign.

Parking and Transport Hub.

With the development of the Royston Gateway, we have been involved in discussion for further parking restrictions in the York Way and Durham Way areas because of the increased traffic that has been generated. We have also started to look at a transport hub for Royston based at the train station to try to ensure bus services tie in with train times, but a lot more work is required on this subject once we can get back to normal working.

Sustainable Travel Town.

In my last report I did mention we could apply to become a Sustainable Travel Town. A sub-committee was set up to deal with just this subject. A total of 9 towns in the county applied, many much larger than ourselves, but we were selected along with Letchworth and Stevenage to try to achieve this

status. Much more work is required but we continue to work with our District and County Councillors on this project along with officers from the two councils along with our Town Clerk. If we manage to obtain this status, we will not only be able to look forward to better bus services in the town itself, together with better footpaths and cycle-ways, but also cut pollution in the town centre.

At our meetings we are very lucky to have the continued support of our two County Councillors along with the NHDC Area Committee Chairman. All three report to us to keep us advised of what is happening around the area. So my thanks goes to Councillors Fiona Hill, Steve Jarvis and Tony Hunter for the continued help and support. I would also like to thank my former deputy Vera Swallow for all her help, but she has sadly stood down from the Council for personal reasons. May I offer both her and her husband my best wishes for the future, and also thank Marguerite Phillips who has stepped up to take her place. I would also like to thank all of the committee for their hard work and support, and would mention Councillor Tom Perry who has done a lot of work on the Sustainable Travel Town. Thank you Tom.

Finally, my thanks to the Town Clerk without whom, we could not operate. Thank you Caroline for all your help and support, and also to the ladies in the office who are always helpful and supportive. Thank you to you all.

8. REPORT FROM HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCILLOR FIONA HILL:

Mr. Mayor, Councillors, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to update you on Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) issues. This meeting is taking place in unprecedented times and is the first ever time it has been held virtually. I am very aware that COVID-19 has had an impact on every individual, to some degree or other.

The County Council has been working with Government and the NHS, together with the many volunteer groups, throughout the pandemic, to ensure that every individual has the support needed, whether this be the basics to live, with food and medicine deliveries, or mental health and physical help. Thanks to all the staff and volunteers, of so many organisations, we have tried to ensure everyone has received the assistance needed. The vaccination programme has been an outstanding success and again this would not have been the case without the NHS staff and volunteers and we should be grateful to them all.

Despite significant grant funding from central Government, the County Council is facing financial challenges but has, again, managed to balance the budget with no real impact on front line services and has been set at 1.99% plus 2% ringfenced for Social Care. Adult Care and Health remains the highest proportion of the budget with Children's Services the next highest.

Education has had to change, beyond all recognition, during the last year and the schools have been amazing in their response to the challenges. We are now in the second year of assessed grades which, on its own, is a huge pressure for schools and teachers, so that pupils are not disadvantaged but, clearly, this will not be possible for all students. Several issues which arose last year have been addressed by Government this year. We have not been able to hold our usual School Visits and events such as Youth Makes Music, Youth Speaks and the Technology Tournaments have also been cancelled, but there have been great efforts to support pupils and hold virtual events and provide help in other ways. Computers have been made available for those students who cannot access technology at home. Hertfordshire Adults and Family Learning Service (HAFLS) has also had to change ways of working and is constantly progressing. I am delighted that HCC has also been able to provide a consistent service in

the Libraries during lockdown, through Ready Reads and have tried to open fully when permitted by the restrictions.

Integration of Health and Social Care remains a Government and County Council priority and I have continued to work with our local MP, Sir Oliver Heald QC and other stakeholders to try and make this a local reality. I would like to praise the wonderful care staff who have had to work in such difficult circumstances to preserve the safety of all those individuals in their care. With joined up Health and Social Care and prevention through Public Health, the pressure will be hugely reduced on the acute hospitals. My work has continued with more recognition for Mental Health issues, particularly in young people, through this difficult time and greater awareness of Carers' issues, Sepsis and Dementia and Domestic Abuse, all of which have a devastating impact on people's lives.

Partnership working continues between Town, District and County Councils, together with stakeholders such as the Police and Royston First and this is proving hugely beneficial with issues such as Social Distancing measures in the town centre, to enable safe opening for retailers and other businesses and town centre improvements, such as dual recycling bins and cycle racks, through the Town Centre Working Party. We have also been working together on speeding issues, with mitigation measures including SID's, DriveSafe and Speed and Volume surveys, together with Police checks. We have commented, objected and participated in various proposals on speed limits, safety measures, weight limits and parking restrictions, in respect of existing and proposed developments, in and around Royston and the villages. There has also been joint working on safer crossings between Royston and Cambridgeshire and safety along the whole length of the A505 and a Sustainable Travel Town.

There have been many highways schemes carried out through the Integrated Works Programme and the Highways Locality Budgets and HCC has put an additional £7 million into the budget to enable implementation of more 20 mph schemes across the County. We do have several roads in Royston, where there have been calls for this, particularly near schools and although there are 20 mph flashing signs, or SID's and crossing patrols outside some schools, there are others without any measures, so we need to address this.

There has been a feasibility study in Burns Road, following accidents near the Community Centre and we are awaiting any safety recommendations from this.

An additional £10m is being invested on improving drainage.

We have also been able to keep the recycling centre open throughout most of the year and residents can check the queues online and which containers are full at any moment in time.

Unsurprisingly, I have received a huge number of grant applications through the Community Locality Budget and we were provided with an additional fund, this year, specifically for COVID related grants. It has been really difficult to allocate, as there are so many invaluable organisations in the town and villages, but I hope the amounts provided have helped to make a small difference.

I will end by thanking Councillor colleagues and Officers from the Town, District and County Councils, for their support and also the Royston Town Councillors and the Town Clerk, Caroline Mills and her team of staff, for welcoming me to their meetings and for their help during the year.

Mr Mayor, this concludes my report.

9. REPORT FROM HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCILLOR STEVE JARVIS:

Clearly, as Councillor Hill said, COVID 19 has had a huge impact on the Council which has a responsibility for caring for the most vulnerable and this is where it has concentrated its efforts. It also has responsibility for Public Health. Although there have been debates about central government's responsibilities, the County Council public health department has made a significant impact, using their local knowledge and working with the NHS to provide testing facilities and vaccination centres. There are still some issues with these shared responsibilities e.g. lack of testing slots in Royston. Last March and April, there was a lot of effort put in to thinking about how we would mobilise large numbers of volunteers. However, there were lots of people who put together groups to help locally and there were actually more volunteers than needed. That local response was incredible. The County Council provided some additional funding for locality budgets, which is normally £10,000, to spend on grants to local organisation but they increased this by 50% and I was very pleased to be able to help some local groups who were providing help throughout the pandemic.

Although the bulk of the money gets spent on social care for adults and children, that is not what we see, what we see is things like roadworks, libraries etc. Some of these normal activities have been delayed such as work on the roads but these have now caught up. The footway near the former Morrison's site has now been repaired and the traffic island on Baldock Road to help people cross to the Heath will be coming soon. This was delayed partly due to work having stopped but also due to new procedures put in place to reduce risk to workers. Having been working on this for many years, I am pleased to see some small steps forward to deal with some of the issues on the A505 between Royston and Baldock. There is work being done at Slip End, the station at Ashwell and there is some soon to be done at the turning for Litlington. Unfortunately there have recently been some serious accidents on the Cambridgeshire part of the A505 and Cambridgeshire are looking at what they can do to make that part safer.

Sustainable Travel Towns have been mentioned. I think this is a real opportunity and I was particularly keen that the County Council didn't just choose large towns as I think there is a real opportunity to do things in Royston which will benefit the town and make it easier to get around and be more pleasant. One of the important things is that it is about a sustainable travel town, not just about the town centre, people need to get to all parts of the town and not just by car.

In terms of other matters, we have talked about the changes in the High Street to make it possible for people to social distance which has produced some changes which have benefitted the town centre and there will now be a consultation on the extent to which they might become permanent or at least longer term.

Finally, I am disappointed that the County Council has made it so expensive to introduce 20mph speed limits. Many other parts of the country have introduced them much more cheaply so the money could go much further but I am pleased that they have found the resources to put the limit in on Tannery Drift for next year. Hopefully, that will be the first of many in the town to make these areas safer and nicer places to live.

9. REPORT FROM ROYSTON & DISTRICT AREA COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN, DISTRICT COUNCILLOR TONY HUNTER:

It is an interesting time we are living in and we are all having to adapt to this different environment. Currently the Area Committee is conducting its meetings by Zoom and we are also engaging with the community in surgeries and town talks by Zoom.

I was very pleased to know that the recycling bins had been put in place. This was the brainchild of your very own Peter Burt who wanted this to happen for years.

We have a parking review ongoing with a dedicated officer but regret this has stalled due to the pandemic. The consultants are unable to come into the town and do their necessary work until the restrictions are lifted. We have been waiting for it for a long time and we hope to see an outcome from it in the near future.

The Local Plan had been delayed but is moving again and the inspector has moved his report on and hopefully the cabinet will be looking at some recommendations on the 23rd of this month. Hopefully that will bring it to a conclusion and we can see another consultation and a Local Plan in place by the end of the year as, because of the delays, we have seen some speculative development suggestions in the Royston area.

The budget was agreed on the 14th February and the Council Tax increase, by the maximum allowed without the need for a local referendum, was approved. That will likely lead to a £5.00 increase for a band D property and pro rata the rest. The capital budget was also reinstated and the skateboard park expansion in Newmarket Road was put into the programme and we thanked officers for listening to us. Leisure facilities were also supported at a previous cabinet meeting, which is a risk, due to the pandemic, but we can only hope that the service provider, Stevenage Leisure, survive.

We have received a number of complaints about litter on the Gateway area, but I can report that the landowners of the Gateway have submitted proposals to eradicate the problem which includes a 2m high fence. In April we will see the council do its normal cherry pick around the area which should see it cleared away.

I was fortunate to join Royston Town Council on the consultation regarding social distancing on the High Street and we sent our thoughts and suggestions to Herts County Council. NHDC have managed the business grants on behalf of the government to aid businesses during the pandemic and I would ask that you pass on the information that the NHDC website shows all the possible grants and when they are available.

NHDC also had its own COVID support fund and managed to support a number of organisations:

- The Need Project - delivering food parcels to Royston residents,
- North Herts Emotional Support in Schools (NESSIE) - targeted online support for families,
- Homestart Royston & South Cambs - running online services,
- Royston and District Community Transport were aided with PPE equipment,
- Viewpoint – a monitoring project received funds and Royston Day Centre which also received PPE equipment.

The actual Area Committee were able to give some grants, even though it's a reduced fund.

We have been able to support:

- 'Free after 3' parking,
- Reed cricket club,
- Royston vs Coronavirus,
- NESSIE,
- Melbourn Youth and Development and
- Royston 1st and 7th Scouts

I am pleased to report that under the NHDC awards Royston vs Coronavirus, which organised about 200 volunteers to support residents by doing shopping, collecting prescriptions and other vital supplies for residents, won a Volunteer Achievement Award. Friends of Royston Heath won the Green Award category.

My thanks go to colleagues who have worked with us, the Town Clerk and her team and County and District Councillors.

OPEN MEETING: QUESTIONS FROM ELECTORS TO TOWN, DISTRICT AND COUNTY COUNCILLORS

The Mayor informed everyone that it was now an open meeting where electors can ask questions to the Town, District and County Councillors.

Q. A member of the public asked:

Over recent years the Town Council has substantially increased the precept Band D from £42.10 in 2017 to £48.49 currently and next year it will be £50.90 which is getting on for a 20% increase over that time, 4.97% this year which is above the County and District. You budget every year for a break-even budget, however, you very rarely achieve this. You normally finish up with a healthy surplus. In fact, I can't see a year when you have had a deficit. You have been stashing away money in your reserves quite generously. I am not sure what the exact figure is, I thought over half a million but I have been since told it was not that much. It is certainly substantial and more than a small council really needs. I know that you need reserves but not massive reserves. I would go so far as to say that now with many people in financial distress, it is not the time to raise the Precept. You should, this year at least, have frozen the precept and used your reserves to meet any shortfall in expenditure. I think it is very unreasonable what you have done. You were working on a six month budget when you drew this up and normally the six month budget is not particularly brilliant drawing up predictions, I have done this myself when I was on the Finance Committee and the working party, you should adjust it as the work progresses. Looking at the January and February figures, I can't see how you will end up with a deficit this year, you will probably finish up with another surplus. I think it unreasonable, and I am sure most Royston residents would agree, to put the Council Tax up this year. You will either have to be more careful, I accept that income has gone down, but so have your expenses, quite considerably. Next year, by the middle of the year, we would expect to be back to, hopefully, a fairly normal service. Things seem to be improving quite dramatically at the moment and let's hope things keep going that way. You have to remember, the money you take from us, is not your money, it is residents money, some of whom cannot afford to pay it. It is better it is in their bank accounts than in your bank account. So can you tell me how you justify a 4.79% increase? And if there is a surplus this year, can you confirm that next year you will freeze the budget and not raise the precept unreasonably? Can you also say, how much you consider would be a reasonable level of reserves for a town council to hold? I know it is suggested that it is 50% of your annual budget. So maybe you should try and cut your annual budget or trim it a bit.

A. Councillor John Davison:

Thank you very much for your question. You and I did have a chat this afternoon. I will try and take your points one by one:

The increase this year is 4.97% which sounds a lot but is actually 4.97% of a small sum. It is £2.41 per year. Our precept is a very low precept. It is not easy to compare town and parish councils – they have different numbers of residents and provide different services. I will give you some examples using this year's figures: Royston £48.49, Ashwell £92.39, Barkway £88.87, Knebworth £75.81. So yes, it is a large percentage, but it is a small amount per year.

I would rather have a healthy surplus than a deficit but there are all sorts of reasons for surpluses, for example, one year when we had a healthy surplus, we were short one member of staff for the whole year and that saved quite a lot of money.

Our forecast reserves at the end of this year are £360,000. Of that, £103,000 is earmarked reserves i.e. a long list of items where money is put aside for known future expenditure. It is a little put aside every year rather than a lump in expenditure e.g. £18,000 for election costs; £4,500 a year into a sinking fund for cinema equipment. When the cinema equipment was put in the total costs were over £100,000. Over time, that equipment will have to be replaced or upgraded. Then there are capital funds and these funds can only be spent on capital projects and not running costs, for example Stamford Yard proceeds, £66k, money from the sale of the Wicker Hall site and some £40,000 that we acquired when we took over the market. In time we will have to resurface the market and replace other items like all the stalls which we don't want appearing as one lump sum in a future budget. So our actual reserves are £193,000.

The revised forecast was made on 1st November with 7 months data. The budget was calculated in December and agreed by Council in January. We can't delay giving the proposed precept to NHDC. It has not been easy to budget in the middle of this pandemic. We didn't know we would get an additional £20,000 in grants taking us up to £50,000 in grants. A significant part of our expenditure comes in March when Agency Agreements are calculated by NHDC and we could easily be £10,000 adrift in our estimates. We might have a surplus and I hope we do.

We justify the increase to balance our expenditure against our income. Our usual income is around £140,000 but because of COVID we budgeted for £109,000 i.e. a reduction of £31,000. Adding £2.41 to the precept only generates £15,700 which is not enough to cover what our loss in other income will be.

If there is a surplus, we will add it to the general reserves. Our reserves policy is on our website. For a town council of our size the recommended general reserve is 6-9 months of our annual expenditure i.e. based on an annual expenditure of £432,000 we should have £216,000 - £324,000. We have £193,000, a little less than 6 months.

- Q. A member of the public asked:
Can Councillor Phillips clarify what she said about the Gladman application being refused?
- A. Councillor Phillips:
I was referring to the outline planning permission which was the first application.
- Q. What are you doing about greening of Royston? The money for the bandstand might be better spent on trees given the climate emergency.
Why can't we use the precept to conserve the Heath for the future?
- A. Councillor Davison:
I think it would be an excellent idea to use the precept to look after the Heath. Every £1 from the precept generates about £6,000. It would be an excellent project for myself and the conservators of the Heath to look into.
- A. Councillor Hunter:
NHDC do have a programme of issuing free trees for anyone to apply to. The officers from NHDC quite often add trees to Priory Gardens, often to commemorate people and there is one such about to be planted. There have also been 3 new trees planted along Burns Road.

Q. A member of the public asked:

Thank you for all the work you do. Is there anything that can be done about the anti-social dog owners using the Heath and dog thefts? And is the Council confident about the electricity supply to the town, given that we have had 2 power outages this year?

A. Sgt Jon Vine:

We have set up Dog Watch. You can sign up via the Owl Service. There have been no thefts in the town as yet.

A. Councillor Hill:

Together with our MP we are lobbying for a change to the law which allows utility companies to dig up the road as and when they require. It has got better, but can still improve.

Q. A member of the public asked:

I'd like to add my thanks for all the hard work and commitment throughout the year. I am delighted you are committed to involving the residents in the decision on where the S106 money will be invested. There are a diverse range of views, how will the Council involve residents in this choice?

A. Councillor Davison:

I am not quite sure, but this is something we will work on. There is quite a bit of work to do as we would like to ask if residents would rather the money was spent on the upkeep of the Heath which is such a unique asset to the Town.

A. Councillor Inwood:

This is most likely to be on our website and will be advertised on social media.

Q. A member of the public asked:

I am the Chair of the Conservators of Therfield Heath. I would like to add that if people have a problem with anti-social dog-owners, please ring 111 to report it and we are keeping track of any complaints we receive. We do think this is a minority. We are also recruiting a warden to cover the Heath and engage with all the users. The Heath has been under extreme pressure in the last 12 months. It costs about £80,000 to maintain the Heath and we rely on 3 main tenants and some not for profit sports groups. We receive no local or NHDC funding so we would love to have a conversation about financial support from the precept.

As a parent, I would like to thank Sgt Jon Vine for bringing up the situation for the youth of this town and I think it is shocking to consider building a bandstand when there is no youth club. I am sure the Youth Council would like to help you decide how to spend that S106 money.

A. Councillor Hunter:

We have a Community Engagement Officer here tonight and it is possible to put forward suggestions to him for what to spend S106 money on. If you are not aware of what this is, it is money which comes from agreements made with developers to put money into the local community. We have quite an extensive list of projects that could happen over the next year or two.

A. Councillor Leggett:

Just a bit of background to the bandstand idea. There is an old bandstand which is not fit for purpose. It would draw people in to the Priory Gardens and therefore the Town Centre. So it is a holistic idea aimed at benefitting the whole community and improving the park.

- A. Councillor Davison:
I would just like to correct one thing – the pot of money is £100,000, that is not the cost of the bandstand. None of the bandstands we have considered cost anywhere near that amount.
- Q. A member of the public asked:
Regarding money being spent on the Heath, can a precept raised by Royston Town Council be spent in Therfield Parish which is where the Heath predominantly is?
- A. Councillor Davison:
I believe as long as everyone agrees to it, we can spend money where we like. Can the Town Clerk add to this?
- A. Town Clerk:
The Town Council currently holds the General Power of Competence until the next elections in May 2022 when it has to be reaffirmed. In order to qualify at that time, two thirds of the Councillors need to be elected and you need to have a CILCA qualified clerk. So at the moment, the Council could make a donation to an organisation outside of Royston. In the future it will depend upon meeting the eligibility criteria or the current powers available to the council.
- Q. A member of the public asked:
Perhaps if instead of using the term bandstand, you called it a performance arena then the youths could use it, the playgroups and others. It would be more open to everyone.
- A. Councillor Inwood:
Thank you. That is a useful suggestion and will be considered as part of the consultation.
- Q. A member of the public asked:
Just an observation, but it would be better to use social media to publicise these meetings as not many people read the local newspapers.
- A. Councillor Inwood:
We do have our website and Twitter account which gave the meeting details and links.
- A. Councillor Phillips:
I shared it on all of the Royston Reporting pages on Facebook too.
- A. Community Engagement Officer Ashley Hawkins:
There are also Councillor Surgeries which although on Zoom now, will be returning to the High Street soon. We also have the Town Talk which takes place before every Area Committee meeting and the next one is on 17th March. There are posters around the town and notifications for these on social media.

The Mayor thanked everyone for coming and thanked members of the public for their questions. He commented that the general public are always welcome to attend council meetings and he would very much like to see more people there. He thanked the committee and councillors for taking part. The Mayor thanked the Town Clerk as well.

The meeting closed at 9.50pm.