

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

Held on Thursday 9th March 2023 at 7.30pm in the Heritage Hall, Town Hall, Royston.

PRESENT:

Mayor of Royston and Town Councillor Mary Antony (Chairman)
Royston Town Councillors – Lisa Adams, Ruth Brown, Adam Compton, Mike Harrison, Lynsey Langdon, Stephen Lockett and John Rees
Royston Town Council Officer - Caroline Mills, Town Clerk
North Hertfordshire Councillors –Jean Green, Chris Hinchliffe, Tony Hunter and Gerald Morris
Hertfordshire County Councillors - Fiona Hill and Steve Jarvis
Royston First Bid Company – David Smyth
Hertfordshire Police – Sergeant Jon Vine
40 electors of the town.

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

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:

Royston Town Councillors - Elizabeth Beardwell, Rob Inwood, Bindi Jani and Emma Squire-Smith.

2. MINUTES:

The minutes of the Annual Town Meeting held on 10th March 2022 were approved and signed by the Mayor as a correct record.

3. ANNUAL REPORT FROM THE TOWN MAYOR, COUNCILLOR MARY ANTONY:

Good evening Councillors, the Town Clerk, ladies and gentlemen.

Let me begin by saying a big Thank You to Royston town for accepting me as a part of this town and electing me to become a councillor and making history by being appointed as Royston's first Asian Mayor.

The greatness of Royston town lies with the people who are very friendly, welcoming and accepting of differences. This great quality attracts people to our community and enables their easy transition. When there is a feeling of belongingness you love to be a part of it and so I got involved in community service beginning with the Catholic Church.

Thanks to Councillor Rob Inwood, I got involved in the Royston Town Party and became a councillor with the support of the people of Royston. As Mayor, my primary target was to support the local businesses and our town market. Thanks to Rob Mills the market manager who ensures that the market continues to attract many shoppers. The pandemic did make people do online shopping but now things have normalised, people in our community are making all efforts to support our local businesses. So, I thank everyone for shopping locally. Thanks to Royston First who work to increase the footfall on the high street and all their initiatives to keep our community vibrant. I try my best to visit the market and meet the local businesses and support them.

I have visited big businesses in our industrial estate such as Johnson Matthey, Mettler Toledo, Sartorius and Aerospace Thermal Engineering. Royston BID members accompanied me and our focus was to connect these big businesses with the council and work together for the community. I'm sure you all are aware that Johnson Matthey already does a lot for the community and the other businesses assured me too that they will do their best for the community. Next month I'm visiting McDonalds.

I have represented Royston at many official events. It was a privilege to be a part of Armistice Day, Remembrance Day and Holocaust Memorial Day. I have represented our town at the garden party for our late Queen's Jubilee celebrations organised by the chairman of Hertfordshire County Council. I hosted a national moment of reflection in the Priory Memorial Gardens on the eve of the funeral of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and to bless our new King Charles III. As President of the Twinning Association, I planted two trees along with the German Mayor of our twin town Grossalmerode and welcomed our German friends when they were in Royston to show our solidarity with the twin towns. Thank you again to Royston BID who worked with the council on the Christmas lights switch on which was a fantastic event where a large number of people participated.

As Mayor I support two charities, Make Lunch and the Mayor's Community Trust fund and I have been raising funds to support these charities. The Royston Indian community donated money from the food festival that they organised to my charity. I had a quiz night for fundraising and it was a success, thanks to the quiz master Councillor Mike Harrison, and staff from the council. The community supported me by participating in teams and the local businesses donated prizes for my raffle. I'm having a Curry night on 14th March and later I will be putting up a stall at our May Fayre to do some more fundraising for my charities.

Some of the achievements during my tenure:

- A Silver Sunday celebration was organised for our senior people which included a free cream tea and a movie.
- New working parties have been formed such as the events committee, youth council committee and senior committee.
- The events committee is working on the May Fayre which will celebrate the Coronation for Royston. To care for our Mother Earth sustainability is under consideration for the May Fayre and everyone is encouraged to buy reusable glasses.

Next year hopefully we will have more events.

You must have seen the new noticeboards up around the town and the new information lecterns in the Plantations.

I have met with different clubs in our town such as the Golf Club, Football Club and the fire cadets at the fire station. A big thank you to the fire station for their marvellous contribution in holding community events.

I will be holding my Civic service on 16th April.

Today, I will be giving grants to some deserving organisations who work to improve the community. I will also honour some members of our community who have wholeheartedly volunteered their service to our town, with Community Awards.

I have officially chaired seven meetings. A special thanks to Tracy, my secretary, who is generous with her time to schedule my visits and she has advised me that so far I have represented the council as the Mayor of Royston at 74 different events.

Once again, a big thank you to the Town Clerk Caroline Mills and her staff, the councillors from the town, district and county, Sergeant Jon Vine, David Smyth from Royston BID and to the people of our community who have spared their time to attend the town meeting this evening. Thank you.

4. PRESENTATION OF THE MAYOR'S COMMUNITY SERVICE 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 | SUM REQUESTED |
|---|---|----------------------|
| Royston Arts Society | Towards the cost of hiring Royston Town Hall for the Arts Festival Weekend | £300.00 |
| Royston Community First Responders | Towards the cost of purchasing a Raizer 2 Lifting Chair | £500.00 |
| Royston & District Community Transport | Towards running costs of wheelchair accessible vehicles | £500.00 |
| Royston Speak Out Club | Towards the cost of the Club's annual summer outing | £300.00 |
| Royston Community Association | To purchase leaflet racks for the Coombes Community Centre | £100.00 |
| Royston Photographic Society | Towards the cost of hiring Royston Town Hall for the Arts Festival Weekend | £275.00 |
| Home Start Royston, Buntingford & South Cambs | Home Start Summer Party at Royston Methodist Church | £157.50 |
| Royston & Villages SEN Lego Club | Towards the cost of an Education Psychologist to offer support at the group | £400.00 |
| Creative Royston | Towards the cost of a gazebo | £120.00 |
| Royston Cricket Club | Towards the cost of redeveloping the pavilion at the Cricket Ground | £250.00 |

The Town Mayor, Councillor Mary Antony, then presented Community Service Awards to:

Make Lunch Royston – In recognition of their service that provides healthy, free of charge meals to families in Royston over the school holidays and a safe place for children to socialise and learn.

Joanna & Rebecca Abrams – In recognition of their voluntary work and dedication in their roles to keep Royston & District Girlguiding running and the opportunity that they have given to Rainbows, Browns & Guides alike.

David Smyth – In recognition of his work at Royston First BID for the last 14 years which has brought prosperity to businesses, the town centre and the community itself.

Graeme Fell & Ian Woodall – In recognition of their contribution to the May Fayre both as marshals & members of the May Fayre Committee for the last 20 years. Their experience has been invaluable to all those involved.

5. ROYSTON FIRST BID COMPANY REPORT:

Firstly, my thanks to Mayor Mary for The Community Service Award given to myself in recognition of my service to Royston with my work for Royston First. Royston First is very much a team of volunteers and I just head it up and we all want to help improve Royston. My special thanks to my fellow directors Cath Boughton, Steve Jackson, Nigel Reader and Peter Heppelthwaite for their help and all members of the Advisory Council who give up their time on a regular basis to help with the management of the BID. At the moment, we are in a particularly busy time as the BID will be going through a renewal process at the end of this year and we certainly hope that local business rate payers in Royston support us to allow us to continue our good work.

As Mary mentioned, I have personally been involved with the BID since the start in 2009 and I look forward to continuing to support the town where I have lived and worked for most of my life. As a matter of interest, I am a Roystonian having been born in St Georges Nursing Home one or two years ago.

As the 4th year of term three of the Business Improvement District (BID) draws to a close and since my report last year, the nation has moved on from the pandemic to re-opening the businesses. In addition, we are now 12 months on from the conflict in Ukraine. When I stood up here last year, the conflict in Ukraine had just started and it continues to have a detrimental effect to our local and national businesses. Our businesses are still seeing continued trading difficulties with the rest of Europe as a consequence of Brexit. All of these mean that we now find ourselves in a cost-of-living crisis and the real threat of recession. Despite these problems, Royston continues to thrive, with new businesses opening in Royston, and surveys carried out by HCC and NHC show footfall has increased in the High Street in recent times.

The BID levy fund has allowed tangible support for local businesses to continue. The support can be seen in the organisation and management of events that Mary has already mentioned to encourage footfall, such as town trail events and the Christmas Lights Switch On, which attracted approximately 500 people to the event.

I'm not into social media but I understand that the WhatsApp and Facebook groups, and additional emails, continue to improve communications between businesses, and share important news, such as funding opportunities and new projects. We revived four large poster sites in the town to promote local events and initiatives.

As Mary mentioned, we continue to contribute funds for The Free After Three and scratch card parking schemes and they continue to be a big hit with the town centre and industrial estate businesses. Also, the Royston Town website and 2023/24 Royston Business Directory have been updated and distributed.

The BID aims to continue to raise the profile of our town centre and industrial areas as a great retail, tourist and business destination. It is important to see that the development of the Gateway Industrial site is continuing and we have welcomed a number of new businesses to that area in the last year. We continue to work on new signage projects for the industrial area and we hope to complete this project in the final year of the current BID.

As I have already mentioned, an important area is communication, and again, with Mayor Mary's help, we are continuing to have face to face meetings with large businesses on the industrial estate. Hopefully we can continue to do that and cover areas that they need input from us on.

As a BID we work very closely with RTC and in particular with the Christmas lights where we supply substantial funding to the project. It is very much a Royston Town Council initiative, but Royston First assist in funding. There are 266 days until the next switch-on in which both organisations are working hard to organise the event. For 2022, we were able to organise new displays in Fish Hill Square and organise the festive painting of various shop windows in the town leading up to Christmas. This year, we also had an initiative for businesses in Melbourn Street, Baldock Street and Kneesworth Street which aren't necessarily covered by the main Christmas lights, so we gave them a budget to spend on their own.

That gives a brief insight into the workings of The BID and as I mentioned earlier, the renewal of The Bid will take place later this year and we hope that businesses will support us in this. As a plea for anyone that will want to come to the AGM, it be held on April 26th at 5.30pm in the Town Hall.

Thank you, Madam Mayor, that's my report. I will be pleased to answer any questions if I can.

6. REPORT FROM SGT JONATHAN VINE FROM HERTS POLICE:

Thank you to the Mayor and to Caroline for inviting me here today.

I'm Jonathan Vine and a lot of you will probably recognise me as the Sergeant for Royston, and that illustrious term means I cover a large area. Not only do we cover Royston town centre, but go up as far as Stevenage, down to Baldock Services, all the way up the A505 on the Cambridgeshire border, and all the way up to Nuthampstead on the Essex border, so when I come to talk about crime figures, please bear in mind that we have that huge area to cover and all the crime figures I give you are relevant to that and not just Royston town centre. So, Royston Police Station is open, despite popular belief, and we train out of there and work out of there. We have 10 uniformed officers that go around in cars and work shifts, 3 PC's from the neighbourhood team as well as 3 PCSO's and so there are 16 of them in total and we run the service for you guys and are responsible for it 24/7 so we have a lot to deal with.

I'm going to do the crime update now and we will come to some other stuff that we have been doing over the year later. Just in relation to crime, these figures run from 1st April 2021 to the end of February 2022 and then they're comparing with the same period this year so it will give you a comparison like for like on what policing has been like for Royston.

Last year at this point, we had 795 crimes recorded, this year we have 680 so we've seen a reduction of 14.5% in crime, and that's overall crime, which isn't to be sniffed at. Coming from the back end of COVID, I expected that figure to increase so whatever we're doing, we're

doing quite well and that's quite a substantial decrease. If you see North Herts figures in general, crime has actually increased by 8.1% which is probably what I expected so we're doing alright there.

Burglary residential which covers garages, sheds and outbuildings, not just people breaking into houses and stealing things, we have seen an increase in this. There were 29 last year and this has gone up to 35 this year. This sounds like quite a horrific figure but if you break it down to what we all consider a burglary to be, i.e. going home, window broken, jewellery taken, we had 6 in the whole of our area. When you take the outbuildings, and the burglary reports that are interesting to say the least, one of which was someone that claimed a vase had been moved in their house and they hadn't moved it so it was recorded as a burglary because they believed that's what happened, as a result we have 35 offences but only 6 of those are 'real' offences in the area. What we have seen is that people who commit burglaries in this area come in by car and we even saw someone that committed a burglary in Green Drift who came up by train from Finsbury Park station because we tracked them all the way on the train back into Finsbury Park so we're seeing this sort of imported crime which is very hard to deal with. We do our best, but with such low figures, it's incredibly difficult to target those one offence incidents.

Burglary business and community buildings, 22 last year, 22 this year. We had a bit of a spate of burglaries that were affecting the industrial area in the summertime with garages that got broken into for cigarettes and someone even tried to smash their way into Marks & Spencer on the industrial estate. However, that bucks the trend as North Herts has seen an increase and the county has seen a 13.6% increase overall.

Theft from motor vehicles, we saw quite high numbers last year. Catalytic converters were targeted and I'm not saying they're not now but it's just not as prevalent at the moment. Last year we saw vans being broken into in quite large numbers. Places like Hinxworth down on the A1 is actually ours for crime recording and there's a Redwings Lodge where all the builders will spend the night and we have had a number of crimes where people drive down the A1, break into vans and off they go again. We saw one of those incidents the other night so hopefully that doesn't start spiking again but it's good to see a 32.4% reduction there.

Robbery, there was none as we just don't get that sort of thing here so that's really positive.

Violence against a person where there is a victim, this includes assaults, stalking, malicious communications and any public order offences. This was 291 last year, down to 211 this year so that's a reduction of 27.5%.

Criminal Damages down from 100 last year to 88 this year.

Shoplifting has gone up, people are finding things difficult, 28 recorded offences last year has gone up to 37 this year. I've been in the police long enough now to see these changes and you do get these spikes, particularly thefts in fuel, shoplifting and metal is stolen when times are tight. We had one today actually where people came into Boots, a team of them came in, they'd been travelling round, up the M11 in Cambridgeshire, they came to us and stole £2,000 worth of stock from Boots. They managed to conceal it on their person, they walked out and they've probably gone off and done the same in Bedfordshire and other areas too. The teams that are hitting us are not home-grown criminals so they're exceptionally hard to find but we did get an index number for a car today, so we've got some enquiries to make there.

So that's where we are and I'm really quite pleased with these figures, they're probably better than I anticipated, we lived in quite a safe town last year and it's quite obvious that we live in a safe town this year so all the hard work that our guys are putting in is working.

We have had some challenges in 2022/23, we saw quite a substantial increase in rural crime at the start of September all the way through to December and again, we had teams of people travelling in from out of the area and stealing some high value kit. It started off with theft of farm machinery up at Nuthampstead, specifically a telehandler and a tractor which are about £150,000 a piece and they just disappeared in the middle of the night. This then went onto caravans, quad bikes and gators. We started working out where this stuff was being taken to, which was Whaddon and Potton and we managed to get a lot of stuff recovered. We worked with Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire and did a number of night-time operations. There was a caravan stolen on one of the nights and the caravan had a tracker and it ended up over at Potton. We've had some fun and games along the way this year, a bit of damage, and some good old fashioned cops and robbers style run-ins. Ultimately, this ended in December when we were working with Cambs, we ended up nicking a guy from the Whaddon Travellers' Site who we think is involved in all of this. One man was arrested and it stopped so we haven't had any incidents again. However, it'll come back in cycles and we need to be ready for that but you know we're talking huge sums of money that were lost so it's good that it's stopped.

This year it's been interesting in the town, anti-social behaviour and such has been pretty ok actually, we've not seen anything on the night-time economy and it hardly causes us any problems at all. We just don't see the problems that we used to have. We're seeing a really bizarre rise in neighbour disputes and to say that they drain us is an understatement as we get drawn into things you would never believe. Only this week we've been working with Settle, the housing association, and anti-social behavioural officers and we've just had an eviction in which the person got a banning order from Royston which is unheard of. These sort of things go on in the background and take up an awful lot of our time and we need to work out what we're going to do to rectify this because it is affecting our ability to provide other services but it is what it is, we have to pick up the bad bits in the town and try to sort it for you.

We have these priorities that we set for the safer neighbourhood team and we set the last ones a couple of weeks ago. We send out online surveys for members of the public to say what they think our priorities should be. We also have a meeting with the councillors to work out what the priorities will look like for Royston and the surrounding villages. To give you some indication of the good position we're in at the moment, parking around schools, yes, it's problematic, but that has been set as one of the priorities and I think that shows you where we are. If I can prioritise those things and I haven't got burglaries and all that sort of stuff, we're in pretty good shape at the moment. Speeding was another one, I'm not going to tell you that I'm going to fix speeding in the town because I'm not, cars have been speeding since they made cars. All we can do is try to make people aware and try to get them to slow down through enforcement, but really, I would rather go down the educational route and using the police commissioner's vehicles that they have. They look like speed enforcement vehicles but they're not, they're like community speed watch and their visual impact is quite good so if we can put more of those out there, we'll maybe slow some traffic down. The third one, which is really close to my heart, was continue with the engagement work which we're doing with young people and the whole premise around that is to prevent anti-social behaviour. In the last year since we spoke, we've set up two community projects for young people in the town which is on top of all the other work that we do. We've managed to get the time and money from various sources to set up two projects. The reason we do it is to give the kids something to do, that's not the whole reason, but it's so we can engage with those children and they get to know me and my staff by name which is so important. A lot of the stuff on YouTube that they watch shows a negative view of the Police and we're seen as the enemy, and we're not, so we need to reinforce that fact to children in this town. The stuff that we've been doing has allowed us to meet them, know them and even have fun with them on occasion. We've got

the Thursday Night Project at Limitless Academy. We obtained funding from Hertfordshire County Council and Johnson Matthey have helped, Wetherspoons have helped and we have this project where between 25 and 30 kids come along and they learn skills around acting, performing and the ultimate goal is to film a mockumentary about kids going to a drama school.

The other project we've set up is the Saturday cinema for the kids, that is fully funded in its entirety by the Brian Leslie Racher Trust and they have supported us for approximately 10 performances. The way that we do it is that we target the kids of ages 12-15, we print lots of tickets and leave them at the reception at school, the kids can then take as many tickets as they want, they can even take their mum and dad along if they want, but most of the kids just come on their own. We're seeing 80-90 people turn up to that and it's fantastic, 90 kids see our officers in a positive light and again, we've been supported by local businesses for crisps and drinks for the kids.

So that's where we are, I think we're in a really good place, we want to do more with the kids and we'll work with anyone that wants to work with us. The long terms goals are that we'd love a youth facility for the children that is theirs and theirs alone that they can help, build, design, run and all those things but that's a long way off at the moment so we'll continue looking at any avenue we can to get engagement. If at any point, anyone wants to get involved with anything, please knock on the door of the police station and we'll see what we can do.

You live in a safe town and all these guys working with me everyday do our best and hopefully you feel safe when you're going about your business but please, if you have any questions, please ask me at the end.

7. REPORTS FROM THE CHAIRMEN OF ROYSTON TOWN COUNCIL COMMITTEES:

Councillor Adam Compton, Chairman of the Finance Committee:

Thank you, Madam Mayor.

Over the past year, Royston Town Council and its residents have faced a turbulent year, whilst the UK economy has grown by 4.1 %, there has been a huge level of inflation as a result of failed supply chains across Europe, predominantly as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

That is a very sombre note and has caused an awful lot of issues not just for residents, but for costs out of the council as well. But it's a very good time to appreciate all the good in humanity, I want to say a big thank you to Roystonians as a whole.

At the start of this financial year, myself and some other locals from Buntingford and Reed drove to Lviv in Ukraine. We delivered aid for people, in addition to the displaced and maimed animals who were directly affected by the invasion. A huge number of those donations came from residents in Royston and the nearby villages. I am aware others in Royston were able to send numerous articulated lorries to the Polish/Ukraine Border as well. Whilst I was in Ukraine, I received some good news as the Ukrainian families whom I was sponsoring had their visas approved and I was able to drive them back to Royston. Before we took them back, we also took refugees across Belgium, Holland and Germany and the donations that people in Royston made were really important for that as we were able to give these people some clothes for their travels.

When Kristina and Timofii arrived in Royston, they had nothing more than a suitcase between them, but our community really stood up to the plate and supported them and many others across Royston have sponsored Ukrainian refugees:

- Free fitness classes at the Coombes Community Centre
- School placement for Timofii
- More clothes than I realised the wardrobes could handle
- Children donated their favourite toys so Timofii had something to play with
- A bicycle for Timofii to learn how to ride

Through various voluntary organisations, Kristina and Timofii found a community here in Royston. It's a really good thing to mention that while this is going on and continues to go on, it's a fantastic thing that Roystonians have done and I want to give a hand to those that have helped Kristina and Timofii, particularly in times of need. But also, whilst everyone is struggling financially, those donations have continued to help as Roystonians have recently put a trailer together for the Turkey victims so thank you to all those involved.

Finances:

Moving onto Finances, we're all struggling and we don't yet have the final figures for this financial year ending 31 March 2023 as we are still in the current financial year. However, it is important to note that this year, we have experienced some severe cost increases which will have a lasting impact on next year's budget as well:

1. Utility Bills have risen massively. Directly as a result of the Russian invasion. If you think of all the buildings that Royston Town Council has, bills have gone up massively for both heating and electricity and that is a huge cost to us.
2. New IT equipment. As a result of the Russian invasion, chip prices have gone up astronomically because there's a huge shortage which has also cost us more money.
3. Cleaning contract had not been re-procured for a long period of time and was no longer commercially feasible for the current provider. This has also increased massively.
4. Increased costs as a result of taking on more responsibilities from North Herts Council around compliance contracts.
5. Central Government public sector pay rises across the board which has meant all of our staff have received pay rises which I think is well deserved.

We have also proactively spent money to help our residents:

6. A new Market Assistant to assist our Markets manager, which is needed in the continued absence of a supermarket in the town centre. The market is thriving but it does mean that we've had to hire another person which is a good thing.
7. New Grants Process. To support our local charities and community groups. What we saw here tonight was the Mayor's Trust Fund, we've now got an additional budget which is costing more money but will also give money to local charities and community groups which is a good idea.
8. New Senior and Events Working Parties which we hope to bring in revenue in years to come but they are new expenditures to our budgets as well.
9. Renovation of the Market Hill Rooms kitchen which was brought up to this meeting last year, but now that we have the budget, we will go ahead with that.

Before COVID, around one third of our expenditure was covered by our income including room hire. Although our income has improved from last year, we have lost a large amount of revenue in the Town Hall from groups that have not returned following the pandemic. A large

proportion of this has been mitigated by the fantastic number of tours from our Cave Team but there is still a shortfall there.

We have not been receiving rents for 30 Kneesworth street for a while, however, if you have looked at the recent financial trackers, we will be putting in a new lease. The current lease is 12 years old and market rates 12 years ago were low in comparison to today's world, meaning that this will have an increase in years to come.

We expect to call on £20,000 from reserves to balance the books.

In setting our budget for the coming year we assumed that our income would continue to recover, and we are pleased it has done so in the last few months. However, the Royston Town Council Tax for a "Band D" property next year will need to rise. Given the increasing costs for our council, we have decided that it will be rising by roughly 9.53% from £52.15 to £57.13 per year, which is an increase of £4.97 per household for the year. Whilst this increase is certainly the largest increase in recent years, it is worth mentioning that the precept is roughly half of what residents of Buntingford pay and approximately a third of what the residents of Cambourne pay for their parish precepts. Granted, there are some different roles and responsibilities around each of those councils, but these are the two closest towns for a fair comparison. The increase is also in line with UK inflation which was 9.067% for the year but has been over 10% since July 22nd – February 2023. So the increase of 9.053% is roughly in line with inflation. Given the additional costs we've had, we've had to cut costs as much as humanly possible to keep that as low as possible as well as take money from reserves. I would like to congratulate the staff on all the work they've done but also to manage to mitigate those costs as much as possible so well done.

That's the bad news, let's move onto something a little bit more interesting.

The Market:

The Council owns the Market Square Car Park and manages the market. It has continued to thrive and has now reached the point we need an extra pair of hands as I mentioned. If you don't already use it, please do, I was there yesterday, they do have tomatoes and you can buy high quality fish, meat and all sorts of other goods. Our Market Manager, Rob Mills has done an excellent job, I thank him on behalf of the Councillors.

Royston Cave:

The Cave is owned and managed by the Town Council. Nicky, the Cave Manager and his team have put in an incredible effort this year and the income we've raised is 230% of what we expected to raise by this time, so it's more than doubled what we expected to take in. I think it's an incredible achievement what they've done, they've got virtual tours and they've managed to put on different things for different groups and I think it's incredible, so I'd just like to congratulate the team at the cave as a whole.

Royston Museum:

The Council handed over management of the museum to the Trust last year. There were numerous reasons for this, one of which was that the council couldn't apply for lottery funding and other things to help improve its facilities. The museum is really thriving, and I would like to congratulate all Trustees in this new working relationship as it has gone from strength to strength and some of the events they've had have been fantastic.

Council Staff:

We have a small number of staff and that is reflected in our low rate of Council Tax. Whilst there has been an increase, it is very low in Royston for precept in our Town Council. It has been a difficult year for them. We have also added a number of public committees, the Senior

Working Party Committee and the Events Working Party Committee which we hope will bring in extra revenue to Royston Town Council which means we can keep precepts low or stop them from going up in the future. This has meant an extra workload for the staff and I'm pleased to let you know that we have been able to increase one of the staff's hours which I think is very important so that they can have a work-life balance. I'm not sure if it's going to be mentioned later, we've also put in things for our staff like Time in Lieu Policies and this is really important to make sure we're looking after our staff and that we're doing the best that we can for them.

On behalf of the councillors, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Caroline and all the staff for their service to the community and largely, deal with a crop of new councillors who from day 1, didn't know what they were doing but are now at the point where they're operating very efficiently after a year. Obviously, loads to learn and I'm one of those new fairly councillors but thank you and thank you to the team as well.

Councillor Elizabeth Beardwell, Chairman of the Planning Committee:

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

I would like to thank our Town Clerk, Caroline Mills and all the office staff for their invaluable support and hard work. I would also like to thank the members of the Planning Committee for their work over the past year. Thank you for your input as we try to do our best for the Town and residents. We have to be mindful of the Climate and Diversity Emergency declared by Royston Town Council when making decisions.

The local knowledge of the committee members is very important in making decisions. The Town Council Planning Committee is of course only a consultee for all planning applications which are submitted to the North Herts Council Planning Authority. Our role is to give a local view on applications submitted. We can also suggest improvements to proposals or suggest reasonable conditions be applied to an application. We can also apply for Section 106 monies towards the town's infrastructure.

This year we have had well over 100 applications. A significant proportion of these being replacement of existing conservatories with built extensions to provide more year-round living space, roof extensions to give more bedroom area, and also conversion of garage space.

We have seen several developments which will provide more dwellings in the present buildings in the town centre with the creation of flats. These will add to the vitality and security of the town centre and increase usage of the town facilities.

5G communications within the town are much needed, but the placement of the large pale grey monopoles and associated equipment cases, requires careful thought. We recently placed a strong objection to an 18-metre monopole with associated equipment near to The Copperfields and opposite Therfield Heath.

We also objected to houses being built on a tree lined area on London Road near the Warren car park, where the A10 enters the town. This was not upheld by North Herts Council as houses had been there within living memory. The loss of trees in the town is always a negative influence on the quality of the town as a living space.

A positive note is the re-development of the building which housed the launderette in Melbourn Street, this should drastically improve the area which has so many historic buildings. To be welcomed also is the new specialist record shop opposite, which has interesting signage and increases the retail offer in the town.

Planning meetings are always held on the first Monday of the month (excepting bank holidays) and members of the public are very welcome to attend. This committee will always do its best to represent the views of local people.

Councillor Mike Harrison, Chairman of the General Purposes & Highways Committee:

Thank you Madam Mayor. Good evening ladies, gentlemen and councillors.

Sustainable travel:

We are continuing our talks with both the County and District councils to become a sustainable travel town, and I believe that when achieved, this will have a great benefit to the people of Royston.

Pedestrian and cycle bridge over a505:

It is still hoped that this will happen in the not-too-distant future. It is believed that Cambridgeshire will start work on the Melbourn Cycle way some time in 2024, the work taking place in stages, and it is planned that it will be joined to Royston's cycle routes by the bridge referred to. Many companies have pledged funds to help with the cost, as have Hertfordshire County, North Herts District Council and Royston Town Council.

Swift boxes:

We have had swift boxes attached to the Town Hall to help with the conservation of these birds, as their numbers have fallen over the years, and we think we should encourage the birds to continue to visit us each year to try to help retain this species of wildlife. We are also having bird and bat boxes installed in our plantations for the same reasons to help conservation.

New signs in priory gardens:

New signs have been erected in the park to assist visitors to find places of interest within the town.

Street cleaning and pigeons:

This is a problem we have tackled, and we have encouraged shop keepers and people who live in the town to do whatever is necessary to deter pigeons from landing on their property and messing on the footpaths below. If we can prevent that, it will help keep the town much cleaner and will stop disease that pigeons can spread. We have had a word with restaurants and food outlets to keep their waste bins covered so the birds cannot get in there to get the waste food that's been thrown away.

915 bus service between Royston and Cambridge:

We were told only weeks prior to the service being withdrawn by Stagecoach. I wrote to the head of the bus company, the Mayors of both Cambridgeshire and Cambridge City Council, and our MP Sir Oliver Heald. I am aware Councillor Fiona Hill did the same and made contact with county to see what help they could give us. As a result of the bus service being withdrawn, Councillor Hill and I called a public meeting, and Royston Town Council allowed us the use of the hall for this purpose. Councillor Luke Haugh leader of Royston Town Council chaired the meeting, and an officer from the County Council attended. There were 40 people in attendance at the meeting who expressed their views and how they wanted the bus service to continue. The officer from county took this away and managed to arrange for the 26 route to run instead of the 915. This is now run by Centrebus instead of Stagecoach but is unfortunately a 2-hourly service instead of 1 hourly but fortunately, we have a bus service which is something Stagecoach was going to leave us without, so at least we do have a bus service and can be grateful for this as a result of Stagecoach's actions.

Seating to the north of the town:

People have approached me about seating where they go for a walk. Some of these are elderly people and they find that when they get to one end of the town, they can feel a bit weary and like to have a sit down before they go back. This has tied in nicely with sustainable

travel, so we are having two seats installed, one at the north end of Melbourn Road and one at the north end of Old North Road to help people that wish to use these seats. We can thank the District Council for helping us out and purchasing these seats. We will be paying them for these but they will install them for us.

Other matters

We are also looking to see if a ramp could be installed by the steps on the market place. This is to make entry to the area easier for people with prams and buggies to get down to the market area from the A10 and Market Hill.

Finally, I would like to thank the Town Clerk and the Deputy Town Clerk for all their hard work and assistance. I must also thank all of the ladies and of course Robbie in the office for running things as smoothly as they do.

In addition, I must thank Councillor Fiona Hill, and Councillor Steve Jarvis, our county councillors who report to us at our meetings to keep us aware of what they are doing and assist us in many ways.

Also thank you to Councillor Tony Hunter who likewise gives us reports on the District Council and offers his help and assistance when required. I would also thank Jean Green who comes to our meetings to support us.

Finally, I would like to thank all the members of the committee for all their hard work and support over the year.

Thank you very much to everyone, thank you.

8. REPORT FROM HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCILLOR FIONA HILL:

Thank you Madam Mayor, Councillors, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for, again, giving me the opportunity to update you on Hertfordshire County Council issues. Since last year's meeting, we have lost our wonderful and inspirational Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, experienced her Platinum Jubilee and have ongoing challenges, following the Pandemic, the tragic war in Ukraine and cost-of-living crisis. The County Council continues to work with the Government and the NHS, together with the many stakeholders and volunteer groups, to ensure that every individual has the support needed, particularly with the increased impact on mental health following the pandemic.

The County Council is facing financial challenges but has, again, managed to deliver a balanced budget, for 2023/24, whilst maintaining front line services. There will be an increase of 4.99% in Council Tax, of which 2% is specifically for Adult Care. We expect to spend over £1 billion delivering essential services, in addition to £1.2 billion for the Dedicated School Grant. Adult Care and Health and Children's Services remain the highest budgets at around £443 million and £170 million, respectively.

Schools have risen to the challenges, following the pandemic, with well over 90% of maintained schools in Hertfordshire, currently judged Good or Outstanding by Ofsted. Following two years of assessed grades, last year returned to exams, with changes so that pupils were supported. We attended the joint Town/District/County Council school visits in Royston, which were enlightening, as always. Step2Skills is continuing to reach out to a wide range of residents and help them gain the qualifications, skills, and confidence to enable them to move into employment. Libraries have also been busy hosting warm hubs, slipper swaps (which prevent falls) and drop-in sessions for Barclays Bank and the Police, in addition to their regular activities.

Integration of Health and Social Care remains a key priority and we welcome the additional funding to support the care of our residents, in addition a 9.68% increase specifically for the wonderful care staff we rely on so much. Work also continues through Adult Services and

Public Health, to reduce pressure on the acute hospitals. I continue to promote, at Government and Local level, greater recognition for Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND), Mental Health issues, particularly in young people, and Carers' issues working alongside Councillor Jean Green who holds the local Carers' group in Royston. Dementia, Domestic Abuse and Sepsis, all have a devastating impact on people's lives.

Town, District and County Councils and Councillors, together with stakeholders such as the Police and Royston First, continue to work in partnership for the benefit of residents in Royston and the villages. We are working on projects to benefit young people, and through joint funding, we are progressing Royston to become a Sustainable Travel Town, with measures such as the County Council initiative of the on-demand bus service HertsLynx and improving safety and parking in the town, including, thanks to the police enforcement near the schools and in areas such as Melbourn Street, the corner of John Street, the Free After 3 parking initiative and are currently investigating a ramped access to the market area for the Town Council. We have been working on mitigation measures for speeding, such as educating drivers using Speed Indicator Devices where there is an additional one on Melbourn Road this year, Speed and Volume surveys, Police checks and DriveSafe.

Participation in consultations, such as the proposal to terminate the bus service between Royston and Cambridgeshire (a service remains), the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs), promoting active travel, the speed limit on Baldock Road, which has resulted in an extension to the 40-mph speed limit, the Parking Review and various planning applications have resulted in positive improvements for the town. Working with Cambridgeshire, we remain committed to the safer crossing over the A505.

The Highways Locality Budget has enabled many roads and footpaths in Royston and the villages, which would not currently meet the criteria for general funding, to be improved and I am delighted that this scheme has been approved again for the next fiscal year.

There have been a substantial number of grant applications through the Community Locality Budget for County Councillors and this, too, was approved in the Integrated Plan (Budget). There are so many invaluable organisations in the town and villages and you've heard from some of them tonight. The full list of grants allocated is available to view.

I will end by thanking all my Councillor colleagues, particularly Councillor Jarvis for working with me on the County Council and all the Town and District Councillors too, so thank you to them for their support. I am grateful to the Town Clerk, Caroline Mills, and her team of staff, for welcoming me to their meetings and for their work during the year.

Madam Mayor, this concludes my report.

9. REPORT FROM HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCILLOR STEVE JARVIS:

Thank you very much Madam Mayor.

I appreciate you don't want to hear exactly the same about the County Council that has just been spoken about by Fiona Hill so I will try and talk about some different aspects.

It's clear that Hertfordshire County Council has faced some real challenges, as many of us have, over the last year. There has been a substantial increase in the cost of many things, some aspects of mending roads which you will be aware the County Council does some, probably not as much as you think they should but the cost of some of that work has increased by something like 25%. There has also been a real challenge in terms of what the council can do to support people who are experiencing difficulties and that's clearly a difficult process, not only limited by money but the physical means to do it. I think that there are a number of ways in which that's been progressed and some more ways in which we'd like to see them progress.

Fiona mentioned the locality budget grants, one of the things that struck me this year has been how many approaches there have been from organisations seeking to provide help for people whether or not they be long-term residents of the town or people who have arrived from Ukraine. Or in other circumstances, there have been requests for relatively small amounts of financial help that we've been able to provide, but I think that it's great that we are able to provide assistance to some of those groups who are doing some really great work. I've also been particularly pleased that, from the same funds, we've been able to provide some help to Jon Vine in some of the work he's doing with the young people in Royston. I think he undersells what he's doing there and we're extremely lucky to have someone in the town who is so interested in getting engaged with the young people as it probably goes way beyond what his job requires him to do and I'm grateful to be able to make a small contribution to what he's done there. The County Council, as Fiona has said, spends most of its money on adult care and support for vulnerable children which are things that most of us don't see unless we use those services personally or have friends or relatives that do. What we all see is the roads, and what we all see is that there are holes because we've had a much colder winter and I've had some criticisms about some of the details in the way it's done. The people who've been trying to fix that have done a great job in terms of doing what they can with the impact of the weather. Because I represent not just the western part of Royston, but the rural area going down as far as Baldock, I spend quite a lot of time on issues around the A505 trying to get the holes filled in, trying to get people to go more slowly and that is something that will no doubt continue. We make small steps forward, but only small steps so we'll have to keep going on that.

I think the last point I'd like to make here before I finish really is that I've been very pleased to work with my colleagues from the County Council, District Council and Town Council. I think that there is a very good working relationship to try and get things done for people in Royston and I'm very grateful for that because it means that we can collectively deliver more for the town than if we didn't work together so much. I think the other thing, and apologies to those of you that come every year that have heard me say this before, but one of the things that is emphasised to me every time I come to one of these and on other occasions is just that a lot of people in Royston are doing great things in the town and how much there is going on. It's great to be able to help some of you do that and it really is only a small help, all those things happen because the people in the town make them happen, we are only here to try and help you do that a bit better, but it's your contribution that really makes the town what it is. So at that point, I'll finish.

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

Thank you, Madam Mayor, I'm the last man standing as per usual.

I'll give you a flavour of what's going at the moment, but one thing I've just got to say, I've been sitting here this evening and not only listening to the good work inside here, but I've been listening to the bells, they're back. I don't know whether it's the first night but for a moment, I wondered what's that noise? I suddenly realised that the bells were back again and that's good, let's hope it's every Thursday night and they continue with it because it's costing a small fortune.

Sergeant Vine, I've got to tell you, I was in Letchworth today having my car serviced and there's a huge spike over there in catalytic converters being stolen. They did 3 while I was there, and they also recommended to another guy that he should have a cat guard so let's hope it doesn't come back into Hertfordshire.

Anyway, back to Royston & District Area Committee. There are a few things going on at district at the moment, the budget has been set, it's standing at 2.99%. It's an increase, obviously things are difficult, I think we've all known it's a hard year and regrettably I think we all know it might get a little harder in the coming months but let's hope that the current government finds ways around it. There's a new contract being considered, going to 3-weekly collections on residual waste.

Car parking charges have gone up which you may have noticed and also at long last the local plan has gone through which is something we've been waiting for, for an eternity. I must admit though, it was good the other night at planning where one application that would have gone through got thrown out because it didn't comply with the current policies within the local plan so it was good to see that there is a little bit of muscle there to stop some of this development if it's not in the right place.

The environmental side of district is trying 9 new areas of wilding, it will be interesting to see how that works because it will affect the mowing regime, so if you do spot a corner where you think the grass is growing a little long and cutting back on the site line for cars, please do report it because that's one of the things that's got to be found out, does it work or doesn't it.

There has also been an exercise in engaging with communities over an alternative to the area committee. Some people are suggesting area forums similar to this, so that's now closed and we'll see the outcome.

The parking review has finished at long last, it has been a little disappointing because one of the things we would have liked to have been done, unfortunately the consultation has stopped it, so there are only certain things that are going to happen within that review.

We, at the local committee, have a grant fund which we have been trying to help organisations. This year, we've given money to Home-Start Royston to help with their home visiting and council services. We've also given to Royston Community First Responders, an amazing organisation that I didn't even know existed and recently were given an award at North Herts. These are people that actually give up their time and effort to come out and save people's lives, and they do it for nothing which sounds quite unbelievable. We've also managed to assist in the cost towards a local concert for the local parish church on Saturday 25th March with the Choral Society.

Our Community Engagement Officer has been made redundant but we've got temporary cover from another officer who used to be with us for a number of years. You may have heard of the town section of Section 106 which a lot of you won't know what that is, but it's the money that developers, through negotiation, give to local authorities to aid with infrastructure, health, education etc. This year, S106 went towards fencing Coombes Community Centre and Royston BMX track. It also helped with the bus shelter at Icknield Walk, the bike shelter at Market Square, the bike racks on the Heath and the kitchen improvements at Royston Town Hall. It also assisted Royston Make Lunch.

The Royston Committee will be considering the Free After 3 scheme at the June meeting which County Councillors, Royston First BID and the Area Committee have supported for a number of years now.

Lastly, I'd like to thank my colleagues at Town, District and County and all the other people that have aided us this year. So, thank you.

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:

I feel sympathy for any person found speeding down Fish Hill because if you turn into Fish Hill off the A10, the 20 mile per hour sign is right up by where you're looking round the corner and you're not going to be looking up in the air to see the speed sign. Why hasn't any marking for 20 miles per hour been put down on the road surface to make people aware that the town centre has a 20 mile per hour speed limit.

A. Councillor Fiona Hill:

It will have been because of legal stuff at the time but we are trying to get some road markings in other areas as well just to make that clear, so that's something that's being looked at and I will take on board your comments. They will be at a certain height for a reason, and we are looking at road markings in various places including in the town centre just to make it clear. For example Market Link, we're doing some work with the Town Councillors, District Council and Councillor Jarvis and myself are trying to make it clear that it's a two-way road but everyone thinks it's a one-way road so we're trying to get some stuff to make it clear and get some markings down there as well so I will take on board that comment.

Q. A member of the public spoke:

Can I take this opportunity from the point of view of Jon Vine's speeding section to mention that for the last few years, myself and an ex-councillor have been leads on Drivesafe whereby we have to go out with a mobile SID and take notes of people speeding. Unfortunately, we've had to stop for the time as there are not enough volunteers. We need community people to carry this on and it doesn't stop people but it does slow them down. When you see these things, you can see them coming up the road at 30 odd miles per hour and you think oh yes, we can write this one down but by the time they get to our speed indicator device, they're doing 28 mph. This is the kind of thing that does slow them down and we have it on Old North Road, Melbourn Road and Newmarket Road but at the moment we can't do it because we don't have the community people to come out and join us. We need at least 5 but at the minute there's only 3 of us. Thank you.

Q. A member of the public asked:

When you look down onto the top of Royston Gateway, there doesn't appear to be any solar panels on any of the new industrial units that are being built. Can it be brought to the attention of the local planning department, we must be thinking about that sort of thing with climate change.

A. Councillor Brown:

I have brought it to the attention of the planning department and we are talking about it a lot, we are talking about biodiversity, sustainability, good design, all those things and having now finally adopted the local plan, we are writing the supplementary planning documents that will go inside that and we are looking to drive up standards. I feel exactly how you do, why are these big green spaces not covered in solar panels like they ought to be? So I am doing what I can and I'm not saying it will happen quickly because the planning process takes a long time

but we are going forward and looking for much higher levels of sustainability through all of our planning.

A. Councillor Jarvis:

That's obviously planning for new buildings, but there is also scope for trying to work with local businesses to put panels on existing business buildings. There is certainly some scope for the County Council and District Council to do some work in that area to enable businesses who don't have the resources to do it, to do it, and generate some income for the council as well so that's something I hope will happen.

Q. A member of the public asked:

Could you tell me what is happening to the Old Morrison's building.

A. Councillor Brown:

It hasn't come to planning yet, as far as I know, no one knows. I know a few people have talked about it in the background but nothing substantial and concrete has been proposed yet.

The Mayor thanked everyone for the time taken to come to the meeting.

The meeting closed at 9:09pm.

DRAFT