

Chairman's Annual Report

Cllr Chris Witham - May 2022

Introduction

2021-22 was a year of change and development. People's lives, our town and the work of the council all continued to be impacted and changed by the global pandemic. By the end of the year, some things would return to a more familiar way, but the impacts of the events we have lived through will be felt for years to come. What shone through throughout the pandemic, was our communities resilience and desire to support one another and work together.

The business of the council

The year started with a big change. Lynda Thomas resigned as our clerk after 30 years of dedicated service and hard work. In June, we returned to in person meetings having met online for over 18 months. Lynda was able to attend the June meeting as a member of the public where she was presented with a stained glass window as a thank you gift from councillors. The gift was commissioned from local artist Jo Snowdon.

Emma Bennett took on the role of Interim Clerk following Lynda's retirement. This allowed time for the council and GAPTC (Gloucestershire Association of Town and Parish Councils) to undertake a full staffing review and evaluation. In the 30 years overseen by Lynda, the scope of scale of the council business had changed and developed considerably. Following the review, Emma successfully applied for the substantive Responsible Financial Officer and Clerk position. We also welcomed Joe as our Grounds and Property Maintenance Apprentice and Les as our Facilities Manager.

Emma has brought a wealth of experience to the council. New processes have been implemented along with a complete review of council policies. A new staff training programme has been established. Ann has undertaken further training on our finance software to enable better management of our budgets. There has been a lot for councillors to work through but we have made more effective use of the committee structure and we end the year with the council operating efficiently.

Sadly we received resignations from Councillors Lyn Sterry and Rachel Lewis this year. We thank them both for their work on the council and their commitment to their community.

History and Culture

Local history was celebrated this year with the unveiling of new green plaques to celebrate significant local people. Timothy Mountjoy is commemorated on the Baptist Church. Dr Bangara and Dame Muriel Powell are commemorated on the Triangle Tower.

Our Archive was able to reopen to the public in May and we held our annual Memorabilia Day in September. October saw the launch of the Cinderford Hidden Heritage App which has proved popular and encouraged people to walk around the town.

In March, The Keelings sign and railings were reinstated putting history back on public display.

Events

Many events had been cancelled in the previous year and we were not able to return to a full calendar of activities in 2021. However more opportunities were created for people to get out and about and start to socialise more.

Foresters' Forest litter picks were well supported and alongside the FVAF community litter pick in the town centre, kept our surrounding area looking good.

New monthly markets were established in September attracting different stalls and traders along with footfall to the town centre.

Repairs to the war memorial were completed in August. A new Remembrance bench was installed in the Triangle in November. We were able to return to a well attended Remembrance Day Parade working with the Royal British Legion Cinderford Branch and Cinderford Churches. The event was live-streamed for the first time to enable those still isolating or unable to attend in person to join in.

Late November and December brought great festivities to the town. Unfortunately due to storms, the Christmas market had to be cancelled. However, the Christmas light switch on went ahead as planned, and 6 Market Street (the former HSBC bank) provided sheltered accommodation for Santa and his helpers. We held a Christmas Window Competition for the first time in around two decades and it was great to see so many traders join in and make the town look good. The Christmas convoy grew again and provided a fantastic display to people all around the town.

In April we held a Family Fun Day on the Steam Mills recreation ground with a wide variety of activities for children, classic cars and local businesses.

In October, council supported the Halloween Fireworks at the Causeway in aid of Forest of Dean Children's Opportunity Centre. An excellent event that provided entertainment for many people from across the town.

Partnership working

Throughout the year, we have continued to develop connections with the Forest Neighbourhood Policing team who regularly attend our council meetings and events. The Police Community Engagement Vehicle now regularly visits the town providing people with an easy way to meet with and speak to the Police. In February, the Police and Crime Commissioner came to speak to the town council and residents.

I had the privilege of opening the Science Experience at BASF in Cinderford. BASF are providing hands on science sessions for primary schools throughout the local area. It was great to meet the BASF team, tour their incredible facility and join in with some of the equally impressive learning resources. BASF also supported our Family Fun Day and really help young people engage with science.

Severn Trent and Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust developed a new wetland area just off Linear Park. Mayor Roger Sterry alongside local school children planted our Queen's Jubilee Tree within the new wetland area where there will be plenty of space for it to grow for decades to come.

We have worked closely with Forest of Dean District Council and Hartpury University on our successful Levelling Up Fund Bid. This will see over £800k invested in the Town Centre with additional match funding from the town council. As part of our plans, the council have purchased and rebranded, The Wesley - Community Arts Centre for the Forest of Dean.

We have continued to work with Forest High School and Cinderford Town Youth Football Club. Council made donations to the school for essential repairs to their cafeteria and the football club to support their work bringing the football pitches at the High School back up to a good playing standard. Both organisations works hard to support the young people of our town.

Major Projects

In June, we invested £32,000 into the two play parks at Mount Pleasant Road. One is either side of the Multi-use Games Area (MUGA) and were in need of new equipment. The new parks look excellent and have a variety of equipment for infant and junior aged children. As part of our work with the NHS to deliver a new hospital in Cinderford, the MUGA is also receiving an upgrade with a new polymeric playing surface that will allow for a wide variety of sports to be played year round. Our clerk Emma successfully bid for some further funding that has allowed us to place a £50,000 order for new play equipment for the Steam

With major projects comes substantial complexity. I do not believe we have always done a good job at communicating this well. We are putting a number of things in place to improve this, including a new newsletter that will be circulated online and in print. One project that has been a long time in development is 6 Market Street, the old HSBC bank. We have had delays waiting for the Future High Street and Levelling Up fund bids to be evaluated. Now that the Levelling Up money has been granted, work is pushing on. Solar panels are on order, for the bank, The Wesley and Rheola House. And internal works are progressing well. We have also recently been awarded £80,000 for the installation of two Changing Places toilets. In April, The Wesley, Forest of Dean Community and Arts Centre, open with much fanfare and celebration. Bookings for community activities have taken off and this will be a vital hub for community groups. Demand for our office space and meeting rooms at the Belle Vue Centre has also increased.

We have been fortunate to have the Covid Vaccination Centre in the Dockham Road Surgery building allowing residents to receive their vaccines close to home. We should have taken ownership of the Dockham Road site at the start of April, however, we chose to postpone this until June so that the booster vaccines could continue to be delivered locally. We have been working hard with Forest Voluntary Action Forum (FVAF) to create a new community support centre that will bring together a wide range of support services at the heart of our community.

The new Forest Hospital has been a big focus throughout the last five years and has needed a lot of discussion and careful consideration from councillors. Building is now underway. This project will see the creation of jobs in Cinderford, new hospital services like endoscopy delivered in the Forest and over £25m of investment in our town. This includes a new £250,000 skate park, £35,000 to upgrade our Multi-use Games Area and an investment of around £450,000 in the new Dockham Road community centre.