



BERWICK-UPON-TWEED TOWN COUNCIL



Annual Town Report 2014/15

Introduction

This year has been both challenging and difficult but has also been a reaffirming year for Berwick-upon-Tweed Town Council.

Two local Council Elections are to take place shortly in Castle and Magdalene Wards to elect two new Town Councillors for Berwick-upon-Tweed Town Council and three more Town Council vacancies have been posted.

Our former Town Clerk, Sue Finch has left the Authority and a new temporary Town Clerk is taking up post.

We look forward now, to a better future for our town and we will all work together to make Berwick-upon-Tweed an example of a community which not only upholds the values and principles of public service but which recognises and welcomes innovation when it is to the benefit of our Town and its people.

There will be efficiencies which we will look at in-year. We will be looking at how some of our services/initiatives are run and how they can be improved upon, but we would hope that the public would expect that of us. We will take the opportunity to get more involved in local communities and empower them.

The Town Council will continue its work with partner organisations and businesses to serve the needs of the community and to provide all residents of Berwick with improved services and total commitment.

The Council is looking at all Play Parks in the area and will endeavour to improve and replace all play equipment where necessary.

Recent areas of concern which have arisen are the safety and storage of the Berwick Archives. Berwick Record Office will be closing at its current location on 8th June, the office will continue to deliver a normal public service in the hiatus period between vacating its current premises in June and moving to refurbished space at the Library at the end of this year.

The Berwick-upon-Tweed Record Office was first established in 1980 as a branch of Northumberland County Archives Service. The office holds records relating to the former Borough of Berwick-upon-Tweed which extended from Berwick, south to Ellingham, west to Ingram and north to Carham on the River Tweed. The records held in the Berwick office include Berwick's Borough records dating from the 16th century. It is considered of the utmost priority by all Councillors that the housing of the Berwick records should stay safely within our Town and every effort will be made to ensure this happens.

As part of Berwick 900 programme of events for 2015, The Berwick Families Project, run by the Berwick Record Office, is helping to trace descendants of families that have historical links with the town and the Berwick 900 story themes. A team of volunteers is using the Record Office's unique archive, with social media and the internet, to discover the stories of family connections through the ages and encourage family members to contribute information and visit the town.

The Council are to hold an Open General Meeting in June and the views of the community will be listened to and where possible acted upon. Councillors will continue to work hard and try to address issues which affect the daily lives of residents in Berwick upon Tweed.

The Neighborhood Plan for Berwick is now in discussion and the Council will endeavor to ensure that the community is consulted extensively in order to give all residents more say over development in our area. Neighbourhood planning gives communities direct power to develop a shared vision for their neighbourhood and shape the development and growth of our local area. The community will be able to choose where they want new homes, shops and offices to be built, have their say on what those new buildings should look like and what infrastructure should be provided, and grant planning permission for the new buildings they want to see go ahead. Neighbourhood planning provides a powerful set of tools for local people to ensure that they get the right types of development for their community where the ambition of the neighbourhood is aligned with the strategic needs and priorities of the wider local area.

Local government plays a crucial role in the life of the town. We need services to work together effectively for the good of the community with Councillors elected by and accountable to local people. Local government should provide democratic leadership and power should be exercised at the lowest practical level - close to the people who are affected by decisions.

The Town Council will build on its work to deliver improvements within the communities of Berwick, Spittal and Tweedmouth.

THE YEAR IN BRIEF

Environment and Regeneration Projects

Berwick Parks Project

It's almost a year now since Castle Vale and Coronation Parks were officially opened by the Duchess of Northumberland on 31st July 2014. They are really starting to establish nicely. Since last July the planting has been completed and the rhododendrons and rockeries in particular are starting to look really wonderful.

Volunteers continue to play an important role in helping to maintain and promote the parks – we have clocked up around 1500 volunteer hours since the project began.

We are in the process of constituting a “Friends of Castle Parks” group – this will allow us to access funding which is not accessible to NCC and hold our own funds for projects. We also have a new website in development – www.friendsofcastleparks.org.

New interpretation boards have been installed at Coronation Park, Castle Vale Park, Scotsgate and on the New Road.

In terms of events we have had willow weaving sessions, big garden bird watch, dawn chorus walk, Easter egg hunt (attended by 100 +) and photography workshops. Tai Chi is ongoing throughout the summer on Monday mornings. We would like to see more music and events generally in the parks, so if anyone has ideas or contacts, please get in touch.

Later this year we will be running a Bioblitz event in partnership with Berwick Wildlife Group and a Butterfly Hunt – watch the press for details.

We still have plans to develop the grassed area at Meg's Mount as a community garden; plans are ready to go out to tender.

Special thanks need to go out to members of the community who helped us repair damage to the Shelter in Coronation Park recently. Overall antisocial behaviour and damage has been negligible, probably because the parks are busier. We will be running a visitor survey this summer to compare use of the Parks with a survey carried out before the Project began.

Allotments

The Lion Allotments have now formally transferred to the Town Council under lease from Berwick Preservation Trust. They will largely be administered by the Lion Allotments Committee. A proportion of the rents (75%) will be transferred to the Town Council to be ring-fenced and kept for any maintenance or repairs. Once the existing waiting list which has been held by the Committee has been accommodated, those on the Town Council's allotment waiting list will be eligible to take any vacant plots on.

Play Areas

The Council has taken on responsibility for all play areas in Berwick, Tweedmouth and Spittal and transfer will take place very shortly. The Council will aim to repair, where practical, any damaged equipment, reversing the policy of removal followed by NCC. Existing equipment will be supplemented by new equipment in existing or new locations. The Council hopes to begin this process during 2015 with a major investment in play equipment in Flagstaff Park.

Berwick in Bloom

The Council continued to aid the work of the Berwick in Bloom Committee, with some grant money part of which will support the hosting by Berwick in Bloom of the Northumbria in Bloom meetings in 2015. Also, the Council provides support by covering the cost of floral displays around the town during both summer and winter. These initiatives complement the ongoing efforts of community groups across Berwick, Spittal and Tweedmouth

Berwick Youth Project

Berwick Youth Project has started up 'Boxercise' funded by LMAP. They have regular attendance of 18 young people and are presently training someone to enable the sessions to keep running.

Supporting Local Projects

Through the Berwick Environment Enhancement Scheme, BEES for short, small grants are available to local organisations as seed money to enable them to get projects moving which will improve the local environment. No applications for BEES grants were received during 2014-15.

Community Assets

The Town Council continues to keep a watching brief on assets which belonged to the

former Borough Council and were transferred to the County Council in April 2009 and, where appropriate, will look at taking them over for community benefit.

One recent example is the former Ladies toilet on Bankhill, which was transferred from NCC before being passed onto Berwick Preservation Trust. BPT restored this building with financial support from, among others, BTC and the Berwick Portas Project. The building is now used as a street cafe.

Seats, bus shelters, litter bins and war memorials

The Council has invested a substantial sum in repairing seats in the Town and will continue to monitor and report any broken seats to the NEAT team for repair.

All bus shelters were inspected recently and broken lights were replaced at the Golden Square, Bus Shelter.

Marketing Berwick

Berwick Town Council will continue to promote the Town and endeavor to look for innovative and cost-effective ways to take full advantage of the tourism market. Focus will be made on the heritage, variety and countryside outside of Berwick as well as within Berwick Town and we will continue to promote high quality, unique and purse friendly places to stay locally. Councillors will re-visit the Visit Berwick website to see if further improvements and promotion of Berwick upon Tweed can be made.

Councillors are also looking into the possibility of taking over the Charter Market.

Markets are a great and cost effective way of increasing the retail presence and diversity in areas, whilst at the same time providing a powerful tool for generating extra footfall for local businesses and this will be given careful consideration.

Dog Fouling and Seagulls

Northumberland County Council has joined with the Keep Britain Tidy campaign and has been erecting 'glow in the dark' eye posters. Officers will target hot spots which are determined by the reports and complaints received by Northumberland County Council.

The printing of special notices asking the public not to feed seagulls, which the County Council has undertaken have been distributed and the notices are available free from the Town Council Office.

Events

Supporting local events

The Council has supported or agreed to support the following local events through its grants scheme:

Spittal Improvement Trust (£2,000) towards the running costs of annual Events: Spittal Gala, Spittal Seaside Festival and Spittal Christmas Parade.

Berwick Army Cadet Force (£175) towards costs of an exhibition to mark Armed Forces Day

Palace green Music Festival (£125) towards PA and insurance costs

Berwick Literary Festival (£2500) towards the cost of fees, venues and exhibitions

November Club (£500) towards research and displays as part of the Secret Berwick project

Tweedmouth Feast Carnival and Crowning Committee (£1250) towards PA and pipe band hire

Berwick in Bloom (£2490) towards costs of hosting Northumbria in Bloom awards ceremonies

In addition, a number of events awarded grants during the latter part of the previous municipal year took place during the summer of 2014. These included the Lowry Exhibition in the Granary Gallery and Berwick Festival Opera. In the case of the Berwick Festival Opera, BTC's support played a part in securing an additional £20000 of grant funding for the performances enjoyed by nearly 500 people, with accommodation and meals for visiting performers contributing close to £7000 to the local economy.

Christmas Lights and Trees

This year saw yet another excellent display of festive lighting in the central area of the town. The Royal Tweed Bridge Christmas lights gave all visitors to the town a warm welcome to Berwick.

Berwick's Christmas lights were switched on by this year's Salmon Queen and her attendants, on Saturday 29th November. The ceremony took place on the steps of the Town Hall, and the Salmon Queen was helped in her festive task by children from Prior Park school.

The cost of installing all the Christmas lights and tress is not inconsiderable. BTC spent close to £5000 for lights in the Town Centre and contributed a further £1800 towards Berwick Rotary Club's costs for light installation on Royal Tweed Bridge.

Remembrance Day

The Town Council, as in previous years, organised the annual service of Remembrance on 9th November, held this year in St Andrew's Wallace Green and Lowick Church of Scotland. Following the service, the Civic Party led the parade to the War Memorial in Castlegate, where wreaths were laid after a brief service incorporating the two-minute silence. Short services were also conducted at the Spittal and Tweedmouth War Memorials.

Civic Events

The Civic Party, as ambassadors for Berwick Town Council have attended a large number of events during the year, including Berwick 900 events, Riding of the Bounds, and the Fair Trade School Awards ceremony. The Sheriff's lady and the Mayor also attended the annual Womens World Day of prayer. The Mayor recently opened the new B and M store, which is

of great advantage to the town. During March, the Britain in Bloom Committee hosted the Northumbria in Bloom spring meeting at the Swan Centre. This was supported by enthusiastic volunteers and local businesses, Berwick Town Council and the Civic Party and also by Northumberland County Council. The Northumbria in Bloom awards ceremony will be held in Berwick later this year. The Civic Party have also enjoyed a busy year visiting local schools, voluntary organisations and residential homes.

Council Matters

The full Council meets every two months, but much of the discussion and decision-making is carried out by its five Committees: Events, Environment and Regeneration, Finance and Resources, Planning and Staffing. All meetings are open to the public, who are excluded only where confidential items are being discussed. Each meeting has an open session at the start, when the public can raise issues of concern, or ask questions.

Supporting the Community

The Council agreed to a number of grants during the year for purposes which are to help benefit the residents of Berwick-upon-Tweed, or which have value but do not fit the criteria of other grant 'pockets'.

The two main grants under this category made during the year were a contribution of £20000 towards the operating costs of the CAB's Berwick Advice service and a grant of £6000 to the Berwick Here for You project, which supports long-term unemployed back into work. Both projects add substantially to the local economy, with the CAB service providing advice securing around £750000 of additional income for clients and assisting in the management of around £500000 worth of debt through the year.

Honorary Freeman

On 23 March 2015, the Council agreed to bestow the title of Honorary Freeman on Mrs Joan Elder and Mr Tony Langmack, in recognition of their long and distinguished commitment to the community of Berwick-upon-Tweed.

Any resident of Berwick-upon-Tweed may nominate someone to be an Honorary Freeman; details of the criteria, and a nomination form, can be down-loaded from the website www.berwick-tc.gov.uk.

Planning Issues

The new delegated authority scheme commenced at the beginning of April, the new Planning Committee structure will commence in June 2015. Town and Parish Councils no longer automatically trigger applications going to Committee, valid objections will be considered in conjunction with the Committee Chairman. The County Councillor can ask for applications to go to Committee on valid planning applications.

The Committee welcomes the views of residents; the monthly meetings are open to the public, and information about local planning applications can be found by logging on to: http://www.berwick-tc.gov.uk/town_council/committees/planning.htm

Portas Group

Two more members have been elected onto the team. It is the team's intention to keep the public informed and any requests for information or assistance is welcome. To date various project funding has been approved and delivered.

Working with Others

The Town Council works in partnership with other organisations to achieve local improvements. The Council's closest links are with Northumberland County Council, especially the local NEAT team, but also collaborate with other organisations such as English Heritage, Berwick's Preservation Trust and Civic Society and Berwick's Tourism Forum and also the voluntary sector.

An advisory group of local people will be formed shortly to feed into a steering group of five Town Councillors to discuss and fully consult together on a Neighbourhood Plan for Berwick.

The Berwick 900 Festival which is a celebration of Berwick's long and exciting history has a packed programme of colourful living history re-enactments, including themed exhibitions, art and crafts activities, festivals and parades, local food and drink all staged in historic locations around Berwick. Children from schools in Berwick and Ford have taken part as have Berwick Rotary Club and many, many other local organisations from within our community are working very hard to make the Festival a huge success.

Guild of Freemen

The Council administers admissions to the Guild of Freemen at a quarterly meeting presided over by the Town Mayor. This year the Mayor has admitted 22 men and women, whose families and history are part of the fabric of Berwick life.

ACCOUNTS FOR 2014/15

The accounts for 2014-15 are currently in preparation and full figures will be posted in due course on the Council's website. Preliminary indications are that total receipts for the year will be £330716, which includes just under £91000 received from the Freemen and just over £13000 of grant relating to bus shelter provision and future maintenance at Morrison's Supermarket. Total payments for the year are estimated to be around £261000

The cost of the Town Council to a Band D property was £69.56, equating to a little under £1.34 per week. The cost was higher than anticipated due to Council Tax support being reduced.

Details of all the Council's receipts and payments can be found attached to the Finance and Resources Committee agendas, which are posted on the Town Council's website.

The Council's finances are audited by the Government appointed auditor BDO LLP on behalf of the Audit Commission. The auditor's opinion was that the information provided by the Council in its Annual Return was in accordance with proper practices and there were no matters giving cause for concern and issued the Town Council with the Notice of Conclusion of Audit on 11.12.2014.

STAFF

The Council's staff, have seen changes in 2015 and now comprise of a temporary, part-time Town Clerk, a full-time Assistant to the Clerk and a part-time Finance Officer, the equivalent of just under two full-time employees. In addition, the council employs a Website Development Officer [24 hours per month] to maintain and develop www.visitberwick.com.

The Sergeant at Mace and Halberdier continue to look after all matters relating to the Civic Party.

Staff & Councillors

Berwick Town Council