

EAST GRINSTEAD TOWN COUNCIL

TOWN MAYOR'S REPORT 2006/2007 CIVIC YEAR

I am pleased to present this report at the end of my mayoral year, a splendid year and one I have thoroughly enjoyed. The Council, which was elected in May 2003, has had an interesting and productive final year with special emphasis on service delivery, maintaining quality in our financial and support administration and seeking to ensure at all times that we listen to and serve as meaningfully as possible our community through direct representation.

There have been seven Council meetings, 43 Committee meetings, two meetings of the Best Value Review Group, one Annual Town Meeting and six meetings of the Charities Committee, in the past year. As always these meetings have attracted varying attendances from the public. Attendances have been particularly good when we have had controversial planning applications, or discussions on items that have a wide community interest. I would like to thank those who have supported us through their attendances at meetings, mentioning particularly the local Press.

The Planning Committee considered approximately 414 planning applications during the civic year. The Committee gave detailed attention to all the applications and many Members visited the application sites in their Wards and studied the plans in advance of the meetings. The District Council reported on 380 applications and some 84% of the Committee's recommendations were upheld at the District Council, 2% less than last year.

The Area Action Plan has again been at the forefront of all our thoughts and energies. The Town Council commissioned an independent planning consultant, John Howell of Localdialogue LLP, to prepare an alternative Plan following a number of stakeholder meetings. We were grateful to all of those who participated in this approach and delighted at the level of support received for the Plan that has resulted. Fundamentally, this called for a comprehensive review of the existing proposals and we very much hope that the new District Council administration will now act upon the views of the community in the way that this sets out. We already welcome the decision to remove the Worth Way as a proposed by-pass option. This Council will remain vigilant in the face of continuing pressures to over develop the Town and will seek at all times to ensure that infrastructure provision does truly meet the needs of any new proposals. In this regard we look forward to more equitable Section 106 arrangements and true partnership with the principal authorities.

In recent years we have had a large number of applications for development in established residential areas, including on back garden land. We remain concerned that many of these applications are unneighbourly and cause huge problems in relation to the road network. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of Spruce Place, with an access almost opposite the already dangerous Sandhawes Hill. We continue to urge the highway authority to have regard to these real highway safety concerns and that they take a more thorough appraisal and ensure that where such developments are permitted then real highway safety enhancements are introduced **before** construction takes place.

The Public Services Committee has been inundated with issues of all kinds during the year. These have included detailed representations regarding the water drought and, in this regard, the need to plan long term to ensure that there is adequate water in this area to meet the inevitable housing needs that central government demands. We made representations regarding the Forbuoys Sub Post Office and were pleased that we were able to help facilitate the opening of a new dedicated Sub Post Office elsewhere in London Road. We have been less successful in our continuing representations to the District Council about the standard of public toilet provision in East Grinstead and remain disappointed that they did not respond positively to our offer to take over the freehold interest of Norton House public toilets and to maintain and fund these. We were also disappointed with the temporary toilets

that have been erected in King Street, which are ugly and do nothing for the image that we are trying to create for East Grinstead. Elsewhere we have contributed to discussions on waste provision in the area, expressed concerns about the inadequacy of the electricity infrastructure in East Grinstead, have made constructive contributions regarding the Change-Up debate and to ensure that the voluntary sector is not diminished because of structural change and have contributed to the District Council Strategic Flood Risk Assessment Review. We also made representations regarding Alcohol Abuse services in East Grinstead, which we consider to be inadequate, continued to monitor changes at East Grinstead Fire Station following the review initiated by West Sussex Fire and Rescue Services, changes that we now consider have been well implemented and beneficial to overall service delivery, and have made our views known regarding changes to the Library Service and arrangements for denominational school transport.

We very much welcome the excellent relationship we have developed with our Sector Inspector of Police, Paul Scott, and the enhanced liaison we now have through a range of bodies such as the Joint Action Group, Pub Watch and the Local Action Teams. These latter bodies are extremely important and the Town Council's facilitative role, in conjunction with the community, is absolutely fundamental to their success.

During the year there have been some problems with Speed Watch but we welcome the commitment of Sussex Police to reviving this locally and attracting more volunteers.

The area where we will have to be vigilant during the coming period relates to the health service review being undertaken by the Primary Care Trust and the possible implications in respect of services generally, but specifically those delivered from the Princess Royal Hospital. The formal review will, we have been assured, commence early in the summer and this Council has made clear its view that one of the consultation meetings needs to be held in East Grinstead and we have offered to host this. Fortunately things are brighter with our own Queen Victoria Hospital, where we have an excellent relationship. The Hospital continues to deliver high quality services and figures at or towards the top of all league tables. We congratulate them on their continuing achievements.

The Leisure and Tourism Committee is responsible for all buildings in the ownership of the Town Council. On aggregate the Meridian Hall, East Court Mansion and the Old Court House exceeded their income targets and usage held up well. The Cranston Suite was redecorated during the year and further works were undertaken at the Old Court House. 2006/2007 was the second year of operation of the Housekeeping Service, which has continued to deliver agency services for Mid Sussex District Council and West Sussex County Council. We were pleased to note that complaints regarding weed control in the gutters reduced by 95% in the year following that in which the Town Council took over this service. Subject to resource implications and assurances that there will be no enhanced cost to local taxpayers there will be continuing discussions with the principal authorities to establish further devolution opportunities in this sphere in the coming period.

The Council is committed to maintaining high standards of maintenance in its land holdings. Further enhancements have been undertaken at Mount Noddy Cemetery, including enhanced planting following the Best Value Review. Later this year we hope to pursue the construction of a dedicated memorial wall in response to public requests. Our two allotments sites at Mount Noddy and Imberhorne are both fully subscribed and we are grateful to the two dedicated Allotment Associations that manage and maintain these on a day-to-day basis within the long-term lease that the Council has entered into with them. In respect of East Grinstead in Bloom, last year was a difficult one because of the drought and we did not have the town centre planting that we normally aim to provide. This year we will be improving our standards in this regard with specific focus on planting drought tolerant plants wherever possible.

We are also fortunate with the East Grinstead Tourism Initiative, whose work is overseen by the Leisure & Tourism Committee. The initiative under Simon Kerr plays a most valuable role in promoting and enhancing the economy of the area.

The Charities Committee, which looks after Chequer Mead Community Arts Centre and the Parish Halls Trusts, is independent of the Town Council but is managed by the Town Council as sole custodian Trustee. All Councillors have the opportunity of becoming Trustees of these Charities and the Town Clerk serves as Clerk to the Trustees. Chequer Mead has had another excellent year with a continuing attractive programme of events and activities in the Theatre, in the Gallery and increasing numbers of bookings in the meeting rooms. Our caterer has maintained high standards. As always we are grateful to John Durrant, the Chief Executive and his hard working and diligent staff for their achievement. The equity in the Trust increased during the year and stood at £143,000 at the end of the financial year, which includes £20,000 in the rolling renewals fund.

The Parish Halls continue to be well used but there is increasing recognition of a backlog of maintenance that requires to be addressed. This will be a priority for the Charities Committee in the coming year. The Trust has an equity of about £10,000 but we do recognise that there is a need to identify additional income streams to help meet the inevitable expenditure that will be required on building maintenance in the coming years.

The Finance and General Purposes Committee has overall responsibility for Best Value. This year was the sixth occasion out of six that our Best Value Plan received an unqualified audit opinion. Subject to the Local Government Bill achieving Royal Assent later this year, it is probable that this will be the last year that we will be subject to the statutory audit requirements of Best Value, although our commitment to ensuring best value in everything we do will continue regardless.

The Town Council's financial position is healthy. The Council has no debts, increased its revenue balances during the year, although we had budgeted for a slight deficit, and we were able to provide a modest and viable capital programme. In the coming year a Band D council taxpayer will pay £57.02 for their portion of the Town Council's services, an increase of 2.98% on 2006/2007 financial year.

The Finance & General Purposes Committee is responsible for community support and for our various partnerships. The Council recognises that it is best able to fulfil its obligations where it works constructively in partnership with others. This creates an enhanced degree of community ownership and real benefits, not least financial. Here I would like to particularly commend the East Grinstead Town Twinning Association, the East Grinstead Youth Sports Development Management Committee, the East Grinstead in Bloom Committee, the East Grinstead Community Partnership, the Christmas Lights Committee and the East Grinstead Christmas Promotions Committee all of who do such sterling work locally.

There are also many other voluntary groups and organisations working within the town who do excellent work. It has been my pleasure to see them at work this year, and I am delighted that the Town Council is able to support their work with grant aid and/ or assistance in kind. Particularly I would mention the Council for Voluntary Service, the Citizens Advice Bureau, Age Concern, the Access Group, Furnihelp, East Grinstead Community Transport, East Grinstead Credit Union and East Grinstead branch of Fairtrade. There are also many other groups and organisations who operate quietly and productively within the Town and we do thank them all.

I am also delighted that the East Grinstead Youth Council continued to prosper during its second year. Facilitated on our behalf by Victoria Dickinson and under the chairmanship of Katrina Dodgson have met regularly through the year, organised events for their peer group and helped to raise charity funds, including for the Queen Victoria Hospital We continue to wish them well and give our unconditional support.

Last autumn I was pleased to hold a Civic Service at St Swithun's Church, and I would thank the Minister, the Rev Canon Clive Everett Allen for helping to arrange this. I also hosted a summer tea party for carers here at East Court and was delighted at the attendance and support this event received. Carers are the quiet, often forgotten members of our community, providing selfless voluntary activity for those they love and care for around the clock, all weathers and all seasons. I hope that I was able to demonstrate some public appreciation to this special group of people and would again thank them for all they do.

During the year I was pleased to raise £3,800 for charity. A number of fundraising events were held concluding, in March, with a charity dinner and dance in the Meridian Hall. I'd like to thank everyone who supported these events. My charity has also benefited by £1,500 from the generosity of the Rotary clubs and street collections amounting to some £2,000. I am now delighted to present a cheque for £3,600 to Murray Ferguson of the Multiple Sclerosis support group who were my chosen charity for the year. This comes with my and Dot's best wishes. For those of you good at maths you will realise that that leaves £200 unallocated and I am delighted therefore to present cheques for £100 each to representatives of East Grinstead Scouts and East Grinstead Air Training Corps, both marvellous youth bodies who have supported me throughout the year and of who we are tremendously proud.

In my year as Town Mayor I have attended 235 events, excluding council and committee meetings. I am most grateful to Dot who has served as my Mayoress and given me every support that I could have asked for throughout the civic year. All events I have attended have been worthwhile and enjoyable. I have welcomed the opportunity to meet so many marvellous people within the town who contribute much to making East Grinstead special.

I should like to thank all Members of the Council for their contribution to its work during the year, to thank them for their personal support they have shown me and to their commitment on behalf of the town that they serve and which elected them. I have been grateful to my Deputy, Councillor Dixon, for his support and for substituting for me on occasions when I was double booked or otherwise engaged. I pay particular tribute and thanks to former Councillors Belsey, Heasman, Mrs Heasman, Jarrett, Matthews and Mrs Wilson who for reasons of the ballot box or personal choice are no longer with us and warmly welcome their replacements Councillors Banks, Mrs Bennett, Mrs Brunson, Mainstone, Musk and Reed and sincerely hope you derive the same satisfaction from your public service here with the Town Council as I know I do.

I also want to thank the Town Council staff for their support and assistance for the Council and its work during the year; it has been much appreciated. Personally can I thank Sarah, Sheila and the Town Clerk for the support they have shown to me personally. This year we were particularly pleased to welcome a number of new employees including Keith Astley, Katrina Hamill and Lorraine Martin here at the East Court offices. We wish them all well and hope they have a long and enjoyable period of employment with the Council.

Finally I wish to thank the public of East Grinstead for the welcome they have given myself and Dot throughout the year and for their many messages of support. We have many great memories, which will stay with us always and for that we are most grateful. Dot and I have had a ball. Thank you.

Councillor Jim Joyce-Nelson, Town Mayor 2006/2007 civic year.