

Newbury Town Council

Mayor's Report for Full Council Meeting on 31st October 2016

Fellow councillors, ladies and gentlemen...

In the four months since the last Full Council meeting on 27th June 2016 my Mayoress and I have attended a total of 70 events on your behalf.

Aside from the regular Saturday morning coffee mornings, there have been openings and unveilings, official dinners, fundraising events, fetes, formal church services, and the funeral of a former Mayor of Newbury.

I won't subject you all to a detailed report of every event, but there are a few things that I think are worthy of specific mention.

I would like to start by paying tribute to Chris Hall, a respected artist and a former Mayor of Newbury who died at the age of 85 and whose funeral I attended a couple of months ago.

Former Councillor Hall lived in this area for most of his life and gained a formidable reputation both as a talented oil painter and a keen political activist.

After completing his national service in Malaya in the late 1940s, he studied at the Slade School of Art in London during the 1950s, before returning to live in Newbury.

He was elected to the prestigious Royal Society of British Artists in 1988 and the Royal Cambrian Academy in 1994, and he maintained a passion for his art right up until his death, with his latest exhibition opening at The Gallery in London just days after he died.

As well as being known for his art, Chris also developed a reputation in local politics, representing the then Liberal Party on the former Newbury Borough and Newbury District councils for several terms and many years.

He served as mayor of Newbury in 1967 to 1968, when he was just 36-years-old, becoming one of the youngest men to hold the post in the 420-year history of this town's Charter.

As a councillor in the 60s, Chris worked to preserve many of Newbury's old buildings, and he was responsible for the planting of the avenue of poplar trees at Stroud Green.

He was a staunch local campaigner, always ready to put shoe leather in service of his principles. Known for his dry humour and sound advice, he has been a huge support to many who have followed in his footsteps as councillors and candidates here in the Newbury area. I am one of many who has benefitted from his wise counsel and relentless campaigning, and I am proud to have known him.

Chris will be missed, and our thoughts are with his wife, Maria, and his family.

[One Minute Silence]

In his later years, Chris often worried about how to get younger people more interested and active in politics.

I know that he very much approved of the Town Council's now annual activities supporting Local Democracy Week, and it was a particular pleasure for me to be able to attend nine of the presentations that took place here in the Council Chamber to groups of young students from local schools. There were some very interesting questions asked, by both the students and their teachers.

We'll be hearing a detailed report later on in the meeting from the Chair of the Local Democracy Week Working Group, so I won't say too much, but it was wonderful to see so many youngsters taking an interest in what we do. Who knows, among them may very well be some of the Newbury Town Councillors of the future.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks on behalf of you all to the Working Group, to the officers who supported it, and to Councillors Margo Payne, Jo Day and Martha Vickers in particular for their hard work and dedication. I know that many councillors supported several of the presentations as well, so thank you for that support, too.

All in all, another success of which Team Newbury Town Council can be justifiably proud.

Of all of the many other events that I have attended on your behalf in the last four months, all of which have been interesting and enjoyable in different ways, there is one more that I would like to pick out for special mention.

The Porch in Speen goes by the uninspiring label of Pupil Referral Unit. This is the place where challenging students between the ages of 14 and 19 go when mainstream education is unable to support them.

I was invited to attend Afternoon Tea at The Porch a couple of weeks ago, to mark the end of their celebration of British Values Week, which coincided with our own Local Democracy activities.

I confess to some apprehension before going, but it was an incredibly encouraging and inspiring visit. The students' work that was displayed throughout the building was of a very high standard, and the students themselves made me feel very welcome. There is so much talent among the students there, and seeing the dedication and caring of the staff who guide and help the students to fulfil their potential was truly inspiring.

On one of the walls was displayed a short poem written by students Ewan Greening and Hannah Crossey during The Porch's British Values Week last year (2015).

The poem had a huge impact on me. I would like to share it with you.

Oi listen!

I'm so frustrated
So isolated
Feels like I'm always being slated.

Hated.

Everything I do, they say it's wrong
but I'm trying to say strong;
Glass half-full

Trying to... Pull myself through.

People bringing up the past
but I can't move that fast.
I'm trying hard to be free from the bad

Can't you see... It's me... Underneath?
I do feel ashamed; I know I'm to blame.
I'm just trying to change.

Earlier in the week, our MP, Richard Benyon, had hosted a group of students from the Speen and Newtown Road Porch buildings at the Houses of Parliament, and some of the British Values work displayed was based on that theme.

When the Local Democracy Week Working Group is planning its activities for the autumn of 2017, I would urge that The Porch is included in those plans.

For those of you who didn't get to the Murder Mystery Ball a couple of weeks ago, you missed a fabulous event. Everyone was in 1920s dress, trying to solve a mysterious and unexpected murder that had apparently taken place just before we all arrived. It was my pleasure to award Councillor Margo Payne the prize for the Best Dressed Lady of the evening, and I'm pleased to say that the mystery was indeed correctly solved by one table of guest detectives. Those of us who got it wrong were able to console ourselves with the knowledge that during the evening over £4,000 was raised for my charity, West Berkshire Mencap.

Coming up as we head into November, I'm looking forward to attending not one but two Diwali celebrations as Mayor this coming weekend, and I would take this opportunity to remind you all of the Newtown Road Cemetery Welcome Day on Saturday 12th November.

The following day, Sunday 13th December is Newbury's annual Remembrance Sunday Parade and Service, one of the most important civic events of the year. I do hope that as many of you as possible will be able to attend.

Finally, since we won't meet again as a Full Council before the New Year, may I be the first to wish you all a very Merry Christmas and a Happy and Prosperous 2017.

Thank you very much, and I am of course happy to answer any questions.

Julian Swift-Hook

Mayor of Newbury

31st October 2016