

Newbury Town Council

Mayor's Report for Full Council Meeting on 10th May 2017

Fellow councillors, ladies and gentlemen...

My previous Mayor's Reports have been relatively brief, so I hope you will indulge me in listening to a slightly longer report tonight, given that this is the last proper Full Council meeting over which I will have the honour to preside as Mayor.

Since my last report to you at the end of January, I have attended 40 events on your behalf, and I have been accompanied by my Mayoress, Tessa Olson, for many of them.

Education and Training

I have attended Newbury College on two occasions in the last three months, and on both occasions I was once again impressed by the range of educational and training opportunities available at our college, to students of all ages.

The first of these events was the opening of the new engineering laboratory, where students are trained how to use state-of-the-art CNC machines for producing complex components to very close tolerances.

And the second was the Annual Apprenticeship Awards, at which the achievements of apprentices from a wide range of disciplines, including engineering, were recognised. The guest speaker was former apprentice David Martin, who is now UKAEA's chief operating officer, working at Culham Science Centre in Abingdon.

The engineering world won many of the awards, but just to prove my point about the wide range of disciplines, the "Best apprentice in a small business" award went to Hannah Benson, who was apprenticed to the Tally Ho pub in Hungerford Newtown, and the "Best workplace mentor" went to Hannah's mentor, Paula Woof, also of the Tally Ho!

Victoria Park

Having presided over this council as Leader during the time when the issues surrounding the damage to Victoria Park were front and centre in our thoughts. I was particularly pleased to be able to formally open the council's fantastic new tennis courts a month ago, marking one of the last stages of the repair and refurbishment of what I have often described as "the jewel in Newbury's crown", Victoria Park.

And with the wonderful new paint scheme for the courts and the surrounding surface, the tennis courts really do look stunning.

There is very little left to do to complete the repairs to the park. The retaining wall adjoining Park Way has been repaired, the railings have been replaced, the paths throughout the park have been repaired, the bowling green has been repaired, and the tennis courts are open.

With only the bowling club green remaining to be formally opened, the work is almost done. Given where we were six years ago, I think this is a momentous achievement by our fantastic Services Team, led by Granville Taylor.

The Arts in Newbury

Musical arts have featured three times in my diary of engagements during the last three months.

My Mayoress and I very much enjoyed Trinity School's performance of "Joseph and his Amazing Technicolour DreamCoat" at the end of March, and a couple of weeks later we enjoyed the Newbury Musical Theatre presentation of "My Fair Lady". Who needs to go to the West End when we have such great performances here in Newbury?

My third musical engagement was just last week when it was my great pleasure to attend the opening concert of the wonderful international Newbury Spring Festival, the biggest music festival of its type in the country, outside the Edinburgh Festival and the BBC Proms.

The Spring Festival is in its 39th year this year, and it is something of which little old Newbury should be immensely proud.

We also attended the Open Studios Insight exhibition last month – the last that will be held in the present New Greenham Arts Centre which is scheduled for demolition later this year.

A new purpose-built arts centre will be constructed to replace it, but the new centre will probably not be open in time for next year's Open Studios exhibition.

My Mayoress and I also attended the 10th birthday party of Newbury Crafters where there were lots of handmade items on display, and a wonderful birthday cake.

Health and wellbeing

A number of the events that my Mayoress and I have attended during the last three months are to do with health and well-being.

Chiropractic Centres

It seems that chiropractic centres in Newbury are like London buses – no new ones for ages, and then two new ones open in a month. I opened the new premises of the Newbury Chiropractic Centre at the beginning of February, and just two weeks later I opened the Spriggs Chiropractic Centre.

Dementia

On a more serious note, dementia is a devastating condition which affects all too many people, particularly, but not exclusively, older people. It is now apparently the leading cause of death in England and Wales.

Two of the events that I have attended in the last three months have been about helping people with dementia, the first of which was the opening of a Memories Café at the Winchcombe Place care home in February. Many of the residents at the care home are dementia sufferers, and the memory boxes that the residents were able to open contained lots of memorabilia from several decades ago to stimulate social interactions around shared memories.

A month later, I took part in the Virtual Dementia Tour, designed to enable people who do not have dementia to experience something of what it is like to be a sufferer.

I can't tell you too much about it because next week is Dementia Awareness Week and I wouldn't want to spoil it for anyone who has the opportunity to experience this Virtual Tour for themselves.

Suffice to say that the degree of sensory disruption was quite disturbing, and the opportunity to talk with the trainer afterwards was very valuable in helping me to make sense of the experience.

If anyone has the opportunity to take this virtual dementia tour, I would strongly recommend it.

Suicide Prevention

And most recently, my Mayoress and I attended the inaugural meeting of a new suicide prevention action group here in the council chamber last week.

It was an incredibly valuable meeting, with all participants saying at the end of it how useful it had been.

Great credit to Chief Executive of the Volunteer Centre, Garry Poulson, for organising this meeting and for bringing together so many apparently diverse organisations, all of whom were able to make a valuable contribution.

I think this was a brilliant start to a very worthwhile community project, and I do hope that this Action Group continues and grows.

And finally under the health and well-being heading, last week was Deafness Awareness Week, and it was marked by children from Mary Hare School singing loudly in Northbrook Street, collecting for their cause. It was a pleasure to be part of this amazingly colourful event.

Sport

On a lighter note, another theme running through my mayoral events over the last three months was a sporting one.

I've already mentioned the opening of the tennis courts in Victoria Park, but other sporting engagements included attending the annual West Berks Indoor Bowls Club Crowe Clark Whitehill competition, and getting up ridiculously early one Saturday to help start a leg of the Devizes to Westminster canoe race from Northcroft.

And of course, there was the Soroptimists annual pancake races in February – although I'm not sure that qualifies as a sporting event as such!

Non-political nominations for non-political Mayoral posts

Those of you who attended the last Policy and Resources Committee meeting will recall that I raised the issue of the nomination of Mayor and Deputy Mayor.

In all the 20-odd years that I have served as a councillor on this Council, it has been custom and practice for the role of Mayor and Deputy Mayor to be non-political.

Indeed, this is enshrined in our current Standing Orders which specify that the Town Mayor is the civic head of the council, not the political head.

This principle is further supported by the protocol and role description for the Mayor and Deputy Mayor which was adopted by this Council on 30 November 2015 and which states that “the position is non-political” and “the Mayor’s role is as the ceremonial head of the town”.

Yet even though the role of Mayor and Deputy Mayor are both clearly considered to be non-political, and have been for as long as I can remember, the process by which the Mayor and Deputy Mayor are nominated is unfortunately still apparently based in political considerations, even after 20 years.

I was told two weeks ago that the nomination process being followed this year is in line with an old Standing Order dating back to March 2006, namely to nominate the Mayor and Deputy Mayor Elect based on the relative size of political groups.

However, I think it's worth pointing out that this Standing Order had very little support at the time, being passed with just six councillors voting in favour. Half of the 17 councillors present at the time abstained. It was subsequently deleted in December 2008 with what I recall was the unanimous support of all 21 councillors present on that occasion.

So that suggests to me that 10 years ago, Council did not think that such a political consideration was appropriate when nominating councillors to non-political posts.

I find myself wondering what's changed.

It is without question an honour and a privilege to be Mayor of Newbury, one which I have fully appreciated and thoroughly enjoyed over the past 12 months. And having fulfilled the role for the last year, I am aware now, more than ever, how important Newbury's Mayor is to the citizens of our wonderful town.

My firm view, therefore, formed with the benefit of 20 years' experience as a councillor on this Council, and having been Deputy Leader, Leader, Deputy Mayor, and now Mayor, is that going forward, nominations for this honour should be made based first and foremost on the length of time for which nominees have dedicated themselves to the service of the town council.

I hope and trust that this will be addressed as soon as possible in the new civic year with a view to adopting it as council policy, so that the citizens of our town can have confidence that the first citizen is so appointed based only on his or her record of service to the town.

Principle, not personal

Finally on this issue, I would like to make it clear once again that my issue here is purely one of principle.

It is in no way a reflection of my views of the prospective nominee for Deputy Mayor Elect as an individual, a councillor who I have come to hold in particularly high esteem in the short time that it has been my pleasure to know her.

And in anticipation of the outcome of items later on tonight's agenda, I would also like confirm that I will be fully supporting both the Mayor Elect and the Deputy Mayor Elect at Mayor Making on Sunday.

Thank you

Thank you very much once again, councillors, for your support during my mayoral year, both here in the council chamber and at the many events that we have all attended. I am of course happy to answer any questions.

Cllr Julian Swift-Hook

Mayor of Newbury

10th May 2017