

This is the third annual report that I am giving as your Mayor. It has been another busy year for the Town Council and I would particularly like to draw attention to the following matters.

Last year, John Kirkbride stood down as Councillor as he felt that he had insufficient time to devote to Council affairs. I would like to thank John for his contribution to Council's work since June 2011.

As you will be aware, there has recently been a local government election. 6 of your existing Councillors submitted nominations to stand again and as there are seven positions, each has been reappointed without the need for an election. Councillors will now co-opt a Councillor at a future meeting. Please speak to me or the Clerk if you may interested in being a Councillor.

Your current Councillors are, apart from myself, Honor Byford, Martin Cade, Liz Stocker, Simon Wheeler and Greg Fortune. The one Councillor who did not seek reappointment was Dominic Slay who had been co-opted in 2017. Despite only being on Council for a very

short time, Dominic made a particularly helpful contribution towards the burial ground project. He wished me to explain to residents that he has recently taken on new business responsibilities which meant he is away from Middleham for much of the time and would be unable to properly carry out his duties.

There may be some of you who not really know what the Town Council does. Our monthly Council meetings, usually held on the last Wednesday of each month, are open to the public and include a 15 minute session at the beginning to ask questions. Although these meetings may not be as inviting as an evening in one of Middleham's pubs or watching your favourite soap opera, there is usually a small but loyal, group of residents who are clearly riveted by the proceedings!. Everyone is welcome to attend, you will have an opportunity to see what we, the bottom rung of local government, do. If you do not wish to attend, there are copies of last week's agenda on the display boards which should give you a flavour of what goes on and

the varied matters we deal with. Our minutes are published on the Council's website and summarised in the Darlington & Stockton Times.

It has been an extremely busy year and I would like in particular to draw your attention to the following:

- Progress with burial ground. This project has been ongoing for some time; you may recall that it took about 12 years to transfer the open space from RDC to the Town Council, a process that was finally concluded 4 years ago. In that time, the Environment Agency's requirements increased substantially and a hydrogeological survey was commissioned and four large pits were dug earlier this year to investigate depth of the underlying water table. We have recently been advised that, subject to submission of the hydrogeologist's report, the Environment Agency has agreed in principle to grant permission for us to proceed. We will then need to submit a planning application which may take up to 3 months to process. I am

optimistic that the burial ground will be open within the next year.

- Honesty box. The box was installed in September last year. It was not particularly cheap, the total cost of a secure box, signs and installation was just under £400 but after only 5 months this expenditure was covered. It is hoped to raise about £1,000 per year which will be used by the Charity for the benefit of our community.
- Grant giving policy. Subject to availability of funds, the Charity will from now on set aside some funds for local groups to apply for. This year this will be £2,000 of which £404 has already been granted to MSCWA for new perimeter fencing on the playing fields. If you are a member of a local group and have a scheme that would benefit from funding, please speak to the Clerk
- Spring clean. This was held at the end of March and was a great success with residents ranging from small children to yours truly using brushes

and litter pickers to tidy the town areas and also along the Buses. This will now become an annual event.

- A Council sub-committee has been set up to look at developing adult and children's play areas in the town.
- Dog mess grant. We received a grant of £450 from County Councillor Sedgwick's environment fund. This cannot be used to purchase more bins but the Clerk and a concerned resident are looking into creative but effective ways to curb this problem.

Lastly, you will be aware that the Council precept increased for the current year to £12,000. It had been £11,500 since 2015-16 so this was a 5% increase over 4 years. Councillors are responsible for setting a budget and whilst our planned activity is very much on a 'business as usual' basis with prudent assumptions for both income and expenditure; we were faced with a general increase in costs. We are legally and contractually obliged to pay more into the employers'

compulsory pension scheme and a higher than projected inflationary wage increases for the Clerk, as well as a general increase in costs.

That is all that I have to say. I would be very pleased to take any questions.

Thank you.