

whitchurch town council

ABRIDGED ANNUAL REPORT | CIVIC YEAR 2023-2024

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Mayor and Chairman 2023/2024

Councillor Andy Hall

Members as at May 2024

NORTH WARD

Chez Doyle **C/Cy/HW**
Adele Jackson **HW/P/PI**
Matt Phipps **C/Cy/O/PI**
Giles Sullivan **Cy/H**
Pete Tew **C/HW**

SOUTH WARD

Gregory Ebbs **O**
Andy Hall **O/PI**
Angie Hotchkiss **P**
Cathy Purt **C/HW/PI**
Mike Ridgway **C/H**

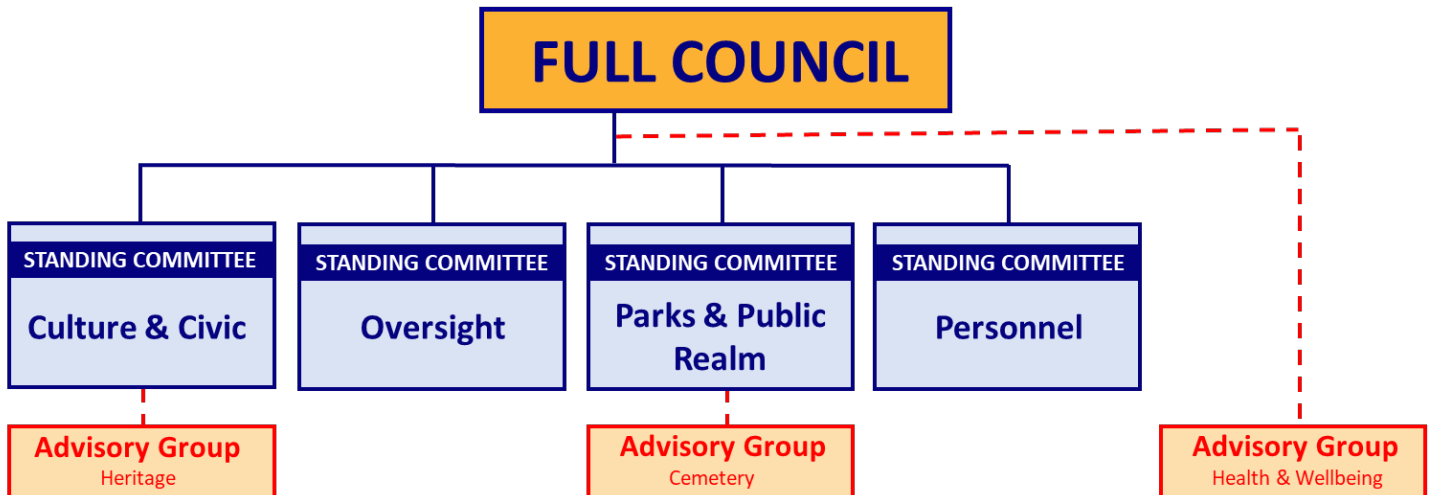
WEST WARD

Jayne De-Wyrall **P**
Anthony Gilmore **co-opt 2/24**
Rose Hall **HW/O/PI**
Pete Lea **Cy/H/P**
John Morris **Cy/H/P**

COMMITTEES: C – Culture & Civic; O – Oversight; P – Parks & Public Realm; PI – Personnel

ADVISORY GROUPS: Cy – Cemetery; HW – Health & Wellbeing; H - Heritage

Governance: Committee Structure 2023/24



The Council appoints Standing Committees and their membership at the Annual Council Meeting, held each May. Committee membership is based on the specific needs of each Committee and membership takes into consideration the skillsets of individual Councillors. The Council delegates appropriate matters for scrutiny and debate to these Committees and define these in the current version of its Standing Orders, Financial Regulations and Scheme of Delegation. Committee and Advisory Group Membership is given above.

Proper Officer & Responsible Financial Officer

Mike McDonald, MA, FSLCC, CiLCA, FCMI, FRSA, MIInstF, CiPFA

STAFF TEAM:

Accounts \Officer: Charlie Burdock

Administration: Jane Down, Linda Field, Pauline Jones

Facilities Team: Lawrence Bebbington, Michael Bloore, Morris Clive (Facilities Manager); David Shepherd, Duncan Taylor, David Whithead

Mayor's Overview – 2023/2024

Cllr Andy Hall

Welcome to our Annual Report for the 2023/24 Civic Year – and what a year it's been!

As I have approached the end of my second year as Mayor and Chairman, I'm delighted to say that feedback I have received recently, throughout the County and beyond, is that Whitchurch Town Council is now considered as being a particularly progressive, confident, and forward-thinking Council. This is exactly what we set out to achieve as your "new" Council a few short years ago.

This has only been achieved through a deliberate and unrelenting resolve for the Council to work together, as a united team, to meet the needs of our Community in an open and transparent way. This 'united' approach, of course, includes both our Councillors and the Staff Team, whose resilience throughout the challenges we have faced this year rightly deserves recognition. My personal thanks go to our Proper Officer, Mike McDonald, for his tireless work alongside providing the Council with crucial advice and guidance throughout this period. Without his drive and passion for our Town, many of our accomplishments would not have happened.

In May 2023 we marked the beginning of a new 'age' with events to celebrate the Coronation of King Charles III ... and just a few weeks later received devastating news that our 'home' was to be closed due to the discovery of RAAC concrete throughout the Civic Centre building. This decision was made by our Corporate Landlord, and owner of the Civic Centre complex, Shropshire Council. Since then, we have striven to retain as many services as possible in the Sports / Market Hall, including the weekly Friday Market – however, many community groups were forced to relocate elsewhere to continue to deliver their services etc.

Following the news in September 2023, Whitchurch Town Council has pushed for our community to be engaged in creating a solution to this 'crisis' and I'm particularly pleased that our call for full public consultation was recently recognised by Shropshire Council and we remain very much 'at the table' in a Working Group to assess the current and future needs of our community against 6 distinct options for the future of the Civic Centre complex. Elsewhere, we have ourselves recognised our community's needs; this has played an important and ongoing part in our decision to relocate to the Old Police Station in Station Road, which will act as our new Town Hall & Community Hub from May 2024.

The unique *character* of our Town, as demonstrated by many of our community groups and events, cannot go without mention too. We may face setbacks, but we face them 'head on' and rise again - stronger than ever and, more importantly, together. This was particularly mentioned by the High Sheriff of Shropshire, Mandy Thorn MBE DL, when she visited the town in October last year. It is what we call **#whitchurchstrongertogether!**

Looking ahead, I'm also pleased to see that inward investment and growth continues with the soon to open Medical Centre at Pauls Moss, and the new Swimming Pool & Leisure Centre finally in construction.

It's true to say that you only miss something when you no longer have it ... Whitchurch has much to be proud of – its heritage, its spirit, its future as a growing town and, of course, its character. A unique combination and a unique place to live and work – and we have no intention to lose anything that makes Whitchurch such a special place to be. So, out of our current 'crisis' we will, of course, emerge – re-energised and stronger than ever in what I believe to be our very own new 'age'.

In May 2024 we celebrate 50 years as a Town Council, with a history going back to 1860 as a Local Board for Whitchurch and Dodington. We accept the weight of responsibility we have to our forebears and resolve to make them proud ... we will fight for what we believe is rightly ours to prosper as a community with the facilities and services to make that a reality.

Committee Report: Culture & Civic

Cllr Matt Phipps, Committee Chair

Key Areas of Responsibility: Strategic development of WTC Estates, Heritage & the Heritage Centre, Markets, Marketing & PR, Economic Wellbeing, Events, Tourism, and our Youth Services.

How do I even put this into words!

From a Committee perspective, the start of this Civic Year was great ... the Civic Centre was busy, the Friday Market was picking up trade and we had a fantastic Coronation Event which was greatly supported ...

And then, one day in September, we were told to vacate the Civic Centre by our Corporate Landlord, Shropshire Council ... with just 20 minutes notice! This was, as we all know, due to the discovery of RAAC concrete within the Civic Centre complex.

We all also know the rest ... but what everyone may not appreciate is how our Staff Team coped in this impossible situation - and how the many community groups who used the Civic Centre building understood our situation and worked with us in these difficult circumstances.

Thankfully a great deal of activity still remains ... community groups meet in the Sports / Market Hall whilst it remains open for the foreseeable future, the Friday Market takes place each week in the High Street and in the Market Hall ... and we even managed to work around the difficulties presented by the main building's closure to deliver a fantastic Christmas Lights Switch-on last November!

Of course, none of this is possible without the support of the people of Whitchurch – the passion demonstrated for “The Civic” gives confidence to an outcome which hopefully meets the needs of our community, not just now, but well into the future.

So, we're not going to dwell on the past, we're going to look forward to a better year with plans well under way to kick start this with our Party in the Park on 8th June, commemorating the 80th Anniversary of the D-Day landings ...

We continue to represent our resident's views as we participate in the Shropshire Council Working Group regarding the Civic Centre complex and, in the meantime, will provide community spaces in our new, temporary Town Hall & Community Hub in Station Road.

Committee Report: Oversight

Cllr Rose Hall, Deputy Mayor & Committee Chair

Key Areas of Responsibility: Scrutiny and oversight of financial and governance matters, policy development and community support through financial initiatives

2023 has probably been the most challenging time that Whitchurch Town Council has faced. However, historically, the old Town Hall was closed previously, and the current Civic Centre built so history repeats itself!

This year, the Oversight Committee has ensured that financial matters were dealt with to the high standard, which is expected, and ensured that historical items and backlogs were concluded. This has resulted in significant improvements from the Council's Internal and External Audit processes. Governance reviews were undertaken where necessary, where practices and policies were reviewed, developed, and recommended to ensure that the Town Council is effective, efficient and value for money.

Our profile in the Town continues to be positive and we continue to work alongside partners, to forge new collaborative partnerships, which undoubtedly has contributed to significant improvements in how people have perceived the work of the Town Council.

The Committee were also pleased to deliver the Town Council's Small Community Grants Programme, ensuring that many of the Town's beloved charitable organisations were able to flourish, develop and deliver appropriate services for public benefit.

Committee Report: Parks & Public Realm

Cllr Pete Lea, Committee Chair

Key Areas of Responsibility: Strategic development of Open Spaces, Public Facilities, Clocks, Allotments, Community Safety, Streetlighting, CCTV and Burial Facilities.

With years of contracted services within our Parks and Open Spaces, some not to the standard we aspire to, in December 2022 Whitchurch Town Council made the decision to recruit and develop our own Public Realm Team to regain control of our environment. It was intended that this locally employed Team would, initially, work alongside selected contractors as we developed the team, aligned to a revitalised strategic approach to the management of our environment.

In May 2023 things took an unexpected turn as our appointed contractor for Cemetery maintenance announced their 'immediate' retirement. Rather than seeking a replacement, the new team relished the challenge to tackle the job. Thankfully, this has proved to be the right move as feedback from residents and visitors has been hugely positive ...

Yet we must acknowledge that the 2023-24 Civic Year was also a steep 'learning curve' for both the Council and our newly developed team, whilst they continued to provide services that you only see when things go wrong! Bins emptied, play equipment maintained, toilets cleaned, areas planted, hanging baskets provided and watered ... and much more – including, sadly, repairing the ever-increasing aftereffects of vandalism!

Elsewhere during the year, we also extended solar lighting within Jubilee Park, worked more closely with our streetlighting contractor (and provided additional streetlighting where need has been identified), championed recently introduced Public Space Protection Orders, enhanced existing play areas ... and, above all, adopted a 'best value' approach whilst ensuring standards are enhanced. We also championed the introduction of a 'Biodiversity' Policy, adopted by the Council in December 2023, demonstrating our ongoing commitment to and awareness of our responsibilities for the wider environment, its wildlife and habitats – this policy informs everything we do.

In all, a much more proactive approach!

Naturally, we remain grateful to voluntary groups, like "We Are Whitchurch" who work alongside us to maintain areas within the town but remain frustrated with the speed of response from others who are responsible for the maintenance of certain areas of our Public Realm, amongst other things – but, hopefully, this will be addressed in the early weeks of our new Civic Year (the Asset Transfer of the existing Contractors Yard at Sherrymill Hill, for example, which will allow 'ownership' of our physical space and allow us to develop areas appropriately).

That said, Whitchurch Town Council has recently approved significant investment within our Parks & Public Realm services during 2024-25, in both training and new equipment identified from the first full year of operation. With external guidance, this will include the re-development of some of our areas to manage open spaces more coherently.

Above all, I thank the Team on behalf of the Committee for their dedication and commitment for striving to create a better town for everyone.

Committee Report: Personnel

Cllr Rose Hall, Deputy Mayor & Committee Chair

Key Areas of Responsibility: Strategic management and operational oversight of our staff team and volunteers.

The Personnel Committee is pleased to report a stable employment year despite the Civic Centre situation - everyone stepped up and adapted to make sure that as many public services as possible were maintained.

It is pleasing to report that the Public Realm continues to develop and feedback from the public proves that their introduction is recognised with significant improvement in service delivery. Thanks must also go to Mike McDonald, Proper Officer, for his excellent management skills and resilience in representing both the Staff and the Council through these challenging times.

The RACC situation has been a significant test of our Councillor and Staff Teams - and will continue to be so for some time to come. However, this has also demonstrated that our united resolve in adapting to the developing situation, together with listening to our community, will ensure that the "Heart" of the Town is not lost.

Supporting the Voluntary Sector

Organisations supported during the 2023/24 Civic Year

BizEd CiC	Bradbury Care Centre
Bridgewater Bowling Club	North Salop Wheelers
Poetry Whitchurch	Queensway Playing Fields Association
Read Easy Telford & Shropshire East	St. John's Methodist Church
Watergate Centre	Whitchurch Cricket Club
Whitchurch Hockey Club	Whitchurch Rotary Club
Whitchurch Scouts & Guides	Whitchurch Singers
Whitchurch Walkers	Whitchurch Waterways Trust
Wingate Trust	

We recognise that Whitchurch is particularly lucky to benefit from more than its fair share vibrant community groups and passionate volunteers, who each contribute to local life - helping people who need additional support. Our Small Community Grants Programme, in turn, is designed to provide financial and other assistance to these groups to enable them to deliver a wide range of community projects.

Feedback from some award recipients:

"The grant funding that Whitchurch Walkers received for the organisation of the annual walking festival allowed us to subsidise all the walks by offsetting the costs of venues, printing, canal boat hire, etc. By doing this, we encourage more people to visit our town. We had about 100 participants taking part in over 200 walks and events. Predominantly, these participants were from the Whitchurch area, although some came from further afield (such as London and Hampshire). The aims of the festival are to encourage people to enjoy the health and mental well-being benefits of walking, whilst creating an influx of trade into the local economy. Our festival regularly injects approximately £5,000 into local businesses and organisations."

Whitchurch Walkers

"The grant from Whitchurch Town Council helped towards a programme of poetry activities accessible across a wide band of age ranges and abilities including children and young people in the local area. We are very grateful to the Town Council ..."

Poetry Whitchurch

"We would like to thank Whitchurch Town Council for their continued support of Bridgewater Bowling Club and their contribution towards this innovative project ... it has enabled the club to deliver its objective in reducing energy costs and support the green agenda."

Bridgewater Bowling Club

"As a club providing sports opportunities to young people in the local area, we are truly grateful for the support the Council has given us. We feel that the Hockey Club provides a safe and happy place for the young people to come and take part, be part of something great. Thank you for helping us give people this opportunity."

Whitchurch Hockey Club

“The Bradbury Centre are thrilled to of been able to raise the funds for the new activity table we purchased at the end of 2023 which was delivered in the new year. The activity table has already bought so much enjoyment and joy to the guests of the Bradbury and has not yet been here for ¼ of the year. It offers such a diverse number of activities to the service users and The Bradbury community are so grateful to be able to stay up to date with modern technology. We would not have been able to complete this project before the new year without the generous donation from the Whitchurch Town Council who kindly made the decision to ‘pay the rest’. The service users of the Bradbury enjoy the communal word searches, cross words, bingo, and karaoke activities. A lot of the gentlemen of the centre often enjoy finding solitude in the card games activities in a quiet space which is excellent exercise of the brain and cognitive abilities. The sensory screens and apps have also proven extremely beneficial for the brains that have suffered significant cognitive impairment as an effect of Alzheimer’s disease. Thank you, Whitchurch Town Council, for your continued support of The Bradbury enabling us to continue serving the community with this special work.”

Bradbury Care Centre

“Whitchurch Scout and Guide Group received a grant to help us to complete the installation of a disabled toilet at our HQ in Claypit Street. The completion of our disabled toilet ensures all youngsters, adult helpers and parents with disabilities can be fully involved in all our meetings and activities, making Scouting and Guiding accessible to all. The disabled toilet will also benefit community groups hiring our premises.”

Whitchurch Scout and Guide Group

“Disability Sport is the charity’s biggest expenditures and most popular service. We offer individuals with specials education needs and disabilities much needed exercise and socialisation. We rely heavily on the generosity of trusts and foundations, the local community, and businesses. This award was received with great thanks and enables us to deliver 4 disability sports sessions for a Whitchurch resident.”

The Wingate Centre

“Funding from the Town Council helps us to provide free, confidential, one to one coaching to adults who want to learn to read. We are a group of volunteers who are passionate about reading and we want to support those who want to learn or improve their reading skills. Funding is spent on Reading Coach training, two sets of Turning Pages Manuals, a set of Turning Pages reading books, publicity materials and volunteer expenses. We’d like to thank Whitchurch Town Council for supporting us as the Telford and Shropshire East group started to offer their services in Whitchurch in 2023.”

Read Easy Telford and Shropshire East

“In 2023, North Salop Wheelers sustained its regular community bus services and modestly increased its number of subscribers. From its accumulated Reserve Funds - augmented by a one-off "covid loss of business" windfall - Wheelers purchased a new 16-seater minibus to replace one of its old vehicles. Community Grants from Whitchurch Town Council over a number of years have kept Wheelers going, as all our costs (fuel, maintenance, insurance) steadily increase. Wheelers is most grateful for your support.”

North Salop Wheelers

“Whitchurch Cricket Club would like to give thanks to the Town Council for supporting our new initiative in offering new cricket pathways for girls under the age of 14. We have so far used the grand to fund a ECB Foundation Coaching Course for one of our female players, Girls softball cricket equipment, match shirts, League affiliation fees ... We also plan to have another player qualify to coach the girls, tournament fees and other equipment we may need throughout the season.”

Whitchurch Cricket Club

“For the past 2 years, St Johns Methodist Church has provided a warm and welcoming space offering companionship, refreshments, activities, and access to the clothing hub for people in Whitchurch. The Small Community Group we received from Whitchurch Town Council has enabled us to heat the rooms during the Winter and continue to offer a warm space throughout the year.”

St Johns Methodist Church

“The Whitchurch Arm is maintained by a small team of volunteers using second hand equipment. We wanted to invest in new equipment and materials which would help us to improve and maintain the area, enhancing the experience for residents and visitors. The equipment was used to prepare the Whitchurch Arm and those areas of the Country Park that are used for the Canal Festival in September. Many thanks again to Whitchurch Town Council for their financial support and encouragement.”

Whitchurch Waterway Trust

“Whitchurch Singers gives local people the opportunity to sing to relieve stress and anxiety, create a feeling of wellbeing and of being happy and relaxed. The grant allowed us to secure the room we use for rehearsals. This has provided us with the security of knowing we have sufficient funds for this purpose.”

Whitchurch Singers

Whitchurch Museum & Heritage Centre Annual Report

Dr Judith Hoyle, Curator

Whitchurch Museum & Archives is a charitable trust with a specific aim to advance the education of the public in the history and heritage of Whitchurch, Shropshire and its surrounding area by the establishment and maintenance of a museum.

To accomplish this aim, dedicated volunteers run an Arts Council accredited museum which displays the history and heritage of Whitchurch and its surrounding area. They also conduct research projects relevant to the history and heritage of Whitchurch, producing booklets, leaflets, and internet material. In addition, they maintain a historical archive of artefacts relevant to the history of Whitchurch.

To fulfil this role, the trust leases Whitchurch Heritage Centre from the Town Council and receives an allowance from them for the day-to-day running of the museum.

2023-24 Highlights

- Volunteers worked over 5,750 hours during the last financial year, the equivalent of more than 3 members of full-time staff.
- Just under 1,700 guests visited the Heritage Centre. This was approaching a 13% increase on the previous year, continuing the upward trend since Covid closure.
- The museum was open to the public between 1100 and 1600 on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Since January 2023 volunteers have also opened the building on the first Saturday of each month from 1000 until 1300.

- Other openings to support national and local events included 8 sites in the town for Heritage Open Days in September, extended Saturday hours for Blackberry Fair in October and a special opening for Whitchurch Christmas Lights switch-on.
- On 26th October the museum had an evening opening, comprising a tour and talk, for members of the Whitchurch Trefoil Guild.
- Also, in October the Heritage Centre played host to Finds Liaison Officers from the Midlands and Northwest. They organised appointments for people who had found objects, mainly through metal detecting, identified them and recorded their finds on the national database. This will hopefully become an annual event.
- During the summer Whitchurch Museum & Archives received a £500 Tesco groundwork grant to help create a museum handling collection.
- Volunteers continue to network and support local groups. We are currently in partnership with Road Stories (Rural Art Hub) and Penley Polish Heritage Project.
- More than 750 new items have been accessioned into the Museum's Collection, some donated, others purchased using grants and donations. These include:
 - Items donated by Peter Moore-Dutton of Tushingham Hall, including a large portrait of Philip Henry.
 - Examples of Herculaneum Pottery from the Tushingham Hall auction.
 - Selection of relevant archival material from the Randolph Caldecott Collection Trust.
 - A number of detectorists finds declared treasure including a gold and enamel finger ring and 6 silver coins c.1400.
 - Whitchurch-made 1890s pocket watch with chain.
- We have continued working closely with Whitchurch Library staff. In addition to loaning the Library a microfilm reader and scanner, volunteers spent two hours a month showing members of the public how to use the new technology.
- Since the closure of the library due to RAAC we have purchased bookcases and rehoused the Local History section of the Library. Also taken into safekeeping were microfilms of newspapers and 12 years' worth of bound copies of the Whitchurch Herald.
- In June we purchased two new table display cases to replace the ones previously loaned to us by Shropshire Museum Service. These currently house displays relating to the history and wildlife of Prees Heath.
- One of our major projects this year was to assist Peter Humfrey, Professor Emeritus at the University of St Andrews, Scotland and Professor Philip Cottrell, lecturer in Renaissance art at University College Dublin, Ireland in their research into a painting once owned by E P Thompson's family.

Other activities by the volunteers

- Creation of free leaflets on Walter Webb (architect), Leighton's Seeds and A short history of Catholicism in Whitchurch.
- New displays created include St George's Church, Herculaneum pottery, and Whitchurch Town Halls. On view in the Community Display Case have been items found by a local metal detectorist.
- Research was carried out in response to requests for information on local, house and family history from members of the public. These requests came from all over the world including New Zealand and USA.

Our website www.whitchurch-heritage.co.uk continues to be updated allowing members of the public to view the Collection electronically. We now have 7 websites containing information on the history of Whitchurch and its surrounding villages.



Herculaneum and Detectorist Displays featured during 2023-24