

As the official Civic Year draws to a close, our thanks must be offered to the retiring Mayor, Cllr Steve Wastell, who has performed his Mayorly duty with grace and decorum, attending many events across the borough to promote Neston Town Council. Cllr Wastell has always been available to attend additional meetings, where required, sign documents, and approve payments in a timely and helpful manner when requested by Council officers. Perhaps it is time for a well-earned break now?

Policy Renewal and preparing for the Town Council's Annual Report 2023/2024 has taken up a large proportion of administrative time this quarter. The Mayor of Neston accepted the Annual Report 2023/24 on behalf of the electorate at the Annual Town Meeting held at the Town Hall on 7th May 2024. During the last financial year, Neston Town Council provided grants and community donations totalling £29,571.19 to support the work of local community organisations and events. The report demonstrates an excellent year of progress for the Council and positive partnership working with the wider Neston and Parkgate community.

I am pleased to present twenty updated policies for Council to consider and adopt at the Annual Meeting of the Council. Neston Town Council officers have developed an excellent system for keeping track of all sixty-one current NTC policies and procedures. This updated record will form part of the Annual Council meeting pack, ensuring that the monitoring and updating process is on track, whilst keeping members informed of the policy renewal time scale.

Changes to procurement thresholds have now come into effect for UK Councils and these updated figures are reflected in the new versions of the Town Council's Standing Orders for Contracts, Financial Regulations and the Procurement Policy. Public contracts with an estimated value (including VAT) over £214,904 (previously £213,477) for goods and services, or over £5,372,609 (previously £5,336,937) for public works (construction), must comply with the full requirements of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 (which will be replaced by the Procurement Act, when it takes effect later in 2024). The maximum threshold for contracts to be advertised on Contracts Finder is now over £30,000, when previously this was £25,000.

On 25th March I had the pleasure of attending a ChALC Clerks Forum Meeting which was hosted at the Northwich Town Council offices and lead by ChALC's Chief Officer, Jackie Weaver. These meetings provide an excellent opportunity for both Cheshire West and Cheshire East based Town Councils to share

information on good practices, offer advice to other clerks and share Council related experiences and knowledge.

FOI requests have been received by the Town Council of late which are time-consuming as the Council has a duty to reply in a timely manner with accurate information, which has to be researched, compiled and evidenced.

At the Extraordinary Full Council meeting on 24th April 2024, Council unanimously accepted updates to the Employee Handbook which have been implemented following national changes in UK employment law. I attended a virtual employment law seminar provided by Work Nest for updates on UK Employment Law on 18th April. I have since written to all staff members to inform the team of the updates to the Employee Handbook and issued them with a copy of the new handbook. It is vital that, as an employer, Neston Town Council keeps on top of these updates and changes to national law.

At the same extraordinary meeting, Neston Town Council has also made a positive resolution to apply to take ownership of two possibly soon to be decommissioned telephone boxes at the Royal Oak in Little Neston and on the corner of Landseer Avenue/Raeburn Avenue in Neston. If successful in our bid, Neston Town Council has some exciting ideas to revitalise these historic features of the town for the benefit of the community.

More recently, I applied for a free portrait of His Majesty, King Charles III under a scheme backed by the UK Government. The framed portrait, which was taken in October 2023, depicts His Majesty in the uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet (No.1 Tailcoat), and he is wearing the Garter Collar and Sovereign's Badge, the Order of Merit, the Royal Victorian Order's Royal Victorian Chain and GCVO Sash, as well as a set of medals. The portrait has been proudly hung in the Main Hall, where it will be on display to staff, hirers, and visitors alike. The portrait signifies the beginning of the King's Reign. It has been an important, and long-standing tradition to display an image of the Monarch in public buildings, to show their importance at the heart of national life.

Unfortunately, one of our Town Councillors has resigned from office this week, leaving us with five vacancies. Thank you for your diligent work, Cllr Hardcastle; Neston Town Council sends you good wishes for your future endeavours. Adverts have been scheduled to re-advertise the Town Council's other current vacancies following the Annual Meeting in the hope that we can soon co-opt some new councillors.

Neston Town Council has joined the world of Facebook. Please do urge friends, neighbours, family members, and colleagues to give the page a 'like' and a follow as we need to grow our following. The Town Council will now be able to provide instantaneous updates on its activities, events, meetings, and good news stories to our wider electorate. However, the Town Council page must remain neutral where possible and the page will not be able to share or promote local businesses, offers or competitions. We have also been enabled to join local forums to provide information and promote the work of the

Council, with a Neston Town Council profile page which will run alongside our business page. With thanks to our IT provider for their support on this project.

Regular discussions are still ongoing with our colleagues at Property Services at Cheshire West & Chester Council to progress the updated lease agreement. Unfortunately, this has not yet reached a conclusion but Neston Town Council has been promised a two-year extension to our current Asset Management Agreement.

I am very pleased to report that for the second financial year running, Neston Town Council has received its completed Year End Internal Audit with no actions. Congratulations to our RFO for his hard work. This confirms that the Town Council is conducting all of its financial obligations and legal practices and in the best way. This year's Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) has been completed in a timely manner, just now requiring Full Council sign off next week.

Zoë Dean
Locum Chief Officer
Neston Town Council
16th May 2024