



ANNUAL REPORT 2015-2016

The role of the Mayor presented by Cllr Mrs Hazel Ramsay

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to serve once again as your Town Mayor. During the year, as well as my duties as Chair of the Council, with the assistance of Cllr Madeline Russell and Cllrs M North and D Albone I have attended many varied events acting as an ambassador for Biggleswade at Civic events throughout the Central Bedfordshire area. Representing Biggleswade Council, I have also enjoyed visiting our schools, voluntary support groups, clubs, and organisations and meeting so many people at various events and sharing their celebrations throughout the year. The commitment that the leaders and members show to our groups and organisations is often taken for granted but it is these organisations that form a vital part of our Biggleswade community.

On September 25th, we held our third successful Macmillan Coffee morning in the Council Chamber which due to your generous support raised over £250 for a really worthwhile cause.

Following the success of last year, we held our Xmas Fair starting at mid-day. The stage was used throughout the Fair by local school and adult choirs and presentations were made in the evening for the best Xmas window before the 'switching on' of the lights. Our thanks to Biggles FM for their support. There was a good variety of stalls selling a variety of gifts, confectionery, cakes with a selection of hot food and drinks available to keep out the cold!

The Biggleswade Civic Service was held on February 28th at the Trinity Methodist Church. The theme of the service this (leap) year was 'Time and Space'. At this service, H.M. The Deputy Lord Lt. Major Simon Sadler presented the Legion d'Honneur to 3 of our Biggleswade war veterans who took part in the Normandy D Day Landings. It was a proud moment for all of us as the citations were read out by Major Sadler and I am pleased that so many of their family members were able to attend the service.

Although the new London Road Retail Park is now open for business we are continuing to monitor the planning conditions and development of the two retail parks. The landscaping is well under way and I look forward to the time when the trees that have been planted will have grown sufficiently to become the 'avenue of trees' as shown on the plans, to provide a gateway to our Town.

I am pleased to say that the Biggleswade/Central Beds Council Joint Committee continues to meet on a regular basis enabling both Councils together with representatives from the Biggleswade Chamber of Trade and Central Beds Council Officers to discuss local issues and their impact on our town.

I thank all our Councillors for their voluntary commitment to the Council and to Biggleswade, in attending the fortnightly Council meetings as well as the various extra committee meetings. The Council have continued to work on your behalf to progress the issues that affect our town and can be seen in action at our Council meetings that are held on alternate Tuesdays and are open to the public so please do come along to a meeting and see the Council in action!

Our Councillors and staff work very much as a team and I am sure that without the support of our administration staff, ground staff, and the advice and guidance of our Town Clerk and his Deputy we would not be able to accomplish as much as we do.

I am proud to have been able to serve Biggleswade again as Town Mayor. There have been many changes in recent years and no doubt there are more to come in the future and I feel sure that Biggleswade will be able to embrace these changes while retaining its identity and continuing to flourish as a thriving and caring community.

Cllr. Mrs H. Ramsay
Town Mayor, Biggleswade 2013-2016

PUBLIC LAND AND OPEN SPACES COMMITTEE- Chairman: Cllr B Briars

The Town Council continues its ongoing maintenance of recreational and sports facilities, allotments and cemeteries. Ongoing work includes refurbishment of play areas, ground works, litter picking, line marking, grass cutting, strimming, chemical weeding, hedge cutting and fence repairs. Our thanks are due to the Town Council's Grounds Staff who continue their good work with the day to day maintenance of our public open spaces.

The Town Council has worked closely with developers on Land East of Biggleswade to ensure that new public open spaces, play areas and sports facilities are designed appropriately with a view to being adopted by the Town Council. However, at the time of this report the Town Council awaits news on the extent of the areas that are now likely to be available for adoption. Once this is known it is likely that there will have to be expansion of the workforce and facilities to support these areas, to be funded by developers' contributions commuted at the time of adoption.

Dog fouling continues to be a concern throughout Biggleswade. The Town Council has been working closely with the CBC dog warden service to advise and educate members of the public to help keep areas clean and safe. A number of fixed penalty notices have also been issued in Biggleswade by the CBC dog warden service.

River Ivel

The Town Council has worked with the Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service to increase awareness of water safety along Town Council owned stretches of the River Ivel, with safety messages displayed at key points along the river and we have installed an additional life buoy south of Franklin Recreation Ground.

The Town Council has also collaborated with the Ivel Protection Association (IPA) for the management of fishing activities along the River Ivel. Biggleswade residents in possession of a free Biggleswade Town Council Fishing Permit along with an Environment Agency rod license are able to fish the Town Council owned stretches of the river, whilst the IPA operates a Bailiff service.

Play Areas

The Town Council has continued a programme of refurbishing and enhancing play areas in Biggleswade to improve facilities and maintain safe play areas. Works have been completed at a number of sites and further enhancements are programmed.

Football Pitches

The Town Council's football pitches support a busy schedule of training and matches for youth teams and adult teams. There is a constant demand for facilities with bookings throughout the season. During the summer months, we refrain from taking bookings for football pitches to enable recovery and grounds maintenance work, which has resulted in better playing conditions throughout the season.

Funding

Ongoing minor maintenance work is generally funded from annual budgets. Larger projects have been funded from Town Council Reserves. However, the availability of S106 money from Developers Contributions is regularly monitored and continues to be drawn upon when appropriate to minimise the impact on Town Council reserves.

Completed works

In addition to general day to day maintenance costs, this past year we have spent £35,000 on specific works to play areas, recreation grounds and allotments including the following:

Allotments:	Repairs to allotment access road and the installation of dip tanks to improve water supply.
Bowls Club:	Repairs to the bowls green edge and the irrigation system.
Eagle Farm Road Area:	New goal posts and the replacement of the vandalised shelter roof.
Foxglove Play Area:	Two new springers and new safety surfaces under swings and slide.
Franklin Recreation Ground:	New safety surfaces under toddler swings and multiplay area and works to trees.

Kayser Court Play Area: New Safety Surfaces and refurbishment of fence and slide.
Kitelands Recreation Ground: Installation of two Zig Zag Twisters and safety surfaces.

Poppyfields Play Area 1: Installation of new springer.
Poppyfields Play Area 2: Complete overhaul of site including installation of swings, springer and turnstile, new safety surfaces and the refurbishment of the furniture.

Stratton Way Pitch: New shower fittings in changing rooms. Ongoing repairs to roof and gutters following vandalism. Regeneration of goal mouths. Replacement flood lights for training area.

Tennis Courts: Repainting the white lines.

Litter Bins: Additional bins installed at various locations.

Ongoing and Planned Works

A further £36,000 is already committed to ongoing and planned works as follows:

Berkeley Close Play Area: Repairs to Safety Surfaces and replacement gate.

Eagle Farm Road Pitches: Removal of concrete rings.

Franklin Recreation Ground: Replacement senior swing frame scheduled for May 2016.

Heather Drive Play Area: Programme of works scheduled for May/June 2016 to include replacement multiplay unit and additional springer. New swing seats, play panels, safety surfaces, play graphics and gates.

Kitelands: Installation of MUGA panels.

Lilac Grove: Replacement springers and surfaces. New knee rails and box hedge.

Stratton Way Play Area: New safety surfaces.

TOWN CENTRE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE-Chairman: Cllr Mrs M Russell

Following on from the TCM report to last year's Town Assembly, it is disappointing to note how many things are still outstanding alongside the real progress that has been made.

Parking

Parking is still the most difficult issue for TCM, both on and off street. The good news is that we have successfully re-surfaced, drained and marked out three of our main car parks – Rose Lane, St. Andrew's Street and Mill Lane – resulting in a few extra spaces and a much nicer feel to all three. Rose Lane was also equipped with a disabled ramp and a bar to stop commercial vehicles using it. The items outstanding are to replace the perimeter fence and improve the landscaping but this is in hand.

With regard to managing our car parks, we have had two setbacks. First, just as we were ready to implement last summer, the Government brought in new legislation which meant that there were technical reasons why we could not implement the scheme in the way that we had discussed with the company that we had appointed. The company, having initially come up with an alternative, have now walked away.

The overall scheme that we want to implement, with both medium and longer term parking and permits for some residents and people who work in the town, is still valid but we are having to look for another partner to help us implement our proposals. We also want to explore the possibility of working with Central Bedfordshire Council to enforce both on-street and off-street parking, particularly so that parking on pavements can be controlled.

We continue to look for opportunities to create more parking and have asked CBC to re-model the area on the corner of Mill Lane and St. Andrew's Street to introduce chevron parking, which will slightly increase the number of spaces.

Central Bedfordshire Council have now completed the process of consultation on schemes to restrict parking in residential areas where commuters leave their cars all day and often park inconsiderately. The implementation of the approved schemes is in process and we are assured that finance for both this and the chevron scheme above are in this year's CBC budget.

Finally, with regard to parking, there is an issue about the number of planning applications for flats around the town centre which are approved in spite of there being insufficient or no parking. This just adds to the problem of lack of parking in the town centre. A letter of concern was sent to Central Bedfordshire Council.

Market and Town Centre

The closure of the High Street bridge for seven months is having a huge impact on the town both in terms of trade and traffic circulation.

To try to boost trade in the aftermath of the bridge closure, the Town Council submitted a bid to CBC's Market Town Regeneration Fund. The bid was first discussed at TCM and involved an upgrade of the Market Square with the demolition of Century House, replacement bus waiting and toilet facilities, de-cluttering, repairs to the block paving, the introduction of free Wi-Fi and setting up a Business Improvement District where Council and businesses would work more closely together to improve the town. The Town Council was prepared to invest over £800,000 over the next 2/3 years as match funding. Our bid was rejected out of hand because we asked that, if we were to invest that amount of money, our Market Square should be handed back to the Town Council by CBC. We also understand that CBC has its own plans for Century House and that end of the Market Square but these have not yet been shared with us.

Because of the bridge closure, three one-way systems have been introduced in the narrow streets around the town centre – Sun Street and St. John's Street; Back Street; and The Baulk. It has been agreed with CBC that these one-way systems will remain in place for six months after the re-opening of the bridge so that their effects can be assessed under normal circumstances and there can be a consultation on whether they should be made permanent.

We still have an outstanding request to Central Bedfordshire Council for the **reversal of Hitchin Street** with the pedestrianisation of the top section from Bonds Lane to the Market Square. This would also require the reversal of Bonds Lane.

Our Charter Market has also been hit by the closure of the bridge and we have been monitoring closely the number of traders who attend. We have fewer regular traders at present but more casuals. The Town Council organised a super four-page spread in the trade magazine *Market Trader*, and also agreed to halve the pitch fees, to limit the damage to the Market.

There was a proposal to alter the layout of the Market to allow the opening up of Market Street and the parking on one side, to encourage people to visit the town centre on a Saturday but the new layout could not be agreed with the traders so Council decided not to go ahead.

The Market Rules were reviewed by a Working Group which included the Market Superintendent, to ensure that they are up-to-date and appropriate.

Quotations were received during the year to refurbish the Drum Clock, which belongs to the town although it is fixed to the Pizza Express building (which used to be the Town Hall). The work has been commissioned and will start on the 8th June 2016.

Having been approached with his ideas, the Town Council has been working with Adam Turney to develop wayfinding boards for the town centre and the retail park. This has rather gone into abeyance with the upheaval in the town centre but we hope to take these ideas forward when the bridge work is concluded.

Christmas Fair

We had another very successful Christmas Fair and Lights Switch-On in December. A TCM working party was again helped by Hayley Down and all the Council staff worked mightily both before and after the day. There were some adjustments to how things were organised, building on the experiences of the previous year.

We again had an abundance of market stalls, street food and a fairground, with Santa and stars for the Christmas tree. A succession of choirs graced the stage and we also enjoyed Edward Peake Steel Band and the Stotfold Salvation Army Band, culminating in the Community Carol Service and the switch-on by the Carnival Court.

We were also well-supported by businesses through the Best Dressed Window Award and those who stayed open late and it was lovely to receive plaudits from townsfolk who enjoyed the event.

The Christmas lights themselves continue to grow in scope. The Council has been steadily investing in the infrastructure necessary and, through hiring the lights rather than purchasing them, we can also tweak the display to add interest year-on-year. We were particularly pleased this year with the cascading effect of the decorations on the lampposts.

In spite of the frustrations, TCM will continue to work to improve the environment of the town centre, the parking, the traffic circulation and the use of the Market Square for markets and other events.

FINANCE & GENERAL PURPOSE COMMITTEE- Chairman: Cllr M North

The council achieved a surplus £32,008 for the year, far in excess of the positions anticipated at the time of Budget and Precept Setting in January 2016 where Income & Expenditure were forecast to be roughly the same. Significant contributions to this were as a result of increased rent income at the Court House, an increase in cemetery income, and an underspend on Cost Centre 105 – Car Parks of £22,000.

Interest earned on Council funds decreased from £1,741 in the year ended 31st March 2015 to £1,200 in the year just ended. The balance of the surplus was achieved by various cost savings where possible.

Major Activities

During the year the Council also undertook the following projects during the year (all funded from previously earmarked reserves or the Rolling Capital Project Fund):

1. Play Equipment
New play equipment and surfacing was purchased for at a cost of £26,636, all funded from "developers" contributions.
2. Car Parks
Rose Lane, St Andrew and Mill Lane car parks were resurfaced at a total cost of £125,635.
3. Courtroom Equipment
A new courtroom microphone system was purchased at a cost of £4,220.
Biggleswade Town Council's finances remain in an excellent position with over £575,000 in Bank Accounts which is used to finance a healthy General Reserve of £350,000 and Earmarked Reserves of £203,000.

Please note that the accounts have not been finalized for 2015-16 and as such the above figures may be subject to change but are fairly indicative of the council's performance this year.

PERSONNEL COMMITTEE- Chairman: Cllr I Bond

Staffing

The Town Council employs a Town Clerk and Deputy Town Clerk, an administration team of four members of staff (three full time equivalents) lead by an Office Manager, an outside workforce team of six full time members of staff lead by a Works Foreman, and a part time Market Superintendent. These staffing levels reflect an increase in the Town Council's workforce from the previous year with the addition of an Office Manager and a Property & Grounds Maintenance Person.

Training

In addition to ongoing 'on the job' training and sharing good working practices, in the last year the Town Council has invested in professional development and training courses as follows:

- Certificate in Local Council Administration
- Agendas and Minute Taking
- Organising Community Events
- Dog Control Orders
- Chainsaw Maintenance & Crosscutting NPTC Level 2 Award (CS30)
- Pesticide Application (PA1): Safe Use of Pesticides NPTC Level 2 Award
- Pesticide Application (PA6A): Hand Held Applicators NPTC Level 2 Award
- First Aid at Work

Work Experience Placements

The Town Council regularly supports work experience placements for individuals to experience the world of work, gain new skills and build confidence. Each year the Town Council offers places for 2-week work experience placements to local schools for both grounds staff and administrative roles. In the last year, the Town Council has also offered an ongoing placement to a student of Ivel Valley School as well as an extended placement under the government's Community Work Placement scheme.

DEVELOPING THE POTENTIAL OF THE TOWN COUNCIL

The Town Council decided that it would review its priorities and direction of travel early in the next financial year and intend to develop a new Corporate Strategy. To commence this process, it engaged specialist advisors to undertake a Strategic Analysis of the Council, which would compare its organisation, administration and services against its legal obligations, current best practice and the Local Council Award Scheme standards.

This work was reported in March 2016. The headline conclusion is of a service oriented authority, ambitious but realistic councillors and a motivated workforce. The Council is well managed and services are continually evolving to meet needs. The Council delivers an impressive range of services to the town, to which many other local councils are now aspiring. It is keen to increase these and to take a lead in taking the town forward in rapidly changing times.

The analysis confirmed what the Town Clerk and councillors suspected, that governance had fallen a little behind the best and that a review of strategic direction would now be timely. Ideas and commitment to developing the Council for the good of the Town appears to come from both members and management, and are not driven solely by one or the other. This “shared vision” avoids major internal conflict and leads to a balanced and stable council. A number of councillors expressed frustration that Central Bedfordshire do not listen to them more, however substantial effort is being put in to building relationships and partnerships with the principal council. The Report stated:

“We found Biggleswade Town Council to be a well-managed authority with strong leadership from key members and the Town Clerk. From our observations, staff are motivated and competent, with a good “partnership” between councillors and staff. The Council are financially sound, strive for “value for money” but are not afraid to invest in the Town. There is a track record of real progress over last few years and an ambition to take the Town forward.

We found a sound good governance base which could readily be developed. Perhaps understandably with so many changes in local government, this has got out of date in some areas as efforts have been concentrated on delivery of front line services. There has been a recognised need to increase capacity and review the effectiveness of support services and we commend this.

The Council provide a wide range of services which are well managed and give excellent value for money. They also take the opportunity to work in partnership wherever possible. BTC appear determined to play a key role in the future development and wellbeing of the Town and are in a financial position to gradually enhance their role and services to the benefit of local people. The Council have recognised a need to re-plan where they are going “if you don’t know where you are going, you won’t know when you get there”. The result of this will be a Corporate Strategy, Business Plan and Medium Term Financial Plan.

There is little doubt that the Council has solid foundations on which to build and is well capable of managing a wider range of devolved services. We believe with a number of key developments the Council will be able to move forward with confidence. We have set out a series of proposals which we believe will help it progress”.

The Council will now develop a programme to implement the recommendations.

WORKING WITH CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

Regeneration and Business

CBC's Business Investment and Support Team managed 20 new inward investment enquiries for property or land in the Biggleswade area, which brought 60 new jobs to Biggleswade with the arrival of Jas Bowmans, on Stratton Business Park.

CBC funds the Creative Bedfordshire network with the aims of supporting enterprise, employment, skills development and growing the number of jobs in the creative sector. Two out of the five networking meetings were held in Biggleswade, attended 34 delegate. A business breakfast was held at Jordans Mill in August, attended by 17 business delegates to hear about plans for the Stratton Local Development Order which was adopted in October 2016.

A new Business Grants and Support Scheme for SMEs was launched in January 2016 to encourage growth and bring forward new jobs and training for local people. The Fund has supported seven Biggleswade businesses to date.

CBC secured £50,000 of government funding which will help food, drink and farming businesses to set up and expand in the Biggleswade and Ivel Valley area. Agri-food is one of the key sectors in Central Bedfordshire and the money will be used to develop a Food Enterprise Zone (FEZ) which enables faster growth for businesses in the sector. The Employment and Skills Service continues to support local residents in the Biggleswade area through providing Work Clubs and short courses to help improve employability.

In Biggleswade, town centre retail vacancies for the year was 6.9% of all A class premises.

Leisure and libraries

New CBC Public/Staff Wi-Fi has been rolled out on the 100MB Fibre Connection at Biggleswade Library. Solar PV panels were installed on the library roof in March 2016 to make the building more efficient and reduce our carbon foot print.

Wet Side Changing Room facilities (male/female) have been refurbished to provide new showers at Saxon Leisure Centre. £19,080 of s106 contributions has been released to the Town Council from new developments to create new or improve existing play and outdoor sport facilities to make provision for the new and existing residents. The town council has identified the projects which it felt would have the greatest impact and benefit for residents. CBC is working with the Town Council to agree designs for the children's play areas on the Kings Reach development.

Waste

The redeveloped Household Waste Recycling Centre was reopened in February 2016. The Biffa Area Support Team has undertaken a number of deep cleanse activities in the Town Centre.

There has been a significant increase in abandoned vehicle reports, due to the current low scrap value.

Countryside Access and Rights of Way

CBC have been investigating unrecorded public rights along paths and alleyways in central Biggleswade. This area is currently excluded from the Council's Definitive Map of public rights of way. Some 37 footpaths and bridleways have so far been identified. Orders are being drafted to record these routes on a new Definitive Map for central Biggleswad.

Consultations are being undertaken with a number of landowners about providing cycle access over certain sections of the Biggleswade Green Wheel that currently doesn't have cycle access. This will extend the cycle access of the Wheel.

As the Kings Reach development expands, some of the previously closed footpaths are being returned to public use, mainly in the north of Kings Reach at present.

Highways

The Parking Strategy has been consulted upon and agreed and is now moving forward towards implementation in 5 zones.

The parking enforcement team issued 396 Penalty Charge Notices in the last 12 months to improve congestion across Biggleswade and ensure that the turnover of vehicles using limited waiting bays is efficient; meaning more people can use these bays to go shopping etc.

Stratton Street Bridge is being replaced to prevent further deterioration and damage to the track below. The replacement will mean that the structure will have a further 120 years of life and will protect the interests of the High Street for the foreseeable future. The replacement was delayed due to adverse weather at a critical time of the programme.

Experimental orders have been implemented to allow the temporary traffic management arrangements in The Baulk and Back Street to remain as part of a six-month trial to see how they operate under "normal" traffic conditions. The creation of additional parking on Back Street will be included as part of the trial. Thereafter, local feedback will be considered before deciding whether to make the changes permanent.

A ban on HGVs was introduced as part of the new one-way gyratory system at St Johns Street, Sun Street and Rose lane. The ban has been operational for a few months and CBC has paid the Police to enforce this on a number of occasions to support the ban. CBC are also actively working with the developers along Potton Road/Drove Road as some complaints have been received regarding their lorries from the housing sites.