

## Ellesmere Town Mayor's Annual Report for 2023/2024

I am pleased to present the Annual Report for 2023/24.

It has been another busy year where the world has continued to face cost of living and environmental crises, war in Ukraine, the rapid expansion of AI, and global uncertainty, including the outbreak of hostilities in the Middle East.

Here in Ellesmere, the population has continued to grow, new houses have been built, and we have experienced the effects of huge pressures on the NHS.

Throughout this time, your Town Council has continued to work hard to make life as pleasant as possible for all residents. Much of the work is carried out quietly, week in week out, by the hard-working team led by Town Clerk, Jo Butterworth, well-supported by Deputy Clerk, Gemma Whitley, and Administrative Assistant, Vicky Martin, who was appointed following the retirement of Deputy Clerk, Jean Hynes.

Not everyone is aware of the assets and services that the Council is responsible for: they include Cross Street toilets, bus shelters, CCTV cameras, street lights, street furniture, floral planters and flower beds, and Christmas festoons. On top of that, the Town Council owns and manages various playing fields and recreation grounds, the Town Hall, New Wharf Square by Tesco, the Boathouse and Mere Cottage (jointly owned with Shropshire Council) and Ellesmere Cemetery (jointly owned with Ellesmere Rural Parish Council). I would like to thank Jo and the team for everything they do. This is not always the most exciting work, but it is vital and makes a difference to so many people's lives.

Councillors have continued to hold their monthly Council and committee meetings and were pleased to welcome Cllr Liz Woodbridge to their ranks in July. Highways issues are still a major concern, particularly the narrow bottle-neck on Scotland Street near Cambridge Court - a meeting was held with local MP Helen Morgan to discuss safety issues that she agreed to raise elsewhere. Councillors drew up a street plan of highways concerns and have lobbied Shropshire Council (who are responsible for highways), on numerous issues, including the introduction of 20 mph speed limits on certain roads and in residential areas. A 20mph speed limit is now in place in the areas approaching our two schools.

Potholes are the bane of drivers' lives and parking concerns, including much-needed coach parking space, continue to exercise councillors' minds. Town Cllr Geoff Elner, who is also a Shropshire Councillor for Ellesmere, has taken up many issues on behalf of local residents not only regarding highways, but also planning, flooding, drainage, housing and other matters of deep concern to Ellesmere people. He works extremely hard, very often under the radar, and deserves our grateful thanks for representing us so well at County level.

During the year, the Council raised concerns about the lack of sufficient affordable housing in the town. It has also lobbied for appropriate infrastructure to be put in place to keep pace with demand as more houses are built and the population expands.

Having listened to the public's worries over the level of health provision in the town, councillors organised a health and well-being survey that was delivered to every door and put online. The biggest issues were found to be the shortage of NHS dentists in the area, the difficulty in getting face-to-face appointments with GPs and long waiting times on the phone. Councillors have since been in discussions with the Shropshire Director for Public Health and representatives of the Integrated Care Board for the County. Useful meetings were held with partners at the medical practice and liaison with them will continue.

Links with the local police have been strengthened with the setting up of a Policing Panel made up of representatives from the Council and the Safer Neighbourhood police team. During a walk around town, police gave advice on what to do to increase safety in local hotspots. The Council, led by Cllr Paul Goulbourne, is currently working on an Emergency Action Plan to assist statutory services in the event of serious incidents in the town.

The Council has been pleased to support development of the market by Project SY12. The Tuesday market now hosts 24 traders each week and the Thursday, Farmers', and Artisans' weekend markets have proved very popular. The Council welcomes the launch of Pulse, a digital hub for the town to promote local businesses, groups, and activities to residents and visitors alike. I was pleased to support Ellesmere Yard in their bid for Heritage Lottery funding and delighted when they were successful in their bid. This will allow them to develop their plans at the Yard that should help to increase tourism to the town.

The Town Council's finances continue to remain in a healthy position. The budget for the next financial year was set at the January meeting and councillors agreed to an 8% increase in the Council tax precept – equivalent to a 26p a week for a band D property. This is in line with many other councils across the country who are working hard to support their communities. Shropshire Council is struggling financially and has announced cuts to assets and services – as a result, it is possible that Ellesmere Town Council might be asked to take on additional assets and services. The necessary increase in the precept will help to sustain this situation.

Careful financial management in recent years meant that the council was able to repair the Town Hall roof, which had become increasingly leaky despite years of patching whilst we saved enough to fund permanent repairs. Consideration has recently been given to the future of the Town Hall and its office accommodation. Local residents were invited to share their thoughts on this issue through a public consultation and a meeting held earlier this week and councillors will further discuss the matter at their next Council meeting on the 9<sup>th</sup> May.

Representatives of the Council sit on the Mere Advisory Board and have regular meetings with Shropshire Council staff who are developing the prom and gardens. Research is being carried out to find the cause of the blue green algae in the Mere that has become an issue at certain times of year.

The Cemetery Working Group and the new Cemetery Co-ordinator, Andy Chatting, faced with an urgent need for more burial plots in Ellesmere Cemetery, carried out searches that resulted in more land being found that will provide space for a couple more years. The search for a new site remains.

The Council has supported Ellesmere Cricket Club regarding an extension of their lease and the plans for development of their ground and facilities. The clearing of the culvert and the maintenance of an open watercourse at the old dairy site was achieved thanks to joint funding by the owner of The Barns holiday homes and the Town Council. The question of who is responsible for the maintenance of the Tetchill Brook is yet to be resolved.

All this routine, but important, work has continued at a time when the country was experiencing some memorable historic events. During the two years in which I was privileged to be the Mayor of Ellesmere, we enjoyed Queen Elizabeth's Platinum Jubilee, the sadness and solemnity at the time of her death, and the accession of King Charles III to the throne. The new king's coronation was celebrated in May, and Ellesmere held a community parade and family picnic, church services, a treasure hunt and shop window competition, street parties, and even the Mayor's Coronation cake competition. The Town Council offered every child a Coronation teddy or water bottle and I was honoured to unveil a Coronation plaque on the wall of the Town Hall.

Young people have continued to feature in the life of the town. New play equipment in the Cremorne Gardens was officially opened by children from Ellesmere Primary School and I was pleased to officially open a new building at their school. The New Saints and Town Council youth group held on Wednesday evenings at the Town Hall is thriving and the Scouts are looking forward to the completion of their new hut. 2023 saw the centenary of Girl Guiding in Ellesmere and was marked by a celebratory day and a visit by the High Sheriff of Shropshire.

I was delighted to invite the High Sheriff back to the town to present her Community Volunteers Award to the Yarn Bombers in recognition of the happiness they spread across the town as a result of their knitted creations.

During the past two years, as you have heard, I set up a number of community projects that I have been relieved and satisfied to see take off and run successfully for the benefit of local people. This has only been possible because of the commitment, talent, and enthusiasm of volunteers. For example, the Ellesmere Food Share, based at Our Space, supports up to 100 families a week with a team of 40 hard-working volunteers who man the shop and collect surplus food several times a week from supermarkets and public donation bins. I would like to warmly thank the volunteers who have run the project, the individuals and groups who have donated vital funds, and the generous members of the public and local businesses who have donated food supplies.

Ellesmere Repair Café's team of fixers provides free repairs on a wide range of items and a relaxing café provides an opportunity for people to chat and relax over a free cup of tea and piece of cake. Surplus funds are donated to other local community groups at Christmas.

Ellesmere Community Cars helps to fill the gap caused by a shortage of public transport. Two volunteer co-ordinators and a team of volunteer drivers take people to medical, dental and other types of appointments across the county for a very reasonable price.

The new Hearing Hub at Our Space provides monthly opportunities for hearing-aid users to have their hearing-aids checked and repaired and to pick up batteries. Our Space also agreed

to provide a room for a representative of West Mercia Women's Aid to be available to support victims of domestic abuse.

A group of people with expertise and knowledge about dementia agreed to form the Ellesmere Dementia Strategy Group and are making good progress in finding ways to help local people living with dementia.

I have been so impressed by everyone who has stepped forward to develop these groups and I cannot thank them enough. They should be very proud of what they have achieved.

Of course, Ellesmere already had many thriving organisations and I was delighted to visit many of them over the course of the last two years and find out more about what they do. Almost 40 of them came together for the Mayor's Community Groups Day held in the Market Hall in March. This was not only an opportunity for groups to publicise their activities to the public; it also allowed them to do some useful networking as groups discovered how they could support each other. This will hopefully become an annual event.

As I mentioned earlier this evening, I have been fundraising for the Mayor's Charities – Ellesmere Food Share and local youth organisations - through a variety of events. Some of that fundraising has taken place in collaboration with Age UK North Shropshire Supporters and I must thank them for the support they have given me over the last two years. In total, over £4,800 has been shared between my charities. Thank you to all the generous people who have supported these events.

The Town Council also awards grants to local groups every quarter and I would encourage organisations to apply. I will be awarding cheques to three local organisations that applied, after this item.

I have enjoyed attending many annual and ceremonial events during the last two years. These have included the cycle of Ellesmere events such as the Rotary Regatta, the Classic Car Show, the Carnival, the Final Fling following Halloween, Remembrance services, and the Winter Festival. Many townspeople and visitors took part in the Walk of Hope round the Mere in September that raised funds for the Brain Tumour Trust and sought to raise awareness of this disease. Last week we welcomed Princess Anne to the town.

My husband, my consort, Brendan, was at my side for so many of these events. When he was diagnosed with neuroendocrine cancer in October 2021, we discussed whether or not I should take on the role of mayor, and he very much wanted me to. He was determined to live as full a life as possible for as long as possible, and he wanted me to do the same.

It was important to him that not only did the school have a good relationship with the town, but that the College actively benefited the lives of people in Ellesmere. He created the Eglantyne Jebb scholarship, annually awarding a free College place to a local student. During the town's various festivals, he provided free labour and transport and for events organised by local charities and community groups he provided food and drink, free room hire, the loan of cutlery and crockery, and free labour once again. When the local swimming pool risked closure, he took it under the College's wing and kept it open. Brendan helped with the town's road system campaign, sat on the old tourist committee, and encouraged students to

volunteer with local organisations. He provided buglers and other music for numerous events, and opened up the Chapel, Arts Centre, and other facilities for the benefit of the people of Ellesmere. As the voluntary Chair of the North West Academies Trust, Brendan helped maintain Ellesmere Primary School, and did much to support local children with dyslexia. Recognised by Ellesmere Town Council in 2017, he was proud to become a Freeman of the town.

I am so proud of all he did, and I am proud of my daughter for stepping into the role of consort following Brendan's death in January. I want to thank Catherine for accompanying me to events and helping to represent the town at the High Sheriff's Legal Service and the county's Young Citizenship Awards.

I must also thank Cllr Graham Hutchinson for his excellent support during his time as Deputy Mayor and Chair of the Finance Committee, and especially for stepping into my shoes at the start of this year when I was unavailable. The whole Council reached out with support for which I am grateful, and I must particularly thank Jo Butterworth for both the support and the space she gave me during this difficult time.

I know that I am fortunate to live in such a warm and friendly town where there is a tremendous community spirit and where I have felt that community support during the last three months.

I would like to thank everyone who has done their bit to make the town such a wonderful place to live and has taken action to help members of the community.

The next twelve months will no doubt see another whirlwind of community activity and I am already looking forward to the commemorative service marking the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the D-Day landings on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June!