

Opening up the Town hall - Part 2



Town hall (photos courtesy of Mark Vesey)



BY MARK VESEY

Before I tell you about my week I would like to tell you about my new place of work, the Town Hall.

Many of you may have never been in? It was built in 1845 for John Woodall and was purchased by 'The Corporation' in 1898.

The Council Chamber has wonderful wood paneled walls and huge stained glass windows. There is a picture of the Queen hanging in the centre of the room. The tables and chairs, for the 50 councillors, all have a push button microphone in front of them and the whole Chamber has a CCTV system so meetings can be broadcast on the internet. The Mayor's & Civic Parlours are used for smaller meetings and have an array of oil paintings on the walls and gifts that have been given to the borough. You can feel history and status all around you.

The Town Hall entrance has a mosaic floor with the borough's seal on. This is a ship and a castle, representing the origins of this town from 1163. Off this area is the Member's room where 50 councillors have their mailboxes and share a dozen seats, two computers, one telephone and two coat stands! I must also mention the gent's toilet as this has an amazing 'blunderbuss' lavatory with a huge wooden seat and a ceiling level cistern.

There is quite a change as you go down into the basement and connecting areas where things begin to look more 1970s, a bit shabby and worn in places. I must say that all the Town Hall staff I have met so far are very friendly, polite and helpful.

On Monday morning we met the Chief Executive and Senior Management Team. They listed their roles and responsibilities that cover at least two dozen areas each.

I often hear people moan about them

for not replying to resident's questions but I now find it amazing how they even have time for their own families! Naturally, I had to ask the question I have had for many years, 'why has the Town Hall got such a bad reputation with the public?'

Jim Dillon, Chief Executive, admitted that they do need to improve and be more transparent. Hilary Jones, Deputy Chief Executive, said that trust needs to be re-established with the public and, that with a new enquiry tracking system, things should improve as they can tell exactly where an enquiry has gone and who is supposed to be answering it.

The full Council meeting on Monday was to approve the leader's choice of Cabinet positions and appointments of Chairs and Vice Chairs for Scrutiny committees and outside bodies. The Labour leader, Cllr. Siddons, said he was very disappointed that the majority of positions were taken by Conservatives and no balance or partnership working would be achieved, which is especially important in Scrutiny!

A few days after we had some training on Scrutiny committees and their role in checking and advising the Cabinet on decisions they have made. This is an important role for councillors as it connects the residents on the ground to the decision makers at the top. Although Scrutiny cannot override Cabinet they can make them look and think again.

Last week we voted and passed a new Environmental and Sustainability Policy where I said it could have been much bolder, a carbon neutral, plastic bag or fracking free borough, the cleanest and greenest in Britain! We then thanked the mayor, Cllr Pat Marsburg, for her year's work in the role. The full video can be viewed on the website www.scarborough.gov.uk

Out in the community I attended a

Friends of South Cliff Garden committee meeting. This small band of volunteers works wonders keeping the gardens clean, replanting, planning new projects, cleaning and painting the rain shelters. It is a shame more residents don't join in as they are doing wonderful work in keeping the area beautiful for tourists and locals, and, reducing the ongoing cost of maintenance for the Council. I have also been out and about asking residents & business owners in Ramshill what they think about the Weaponess development plan.

7 hours of training took place last Tuesday. Nick Edwards, who oversees the £80 million budget, went through the finances with a fine tooth comb.

Despite massive savings over the past few years, and the loss of many staff, the Council faces another £2 million hole this coming year and every year after! As a training exercise for new councillors we were given a list of services the Council supplies and we had to decide where we would cut funding and where we would protect it.

For example: Tourism including theatres & museums, housing and the homeless, refuse & recycling, toilets, parks, sports, CCTV, coast protection, mayor & members, planning, maintenance etc. These are all difficult choices to make and even if you cut a few of the above the money still does not add up to £2 million!

We then had a presentation on the Weaponess Leisure Village, UTC and Coventry University development. The scheme will cost £45 million and is self-funding as long as SBC can sell all the old parcels of land and get the grants and funding from other parties involved.

If one bit falls the whole project falls apart. It has taken 7 years to put together. Jumping forward a week, the planning committee meeting arrived and we all spoke our piece, in favour and against.

The vote was taken with 12 in favour, 1 against. One resident was telling me after how disillusioned she is with the democratic process as the group knows that certain criteria have not been met and the travel assessment is woefully inadequate.

The chair of planning, Cllr. Jane Mortimer, did however say that they have taken on board the concerns regarding traffic and parking and will look into it and keep a close eye on the issues as the project develops. Whilst we were all talking in the corridor afterwards, David Holland, the Scarborough Athletic chairman, came to speak to the residents group and said he will do all he can to ensure good stewarding and behaviour of the supporters. It is a shame that residents, football club and developers had not all come together a year ago to talk this through and agree a reasonable outcome. It would have saved a lot of stress, worry and concern for all involved.

Last Wednesday was our briefing on the 'Employment & Skills Plan' for the borough to 2030. Castle & North Bay wards are in the top 3 per cent of the most deprived in Britain. Poor education & skills, unemployment, poverty, poor health etc.

Overall, the borough does not have the skills base to meet the future needs of employers in the area. A department of 30, now reduced to 4, is applying for funding to correct this. Skills = jobs = houses = businesses = happier healthier people and lower cost to the public purse.

SBC hope that Potash & offshore wind farms will be our saviour. To achieve this we need the UTC & Coventry University Campus. Nick Taylor, town centre manager, spoke about the continued investment and promotion of the town.

We also heard about 'Scarborough Job Match', a scheme that has helped employers take on apprentices and sole traders to take on workers. A 'Construction Skills Village' will be built in Middle Deepdale, to train new workers whilst they build 2000 new homes.

Tackling crime, disorder, social & economic disadvantage was the topic for the afternoon. The goal is to improve the quality of life for all residents by working in partnership with all services to tackle homelessness, poverty, drug & alcohol issues, domestic abuse, hate crime etc.

We are a typical seaside town with seasonal work and a low skills base. Lots of poor condition privately rented property, isolation & loneliness. The Community Impact Team tackle these issues in specific areas of town.

EU funding helps do this as well as with the employment & skills goals listed before. The key word here is prevention and early intervention which costs a lot less in the long run. Gosh, who knew the Council did so much?