

FARNHAM TOWN COUNCIL — WINNER OF COUNCIL OF THE YEAR 2021

Iain Lynch, town clerk at Farnham Town Council

Innovation, partnerships, and collaboration underpinned by volunteers are behind the success of Farnham Town Council and its positive response to COVID-19. Town clerk Iain Lynch explains how Farnham continues to punch above its weight and what it did to achieve the accolade of Council of the Year in 2021.

The community is our key asset

Farnham Town Council has long believed in the importance of working with its local community and the value of volunteers in adding capacity to deliver more from its limited resource whilst creating resilience and cohesion.

We place great emphasis on facilitating others to make things happen. Some fantastic community initiatives have come to fruition because we have been able to underwrite the risk or simplify red tape for our community-based partners.

Responding positively

From the outset of COVID-19, we immediately responded with our key partner, the Farnham Maltings, a community arts organisation, with the objective that any initiative would be neighbourhood-based and continue long term. We created a Farnham Coronavirus Coordinating Group for community organisations to share information and collaborate, and a safeguarded framework of volunteers who managed a helpline and provided shopping, prescription collection services and befriending.

We deployed town council staff to build a temporary COVID-19 assessment centre and mobilised over 200 volunteers to support Farnham's vaccination programme, still working alongside the vaccinators one year on.

We brought together local philanthropic groups with a new Coronavirus Support Fund, raising £67,000 from individuals and organisations and allocating weekly hardship grants. Other community-led initiatives were developed, including a shared shop and community fridge, and there is a much stronger sense of community.

The coordinating group is now Farnham Connects, the volunteer network continues as Farnham Neighbours' Network, and the support fund remains a vital safety net.

Learning and adapting

Farnham Town Council looks to adopt best practices and adapt to deliver high-quality, responsive services. We have an impressive calendar of free events, markets and other activities supported by volunteers from Farnham Lions, Rotary and Hedgehogs and which create a positive sense of community. In the pandemic, we innovated and adapted these being one of the first to restart our farmers' market and programme of free summer outdoor music events where people could book socially distanced bubbles. Many commented that this, plus other socially distanced volunteering opportunities as part of Farnham in Bloom and litter picking as part of daily walks, contributed positively to their general well-being.

Small business, big ideas

Farnham Town Council actively supports its business community, with many independent businesses operating alongside familiar high street names. We created wider footways with planters, provided updates and information to businesses and created 'We Are Farnham', an online marketplace to connect customers with retailers, learning from Nailsea. As we emerge from the pandemic, the time is right to build on the confidence generated by these and other initiatives with a Business Improvement District.

A voice for Farnham

Our voice is always local, never parochial and ensures that we can be part of the conversation when anything concerning Farnham is on the agenda, and we can demonstrate that Farnham is an asset to our public sector partners. We have ambitions to take on more services where we can add value.

As we reflect on our award, we know that the title of Council of the Year belongs to all our community because, without our amazing volunteers, councillors, and partner organisations, we could not have supported our community as effectively or achieved as much. Effective partnerships take time and attention but pay dividends.