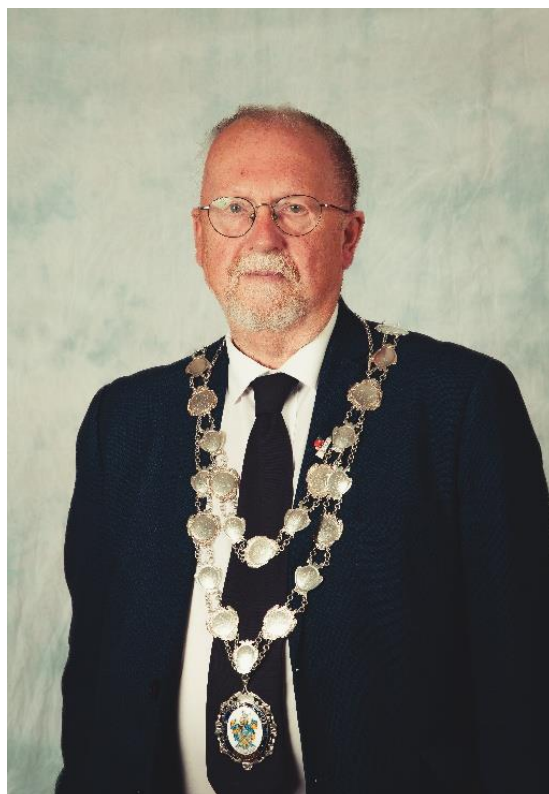


Leek Town Council



Annual Report 2025-2026

Leek Town Mayor, Cllr Derek Hilyer

2025-26 has been a momentous year for the town of Leek: the Town Council has been fortunate in the service it has received from the Town Clerk, Denise Wheat, her deputy Victoria Johnson, and the lengthsman Ash Lovatt; the councillors have worked as a team, ably led by those serving as chairs and vice-chairs of committees; and the town is most fortunate to have an army of willing and resourceful community organisations and volunteers. As Mayor I am keenly aware of having benefitted from an inspiring predecessor in the late Barry Birch and an experienced and wise deputy in Lyn Swindlehurst: I know that Lyn will be an excellent Mayor in her turn.

KEY EVENTS



The Centenary of the Nicholson War Memorial went, I thought, very well. The event in August 2025 included an exhibition, parade and ceremony which recognised a hundred years of remembrance, renewed our commitment to peace, celebrated the town, and left a worthy legacy. Councillors, staff and many members of the community came brilliantly together. Everyone was moved by the rededication service led by the Revd Nigel Irons

and his colleagues, by the singing of the Peace Choir, and by the reflections on peace and remembrance so ably presented by members of Leek Theatre Company. The number of local people, organisations, and enterprises that have been involved shows that the Council's job was largely one of unleashing the enthusiasm of people for both the Monument and for Leek. This commitment was epitomised by the contribution of the Royal British Legion and the sea and police cadets; by Jean Fisher who has so generously shared her knowledge, her archive, and her time; by Ben Benefer's unrivalled knowledge of the NWM; by Julie and Sue and many poppy makers for dressing the Monument and the exhibition; and by the Brown Edge well-dressers. And it was also demonstrated by the thoughtful reflections of members of Borderland Voices, and by the imaginative work of the Council's War Memorials Committee and Council officers. Over a dozen local firms were involved, in creating memorabilia, in catering, security, design, printing and making banners.



A great-grandson of Sir Arthur Nicholson thanked the Council team for "laying on a splendid ceremony" which he found "moving in terms of remembrance for all those of Leek and its environs" – he was "delighted to see that the memorial remains at the heart of Leek itself". The poems that were read were "so pertinent to the cause of remembrance and peace" and he congratulated "the young man who blew the Last Post – outstanding in its quality". For a great-niece "everyone was so welcoming, and it was a great privilege to be part of such an important day. It was an impressive turnout, both in the parade and by

the people of Leek. The Act of Rededication was a lovely and well thought out service. The speeches were excellent, and I was particularly moved by the readings at the end. The exhibition is both thought provoking and very interesting. The poppies as you enter the building were beautiful".

For the Mayor of Biddulph "it was a great pleasure to attend the ceremony at the war memorial. What a lot of effort you all must have put in to plan and organise the event and to assemble the exhibition as well as making sure that everything went smoothly on the day itself. The service at the Cenotaph was varied and appropriate and your hospitality afterwards was welcoming: what a really congenial atmosphere there was too. It was truly a day to remember". And Judy Scott Moncrieff, a Deputy Lieutenant for Staffordshire (and great friend of Leek and the Moorlands) who represented the King, thanked "everyone who was involved in the Centenary of the Nicholson

Monument for a wonderful day. It was perfect, and the Nicholsons felt very honoured to be there”.

The Centenary was an opportunity to enhance the town and so we cleaned and repaired the Monument to respect its importance and age, improved its external lighting and facilitated some dramatic programmable illumination; and added to our artistic stock: banners have been erected in Sparrow Park to reflect our pride in where we live; we commissioned a beautiful illustration from Ruth Lear, in silk, of what the Monument means to us; and we were delighted to support Martha Callaghan’s excellent play ‘A True British Soldier’. The 2025 Centenary was a significant and memorable day in Leek’s history.

The poppy works produced by Leek people for the Centenary were a valuable addition to the award-winning Longest Yarn exhibition at the Great Wood Community Hall and they will grace remembrance events for years to come.

The destruction of Big Mill, however, was a tragedy for the town. It was once a proud symbol of the town’s past but had fallen on bad times. Our immediate thoughts were for the residents for whom the night must have been dreadful, and for the people of Leek who have lost an important part of our heritage. We were immensely grateful to the emergency services who so ably responded to the emergency, in dealing with the fire and the disruption it has caused.

The death of former Mayor Barry Birch brought Leek people, councillors and council staff together in sadness for his loss and we offered our deep condolences to Barry’s family who were his invaluable support. He was an excellent councillor for Leek North, an inspirational Mayor in 2024-25, and a true friend to Leek and he will be sorely missed. As his friend Cllr Lyn Swindlehurst said, times with Barry were infectious, “full of laughter, conversations, and real listening. Barry had the ear of the people, and he never took that lightly. He always did his best to address the issues raised and to stand up for those who needed a voice... Barry treated everyone the same - he was simply Barry. Happy. Supportive. Approachable.”

Barry echoed the promise of Arnold Bennett’s ‘Denry’ Machin, who was made Mayor of Bursley so that he could pursue ‘the great cause of cheering us all up’. I hope that my colleagues and I have done our bit in that great cause.

WHAT WE DO

We lay on town events and support tourism and community organisations. Alongside the Centenary, and reinforcing its message of remembrance and peace, the Civic Service in October, and the three moving Remembrance ceremonies in November, stand out. At the Centenary we heard the poet laureate’s words about poppies “they nod and they nag, reminding us not to forget, flagging a red alert as their crumpled petals unfold”; at the service we heard the epistle of James’ words about wisdom – “peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere”; and at Remembrance Day the Monument was again adorned by the three large community-knitted poppy panels, and there were many local people there to welcome 52 members of the 16th Signals Regiment plus the 5th Leek Scout Band and police and air cadets. At night the Monument was flood-lit in red. As is our proud tradition there were eight other remembrance ceremonies at the Monument plus Armed Forces and Merchant Navy Days at the SMDC offices.

Holocaust Memorial Day was marked at All Saints' Church and the service emphasised that we weren't simply looking back 80 years but also recognising that hatred of the other, and division into those seen as worthy or unworthy of respect, were still with us.

Alongside these occasions there have been joyous events which are listed below. Some have been organised by the Town Council and others are initiated and organised by local organisations and volunteers. Many local events are supported and facilitated by OUTSIDE, which is "a Creative People and Places project, a participatory arts programme, (which) is led by people in the Staffordshire Moorlands working with professional artists".

Enhancing Leek is a priority of Leek Town Council in a whole range of ways: maintaining and cleaning the Monument (whilst respecting its age), bringing back into prominence the Leekbrook war memorial and looking after the Ball Haye Green memorial arch and field, providing the Moorcock and chatty benches, dazzling the town with its floral displays, particularly around the Monument, erecting the new banners around Sparrow Park representing Leek (the arms), Staffordshire (the knot), the moorlands (a curlew), silk (swathes of colour) and diversity (the pride emblem); and the promised Welcome to Leek banner in Derby Street will be a great addition. The Christmas light display gets better every year, and the programmable illumination of the Monument allows for celebration of events throughout the calendar. Monthly tours of the Monument were revived in 2025.

Allotments and Green Spaces are a priority for the town, encouraging healthy exercise, boosting biodiversity, encouraging pollinators, bringing people together with nature, building communities. Leek has 7 allotment sites, 280 individual allotments, and works closely with tenants and the Leek Allotment Holders and Gardeners Association. The Council is responsible for a few green spaces, Ball Haye Memorial park and some smaller sites such as the (recently improved) Prince Street/Ball Haye Green plot: others like Brough Park and Pickwood Rec are the responsibility of Staffordshire Moorlands District Council; the Council is particularly interested in Sparrow Park and the Market Square; and is concerned that areas that we don't own like St Stephens Square and the tree-lined entries to the town are seen to their best advantage. Leek was particularly proud, in 2025, that Haregate was awarded Runner Up for the Large Village (North) award in the Best Kept Village Competition, and the Haregate in Bloom competition was well received by local residents.

CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES

Local government re-organisation Leek Town Council supports the creation of an Enhanced North Staffordshire unitary authority, as recommended by Staffordshire Moorlands District Council, which takes in the Staffordshire Moorlands, Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme plus Stone and Uttoxeter and their surrounding villages. I firmly believe that what the people of Leek, old and young, need is a say in those things that most directly affect them, and for Leek to thrive we need a prosperous and well-run north Staffordshire. This cries out for improvement to work opportunities, shops, post-school education, health provision, leisure and culture, and the night-time economy; better road and bus links with good connection to the station and the hospital; effective official and charity support; safer and cleaner streets. We have a failure of democracy, where decisions on developing the facilities and opportunities that we use and need, that Stoke/Newcastle offers, are taken without our input – we can influence decisions about Kinver, 60 miles away, but not Hanley. Reorganisation always brings disruption, and the benefits will take

some time to be fully seen, but now is the time to make the change and for our voice to be properly heard. Devolution of local government is moving on – more than half of the country was covered by 2024 and the process will reach Staffordshire in 2028. Whatever configuration is chosen there will be implications for Leek Town Council, to ensure that what local people prize most as being their's is decided as locally as is possible. And we must be sure that the Council can meet (and is properly funded for) these challenges.

Development of council operations: for many years I was a university administrator and during that time, and for my first 15 years in Leek, I have been involved in charity work, in the arts, in regeneration, and latterly as chair and skipper at the Beatrice Charity. I am keen that whatever expertise I have developed can be of us to the council, to help the office, the Council itself, and the councillors to work in a more focused, prioritised and systemised way. There needs to be clarity about roles, how information can easily be found, and where all concerned can concentrate on often critical issues without interruption. An initiative for councils strangely called Assertion 10 is designed to improve professionalism, security, and accessibility in digital services to ensure good governance and accessibility. It covers such things as proper use of emails and domain names, clarity and accessibility of websites for all residents, good data protection and information technology practice. Starts have been made with redesigning the website, adopting an easily read font, adopting regular email addresses. I will happily continue work with the Mayor and the Town Clerk to take these developments forward.

Celebrating Leek's heritage and protecting it where it is under threat. There must be more effective means for safeguarding our heritage, for restoring and repurposing such buildings and structures. And at the least, we need to be clearer where what we hold dear is under threat. The draft Leek Neighbouring Plan states that “the historic mill buildings and other historic buildings have proved to be challenging due to issues around viability, car parking and physical challenges around conversion. A flexible approach will be required to secure heritage-led regeneration. It is recognised that refurbishment of the Mill Buildings may require involvement of a community or other third sector organisation with capacity to raise capital funds”. It further says that “residential development will be positively supported in ... the sensitive refurbishment and reuse of historic mill buildings (and) will be supported for the following uses: residential accommodation; workspace, including offices and co-working space; arts and cultural uses; ancillary car and cycle parking at the lower levels of the building. Where there are viability challenges in converting historic buildings, consideration should be given to the flexible application of parking requirements, based on a green travel plan to support walking and cycling”. Working with the district council and with the Civic Society we need a comprehensive list of buildings under threat.

THE MAYOR'S WORK

Representing Leek: As Mayor,

- I have worn my chain of office with pleasure at events including civic and carol services, mayor-making, light switch-ons, balls and dinners in Ashbourne, Burton-on-Trent, Biddulph, Cheadle, Congleton, Endon, Matlock, and Stone; Remembrance Day at the Nicholson and Ball Haye Green War Memorials and Armistice Day at St Edward's Church; Royal British Legion commemoration events at the Monument; Armed Forces and Merchant Navy Days at SMDC; Commonwealth Day at Flash Village Hall;



- I enjoyed Club Day, Circus Day, Country and Western Day, Ipstones Agricultural Show, the launch of Where's Wallaby at Peak Wildlife Park, Action West End Family Fun Day, Cheadle's Party in the Park, the HUG Festival, Leek Show, Leek Loves Books, the Piano Trail, Leek Theatre Company productions, the Sound of Music and the presentation evening at the Painsley Academy, a performance of A Christmas Carol sponsored by the Chairman of SMDC, and three walks with the Moorlands Walking Festival – Parkrun at Birchall playing fields, a national Trust dawn chorus walk at Ilam and a tour of the town's mills with Cllrs Cawley and Barks;
- I happily accepted invitations to the Wetley Rocks Choir carol evening and that of the Leek Salvation Army, the opening of CAB's Newcastle premises, the Spode Museum (and factory redevelopment), the Werrington YOI Christmas market, the pensioners' lunch at the Priory, the opening of Kate's café, the Christmas lights at Hen Cloud House, the remembrance event at St Mary's Primary School, a Borderland Voices event, meals with the Twinning Committee and our friends from Este, Italy, the exhibition celebrating women in the Staffordshire Moorlands in Cheadle, Leek College's Open Event, the launch of the Leek Blue Plaque Trail which celebrates human endeavour in the town;
- I supported the Blooming Bus, Nature in your Neighbourhood, Dementia Friends, the Piano Trail, Leek Allotment and Garden Holders' Association Annual Show, School Show, and hanging basket day, the Norton House AGM, Staffordshire Moorlands District Scout Council and its St George's Day celebration on the Churnet Valley Railway, Staffordshire Girl Guides AGM, Headway North Staffordshire AGM, Home Start AGM (whose closure is a disaster for young families in Leek), the Skills Hub breakfast; the Smart Symptoms Roadshow at Flash Village Hall;
- I represented the town at three moving and thoughtful funerals, of my predecessor Mayor, Barry Birch, of former Mayor Arthur Rowlands, and of Michael Brough, long-serving and much admired chair of Leek British Legion; at the mass for HH Pope Francis, at Holocaust Memorial Day at All Saints' Church, and at the Grindon air disaster commemoration service.

Leek was honoured that the Lord Lieutenant for Staffordshire Professor Elizabeth Barnes CBE attended the Holocaust Memorial Day, that Deputy Lieutenants Judy Scott Moncrieff and Admiral Sir Trevor Soare KCB OBE dignified Remembrance Day, and that Mrs Scott Moncrieff, a great friend of Leek and the Moorlands, graced her friend Barry's funeral and many other of our civic and fund-raising events.

Fundraising: much of 2025 was taken up with the Centenary of the Nicholson War Memorial but nevertheless I have been working to support two excellent charities, Headway North Staffordshire and the Leek Theatre Company. **Headway NS** “works for people with brain injury, their families and carers, it has been a valuable source of help, information and support within North Staffordshire since the mid-1980s. The overall aim is to help improve the quality of life of the members by maximising opportunities and choices for them whilst giving respite to their families. The approach to this is participative, with members, families, our staff and volunteers working together”. **LTC** produces musicals and play of a high quality, bringing the people of Leek together.



The volunteers are “a vibrant group who work tirelessly to create some of the most energetic and passionate performances which are a delight to watch”. Beauty and the Beast and the Calendar Girls were excellent, and the theatre members made most moving contributions to the Centenary

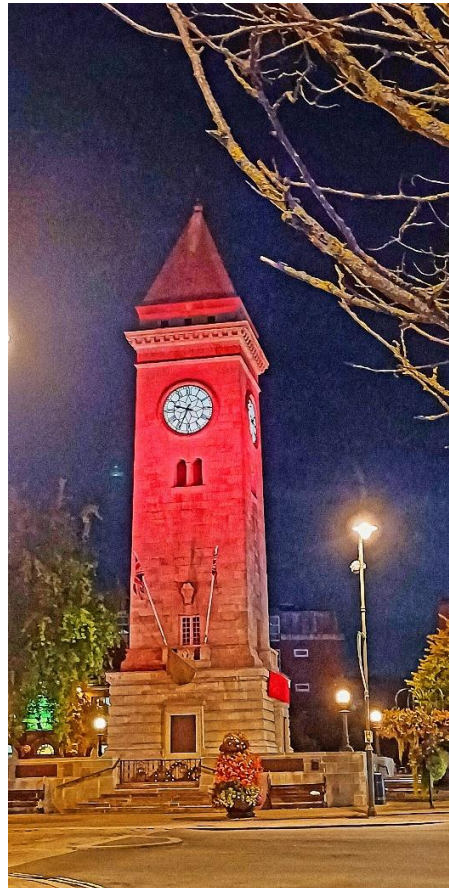
Fundraising events have included a civic cruise on the narrowboat Beatrice, an evening at the Bankers Draught with screenings of the Silent Night film in the NWM, a performance of ‘The Mob’s Hero, the Signboard Hero’ about the Marquis of Granby at the Roebuck, a Civic Celebration at the Hotel Rudyard, and a collection at the Civic Service.

Committees: most of the work of the council is undertaken in the office and at committees which report to the Council, which I chaired as Mayor with Cllr Lyn Swindlehurst as Deputy, and its General Purposes Committee, chaired by Cllr Keith Hoptroff with Cllr Sue Webster as Vice-Chair. I also chair the War Memorials Committee (supported by Cllr Kate Nichols as Vice-Chair) and Finance (with Cllr Paul Powner). Like all councillors I attend the other committees: Allotments and Green Spaces (Cllr Dee Young took over from Barry Birch and I acted as Vice-Chair); Tourism, Events and Community (Cllr Matt Swindlehurst with Cllr Hoptroff); Planning Committee (Cllr Webster); HR Committee (Cllr Lyn Swindlehurst) and Environment Committee (Cllr Hoptroff with Cllr M Swindlehurst).

FINALLY

Of the many events in my year a few stand out. The Centenary was a moving and significant day not least because it brought together councillors, officers, the churches, community groups and volunteers to create a remarkable fortnight-long event. The Christmas Lights, Civic Service and Remembrance Day showed the quality of the Council operation. But there were many occasions where members of the community came together to show Leek at its best, how local people can produce top quality events: the Leek Theatre Company productions, on the stage and behind the scenes, Leek Loves Books, HUG and the Days of Dance and of the Dead, among many other events, and the Moorland Scouts railway event on St George’s Day where all those involved, adults and children, demonstrated why work with young people is invaluable and rewarding.

This has been a fascinating and rewarding year for me, another step in a long career that has included computer programming for the Coal Board at Cannock in the late sixties, university administration in Cardiff and London, union work for the Association of University Teachers, work in arts and regeneration charities and initiative in Lewisham, work as Assistant Director of the Learning from Experience Trust, chair/secretary/skipper of the wonderful Beatrice Charity based on the Caldon Canal, and finally (till now at least) Councillor for Leekbrook with my estimable colleague Kate Nicholls. At nearly 80 it is invigorating and convivial to work with my councillor colleagues and Denise and Victoria, and I am looking forward to 2026-27 as chair of Finance and War Memorials committee and fitting the Council for the challenges of local government reorganisation and devolution. And whatever other challenges face both Leek and me.



THE TOWN COUNCIL

Leek Town Council has eleven councillors who were elected on 4th May 2023 to represent each of the six wards in the town and they have a four-year term of office. On 7th May 2026 the vacancy at Leek North was filled following the death of Cllr Barry Birch.

Leek North

Cllr. Lyn Swindlehurst

Cllr. Stephen Ford

Leek West

Cllr. Bill Cawley

Cllr. Susan Webster

Leek South

Cllr. Matt Swindlehurst

Cllr. Keith Hoptroff

Leekbrook

Cllr. Derek Hilyer

Cllr. Kate Nicholls

Leek East

Cllr. Paul Powner

Cllr. Dee Young

Birchall

Cllr. Stephen Wales

Cllr. Mike Worthington

MEETINGS

The Town Council meets monthly on the third Tuesday (except August and December) in the Council Chamber at Moorlands House, Stockwell Street, Leek at 7.00pm. The remaining meetings for the year are:

Tuesday 19th May	Town Council and General Purposes Committee at 7.00pm in the Council Chamber
Tuesday 16th June	Town Council and General Purposes at 7.00pm in the Council Chamber
Tuesday 21st July	Town Council and General Purposes at 7.00pm in the Council Chamber
Tuesday 15th September	Town Council and General Purposes at 7.00pm in the Council Chamber
Tuesday 20th October	Town Council and General Purposes at 7.00pm in the Council Chamber
Tuesday 17th November	Town Council and General Purposes at 7.00pm in the Council Chamber

Mayor of Leek 2025-2026

Cllr. Derek Hilyer