

Council 24 January 2024
Agenda item 9 (Portfolio Holder reports)

1. Report of the Leader and Cabinet Member for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy

Portfolio Holder's Report for Planning Policy update:

As portfolio holder for planning, I continue to liaise with the Planning Department and all officers. This year there will be a call for sites to allow us to create our five year land supply pipeline as required by the Government. We continue to receive a high level of planning applications per year, although the pressure on the planning department is often very high, I am very confident in our group of officers to manage these high levels of applications with skill and professionalism.

Portfolio Holder's Report for Otterpool Park:

I have been delighted to welcome Gary Ridgewell as the new Managing Director of Otterpool Park LLP. Gary has been the Construction Director for two years and is intimately familiar with the development. We are continuing our discussions with Homes England and potential strategic partners. We are in discussion with landowners, Government Agencies, KCC and other stakeholders. We have received a proposal to create a solar farm on land owned by FHDC at Otterpool. We are hopeful that this solar farm will enable Otterpool Park to become a Net Zero development from the outset.

Leaders Announcements:

1. I would like to wish all members and officers a very happy new year and I hope it will be a good one, I know it will be a challenging one!
2. I was delighted to be a guest at the Cheriton Community Centre for the Nepalese Community to welcome me as Leader.
3. The leaders of the four political groups and Independent Councillor Paul Thomas have been meeting regularly as we move towards a committee system.
4. I have attended many meetings regarding Otterpool Park with government agencies, developers and potential Joint Venture Partners and these discussions continue.
5. I attended a training session with many other Council representatives in my role as Armed Forces Champion.
6. I have been delighted to visit many businesses in our District, including Euro Tunnel, which was fascinating. I committed this Council to do whatever we can to help Euro Tunnel face the further challenges of Border Control which when introduced this summer may slow access to the Port of Dover and the Euro Tunnel site. This Council is a friend to good business.
7. Princes Parade hoarding: I am delighted to announce that the hoarding surrounding the Princes Parade site will shortly be dismantled. I am also delighted to announce that the hoardings and the concrete blocks that support it will be recycled to Otterpool, where they will be stored and used as required.

Once the site is re-fenced we will be consulting next year to ask local people for their views on the future of Prince's Parade.

8. Following their announcement of cuts to local bus services I have been in almost daily contact with Stagecoach to discuss, indeed I recently attended a 6.00am meeting at Dover Bus Garage to establish for myself the feelings of the relocated drivers from Folkestone.
9. I have been in regular contact with Southern Water and held meetings with them, mainly because of the sewage on the Copperfield's Estate in Lydd, the flooding on Udan Rd in Dymchurch and the failure of the pumps at the Range Road pumping station in Hythe. I have further meetings with Southern Water and KCC Councillors this month.
10. Along with many coastal District Councils I attended a meeting organised by the Environment Agency to collectively express our shared concern about Southern Water's consistent failure to meet the needs of their customers.
11. I have attended the Kent Leaders Forum to discuss the issues which affect the Council's in Kent. I have also attended meetings of the East Kent Leaders forum which has a more focused view of the issues affecting the East Kent Districts.
12. I joined FHDC's excellent Licencing team on their regular Saturday night patrol around Folkestone. I was amazed the warm welcome we received in every pub and restaurant we went into, clearly the licencing team is seen as part of the solution to many of the nighttime economy problems and not seen as the enemy by licensees.
13. I joined our local police force on a daytime patrol in the centre of Folkestone to see for myself the types of problems they encounter. On the run up to Christmas the patrol officers are particularly on the look out for shop lifters, street crime and organised begging. I was impressed by the individual officers knowledge and understanding of the specific problems that affect Folkestone.
14. I was delighted to attend the Panto, Beauty and the Beast at the Leas Cliff Hall.
15. I spent a morning with our front-line staff who answer the telephone and deal with all the problems our residents have. To say I was impressed by the care and understanding exhibited by our team is an understatement.
16. Without doubt my most pleasurable task this month was to join colleagues as we said goodbye to Karen Everett after 46 years of excellent service to this Council. Karen is a remarkable person, loved by colleagues and residents alike. We all wished Karen well in her new adventure and she will be greatly missed.

2. Report of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Governance

The Key Focus over the last months remains our budget for 2024-25 and a new MTFS for the 4 years 2024-2028.

I won't need to remind people (but will!) that the Medium Term Financial Strategy left to us by the last administration forecast a budget deficit of £4,501,000 for 2024-25 and a forecast deficit for the 4 years 2023-27 of over £18m. It was not the job the incoming administration wanted to fix the mess left to us, but it is the card we were dealt.

And in December, we brought to Cabinet a “first draft” budget for 2024-25 showing a £638,000 deficit for the year, and a 4 year MTFs deficit of £4,609,000. This hugely improved forecast is due to the hard work of the Chief Executive, S151, Finance Team, Officers and all staff in looking at our costs, management structure and staffing to give us a significant saving from the “transformation” of the Council to reduce our staffing costs while trying to protect from line services. **We owe them huge thanks.** Councillors have really paid their part too, understanding that although there are some difficult decisions to be made they are necessary, but rightly working as hard as possible to defend those services we see most important.

Following that first draft, the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement was announced **by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) on 18 December 2023.** Although not generous or welcomed by all Councils, it was better for Folkestone and Hythe than we had expected (plan for the worst, hope for the best!) and has further improved our forecast budget for 2024-25.

After a lot of work by Ola and the Finance Team over Christmas on the implications of that Finance settlement, **I’m now really hopeful that we will be able to vote for a balanced budget – one that does not rely on drawing from our General Reserve – for 2024/25 in February.** From a forecast deficit of £4.501m to zero in one year will have been an extraordinary turn-around, and one better than I had thought likely six months ago.

Also, the newest version of the MTFs forecast shows a cumulative funding gap of **£2.78m over the four year lifetime of this MTFs – some £15m better than the version left to us by the administration.** There is no deficit forecast in the 1st year, and a sub £100k deficit in the second year (which we’ll seek to address before we set the 2025-26 budget!).

And there is further good news in the end of Q3 finance monitoring, showing that is this financial year, **we’re currently predicting a deficit reduction of £458k on the budget.** The budget for this year of the last administration relied on drawing £1,786,000 from our General Reserves. We are now forecasting that will be a draw instead of £1,328,000 – a really significant improvement in our position (still clearly a deficit, but a much reduced one). Again – this has only been achieved in year with a steely determination from the whole team to save money against budget where possible, and to do more with less.

From a position where this Council was going to be in serious financial difficulty in three years to one where we have a genuinely balanced budget, and can now seek to regroup and go forward. That’s a huge step.

3. Report of Councillor Mike Blakemore, the Cabinet Member for Community and Collaboration

In my last update I mentioned the various discussions I have been involved in aimed at improving the health of our district and in December I added Kent

Health & Wellbeing Board to the list, joining this Kent County Council forum as FHDC's representative. I am delighted to be part of such important work – having worked in communications roles in the NHS and at a medical Royal College, the subject is close to my heart, especially the need to address health inequalities.

Linked to this to this, of course, is the cost of living crisis and the challenge many people currently face feeding themselves and their families. I was also pleased, therefore, to attend another meeting of the District Food Network, and to hear more about the important role being played by the mobile food service, launched last year, and by local community fridges and pantries.

Earlier, I attended a workshop on migration run by South East Councils and the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration.

One piece of news that rightly received a very warm welcome as we began 2024 was that the council has begun working with community partners to develop a practical proposal to reopen the library service at Grace Hill and to create new opportunities for the community to use this landmark Folkestone location.

I have been pleased to be part of these discussions, along with the Leader and Cllr Holgate, and am grateful to officers for their support – it is very early days as far as this particular proposal goes but it is a terrific example of the council's commitment to working with and engaging the community.

Finally, I was delighted to be invited to the Marsh Academy's prize-giving evening. It was my first visit to the school and I was made very welcome. I was extremely impressed by the faultless choreography of the evening, with dozens of certificates and trophies handed to well-deserving students without misstep or misspeak.

4. Report of Councillor Polly Blakemore, the Cabinet Member for Transport, Regulatory Services & Building Control

In collaboration with our Transportation Manager, who has worked hard to prioritise the CPZ applications made by residents over the past year, I am looking at a shortlist of proposed schemes. The next step for each of these will be an informal consultation to gauge if there is wider support.

In early December I attended a public meeting for residents of Broadmead regarding the cuts to local bus services, in particular the 73. Meridian TV attended the meeting and I had the opportunity to draw attention to the impact of the local bus cuts on the local news. We continue to communicate with the County Council and to keep up pressure on Stagecoach to restore a bus service that is fit for purpose following last year's devastating cuts.

I have been working with officers to formulate the district council's response to the Kent Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan to identify preferred routes, prioritise investment and improve connections across Kent. The plan aims to integrate walking and cycling into transport policies and to provide evidence to support local projects. Three of the 15 routes are within, or pass through, our

district so our engagement in this process is essential to ensure the district is best placed to secure future funding for the schemes. Following input from ward councillors and Sandgate Parish Council, our response has now been submitted.

Work continues on plans for EV on-street charging and it is hoped that installation of charging points in selected locations will commence in the Spring.

The first Licensing Forum of 2024 is scheduled for January 18th. The purpose of these events is to facilitate positive and collaborative communication between the council, Kent Police and all local stakeholders to enhance working relationships. I will provide an update on this meeting in my February report.

5. Report of Councillor Gary Fuller, the Cabinet Member for Resident Engagement and Accountability

This month we say thank you and good luck to Karen Everett who retires having completed more than 45 years of service. She will be a tough act to follow, and I would like to thank her for everything she has done for the council over the years, and for her incredible patience in helping me get up to speed as a cabinet member.

It has also been a month in which we begin reviewing our customer access policy and digital strategy. With the increasing move to online systems and automation of decision making, we will need to be mindful of how we can ensure that our services continue to be responsive to the needs of residents and that we don't lose the important human component. I would welcome any feedback from residents on how things stand currently and what needs to improve, though I'm sure that speaking to the public will be an important part of our strategy review process.

As part of the preparation for reviewing these strategies, I have attended training on digitalisation. This highlighted the range of ways in which councils have managed digital transformation projects and how they have ensured that residents are at the centre of these projects and their outcomes. I particularly enjoyed learning about Wigan's transformation, known as the Wigan Deal, though I'm pleased to note that our take up on My Account appears to be even higher than theirs at more than 70% of properties.

With the general election expected this year, along with PCC elections in May, and a district by-election in February, officers are working hard to ensure that everything is in place and residents know what to expect. There will be changes affecting postal voting as well as new constituency boundaries (affecting North Downs East and West) to contend with. I would encourage all residents to read about the various changes so that they don't miss out on the chance to vote.

I hope that all residents managed to have a joyful and restful Christmas and New Year and I look forward to offering further updates as the year progresses.

6. Report of Councillor Rich Holgate, the Cabinet Member for Place Plan, Heritage, Tourism and District Economy

Since the last report we have delivered an exceptional and well attended public engagement event for the Levelling Up Programme. Over 400 in attendance makes it one of the most well attended events in years and upholds this administrations intent to be communicative with local communities.

On which note, it was fantastic working with Cllr Blakemore and several local community interest groups on a revised, refreshed approach to saving Folkestone Library.

From a Heritage perspective, it has been very exciting to hear about plans for workshops later this year to greater support Heritage knowledge and understanding across the district. Looking forward to supporting our passionate local Heritage forums in delivering these workshops.

Ahead, plans have been made for the third annual 'Skills and Jobs' event in Romney Marsh. Last years INSPIRE event was a huge success and looking forward to building on that this year.

7. Report of Councillor Stephen Scoffham, the Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Biodiversity

This has been a relatively quiet period given the Christmas and New Year break. But it has also been a chance to review the last seven months since the May elections and what has been achieved. I have been struck by the diversity of the portfolios which all Cabinet members hold. My own role spans not only activities to do with climate change, carbon reduction, land management and biodiversity loss, but it also includes inland drainage, sea water quality, beach defences, recycling and waste disposal. One of my key objectives since the election has been to get to know the staff at FHDC. I have been delighted to meet so many officers all who appear enthusiastic and dedicated to their roles. The positive and supportive culture which I have witnessed is a credit to all concerned.

District Wide Carbon Reduction Strategy

The public consultation has now closed and the results are being analysed. These will inform the actions which are yet to be identified and enumerated in the strategy. The consultation itself reached out the local community in a number of different ways. The short videos which were posted on the website were particularly engaging and well produced.

Bathing Water Quality

There has been some really disappointing news about bathing water quality, especially in and around Romney Marsh. Preliminary investigations have failed to yield any definitive results and we are pressing hard for decisive action. This is a problem which is distressing to local residents, damaging to health, detrimental to marine life and has significant implications for the economy of the district.

Inland Drainage

Together with around 20 other local authorities, we are making representations to central government about inadequate funding for the maintenance and flood protection services in marshes and low-lying areas around the coast. As a representative of the District Council, I shall be attending a high-level reception at House of Commons to press for proper funding.

Waste and Recycling

Recycling rates remain steady or slightly improved at just under 50%. I have been involved with volunteer groups to discuss ways of recycling electrical waste and raising awareness of recycling across the district through targeted campaigns.

UNESCO Geopark Bid

In early December I attended a meeting with the UNESCO assessor and trustees from both the UK and French Geopark committees. The feedback was that we were making strong progress and that the criteria to submit the bid could well be met in the next couple of years. The resolution to actively support the bid which was passed unanimously at the Council on 29 November was very well received and I am now liaising with staff from the AONB about a range of possible actions.

8. Report of Councillor Rebecca Shoob, the Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness

Although not freezing, it was still a very cold night at the end of November when the annual rough sleeper count took place. I was able to join the many professionals and volunteers who undertake this task. It was an invaluable opportunity to get some small insight into the outreach work that council and other outreach teams undertake across our district. The knowledge and dedication of the teams that work on the ground is to be commended. A couple of nights after the count the temperatures dropped a few more degrees and SWEP was implemented.

As well as regular portfolio briefings from the housing team, I have attended a couple of external briefings including one by the Regulator of Social Housing detailing how the new inspection regime to improve consumer standards will apply to local authority landlords and one hosted by Eastern Community Homes on local authority approaches to community led housing.

I attended the Independent Living Forum held in Dymchurch for tenant representatives from our independent living schemes to discuss issues affecting the different schemes. I also attended the December Strategic Tenants Advisory Panel which amongst other things heard updates on the HRA business plan and the repairs and maintenance options appraisal. I also sat in on the STAP scrutiny sub-committee which has been looking at how tenant complaints are handled, again an extremely valuable opportunity to hear tenants' experiences on specific areas.

Finally, I've joined officers, councillors and residents for neighbourhood walkabouts in Folkestone and Dymchurch to look at different issues such as rubbish bins, parking, access and grounds maintenance.

9. Report of Councillor Jeremy Speakman, the Cabinet Member for Assets and Operations

As well as casework and attending meetings relating to my Hythe Rural Ward, I continue to have regular meetings and correspondence with relevant officers and residents on matters specifically relating to my portfolio.

Assets

- Grounds maintenance staff currently undertaking usual winter projects, top dressing fine turf and bedding across parks and gardens
- Cut back of vegetation growth along the top of Leas Cliff started (every 2 years), and the bandstand has been repainted
- Landslip on the Leas has closed off a section of the Coastal Park path. Officers are liaising with landslip consultants to establish the best way to stabilise the area. Looking to introduce vegetation to stabilise the slope. Likely to remain out of use until the Spring.
- The Changing Places Toilets for Disabled Adults Project remains on track in budget to deliver new facilities at The Coastal Park, Radnor Park and Dymchurch main car park.
- A redecoration schedule is in place for a number of public toilets
- The new Hawkinge maintenance depot has been handed over and finalising internal fittings
- Biggins Wood site exchange of contracts with buyer expected in February and completion in March
- Ship Street site currently being market tested and planning submission being finalised. Report expected to go to Cabinet in March
- Varne site – contracts exchanged with services being relocated prior to completion
- Offers on High View site received and officers are working through these. Will be reported to Cabinet, probably March
- Letting of Connect 38 office block ongoing, 50% first floor secured reducing remaining vacant space.
- Coast Drive Beach Hut and Visitor Centre project redesigned due to land title and ecological complexities. Approved Cabinet 13 December. Tender to be released shortly
- Ongoing work to identify savings options in Asset budget relating to KCC mowing contract as outlined in report to Cabinet on 13 December
- Potential solar park at Otterpool - negotiations to commence with preferred supplier as reported to Cabinet on 13 December.
- Ongoing case work with residents addressing concerns regarding vegetation overgrowth on Leas Cliff
- Ongoing correspondence addressing residents' concerns relating to potential solar park development at Otterpool

- Princes Parade – tenders received for removal of the hoarding and erection of a new fence. Officers working through the tender returns and preparing a report for the Leader

Waste Management

- Ongoing work with officers and Waste Management Team on the action plan to address the issues identified in the audit of the service earlier last year. This included publication on the website of the cleansing zones by street and a description of services, and improvements to service monitoring arrangements, and the process of issuing contract deductions.
- Ongoing work to identify savings to street cleansing service and review of waste management fees and charges as part of the Council's budget setting exercise.
- Ongoing discussions with Veolia on revised Garden Waste collection routes to improve capacity and scheme participation.
- Meeting with Hythe Environmental Community Group to look at options for the expansion of their e-waste recycling scheme, which has enjoyed much local success.
- Ongoing case work including relocation and replacement of litter bins, consideration of the government's 'Simpler Recycling' proposals, liaison with Enforcement over fly tipping issues and support to local litter picking initiatives.