

## Dover District Council Report to Annual Parish Assemblies for the year 2019/2020

This report is being written as the catastrophic effects of the Corona virus have become ever more apparent. The report does not attempt to recount the details of the events of the last few weeks of the financial year to the end of March – that will be a task for the historians – but rather to chronicle the ‘ordinary’ events of the year. The cost to the Council of Covid 19 will be very high, so not all the plans and projects outlined below will necessarily be brought to fruition. What looked like a reasonably solid Budget and Medium Term Financial Plan in February is now fundamentally compromised and only time will tell what the medium and long term effects will be. It is though reasonable to say that in terms of Community Support and adaptation to different ways of working the Council has responded very strongly. Suffice to say that as of late April a huge amount of work is going on to plan how the Council will come out at the end of the crisis and how it will meet its obligations.

For DDC the year began in May with the council elections, the first since the number of councillors was reduced from 45 to 32. The new council consists of 19 Conservatives, 12 Labour and one independent. Mike Conolly became Council Chairman in succession to Sue Chandler, and Steve Manion took over Mike’s role as Finance Portfolio Holder.

There were further changes in October following the abrupt resignation of Keith Morris as Leader and Councillor. Trevor Bartlett was elected Leader and two Cabinet appointments were made: Derek Murphy for Housing and Health and Oliver Richardson for Property and Assets. Following her appointment to the KCC Cabinet – congratulations Sue – Sue Chandler stepped down as Deputy Leader of DDC and was replaced by MJ Holloway. She remains a District Councillor for Sandwich.

A major problem arose in May following the revelation that East Kent Housing had failed to carry out large numbers of gas safety inspections of council-owned homes. Emergency action was taken to bring inspections up to date. There had already been concerns about the performance of EKH in a number of areas and this problem proved to be the catalyst to the decision taken later in the year by the four parent councils – Canterbury, Dover, Folkestone & Hythe and Thanet – to bring housing back in-house. That process has now started and will conclude in early October, but it should be emphasised that it will be neither easy nor cheap.

Work has continued throughout the year on the new Local Plan which will take us through to 2040. This covers not only housing but infrastructure, business and leisure, though inevitably the main focus will be on housing. The Government has set DDC a target of 629 dwellings per annum across the Plan period. This is a very challenging target and means that difficult decisions will have to be made, including probably a higher burden on rural areas than we would like. Your councillors have been active in debating these with the Planners and have succeeded in mitigating some of the more damaging suggestions. Draft proposals were revealed to towns and parishes in March and these will now go out to formal consultation later in the year.

Regeneration remains a major focus for DDC. We have now seen the first full year of the St James retail and leisure development near the Dover waterfront, and this has been successful for the tenants. We’ve also now had a full year of the Dover District Leisure Centre at Whitfield where footfall is more than three times higher than at the

old Dover Leisure Centre, now being demolished. The redevelopment of Kearsney Abbey and Russell Gardens is now nearly complete and we are working towards a Lottery Grant to update Dover Town Hall – Maison Dieu – a wonderful old building but desperately outdated and unsuitable for present day use. Tides is also showing its age and we have reached the point, as we did with Dover Leisure Centre, where continuous repairs no longer make economic sense. A cross-party advisory group has been set up to review a number of options, which do not include a re-build elsewhere, but we are looking at a sizeable funding gap if we are to do what we would ideally like.

Much time and effort went into the preparation of how DDC will handle Brexit when it is fully implemented after the transition period. We worked closely with KCC, the police, the Harbour Board and Highways England but of course our powers of decision in this are limited. Major concerns were that Dover Town would not be clogged up by vehicles seeking to avoid authorised routes and that Sandwich would not be effectively cut off by congestion on the A256 if the Manston option were introduced (despite our oft repeated objection to this idea!).

Climate change and the council's response to it has been another major theme. A cross party working group has been established to recommend action to Full Council in due course. The objective is to make all DDC activities carbon neutral by 2030. Because of its long term importance this group is chaired by the Leader, Trevor Bartlett.

A comprehensive Tourism Strategy has been developed. This highlights the many attractions of White Cliffs Country and will be publicly launched when the time is appropriate. The Open golf championship will now be coming to Sandwich in 2021 and will be a key opportunity to persuade investors of the advantages available to them in Dover District.

Our waste and street cleaning contract with Veolia expires at the end of 2020 and negotiations with potential contractors have been continuing. We had hoped to be able to announce a result in June to allow time for any transition needed but this is now under review.

As ever it has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with our parish councils. We can't always deliver the outcomes that colleagues are hoping for but that isn't for any lack of effort as we live among you and your concerns are ours.

Trevor Bartlett  
Mike Conolly

May 2020