

**Council 28 February 2024**  
**Agenda item 9 (Portfolio Holder reports)**

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

1. I joined the personnel committee for their final deliberations on this year's pay award. I then chaired the meeting with the union representatives and staff representatives to discuss. The negotiations were frank and fair, I was very impressed by the professional approach of all members of the negotiating teams and hope that the recommendation will be accepted.
2. The leaders of the four political groups and Independent Councillor Paul Thomas have been meeting regularly as we move towards a committee system.
3. I have attended many meetings regarding Otterpool Park with government agencies, and developers, these discussions continue.
4. I attended a meeting with many other Council representatives in my role as Armed Forces Champion.
5. I have been visiting businesses in the District as usual, hotels, hospitality and Chartered Surveyors. Business holds some very interesting perspectives on the future of the District. This Council is a friend to good business.
6. Princes Parade hoarding: I am delighted to announce that the hording 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 refenced we will be consulting next year to ask local people for their views on the future of Prince's Parade.
7. My regular contact with Stagecoach continues, this month we will begin the work on our joint "use it or lose it" campaign to encourage people to us the bus service.
8. Councillor Scoffham and I attended a presentation by Southern Water regarding the declining bathing water quality around our coast. 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 a further meetings with Southern Water, the Environment Agency and KCC Councillors this month.
9. Along with many coastal District Councils I continue to attend a monthly 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.
10. 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.
11. I spent a morning with the team responsible for our sheltered housing and was so very impressed with the dedication and commitment of the Council's staff.

12. I accompanied our excellent Homes in Multiple Occupation team, to carry out a licencing inspection. Essential work, carried out with a high degree of professionalism and empathy by our Council team.
13. I have held meetings with local charities and agencies including Citizens Advice, Folkestone Parks and Pleasure Grounds, local Business Groups, local Community Groups.
14. I was pleased to talk to the students at East Kent College about the future of the District and potential career opportunities.
15. Finally, I attended the brilliant Youth Speaks event at Brockhill School, along with Councillors Belinda Walker and Anita Jones in their respective roles as Mayors of Folkestone and Hythe. Great thanks to the local Rotary Clubs who work so hard to put the event on.

### **Portfolio Holder's Report for Otterpool Park:**

There is a lot of "behind the scenes work going on at Otterpool. I am continuing to work closely with Gary Ridgewell as the new Managing Director of Otterpool Park LLP. We are focusing on modelling alternative ways to deliver the first phase. We are continuing our discussions with Homes England and potential strategic partners. We are in discussion with landowners, Government Agencies, KCC and other stake holders.

### **Planning Policy Portfolio holder update:**

Planning like many of the Council functions continues at some pace, the workload ebbs and flows but often is extremely high. 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.

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

I promise to not say this again in March: the key focus at this time is the budget!

The detailed draft of this I was delighted to propose to and see passed by Cabinet, and it will be before full Council on February 28th: an ACTUALLY balanced budget for Folkestone and Folkestone & Hythe District Council. But I don't write the budget. I just get to present it.

That we've got to the position I can present a budget that includes zero contribution from the General Reserve is testament to the superb work, and commitment of, the Chief Executive, Directors, Officers and staff of the council through the last six months, and not least their engagement with the transformation project.

Transformation included redundancies, but we've absolutely tried to minimise that, and we thank all staff, including those now leaving, for their contribution.

Councillors have also played their part in finding other savings and evaluating the benefits of other savings proposals. I want to flag in particular the role of the Finance Scrutiny Committee who look in detail at the proposals, and whose in depth look is not only invaluable and led to our changing the budget, it even found an error (take a bow Laura!) that has been corrected.

And all that work means that despite having a forecast £4.501m deficit for this year in last year's forecast and despite having a £1.8m deficit budget set for this year, we'll have \*no\* deficit next year, secure \*all\* key services, and have a strong position from which to rebuild.

However, one saving the leader Jim Martin and I really regretted, and hoped we could change, was a reduction of £15,000 in ward grants. That reduced the amount each Councillor could allocate to community projects in their ward by £500 (to £2,500).

This was a reduction flagged to us as of concern by the Finance Scrutiny Sub-Committee and Clive Goddard amongst others. We agreed as we hugely value the ability for Councillors to make a direct difference. However, we could hardly give that ability back to Councillors from a budget set on the sacrifice of staff and officers.

So we've found a different way to put that £15,000 back in the budget, but clearly at the expense of Councillors. Specifically, the Leader and Deputy Leader. They will sacrifice their allowances above cabinet members: Jim and I will no longer take the larger leader and deputy leader allowances. To be clear: the sacrifice on that is 90% Jim Martin and hugely honourable: I'm proud to be working with him.

So, with that amendment (put by myself and Jim) the proposed budget passed Cabinet, and with a few other tweaks will be put to Full Council. All major services: saved. Ward grants: protected. Deficit: eliminated.

Not many Councils in the UK will be saying that. Let's take some pride in being one of them.

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

I was delighted this month to launch the Folkestone & Hythe District Excellence in Volunteering Awards, the result of conversations I have been having with officers since I had the privilege of taking on this portfolio last May.

I am keen to highlight the important role volunteering plays in our local community and to encourage more people to follow the lead of those who already give up their time so generously, especially as the latest Community Life Survey found 16% of the UK population had volunteered at least once a month in 2021/22, down from about 23% in 2019/20. The impact of the pandemic is still

being felt and volunteer groups across the district say participation has not fully recovered.

The excellent Kent Coast Volunteering are running the awards on behalf of the council and full details are available on their website. Nominations for the five categories close on 22 April and the winners will be announced at an event on 6 June, during Volunteering Week.

Alongside this work, I continue to support efforts to ensure the council works with and in support of the local community in the best way possible.

Folkestone Community Forum met for the second time in January, bringing the council and many local groups together to discuss issues of common concern.

This month I enjoyed welcoming dozens of representatives from local community groups to Hythe Cricket & Squash Club for another of our regular networking events, this time with the theme of organisational sustainability.

These events help to establish new connections between groups and organisations, voluntary or otherwise, and I was reminded in recent week of just how powerful such relationships can be when I attended a regular District Food Network meeting and a quarterly update from the Community Safety Partnership: both doing vital work to protect the wellbeing of local residents and improve the quality of their lives.

My portfolio includes representing the council on the Kent Police & Crime Panel, scrutinising the work of the Police & Crime Commissioner (PCC), including his budget and the sum that will be added to council tax bills to pay for police services (this accounts for about a third of the police budget alongside government funding).

I attended a budget briefing and then a meeting of the Panel earlier this month where members voted unanimously to approve an increase to the precept of £13 for 2024/25 as well as agreeing to back the PCC in lobbying the government for a fairer funding settlement for Kent Police. I expressed disappointment during the meeting that no sooner had our Community Safety Partnership been awarded £335,000 of funding for safer streets initiatives than 30% of this allocation was clawed back by the Home Office to help fund the police pay award.

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

This month I've been out and about with officers from different areas of my portfolio. I visited Repton Park in Ashford to see the road layouts and traffic calming measures which have been designed into development there as an example of how we could potentially make roads in our district calmer, safer and more suitable for cyclists. I also spent a morning visiting locations across the district with Environmental Protection to gain an overview of the breadth of cases that the team deals with on a daily basis across the whole range of environmental complaints.

I chaired the Licensing Forum held in mid-January which was a positive and productive session resulting in some wholesome debate between stakeholders. The meeting has already had some proactive results and we look forward to the next forum in the Autumn.

I've approved a shortlist of three proposed Controlled Parking Zones for 2024/2025. Each of these will be going to consultation to establish the level of resident support before progressing.

I attended a public meeting, organised by Labour councillors, where Joel Mitchell, Managing Director, of Stagecoach South East, spoke candidly about market challenges. The dialogue continues as we insist on a service that's fit for purpose for our residents. I am currently seeking to ensure that FHDC is represented on the Enhanced Partnership Scheme Monitoring Group for bus services in East Kent. In addition, I have requested an update on the status of and timescale for dissemination of Bus Service Improvement Plan funding across the county at this month's Joint Transportation Board.

December 2023 Fixed Penalty Notice figures proved Enforcement Officers' commitment to the district with the inclusion of four FPNs for dog fouling. It is notoriously difficult for officers to issue FPNs for dog fouling as it is essential that they witness the incident so the December figure is a real achievement.

Along with Cllr Scoffham, I met with Olu Fatokun, our Low Carbon & Sustainability Senior specialist, to discuss alternative transport solutions: ideas that could feed into our Corporate Plan.

I represented the council at the Cycle Shepway and the White Cliffs Community Rail Partnership quarterly meetings and will also be attending an Active Travel Workshop in Hythe organised by KCC later this month.

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

Firstly, let me say thank you and good luck to Steve Makin, our excellent ICT & Infrastructure Senior Specialist, who is leaving us soon. I've really enjoyed working with him to learn about our IT infrastructure and how we cope with the many cyber threats that face us.

Preparations continue for the various upcoming elections. We are also making progress with the updating of the customer access policy and digital strategy, with drafts expected for internal review soon, ready to take to Cabinet later in the year.

Both our customer support and IT teams are experiencing significant change over the next few months, with new leadership and an evolving organisational structure. I'd like to thank everyone involved in this process for their hard work and patience.

I'm confident that, despite the uncertainty that change can bring, we will continue to make progress in improving our support for residents.

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

A busy month across the portfolio has seen movement on multiple fronts:

### **Folkestone: A Brighter Future**

In summary, the following activity is planned:

- Thursday 7 March – Folkestone Academy. Engaging with students to get their views on the project and the benefits they envisage it will bring to the town. Years 5 and 6 from Folkestone Primary School will also be coming along.
- Friday 8 March – Folkestone Town Hall. Students from Brockhill Park Performing Arts College will be attending as will students from other local primary schools (like St Eanswythe's, but awaiting confirmation) before doors to the public open from 1pm-7pm
- Saturday 9 March – Folkestone Town Hall. Open to the public 11-4pm

We have also actioned on feedback from the previous engagement events:

- Stagecoach have been encouraged to attend and have told us they should be able to send a representative (awaiting confirmation)
- We have liaised with our communities team and have contacted numerous community groups to attend, to try and increase the diversity of those who provide us with feedback

### **Tourism**

- Working to do more in relation to supporting tourism sector including a better digital / web presence to showcase the district. This is such a key part of our economy and there is a fantastic and diverse offer across the district. Taking on board views of tourism businesses has been key in shaping our thinking on this.
- With this in mind I have begun working with officers to revisit our strategy and plan in regards to tourism. There is too much confusion, too many brands, and not enough resource. I look forward to addressing this across the year.

### **Heritage**

- Engaging with local groups find ways to work together to promote heritage and keen to establish a forum where groups can come together
- We're updating the draft Heritage Strategy at the moment ahead of wider consultation and engagement - aim to have this as a driver for the promotion of heritage as well as being a key planning policy document.
- Council currently recruiting for a Conservation & Heritage Officer in the planning team which will boost our capacity to focus on heritage.

### **Rural England Prosperity Fund - update**

- 30 x Expressions of interest received since inception.
- Resulting in 21 invites to make a full application.

- 10 x full applications received to date.
- For these 10 applications, the total requested value is £140,106. This means that if all were to be approved for the full ask, this would virtually use up the first year allocation of £142,868.
- Will continue to promote the scheme, with a particular emphasis on this when year 2 funding allocation takes effect from April.

### **Green Business Grant Scheme**

- Green Business Grant Scheme to help smaller businesses become more energy efficient.
- Grants of up to £10,000 may be available to your business (up to £25,000 in exceptional circumstances). Total value awarded to date £85,488.
- 9 new applications received and being assessed.
- For these 9 applications the total value requested is £100,271. If all applications were to be approved for the full amount this would take the total sum allocated to £185,759, thereby leaving £64,241 of the total £250,000.

### **Romney Marsh Business Hub and Grant Scheme**

- 13 businesses now located into the employment hub (16 offices available in total so 3 vacant), which is a very good performance and interest in the business pace remains high.

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

### **Making Space for Nature**

On 1st February I attended a day-long discussion and consultation (together with a FHDC planning officer) organised by the KCC Making Space for Nature team. Central government has mandated 48 responsible authorities across the country to devise local nature recovery strategies which will agree priorities for nature recovery and propose actions in the locations where they would be particularly effective. The strategies will also influence local planning and inform biodiversity net gain requirements. There was a wide range of interest groups and organisations represented in the session we attended. A further day-long consultation is planned for late April.

### **Sustainable Schools Project**

I have started to develop a small -scale pilot sustainability project for local primary schools. Four teachers have agreed to take part in an initial trial. They have each identified cohorts of around eight to ten children who will devise a sustainability project which they can implement in their local environment during the summer term. The pupils will be coming the Civic Centre on 18th March to share and discuss their ideas. This will also allow them to get a better understanding of how the Council works. The aim of the project is to allow children who are concerned about the sustainability to have a voice and do something practical about it. If successful it may be possible to extend the project to other schools across the district in due course.

### **Inland Drainage**

Together with representatives from around 20 other local authorities, I attended a reception at the House of Commons on 6th February to campaign about funding for the Inland Drainage Board. Due to cuts from central government Councils now have to fund the IDB levies directly from council tax and costs have risen hugely due to rising utility bills. Continuing to see that Romney Marsh and other low-lying areas such as the Fens in Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire are properly protected from flooding is obviously a high priority so a permanent funding solution is urgently needed.

### **Waste and Recycling**

Discussions with volunteers about setting up new collection points for electrical waste are ongoing. As is so often the case, the devil is in the detail and finding suitable sites and setting up an appropriate collection service needs to be carefully managed.

### **UNESCO Geopark Bid**

I am currently exploring different ways to fund leaflets, display boards and other initiatives relating to the Geopark bid and will be reporting further about this at the Council meeting in April.

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

Several housing papers went to cabinet in January:

- Updates of gas and fire safety policies to bring them formally in line with new regulations and best practice. I am pleased to note that compliance across the board is well on track and expected to be at 100% by the end of the year.
- Cabinet gave agreement for the housing team to start a project to look at "de-pooling" service charges. This essentially means looking at all the costs incurred by the council in looking after communal parts of buildings and grounds as well as the costs of some communal services such as communal heating for a small number of blocks. The council can then be sure that all costs incurred are first of all covered and, just as importantly, that tenants are paying for the costs that actually apply to them. This is a huge piece of work scheduled to take two years. Until the work is well underway, it is impossible to know how the costs break down in practice. Engaging with and keeping tenants informed of the work will be an essential part of the ongoing project.
- Cabinet agreed that work could be started to dispose of Hay House as the cost of bringing the property up to the standard we would require would be prohibitive (£1.2m).

I've had a meeting with the Chair of the Strategic Tenants Advisory Panel ahead of the panel's next meeting.

In addition to ongoing and varied housing casework, I have had regular briefings from the housing team.

Several major procurements are underway, including for the repairs and maintenance contract and a new telecare contract.



Good progress is being made on the decarbonization programme, with 125 due to be completed in the first wave of the programme and work starting on a further 300 homes in the second wave. Among the main improvements will be much better levels of insulation which should help save energy and make homes more comfortable for tenants.

Despite the winter shelter currently in operation, unfortunately there still remain a relatively high number of rough sleepers, many of whom have complex needs. The outreach team continues to work closely with them.

Preparations have started for this year's tenant engagement survey. This is a requirement of the Regulator of Social Housing and large elements of the survey are prescribed by the Regulator. Overview and Scrutiny looked at the results of last year's survey and gave useful recommendations for this year which the team is taking forward, primarily around ways to increase response rates and to make sure that we get a good response rate from across the district.

## **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 winter works going well including the removal of the conifers in Hawkinge cemetery
- Survey of churchyards across the district completed to inform longer term management plan
- Cut back of vegetation growth along the top of Leas Cliff has been completed in accordance with 2 yearly maintenance schedule
- Parks applications for Green Flag status submitted for our 4 Green Flag parks
- Work ongoing on Road of Remembrance to clear trees and debris following landslide. Area being surveyed to assess risk of further landslips and to identify effective prevention measures.
- Section of the Coastal Park path affected by landslide likely to remain closed until Spring as work to stabilise the area continues.
- Public toilets are going through deep clean
- The new Hawkinge maintenance depot has been handed over and hard standing to be installed in March.
- Radnor Park Lodge, formerly leased by East Kent College, now transferred back to FHDC / FPPG Charity. The Council will be looking for new tenants
- Biggins Wood site disposal on track for completion in March
- Ship Street site currently being market tested and planning submission being finalised. Report expected to go to Cabinet in the next few months
- Varne site – contracts exchanged with completion imminent as outstanding issues with utilities have been resolved
- Sale of 6 business units in Learoyd Road close to completion

- Offers received on High View site being assessed and will be reported to Cabinet, probably April
- Letting of Connect 38 office block ongoing, 10 year lease of 50% first floor secured reducing remaining vacant space.
- Potential solar park at Otterpool - negotiations ongoing with preferred supplier as reported to Cabinet on 13 December.
- Princes Parade – Removal of the hoarding and erection of a new fence to begin in March.
- 3 Changing Places Toilets – construction has commenced at Radnor Park, The Coastal Park and Dymchurch Main Car park with the facilities expected to be open by the end of March.

### Waste Management

- Ongoing liaison with the public and the Waste Management Team to ensure that day to day issues and complaints from the public relating to refuse collection and street cleansing are promptly addressed.
- Liaison with Lympne Parish Council and the Waste Management Team regarding action to address specific waste issues affecting Otterpool Lane
- Ongoing liaison with enforcement over flytipping issues
- Officers and Waste Management Team have been working on an action plan to address the issues identified in the audit of the service earlier last year. Remedial measures are now in place that meet the key requirements of the Audit.
- Ongoing work to identify savings to street cleansing service as part of the Council's budget setting exercise including establishing criteria and consultation process for the review of litter bin locations.
- Ongoing discussions with Veolia on revised Garden Waste collection routes to improve capacity and scheme participation.
- Revision of arrangements to provide a more comprehensive waste and recycling service for routes that present particular collection challenges
- Ongoing discussions 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 consideration of the government's 'Simpler Recycling' proposals