

Council 3 April 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 Otterpool Park:

The "behind the scenes work" continues 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. We are looking at every aspect of the scheme, we are looking at the phasing order, the size of phases and the financial viability. Savills have been instructed to construct a new financial model.

Planning Policy Portfolio holder update:

Our planning department has to deal with a wide range of projects, from Otterpool Park to side extensions. Planning services are in high demand, 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 the create our five-year land supply pine line 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

Following the 2024-25 budget at the last Council meeting, we're now moving on to consideration of how to involve as many people as possible in the development of a refreshed Corporate Plan, which we hope will have enough shape by the Autumn to start to advise next years budget.

That Corporate Plan should also align to the Committee System from May 2025, and that is being kept in mind as the process for the development of the plan is being brought forward.

I'd also welcome any feedback from Councillors and residents on ways we can make the budget process more user friendly in future, take input and look at suggestions and alternatives. We are already looking at the ways we time meetings to give a better flow from Scrutiny > Cabinet > Council next year. There will always be a tension between what we need to do and what we want to do. However, we also want to see a system that can explore ideas, and give feedback, and where possible incorporate ideas that can be made to work into future budgets at the right time. If you have thoughts on that, please do email me tim.prater@folkestone-hythe.gov.uk and I'll take them on board.

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

Having worked in health twice in my career, once for the NHS and once for a medical royal college (both times in communications rather than anything more important), I am very interested in the health and wellbeing part of my portfolio.

There are huge health inequalities in this district. Perhaps the starkest statistics are around differences in how long residents are expected to live. Life expectancy inequality here has increased by about 30% over ten years, with those living in the most deprived areas now expected to live 52.2 years compared with 70.7 years in the least deprived.

This council has an important part to play in working with the local NHS, Kent County Council (responsible for public health) and the voluntary sector to address health inequalities and improve health and wellbeing so I was delighted to attend February's inaugural meeting of the Folkestone & Hythe Health Alliance, which brings us and the other key players together. We discussed targeted interventions which, over time, have the potential to make a real difference.

Appropriately, a couple of days later, I attended a Winter Well Event, where the council and other agencies hosted stalls providing lots of practical information and advice in the always amazing setting of Romney Marsh Community Hub.

More statistics. COVID-19 reduced activity levels, which declined between 2019 and 2021. Walking for travel decreased by 37% and this district now ranks in the bottom half of Kent districts for average walking for travel rates. Meanwhile, between 2016 and 2021 cycling decreased in Kent by 24% overall.

We must reverse these trends, especially as the numbers of overweight or obese people in this district are higher than the county average and rising.

I jumped on my bike and joined an active travel workshop in Hythe organised by Kent County Council (KCC) and hosted by the charity Sustrans, during which we explored for ourselves some of the barriers (and not just actual barriers) discouraging people from walking, wheeling and cycling.

I also attended (virtually this time, so not so good for being active!) the South Area Local Children's Partnership Group (covering Dover and Ashford as well as Folkestone & Hythe). Among the many items under discussion was KCC's new family hub model and I again raised the issue of funding being removed from commissioned services, with a still uncertain future for Shepway Autism Support Group and other youth clubs in Hythe.

Health and wellbeing also includes the very important work of the district's Community Safety Partnership and I attended the Overview & Scrutiny Committee to introduce the draft community safety plan for the next three years. The committee had lots of great suggestions for improving the plan's presentation.

Finally, a recent highlight was attending the launch of Folkestone Music's multi-genre Music in May festival, which promises to be bigger and better than ever. Something good for everyone.

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

Since my last update, I have continued to attend the weekly meetings of the Environmental Health and Protection Teams and remain impressed by the sheer scale of what these small teams continue to achieve week in week out.

On the 26th February at the Joint Transportation Board, as well as the usual Proposed Parking Restrictions and Highways Forward Works Programme, attendees considered a report on the Kent Bus Service Improvement Plan. This paper gave an update on BSIP funding to date and documented the allocation of the second tranche of funding for Kent still to come. Along with our Highways Engineer, I attended the Enhanced Partnership Scheme Monitoring Group on 7th March. This body consists of representatives from KCC Highways, District officers and transport operators and is an opportunity to get first hand updates on the National Bus Strategy and BSIP as well as to raise issues and suggestions. Local Transport Authorities have been tasked by the Department for Transport to revise their BSIPs against a very tight deadline. This process is likely to inform future funding allocation so we will be responding to KCC's request for information to ensure the demands and needs of our residents are heard.

Still on buses, I was invited to attend the inaugural meeting of the Bus Users Group on 12th March. It was fantastic to see so many people (14 volunteers came forward!) passionate about improving public transport for all. The next meeting is on 30th April and FHDC's Transportation Manager has been invited to attend as this forum will be a fantastic source of information and ideas for the council to feed into the above processes to ensure we are representing our residents

On Tuesday 27th February I, along with several other councillors attended an Active Travel Workshop organised by KCC and presented by Sustrans, a UK based charity that works to promote active travel for everyone. We cycled around a small area of Hythe just to establish how easy (or otherwise) it is to do so while obeying the rules of the road and signage. The answer – just as when I joined Cycle Shepway who carried out a similar exercise in Folkestone last Autumn – is 'not very'. Kent's Active Travel Rating is currently one out of a potential four. There is a long way to go to make our streets safer and more appealing for cyclists but initiatives like this workshop are a fantastic first step.

Some residents of Cheriton have requested a Controlled Parking Zone. The consultation to establish if there is wider support for this, the first of the three schemes shortlisted for 2024/25, went live in mid-March and closes on 19th April.

Finally, I am thrilled to report that the White Cliffs Community Rail Partnership whose Steering Group I joined last year to represent FHDC has been granted accreditation by the Department for Transport. This is formal recognition that the partnership operates to high standards of governance and financial propriety and that its objectives and activities are supported by Government. The accreditation is a real vote of confidence and opens up opportunities for future initiatives to encourage increased participation of our local communities in our railway line and

to provide our residents and visitors with associated economic, social and environmental benefits.

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

Since the previous meeting we've made some progress with the customer access and IT strategies. We intend to ensure that residents are a core part of the process of developing the new strategies. Developing our ability to support those who don't yet have access to My Account is one of the many ideas floated at the initial meeting. There will be more detail on this process in the next few months.

Given the impending General Election, it's important that we ensure that everyone is aware of the effects that the Election Act 2022 will have on voting. To assist with this, the council tax bills that have gone out contain a reminder of the photo ID requirements for voting. If you need more information, I recommend visiting <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/voterID>, or calling 0800 328 0280.

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

FABF programme update

- Ground investigation surveys to commence in town from 25th March for a period of 16 days. Communications to be issued this week.
- KCC looking to publish ITT (Invite to Tender) for main contractor works by 1st week April, moderation and evaluation planned late May with contract award planned for early August. This is a change in dates from previous update, owing to the commission of works for phase 1 and phase 2 being combined
- Public consultation held 7th – 9th March more than 535 members of the public engaged (inc. Folkestone Academy on the 7th and circa 11 pupils from Brockhill on March 8th). Included members of the Town Centre Activation team engaging public.
- Consultation surveys are open (accessed via the corporate website) until midnight 2nd April

Tourism/Visitor Economy

- Notice to be served with bubltown for the ongoing use of their marketplace technology "ExperienceFH" owing to return on investment and low take up by local businesses.
- Meet with Visit Kent 12th March to discuss ongoing support and investor programme.
- Consolidation of activity to date to drive action plan for 24/25 and beyond
- The above will feed into an emerging plan which will be communicated to members in due course

UKSPF

- All progressing well as per update at the F&P

- Skills work for 24-25 in planning stages and programme will begin in spring/summer.
- Grant scheme details being finalised and likely to be open to local SME's from May.
- Working with local providers on using the capital funding – possibly with a digital element to tie in with the council's digital twin.

Stats for UKSPF, REPF and RMBH grant
Green Business Grant Scheme (last date to apply 31st March)

Last week the following projects were approved for funding:

- HEH Global Ltd, Folkestone - £2,260 towards solar panel installation at hair salon
- Leas Lift Company, Folkestone - £25,000 towards Solar panel system and LED Lighting systems
- Sandgate Parish Council - £4,800 towards solar panel system installation, providing power for both public conveniences and café business
- TQB Ltd, Hythe - £954.00 towards eco heating and printer
- NIC Instruments, Folkestone - £11,798 towards various initiatives to reduce business carbon levels
- Plamil Foods Ltd, Folkestone - £1,996 towards a project that will significantly reduce the level of water used in the manufacturing process

One further application was brought to panel, but the members require some additional information before a final decision is made. The applicant has been contacted for this. The sum requested for this application is £25,000

The total funding approved to date is £132,296 since inception.

In addition, there are currently 2 further applications to consider requesting a funding total of £27,000.

If the 3 applications detailed above are approved for the full amount requested, this would bring the total funding approved to £184,296.

This would leave £65,704 of the £250,000 total allocation.

It is unknown whether we will receive any further new applications before the scheme closes on 31st March. Since launch, 30 applications have been received.

Rural England Prosperity Fund

Decision panel dates have been set to consider the following applications for funding:

18th March

- Newchurch Village Hall Trust, Romney Marsh - requesting £15,109 towards solar pv system
- St Mary in the Marsh Project, Romney Marsh – requesting £30,000 towards building of a new village hall facility
- EAV Networks Ltd, Romney Marsh – requesting £30,000 towards growth of new internet business

21st March

- Hawkinge Cricket Club, Hawkinge - requesting £20,000 towards solar PV system
- Elham Village Hall Association, Elham - requesting £3,317 towards a secure cycle shelter
- Godden & Readman, Selsted - requesting £5,400 towards diversification of land to a cut flower business
- Mount Lodge Smallholding, Elham - requesting £17,606 towards various diversification initiatives
- Sellindge & District Playing Fields Benevolent Society, Sellindge - requesting £25,000 towards a solar PV system
- Stowting Community Council, Stowting - requesting £10,000 towards a solar PV system

28th March

- Hop Fuzz Ltd, West Hythe – requesting £2,100 towards green waste food oil hot water system

The total sum requested for the above application going to decision panels during March is £158,532.

Romney Marsh Business Hub Grant Scheme (now closed to new applications)

£49,690 of funding approved across 7 applications.

One further application awaiting outcome for £9,638.

If approved, this will bring the total awarded to £59,328.

Folca

Work continues on Folca and this will be communicated through various member forums over the next few months outlining the work to date from the last report and the emerging plan going forward .

RMP

This partnership is currently chaired by Cllr Thomas the last meeting was held in 8th Feb .

Linda Marsh the RMP specialist left her post in late Jan 24

FHDC have appointed a temporary replacement.

The role's funding finishes in August 2024 with plan to submit a funding BID to NRS to seek 50% of the funding for the next 3 year (FHDC fund the other 50% and this will need to be authorised internally)

Kent Wildlife Trust have served notice on their Visitor centre in New Romney, FHDC will be reviewing option for the site going forward with key stakeholders.

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

Partnerships

Since my last report at the end of February I have held meetings and established links with local organisations, groups and businesses. These include Eurotunnel, Kent Wildlife Trust and the KCC Making Space for Nature team. I have had a special briefing session with the Chief Engineer and Trustees of the Inland Drainage Board, and I have represented Folkestone and Hythe District Council at the National Landscapes Joint Action Committee meeting. Working in partnership with external agencies is often complicated but brings multiple benefits and is particularly important when it comes to environmental issues which are well beyond our direct control. I have also been reaching out to my counterparts in neighbouring districts – Dover, Canterbury and Ashford.

Schools Sustainability Project

I have now established a working relationship with teachers and visited pupils in three local primary schools. This has proved more complicated than I expected as schools are under huge pressure these days, but I have been really heartened by the enthusiasm and depth of knowledge which the children have exhibited and the dedication of their teachers. The project was launched at the Civic Centre on 19 March when 25 children aged 7-10 shared their ideas for projects they will implement in the summer term. As the project develops, I hope to involve other schools and councillors. At the moment, it is still at a trial stage.

Local Planning Issues

Local planning issues have been taking up a lot of my time recently, especially the proposal to build over 40 houses on Blackhorse Field on Canterbury Road in Densole. I have attended several public meetings about this and liaised in detail with the local action group. Losing a treasured open space has to be set against the need for housing and the opportunity to enhance the built environment through thoughtful place making. Similar equations are playing out in new developments across the district.

Listening to Local Concerns

The North Downs Forum which was established early last autumn is slowly gathering strength and momentum. This aims to bring together councillors of all political parties from North Downs East and North Downs West with representatives from the local community in an informal discussion group. The advantages of a friendly setting where people from across the area can get together and make new connections are becoming apparent so we hope this forum will continue to grow and flourish.

UNESCO Geopark Bid

I am continuing to investigate different ways of supporting and engaging with the Geopark. The good news is that for the time being at least the bid to UNESCO continues to be on track for submission in November.

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

Further tenant health and safety policies have been updated as part of the regular cycle of reviews, with Legionella and Lift Safety policies the latest to be approved by cabinet.

An updated version of the Tenant Engagement Strategy has also been approved by cabinet, in line with Regulator of Social Housing requirements. As well as meaning that we are compliant with regulator requirements, this provides a great framework for making sure tenants really are involved with shaping and scrutinising the housing service on a regular basis.

Cabinet has approved the disposal of the Highview site to a local developer. While it is extremely disappointing, to say the least, that the council has not been able to proceed with the original plans to build a 100% affordable scheme, the disposal of the site to a local developer should recoup the vast majority of the council's costs to date and mean that an empty site is still brought back into use with much needed housing.

As usual, I've had regular briefings from the team on the main projects that are either underway, such as the decarbonization programme and various tenders in progress, or issues that will be coming up. And as ever, I've had great support from the team with the regular housing casework 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

- The unprecedented levels of rainfall have been the main contributing factor to a series of landslips affecting the Road of Remembrance and the Coastal

Park. The whole area is being surveyed using LIDAR to assess the topography of the bank and highlight areas of further risk. This will be analysed by geotechnical experts and will inform a programme of work to reduce the risk of further landslips. The affected areas have been cordoned off with relevant signage. These areas are likely to remain inaccessible for several months.

- Grounds maintenance winter works are nearing completion and spring mowing schedule has begun.
- Sale of 6 business units in Learoyd Road has been completed
- Letting of Connect 38 office block ongoing, 10 year lease of 50% first floor now secured and interest being shown for letting of the remaining space on the second floor.
- Discussions commenced with Network Rail who own the Warren Promenade where surface cracking is raising health and safety concerns.
- Survey of churchyards across the district completed to inform longer term management plan.
- Public toilets are going through deep clean before the summer season commences.
- The new Hawkinge maintenance depot has been handed over and hard-standing is being installed.
- Radnor Park Lodge, formerly leased by East Kent College, now transferred back to FHDC / FPPG Charity. The Council will be looking for new tenants after remedial works have been completed.
- Biggins Wood site disposal on track for completion in the next few months.
- Ship Street site currently being market tested and planning submission being finalised. Report expected to go to Cabinet in June.
- Varne site – Sale completed Friday 15th March.
- Offers received on High View site have been assessed and will be reported to Cabinet on March 20th.
- Potential solar park at Otterpool - negotiations ongoing with preferred supplier as reported to Cabinet on 13 December and ongoing discussion with Lympne Parish Council and other local interested parties with concerns as to its impact on that community.
- Princes Parade – Removal of the hoarding and erection of new fencing has commenced. Hoarding will go to Otterpool development.
- 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 / early April.
- 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.

- Meeting with Lympne Parish Council and officers 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.
- Continuing 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.
- Planning for more effective deployment of bulk bins at identified coastal 'hotspots' over summer period.
- Finalising arrangements with Veolia on revised Garden Waste collection routes to improve capacity and scheme participation.
- Finalising 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 campaign arising out of the government's 'Simpler Recycling' proposals to achieve 50% recycling target.