

SANDWICH TOWN COUNCIL : AGM 2021

Dover District Council Report for 20/21

The Setting – “Unprecedented times “

1. DDC’s workload over the past 12 months has been heavy and unrelenting. Pressures from the District Council’s participation in the national response to Covid19, the impact on the District of lorry chaos caused by the French blockade of Dover in December, and EU transition issues relating to the Port of Dover, has resulted in the Council operating more or less on a war footing for most of the past 12 months. Despite the considerable challenges and uncertainty, DDC Cabinet’s approach has been to keep calm, carry on, and to continue at pace with key pipeline projects aimed at improving services to residents, increasing growth and investment. Throughout the Pandemic, DDC Officers have performed brilliantly, stepping up to participate in Covid19 response work, while ensuring DDC front line services throughout have been maintained. The flexibility, determination, common sense, and resilience shown by the Officers has been outstanding – the very best of British. As District Ward Councillor, I want to put on record my thanks to DDC’s Officers for their outstanding support of our community throughout the crisis.

Covid19 Response

2. Within hours of the Prime Minister announcing the first Covid19 lockdown on 23 March, DDC established a “Community Hub” staffed 7 days a week. This operations centre has over the past 12 months masterminded the District Council’s response and at its peaked was staffed by the redeployment of some 120 Officers – around 40% of DDC’s entire Officer establishment at the time. To date, 8078 extremely vulnerable residents have been contacted, with support provided as required, and working with Partners this has included the delivery of 1829 food parcels. From its own resources, DDC set up emergency fund to support community groups helping with the Covid19 response paying out quickly some £300K. Throughout the Hub has maintained contact with residents and the wider community with weekly coronavirus updates for which there are over 200,000 subscribers on Keep Me Posted, with 9000 followers on Facebook and Twitter respectively, and through some 100 press releases giving updates.

3. As the impact of the Pandemic worsened, the Hub took on the additional responsibility of supporting businesses and over the past 12 months has masterminded the dissemination of Government Covid support Grants totaling £36.6m, involving 7256 payments to 100s of business across the District, small and large, covering retailers, hotels, B&B, restaurants, pubs, gyms, etc. Some 12 months on, DDC’s Community Hub continues to operate, supporting the vulnerable and businesses. The figures show an outstanding effort that has had huge impact.

EU Transition

4. Throughout 2020, DDC participated in high level planning meetings aimed at keeping Kent and Dover clear of traffic following the end of the EU transition arrangements on 31 December 2020. Despite best laid plans, the French Government's unjustified blockade of Dover in the days leading up to Christmas resulted in huge lorry queues across Kent, and for several days grid locked the Town of Dover, threatening food security and emergency services. DDC's new CCTV network, together with the local knowledge of DDC Officers played a key part in assisting with the UK's response. The Port of Dover now say that lorry movements across the Short Straits are back to normal levels, so in the absence of any lorry queues since the French blockade, the transport plans to keep the roads clear are working. A major headache for DDC has been the resultant huge quantity of litter and detritus along the A256, A2, and A20 - the District Council is now clearing following additional resources from Government.

5. A Brexit dividend for the District has been the Government's decision to build one of the UK's new Inland Border Facilities (IBF) at Whitfield. This customs clearance facility for up to 900 vehicles at any one time, will create an additional 160 jobs, including a new DDC Port Health Office requiring 100 new staff for which recruitment has started. It is hoped that the new Dover IBF will be up and running by the end of this year.

DDC's Housing Stock

6. On 1 October last year, DDC took back in-house the management of its social housing stock following the failure of outsourcing arrangements to East Kent Housing (EKH), in particular EKH's sustained poor property maintenance performance, and resultant increasing concern at DDC that we were failing in our duty of care to our tenants. This has been a huge change programme involving the setting up of new DDC Housing and Property Maintenance Teams with some 50 staff, transferring 4318 DDC owned rented dwellings, 888 garages, and 439 DDC leased dwellings back into DDC's full control. As DDC now clears the backlog of outstanding maintenance jobs and improves communications with tenants, complaints are falling away, with the estate now being properly managed. And in tandem, DDC has now started its programme to build a further 500 council dwellings.

Finances

7. Despite initial concerns the Pandemic would have on the District Council's finances as a consequence of income loss, DDC's budget will deliver on a small surplus for 20/21, a manageable deficit in 21/22, and a fully funded 3 year capital programme which will enable DDC's growth and investment plans to proceed. This positive position is because of DDC's prudent management of its finances over the past 10 years, putting reserves away for a rainy day, and additional Government funding to help with Covid pressures. As a consequence, DDC has been able to maintain its position as the District with the lowest Council

Tax in East Kent, restricting its 21/22 increase to 2.6% or £4.95 for a Band D property.

Covid19 Recovery

8. As we emerge from the Pandemic, DDC will look to encourage growth and investment to reboot the District's economy by prioritising (a) the renewal of our Town Centres, and (b) enhancing the Tourism and Visitor offer. An ambitious and transformational plan for the renewal of Dover Town is now well advanced with levels of investor and developer interest not previously seen. For Sandwich, DDC has committed £400K as a contribution to the £1m Guildhall Forecourt Refurbishment which DDC Officers are project managing, preparatory work on which has started, with construction due to begin this Autumn and for completion by late Spring/Early summer next year. In addition, a Review of Sandwich's Quay which DDC owns will shortly get underway and will look at scope for establishing the quay as a national destination for yachts and boats, with £150K set aside for improved mooring infrastructure. And taking on board the increasing concerns residents have on parking, plans are being considered for enhancing the public parking provision in Sandwich to provide additional capacity for increased visitor numbers and a new dedicated coach park – more on this over coming months.

New Local Plan – “A Bold Vision for 2040”

9. Work on the District's new Local Plan is well underway with current public consultation ending on 17 March. Some 10,502 people have visited the new Local Plan Website, with Facebook posts having reached 70,000. There have been a series of meetings held with Towns and Parishes, and public events. And there have been high levels of engagement via email and calls taken on the Local Plan telephone hotline. Feedback will now be assessed, and there will no doubt be changes made to the existing draft.

10. This is a hugely important piece of work which is key to underpinning the District's growth and investment agenda, increasing prosperity, encouraging new businesses and job creation. Government requires District Councils to develop plans which deliver on national targets for building new houses. The sites considered are mostly driven by landowners and developers – that's the national process. No growth is not an option. It's about the best growth which through constructive consultation should be achieved.

Other Sandwich issues

11. There has been a number of Sandwich specific issues over the past 12 months which DDC has progressed and on which I've reported in more detail, covering : bearing down on graffiti; improving Sandwich's Waterways; funding agreement for Sandwich Town Cricket Club giving certainty; and securing reparation from Southern Water for damaged caused to roads and public realm.

12. Sandwich is hugely important to the District. It's the Town that's associated with Discovery Park, one of the UK's 6 Life Science Opportunity Zones, a strategic national asset of growing importance, home to 160 businesses, some 3000 jobs, including Pfizer where vaccine manufacturing might now be a possibility. A national and global reference point for golf when in July the 149th Open will be staged at Royal St George's, planning for which DDC takes a leading role. And of course the Town is a heritage treasure. In recognition there has been a significant increase in the of District's support over the past 12 months for Sandwich. There will always be a need to do more. Cllr Chandler and I over next 12 months will do all we can in support of that.

Cllr Michael John Holloway OBE

17 March 2021