

Leader's speech for council (Thursday, July 9th)

We meet tonight in circumstances that would have been unimaginable six months ago, connected by technology but unable to share the same physical space. Since the leader's speech must be supplied to group leaders in advance in any case, it seemed to me more efficient on this occasion to publish it publicly for everyone to read.

Since we last met at the end of February the council and the country have been through extraordinary times. As we begin to emerge from them, we must focus on the future. However, as this is our first full council meeting since February, it is right that we first reflect on what has happened in the intervening period.

First, I want to note with sadness that dozens of our residents have lost their lives to Covid-19, each case a tragedy for the family concerned. The council will want to extend its condolences to all of them. None was more poignant for our community than the loss of QEQM nurse Aimee O'Rourke at the beginning of April.

Whatever criticisms may be made of the government's handling of this epidemic, the bravery and sacrifice of staff in the NHS is beyond dispute. There are many other people working in frontline services, from shop staff to bus drivers and delivery workers, who have helped our community carry on. We should be grateful to them all.

The community itself, in the shape of numerous voluntary agencies and individual volunteers, has stepped up too, as have many of Thanet's town and parish councils. Ramsgate Town Council, in particular, can be proud of its service to the district as a whole in supporting the distribution of food parcels.

The challenge for this council was to play its designated role in the national framework while at the same time delivering its essential services. The regular collection of household waste and recycling became more important than ever, not just because residents were largely trapped at home, but because it showed society continuing to function.

I have said before, but it is important to do so again in this formal meeting, that the response of council staff at every level has been excellent, from the frontline to the back office or, as has more often been the case in recent months, the back bedroom. They have not just been doing their normal work, but in many cases going above and beyond that in service to the district. This is our opportunity as a council to recognise and thank them.

The first priority for all us has been the welfare of residents and TDC has played a vital role in coordinating between vulnerable individuals and the various third sector agencies. The council also contacted nearly 6,500 people in the government's shielded group, to make sure that each had a support network in place, and in hundreds of cases organised house calls where individuals could not be reached by telephone.

Providing suitable temporary accommodation for the homeless was a key priority from the start of the emergency and with local hotels unable to operate normally this was quickly

achieved, although the nature of the issue means that not everyone will accept or can remain in accommodation even when provided.

TDC has committed to ensuring excellence in this service even throughout a crisis situation; residents housed in this way have been moving into long term tenancies as soon as they were ready, and our homelessness team and RISE are working with all residents who are able to secure and maintain tenancies, and working to support all those who will need ongoing help in order to reach this point.

From the beginning of the crisis, the council was charged with supporting businesses through the distribution of government grants. Much of this work was done by Civica staff through our shared service arrangements, but with the oversight of our own finance team. TDC staff voluntarily took a proactive approach to try to contact businesses who were slow to take up the offer. More recently the council has itself delivered a discretionary grants scheme to try to assist those businesses who were not covered by the original payments.

Altogether we have paid out £32.5m to just over 3,000 local businesses over the space of three months, but we recognise that the task of rescuing our economy from the effects of lockdown does not end there. The safe re-opening of non-essential shops and, from July 4th, food and drink outlets is critical to supporting our economy and the jobs that depend on it. We have already seen a significant rise in unemployment locally.

Like the response phase of this emergency, the recovery phase requires adaptation and cooperation. Government has not always given local authorities the time they need to adapt to changes in the regulations. A good example was the change to the travel regulations, which gave us two days to prepare for the re-opening of beaches.

At the beginning of May we were being lobbied to suspend the annual dog restrictions because the beaches were unlikely to be used by visitors this summer; by the middle of the month we were facing a growing challenge from large numbers of people arriving when the timing of the lockdown had prevented us making normal provision for the summer season. In particular, we faced the challenge of opening public toilets safely and with additional cleaning staff. When we did, staff were abused and materials were stolen.

There were particular problems of litter, inconsiderate parking and people relieving themselves in public around some of our smaller beaches, which though not unique to Thanet are of particular concern to the local residents affected. We are grateful to the many volunteers who have helped us clean up after the beach users. The sheer volume of rubbish being left behind across all beaches remains a major challenge.

By June we were operating at peak summer resource levels, and in some cases above them. We have put in place a beach management plan which we will continue to adapt in the light of experience as the situation unfolds. Following the extraordinary numbers who visited Thanet on Thursday, June 25th, with an estimated 40,000 on Margate Main Sands alone, we convened a multi-agency meeting with police, RNLI, transport operators, KCC and the NHS to discuss how best to manage any future surge in numbers.

As a district council we are constrained in two directions, resources and authority. Most obviously we do not have the ability to close roads or beaches, even if that was perceived to be the right thing to do. I have noted that even authorities which asked visitors to stay away have been overwhelmed. The reality is that there are about 320 local authority areas in England alone and they cannot sensibly each have their own travel policy. Any public health intervention around travel to beaches must come from central government in order to be effective.

The opening of air bridges to overseas holiday destinations may mitigate some of the impacts on Thanet's beaches, and the opening of pubs, cafes and restaurants may divert some people who were previously using the beach, while the unpredictable British weather will have its own impact. However, the council will continue to prepare for exceptional numbers of beach visitors. As part of this, we have worked with the two local MPs to make a case to government for additional resources around the particular issues we face and I am grateful to them both for their constructive input and support on this matter.

As with every other local authority, the council's financial position has been severely affected, not just by extra expenditure related to Covid-19, but by loss of revenue from council tax, fees and charges and business rates. Our best estimate has been that we faced a budget shortfall of £5.5m, which has been offset by around £1.5m in government support and a further amount, unspecified at the time of writing, that is now expected.

It is disappointing, if unsurprising, that government support has not matched the "whatever it takes" rhetoric of the early weeks, but a report will come to cabinet at the end of July which will give a more detailed and accurate account of the financial position and how the council can address it, including drawing on its reserves.

It is still uncertain when the council will be able to meet again in person. I am nevertheless proud that thanks to our democratic services staff and digital team, our officers and members have been able to operate efficiently from home and that we were among the first to resume formal meetings and continue the everyday public business of the council.

Clearly these online meetings have limitations and frustrations, but the situation also provides opportunities to consider new ways of working for all of us. We will want to go back to the council chamber for formal meetings, but the fortnightly online member briefings have been a resounding success, with attendance well beyond the numbers we might expect for traditional sessions. I believe that these bring the council closer together, provide more opportunities for backbenchers to engage with senior officers and have demonstrated the cross-party commitment of councillors to represent their wards.

Another lesson that we have taken from the experience of using the technology is that there is an opportunity for senior officers and members to save time and money by no longer driving to some working meetings outside Thanet, and in some cases meetings at Margate. This is not only sensible but must form part of the council's response to the climate emergency. In the same way, where officers can work just as effectively remotely there is

potential to provide savings on council accommodation costs and a better work/life balance for staff. Some will always find it more practical to work in the office, and wish to do so, but the balance is likely to change as a result of the crisis, even when it is over.

Much else has happened in the last four and half months that I cannot cover here. The adoption, hopefully, of the local plan tonight is a landmark event. But there are two more things outside the currently dominant concern, or indeed council control, that I want to mention.

The first is the two large Black Lives Matters demonstrations that took place in Thanet in June. These were problematic because they took place in defiance of the Covid-19 regulations on public gatherings. However, they were substantial, dignified and orderly. We do not just have a legal duty, but a moral one, to challenge racism in society and anyone who has followed the Windrush scandal will know that it is very far from being eliminated. We must not pretend that racism does not exist in Thanet and I welcome Cllr Rawf's recent detailed response to South Thanet MP Craig Mackinlay on this point.

In this context I recently made a formal decision about the future of Uncle Mack's plaque in Broadstairs, and that has quite properly been called in by the overview and scrutiny panel. I look forward to hearing other members' views at that meeting.

The second thing I want to highlight is the start of building work on the former Pleasurama site in Ramsgate, 22 years after the original amusements burnt down. This prominent vacant plot has damaged Ramsgate seafront for two decades and been the source of endless frustration for residents and councillors for most of that time. It was a constant issue when I was an Eastcliff councillor between 2011 and 2015, although the land is now in private ownership and has been under third-party control for many years. Last week I went and spoke to the developers Blueberry Homes on site. The flats are going up fast and they expect to have the first occupiers move in next spring, with the whole development built out in 2-3 years.

This is a timely reminder that even the most stubborn problems do get resolved eventually. And tomorrow we are promised, again, a decision on the DCO for Manston. Even when circumstances are at their most difficult, things do eventually move on.