

Leader's report for Council (10 September)

"This is the second leader's report that I have posted online in advance of the council meeting for which it is intended, and I am grateful to those members and others for their feedback on that practice, which generally seemed well received.

"I think it is an innovation we should consider continuing, even when we are able to resume meeting face to face, which I know many members are anxious to do.

"The council, and society generally, has had to learn to do many things differently over the last six months, and I continue to be proud of the way our officers and members have adapted.

"While the health emergency is not over, the rate of infection has significantly abated and so far there has been no risk of a local lockdown in Thanet. We rely on the good sense of our residents to ensure that this remains the case by following the government guidance as far as possible. However, we must also be ready if it happens and that work is in hand.

Busy beaches

"I don't usually talk about the weather in these reports, because not even the most cynical observer can argue the council is to blame for that, but the very warm spell which extended until the middle of August saw record numbers travelling to our beaches.

"This was what our local economy needed after lockdown and in many ways great to see, but it also brought a range of challenges and in some places inconvenience for residents because the existing toilet and parking facilities struggled to cope with such a large and sudden volume of visitors.

"The sudden reversal of government restrictions on travel in May was a factor in this, but the limited opportunity to travel overseas also swelled numbers of visitors to levels we perhaps had never expected to see coming regularly to Thanet again.

"The new beach management plan launched in June was followed by the beach safety information booklet in July, both of which were important to our approach. We installed hundreds of extra bins and, where needed, temporary toilets, extended hours for cleansing teams and brought in security staff, and we deployed a beach supervisor to improve coordination and response.

“We worked more closely than ever with partners, including the police, the RNLI, KCC, Southeastern, town councils and a number of volunteer groups, with online co-ordination meetings taking place before the hottest days when we knew we would be most tested.

“Five of our beaches – Margate Main Sands, Ramsgate Main Sands, Viking Bay, Joss Bay and Botany Bay – were the subject of alerts on days when numbers rose to the point where concerns were coming into play about safety, including around the opportunity for social distancing.

“These alerts, issued via our Communications team through social media and other channels, were sometimes reported as evidence that things were getting out of control. On the contrary, they were indicators that the council and its partners were managing the emerging situation.

“We also received some fantastic national and regional media coverage, particularly the live BBC Breakfast broadcast from Ramsgate beach on the glorious early morning of August 7th, where viewers were treated to stunning shots of the coastline taken by a drone.

“I know that made an impact because of the number of people from outside Thanet who have told me that they saw it, but at times that week we were stretched to cope with the level of demand from media outlets wanting to talk to us about our beaches.

“That is publicity which cannot be bought, and I really hope that this year’s visitors and others will be encouraged to come back, because our beaches are at the heart of what we are as a district. Notwithstanding the public health issue, it was heartening that people returned to Thanet in such numbers and that so many families brought young children who will now have their own happy memories of time spent here.

“Of course, not everything was picture postcard perfect. Litter was still a big problem. There were incidents of anti-social behaviour.

“One particularly unpleasant side effect of the weather was the quantity of seaweed and the odour it produced along parts of the north coast, despite the fact that we have already removed more than 500 tonnes, far more than in recent years. This was despite the legal restrictions on doing so from the protected chalk reef.

“Although seaweed is a natural phenomenon and we are reassured by the tests carried out by Kent Fire and Rescue that the concentration of hydrogen sulphide was harmless, it was clearly unpleasant for residents affected and the media coverage of it was not good for Thanet.

New station approved

“There was some more positive news last week with Kent County Council’s planning committee granting the final go-ahead for Thanet Parkway Station.

“Minutes before our last council on July 9th, by the wonders of video conferencing, I was in the Kent and Medway Economic Partnership meeting asking its members to support a £17.5m bid to the government’s Getting Building fund for Parkway.

“Over the previous two weeks the Chief Executive and I had worked hard lobbying our East Kent neighbours to support this bid and it should be recorded that they all did, in some cases at the expense of their own projects. This is because they understood the potential that it has to encourage new investment into the district and the wider area.

“We also lobbied our MPs and wrote to ministers. We were eventually successful in securing £12m via the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP), taking central funding to £26m out of an estimated £34.5m.

“This cash is ring-fenced for infrastructure and to support growth of the economy. If it was not being invested in this project it is extremely likely that it would be invested elsewhere in the SELEP region, which covers Essex and East Sussex, as well as Kent – not on another scheme in Thanet.

“The total cost is a very large amount of money, and extraordinarily more than £10m of it is just for an upgraded level crossing to improve safety in Clifftsend, but it includes significant contingency and overall this is a substantial investment in Thanet’s future which will underpin the local plan we adopted in July.

“I am grateful for the support of our two MPs, particularly Craig Mackinlay who asked the Prime Minister a question about it in Parliament – even if Boris Johnson called it “Thanet Park” in his reply.

“This is an investment in Thanet’s future and I am sorry that some of our local representatives across various political parties fail to recognise that creating more jobs and prosperity requires changing the way things have been in the past.

“It is not about extra capacity or comparative journey times from Ramsgate, but opening up opportunity to a spread of people who already drive to that station or others.

“Even if commuting patterns change post-Covid, the evidence is that people want to move away from London and have the ability to travel in when necessary. They will bring money and jobs into our economy if we make it easier for them to live here.

“I hear people say that Parkway will benefit Discovery Park as if this is a bad thing for Thanet because that is just over the border in Dover district, but I’m not aware that there is any ban on our residents working there, and in fact a substantial number already do.

“I know that part of the concern expressed locally was about Thanet District Council’s own budgeted contribution of £2m, a commitment which we inherited from the previous administration but believe to represent good value considering the amount of government money it is levering into Thanet.

“The £2m comes from a pot of business rates funding that is required to be spent on supporting economic growth in the district. It is not available for general use. However, given the financial pressures on all local authorities post-Covid, I am pleased to tell the council that part of our ambition has always been to secure a reduction in TDC’s contribution.

“I had more, constructive discussions on that with Roger Gough, the leader of KCC, last week. There is a further bid to the New Stations Fund for £3.4m due for decision soon.

“If successful that would bring KCC’s commitment down to about the same level as TDCs and neither side believes that would be equitable, given the relative size of the councils, but we expect and will push for some reduction regardless of that.

Manston DCO

“Although some people think there is a connection, personally I have never believed that the case for Parkway has anything to do with that for Manston Airport. We heard on the day of the last council meeting that the DCO had been successful so were able to discuss it then.

“I am not a supporter of reopening the airport, for environmental reasons and because of its potential impact on Ramsgate, and I remain sceptical that it will happen, but I recognise that there are other views within the council. Regardless, with the DCO being granted, we have a duty to engage constructively with the owners in the wider public interest.

“I therefore recently held an initial meeting with Tony Freudmann, of RSP, and have invited him to give a members’ briefing soon so that councillors can get an early understanding of their plans for the site, regardless of whether they are pro- or anti-airport.

“In the short term it is clear the airport is back on the government’s agenda as a lorry park for Brexit so there are no plans to do any work on site until next summer.

Council depots

“While we haven’t been able to assemble in the council offices since March, Cllr Albon, Cllr Whitehead and I did get to visit the council’s Manston Road and Dane Park Depots in July.

“The operational staff who are based at these two locations are among the most visible of the council’s employees and do vital work, but there is a risk that the two bases from which they work escape the attention of elected members’ entirely.

“I hope that other members get an opportunity to visit, because we need to do better. It showed me that any relocation plan that comes forward as a result of the changed working environment for office staff post-Covid needs to include improvements in this area too.

Performance issues

“We have an item on the agenda this evening about the budget so I am not going to dwell on that issue here, except to say that the council has been placed in a serious financial position by the impacts of Covid-19, but so has nearly every local authority in the country.

“We can manage the present situation without impact on services by drawing on our reserves, but it does mean that our resilience to further unexpected costs is limited and there remains a significant likelihood that the financial impact of Covid is not over.

“I do think it is to the credit of the finance team that the assumptions they brought to cabinet at the end of July have largely proven robust enough to bring before council six weeks later, as indeed have those they shared with cabinet members from early in the crisis.

“I believe that the council has performed well over recent months in very difficult circumstances. I was disappointed therefore to see that once again internal correspondence has been pushed into the public domain to create a different story.

“While I recognise some of the issues in the recently leaked letter from the head of internal audit and they are already being addressed, other points are subjective and may be inaccurate, and it cannot be right that they are placed by a third party in the media where reporters and the public can have no real understanding of their context or validity.

“I know that the head of internal audit is particularly unhappy that the letter has been leaked and misrepresented.

“In order that members can have confidence in the actual situation, the chief executive and I asked the Local Government Association to conduct a peer review to look at issues raised in the leaked letter and to provide a proper overview.

“Having been part of a previous peer review here, I know that this won’t necessarily be a comfortable process and that some of the answers we get won’t be what we would like.

“However, I also see the enthusiasm of so many officers with whom I work on a day-to-day basis, their obvious pride in working here and their complete commitment to delivering the best possible services for our residents. I am certain the peer review team will see that too and that this review will highlight things that are positive and should be built on.

“I am confident, too, that members from across the council have been working together much more constructively and effectively in the last year than was the case in 2014. I hope that can continue.

“I want to commend in particular to council the commitment and hard work of my cabinet, including my deputy, Cllr Helen Whitehead, especially on housing matters. We are due to resume direct management of council housing on October 1st and I thank everyone involved in the transition from East Kent Housing for their contribution.

“In the end, this council is here to serve the people of Thanet to the best of its ability within the resources that are available. That is what matters and any help we can get to do that better we should welcome, even if some of the things we learn are difficult to hear.”