

Leader's report for Council (15 October 2020)

“This October council meeting completes one year of the current administration. The circumstances have probably been the most testing that Thanet District Council has faced, with the last seven months dominated by issues arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. This crisis continues and its effects seem set to go on for many months to come.

“I am grateful therefore for the way that officers and members have worked together, to the extent that all four group leaders were recently able to issue a joint statement in respect of the proposed Local Government Association review, which noted that “the council is currently performing well at all levels”.

“We also decided – jointly, and with all members having had the opportunity to talk to Will Brooks from the LGA about what a review could do – not to proceed with such a review in the current circumstances. This decision was not driven by complacency but by practicality and we remain open to external advice about improvements the council can make.

“Cabinet must lead the council, even when there is no majority group, but it is also right that on such matters we all work together and strive to reach a consensus where possible. That is the approach I have taken as leader over the last 12 months and I believe it is the right one, particularly in these unprecedented times.

“Since that decision about the LGA review was taken, Cllr Lesley Game has resigned as leader of the Conservative group and I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for her constructive and useful contribution as shadow leader of the council.

“The shadow of Covid-19 is once again looming over us, although happily the infection rate in Thanet has recently remained below the Kent average and well below the national average, meaning we were not affected by the initial spate of local lockdowns and are currently in the lowest tier of the new arrangements introduced this week.

“This does mean that any fears that the influx of visitors to our beaches over the summer posed a significant risk of spreading the virus locally have not been substantiated. The boost to the district’s economy was much needed. It also shows that our residents and businesses have generally behaved responsibly and we need them to continue to do so.

“Very recently we have seen the infection rate start to rise in the South East and it is now clear that we face many more months of restrictions. The council has had to show agility in responding to the changing expectations of central government, most recently in respect of a new scheme designed to support residents required to self-quarantine.

“It should be noted, however, that this scheme is very limited in its scope and funding, so as with other announcements there is a risk that government creates expectations we cannot meet.

“As well as unquantifiable impacts on residents and businesses over the coming months, Covid-19 continues to create financial challenges for the council, with the consequent uncertainty now extending into the 2021/22 financial year. That applies not only to our own revenue but also to the basis of government funding. This will complicate the budget-setting process.

“We also face the uncertainty of the end of the Brexit transition period and the potential use of the Manston site for up to 4,000 lorries, at a time when Covid infection rates are rising. Even without Covid that would be a considerable risk to our district.

“It is only five weeks since our last meeting and the significant event in that time has been the transfer of responsibility for management of the council’s housing stock back to direct control after nine-and-a-half years under East Kent Housing.

“I am conscious that a great deal of work has been done by officers to provide as smooth as possible a transition for tenants and former EKH staff and I thank them for that. In one respect, however, we do want tenants to notice the difference. We want to do better.

“I have been consistently impressed by our housing officers in all facets of their work and nobody could be more committed to her role than the housing portfolio holder Cllr Helen Whitehead, the deputy leader, something which I believe is recognised across the council.

“Next week’s cabinet will consider plans to add 36 new council homes for rent over the remaining lifetime of this council using right to buy receipts, although we have to meet 70% of the cost from our own Housing Revenue Account business plan. There are strict rules to ensure that we cannot use the 30% from receipts in conjunction with planning agreements with developers or other subsidy, which limits our approach.

“Despite this, Thanet has been providing new council homes. This 36 will mean the council has directly provided 191 since 2015. However, in that period the total provision of new affordable homes by the council and local housing associations has been 265, whereas the estimated requirement in the 2016 strategic housing market assessment was 397 every year. That demand is likely to rise in future.

“The council recognised that it needs to do more in its Housing, Homelessness and Rough sleeper strategy earlier this year and I was reassured by the engagement it received from members.

“However, this shortfall has human consequences. As Newington ward councillor I represent an area where the effects on some people’s lives are apparent. A significant proportion of the casework I receive is from residents who are housed in intolerable conditions, but nonetheless cannot easily be rehoused because of the shortage of suitable available homes.

“These issues include overcrowding, disabled people stranded in their homes or unable to access bathroom facilities on an upper floor and others with a variety of mental and physical health conditions for whom their housing situation is seriously affecting their quality of life.

“Too often these conversations start, never mind end, with the belief that nothing can be done. It is a dispiriting experience for all concerned.

“This is not the result of council officers being unwilling to help, or an unfair rationing system. It is the consequence of long-term structural failure in housing supply at national level, dictated by national policy. Even the government’s new planning white paper focuses on helping people to buy, when the priority for Thanet is affordable rent.

“We should not confuse this with an argument about the desirability of individual housing sites in the local plan, which can be contentious. It is about the unacceptable conditions in which some of the people we represent already live in Thanet, whether as council tenants or in the private rented sector.

“These individual cases are, of course, confidential and don’t usually make headlines. They necessarily affect a minority of residents who may be concentrated in particular wards, whereas issues with services that affect everyone or become the subject of controversy tend to consume our collective attention. Every year as councillors we subject the general fund budget to scrutiny but rarely spend much time on the housing revenue equivalent.

“There is a risk that in talking about numbers, reassuring ourselves that our policies are fair and that our officers are doing everything they can, we can fail to recognise the individual suffering that continues. We rightly prioritise tackling homelessness because rough sleeping is highly visible and temporary accommodation is expensive. But I do not believe that collectively we give the problem of residents who are unsuitably housed enough attention.

“That is why I am arguing that the return to direct management of our housing stock needs to mark a significant refocus, not just on providing all our tenants with a better service, but in putting housing at the heart of the council’s agenda.

“The deputy leader and I have asked for a standing cabinet advisory group to be established so that members who have a particular interest in housing can meet on a regular basis to discuss all facets of the service we provide.

“Setting up another committee won’t solve anything of itself, but it is recognition that housing matters to members of this council and that to our tenants it is the single biggest difference we make to their lives. I believe we can do better, and therefore that we must.”