

23 February, 2021

Leader's report for Council (25 February 2021)

This leader's report can only begin by recording my sadness – and, I believe, that of the whole council and its senior officers – at the news last week of the death of Cllr Peter Campbell, a Labour member for Central Harbour ward since 2007.

Members will have had an opportunity to pay tribute to Peter before we come to discuss this item and I will say more then, but it is only right to record here that he was an outstanding member of this council and a tremendous advocate for Ramsgate and Central Harbour in particular. He loved being a councillor, and he was one of the best that I have known.

His residents knew that, too, which is why they elected him four times, even when Labour's fortunes were at a low ebb, and three times to Ramsgate Town Council, which he also enjoyed and where he had a big influence.

Peter was knowledgeable, reliable, dedicated, fearless and kind. He was also my friend and my best political adviser, and I know that we will all miss his wit and insight – even the senior officers whom he sometimes interrogated at scrutiny and elsewhere with the tenacity of a dog that had found a juicy bone. But he never did so unfairly or with malice, and they knew that too.

Cllr Gary Taylor recently resigned his seat in Dane Valley and I know that he was also very well regarded in his ward and across the council. I wish him well.

With this meeting we have completed a full year without being able to assemble in person in the council chamber. Nobody could have imagined what lay ahead 12 months ago and this has been a difficult period for Thanet, the country and most of the world.

The infection rate in Thanet and across Kent was frightening in December and January and the NHS staff at QEQM and elsewhere continue to deserve our gratitude and respect for the extraordinary service that they have provided.

I am proud of this council's performance in the crisis, but I am in awe of the capacity of NHS staff to work such long hours in such circumstances while putting themselves at risk of infection. Thankfully, we are finally seeing a major reduction in the local infection rate, as a result of the lockdown and the vaccination roll-out, but caution will remain necessary.

More than 1,000 extra people in the clinically extremely vulnerable category have been added to the shielding list in Thanet in the last week or so. The council is contacting them to provide advice and point them to support where needed, but it shows that the crisis is far from over and there is no justification for complacency.

I also want to mention the hard work of the finance team, both our own staff and Civica, in handling the array of different business grants and other payments that have been progressively introduced over the last year as the various tier arrangements and lockdowns have unfolded. This has been on top of their normal work, including putting together the budget for 2021/22 that council agreed a fortnight ago.

As of last weekend the council had paid 1,290 businesses £12m in Local Restrictions Support Grants and 232 businesses almost £3m in Additional Restrictions Grants, which are just one part of the support equation and presumably there is more to come in next week's budget, given the roadmap for unlocking announced by the Prime Minister on Monday.

Spring is coming, even if that seemed incongruous when the snow was on the ground a fortnight ago. The weather caused some disruption to our waste collection services, but this was minimised thanks to the hard work of our waste teams and effective planning by managers. We should also note the introduction of two of the new waste vehicles that are coming on stream this year, which will further improve the service.

Our staff were also out gritting footpaths and car parks, as were town council staff in Ramsgate, helping make public areas safer than they would have been. We are not responsible for gritting the highway and do not have the resources to step in, but I am grateful to all those who worked in freezing temperatures to make things better.

Throughout these early weeks of 2021, Manston has been in continuous use for the Covid-testing of lorry drivers bound for Europe. What was supposed to be a contingency for delays at Dover has become an essential component of the country's freight arrangements. The government has given itself powers to sanction drivers who reach Kent without a recent Covid test, but to date has declined to trigger them. Consequently the numbers have been beyond what the transport network can accommodate without Manston.

In recent days there appears to have been progress in agreeing some relaxation of the testing regime with the French, which is good news as there appeared no prospect of other locations being able to take on this role on June 30th when Manston is due to be stood down.

Coupled with the continuing uncertainty over the DCO for Manston to become a cargo hub, we remain wary that we may find its use continues beyond that date in practice, which we would not support.

One positive is that disruption to our district so far from the use of Manston has been limited, although I am aware that some residents in the village itself have complained about noise and disturbance. However, since the lack of congestion appears to

reflect a fall in UK exports and, anecdotally at least, jobs and business relocating abroad, the long-term impact may be to make Thanet and the country poorer. Regardless of our different views on Brexit, we must all hope otherwise.

As the months go by, the risk of lorries heading in and out of Manston combining with seasonal visitor traffic to our beaches to create delays will grow ever greater. The continued use of Manston is therefore unacceptable and other solutions must be implemented.

In January, the council completed the sale of Dreamland to Sands Heritage Limited, removing a significant risk from its balance sheet and, we believe, giving this iconic Margate attraction the best chance of survival in the long term. The sale of the car park has been deferred until April due to the use of the site for Covid testing, but the price agreed reached the two independent valuations requested by scrutiny and both this amount and compensation paid to the previous owner have been disclosed by the council.

I would like to thank all the officers over the years whose hard work made this compulsory purchase and eventual sale possible. Like the scenic railway itself, which I confess I haven't been on for nearly half a century, it was always going to be a bumpy ride. I seem to remember that when I did try it, it was always a relief to get off at the end, and the council may feel the same. But the fact that we did it at all should always be a matter for pride.

Hopefully it will not be too long before Dreamland welcomes back the public, and the same goes for the leisure and hospitality businesses across the isle. This week the sector has been offered the prospect of outdoor reopening in mid-April. However, travel restrictions are to be relaxed on March 29th, which means there is potential for significant visitor numbers in Easter week, before any such facilities are open at all.

Some residents were worried last spring that the influx of tourists would raise infection rates and criticised the council for not trying to discourage them. Now we

know more about the virus, there is confidence among the experts that the public use of beaches has not been a cause of increased infection anywhere.

Nevertheless, the easing of lockdown last year did bring problems. Quite understandably, given the suddenness of the initial lockdown and then the prime minister's relaxation of restrictions on travel, we were not ready for the influx. In particular, the closure of all other public toilets, and our own until we could put in place a safer cleaning regime, caused issues. This year our toilets will be open.

I believe that the Beach Management Plan and additional measures we subsequently put in place last summer to manage the crowds and deal with the waste they left behind, as well as the multi-agency approach that we pioneered, were a success. However, I acknowledge there were some local problems we could not address satisfactorily then.

At the same time, this surge in visitor numbers provided a shot in the arm the Thanet economy needed almost as much as the vaccine itself. I believe the council and its partner agencies learned a lot last year and that further measures we are putting in place, such as the new PSPOs, will stand us in good stead in the months ahead.

We can't always predict the future – and the British weather in particular – and we are always limited by resources in what we can do, but I accept that the council will be judged harshly by residents if it is caught with its trousers down by visitor numbers this year. We are doing everything possible to avoid that, including addressing the issue of adequate public toilet facilities, in Margate and elsewhere, but inevitably there will be further challenges. We will do everything we can to anticipate them.

There was good news for Ramsgate with the provisional award of £2.7m through the Future High Streets fund, details of which were issued to the council on Boxing Day. This is a scheme with a long history, but like most other towns we have only been

allocated 69% of the original bid. It has meant that officers have had to work hard to refine the proposals while retaining as much as possible of the benefit.

The scheme has to meet some very specific government criteria and this can be difficult to explain to the wider community, which might prefer the money spent in other ways that are not possible under the complex rules. It's all too easy for some to assume that a failure to deliver all of what those parties who were consulted might have wanted reflects this council failing to listen or that it is imposing its own agenda, but in my experience that is not the explanation. It is rather that the situation is invariably more complicated.

We live in a world of fake news, baseless rumours and, in some cases, malicious misdirection. Nevertheless, we all know from our own engagement with residents that most who live in Thanet are decent, reasonable people getting on with their lives, who want to work, respect others and in many cases give up their time to help their fellow citizens out.

Surprising as it may be to anyone who relies on Facebook for their worldview, councillors are drawn from this same community. Just one example is Cllr Aram Rawf giving up his time on a daily basis to volunteer his help with the Covid vaccination programme and also with a local food bank. We could all name other councillors quietly doing their bit beyond the council.

Nevertheless, if we are to stand firm against the tide of misinformation, the council needs to do more to engage directly with residents. We are developing a brief to engage with residents across the whole of Ramsgate about the future of their town, building on our successful experience in the Margate Town Fund bid, so that we can work together with the community on the changes they want to see.

We will need to identify new funding streams to make significant change happen, including at the port, and work with the private sector, as well as the many local groups that already exist in the town and who bring huge enthusiasm and significant

expertise. This council does not have all the answers but we must be the enablers of positive change, build confidence through early successes and meet the naysayers head on.

Beyond that, I have asked the chief executive to look at ways that we might extend the successful model of our regular online members' briefings to enable direct communication with the public on the issues that matter to them, over and above the formal processes.

While recognising the risks of excluding those without internet access or the confidence to use the technology, it's clear the old model of evening public meetings in the community is of limited use. I strongly believe that the council has a good story to tell, but also that we can learn from listening to the community, and that we need to find new and better ways to do so efficiently for the benefit of all concerned. None of us should be afraid of such public scrutiny.

A problem all institutions face is that they get set in their ways and sometimes fail to recognise when old methods no longer work as well as they did. Covid has been a once in a lifetime shock to all of us and it has accelerated the rate of changes that may have happened anyway. As recovery begins, we must seize this moment to do things better.