

Hythe Annual Town Meeting May 2022

I have been proud to serve as a District Councillor representing Hythe. Once again it has been a difficult year for the district council: challenges included the ongoing pandemic, the new waste contract and the Ukrainian refugee situation.

The Council is currently running at a deficit, the level of indebtedness has increased and yet again Folkestone and Hythe have set the highest Council Tax in Kent.

The management of the Council housing was successfully brought back into house in 2020. There has been a focus on tenant engagement. A stock survey has been carried out to assess the condition of all Council homes.

Many residents suffered as the Council renegotiated the Waste collection contract with Veolia, many bins were not collected and eventually the garden waste collection was completely suspended. Matters have recovered somewhat but there are still some problems to resolve.

Throughout the year work has been carried out on the Folkestone Place Plan project. This is a plan to regenerate the Folkestone Town Centre. There have been a number of public engagement sessions and a bid is being prepared to the Levelling Up fund.

In recent years, the Council have bought a Racecourse, a Castle and an office block in Ashford, but this year, very disappointingly, Cabinet agreed in January to continue with the Princes Parade project despite the huge increase in costs from the budget of £28M to a contract sum of £46.6M.

In March the Council adopted the Core Strategy Review which had been passed by the Planning Inspectors subject to a number of Main Modifications. This has allowed a revised Otterpool planning application for the first phase to be submitted. Total homes at Otterpool will be over 10,000.

Lesley Whybrow, a Hythe District Councillor is the cabinet member for the environment, and a number of achievements, within the Council's climate change programme, have been made.

The Council declared a climate & ecological emergency in 2019 setting 2030 as a target for the Council's own estate to be net zero. (Following Hythe Town Council's example) The Council have identified their largest sources of carbon emissions and have agreed a carbon reduction action plan. Most of the Council staff have now completed climate change training and all cabinet papers now have a climate impact statement. Some of the challenges will not be quick fixes – for example retrofitting the sheltered housing blocks, but Lesley is making good progress in a number of areas:

1. The Council have won a £2m social housing decarbonisation grant. This will enable an improvement in the energy efficiency of 109 of our least efficient homes and also Ross House. The Council are preparing a bid for the next wave of funding. However to put this in perspective – it could cost something like £60-80m to fully retrofit all Council homes.
2. The Council have been awarded a separate £1.3m to raise energy efficiency low income, low energy performance homes, mostly privately owned/rented homes.
3. The Council have recently taken part in KCC's Solar Together scheme. This enables local residents to take part in a group purchasing scheme for solar panels and/or battery storage. There was a lot of interest in this scheme from residents of the district.

4. Unfortunately national planning rules prevent us from insisting that developers build net zero carbon new homes. We are developing a Net Zero Toolkit which will be a practical, easy to follow guide for new build and retrofit projects. Aimed at both developers and householders.
5. FHDC will be constructing 30 homes on the site of the former Highview School on Folkestone. There will be a mix of affordable rent and shared ownership homes. The aim is for the houses to be net zero in use incorporating a high level of insulation; mechanical ventilation; solar panels; air source heat pumps and the capacity for battery storage.
6. The Council have set up a Green Business Grant scheme for local companies either working in the low carbon economy or who want to invest in more energy efficient methods of working.
7. The Council are currently updating the Strategic Flood Risk Assessment.
8. The Green Infrastructure Strategy and Action Plan will go out to consultation shortly.
9. The Council are in the process of installing EV charging points in most of our car parks. On street EV charging is proving more of a challenge.
10. The Council are currently installing LED bulbs in our streetlamps.
11. The Council has just approved a district wide carbon plan. Local community groups. Businesses etc will be invited to join a carbon innovation lab to work to reduce carbon emissions across the district.

In addition FHDC have moved very quickly to set up support networks for residents who are trying to sponsor refugees from Ukraine.

Finally, great praise is due to the Council for their work on Homelessness, particularly over Christmas.