

Councillor Robert Thomas Report

Annual Parish Meeting

April 2022

Below is a summary of activity from Canterbury City Council in the past year or two and my own roles serving the community. I hope you find this of interest and if you have any follow up questions do feel free to get in touch.

Best wishes,

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COVID-19

Needless to say, the past two years have been hugely challenging. I'm sure you, like me, will have your own personal story to tell. Looking back to March 2020 the role of public sector in the emergency response has been remarkable. Much of this work locally has been done through the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) which includes many partner organisations. The LRF is the body for emergencies in Kent. Historically they may have been dealing with issues such as flooding but in the past five years or so it's included Brexit Preparedness, COVID-19, refugees and the ongoing challenges our county has seen in these areas such as operation Brock.

Working from home became the norm, however, as you'll know government didn't extend regulations for decision making committees and so the city council are now back up and running with all meetings in person.

During the COVID emergency the council were required to issue several grants to businesses to the tune of tens of millions of pounds. As an authority that is used to collecting money from businesses and residents it was an interesting challenge to ensure that monies were distributed on a timely basis.

This extends to the upcoming £150 rebate on council tax for those in A-D council tax bands, and the discretionary fund for those outside of these bands, which will be paid to households on the week commencing 25th April.

On the subject of finances, the city council's strategy of increasing property and parking income over time has allowed for greater provision of services. However, with the impact COVID-19 is has had the unfortunate effect of meaning greater savings to be found as these have, at least in the short term, reduced. The council is currently marketing four of its city centre car parks.

Homelessness

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic the government required that all homeless people were taken off the streets and placed in accommodation. Canterbury City Council used a city centre hotel to house the homeless. It was a great opportunity for the housing team to provide a huge number of services and wrap around care during this time. There were some success stories of individuals being placed into housing and assisted with job opportunities. Needless to say, the issues faced by homeless people is far more complex than simply requiring a house or a job. Unfortunately, a few people left this accommodation for a variety of reasons. However, recent statistics highlight the improving trend in the overall number of homeless in the district. With the latest challenge of cost of living it may throw up new challenges.

Refugees

The city council has been providing support to a handful of Syrian refugees for many years. However, in the past year the city council, along with others such as Kent County Council, has been providing support for Afghan refugees since last summer and in more recent weeks and months the Homes for Ukraine Scheme in Kent. The latter is a “live” situation it is throwing up some interesting challenges. It will be interesting to see what cumulative learning there is, both locally and nationally, when Kent provides this type of support in future.

Local Plan

Canterbury City Council adopted its Local Plan in July 2017. The Government requires the city council to have a five-year review of this plan. While it won't be ready by July 2022 work is well underway for the next iteration of the plan (for development through to at least 2040). In the past couple of years the council has considered “the issues” of development such as the environment, transport and so on. It then issues an Options consultation to see how development should progress for example should the previous priority of extending urban areas rather than increasing rural communities continue? Should there be new settlements? The preferred option should be put out for consultation in the summer. Challenges include open spaces, transport and other infrastructure etc. The government require the city council to provide at least 9k homes. The city council are considering almost double this number. This will be on top of previous allocations such as the Mountfield Park (4k homes).

Additionally, the “Stodmarsh issue” with regards to wastewater which is affecting around 30,000 homes across East Kent. Means that permissions are currently limited to self-mitigating schemes or a small area of the district, essentially in the Whitstable area, where there is no impact on the Stodmarsh nature reserve. This has been ongoing for around 18 months. It perhaps comes as no surprise that the council's Housing Delivery Test came back unfavourably, with approximately only 75% of the houses required to be built across the whole district. As such when considering new planning applications local planning policies are now essentially set aside in favour of “sustainable development” notwithstanding the “Stodmarsh issue”. We have already seen additional housing in Whitstable approved outside of Local Plan allocations.

Transport

While Transport is a county council function the city council provides several transport related services. This includes on-street and off-street parking and associated permits and enforcement activities. No profit can be made from on-street parking, but monies reinvested in transport activities. You will have seen the e-scooter trial in Canterbury, which has been extended to November 2022, has been supported by both city and county councils. The city council will also be coordinating the revised Transport Strategy to support the Local Plan. An interesting recent development is that the city council will cease operations at the Sturry Road Park and Ride with the site mothballed for two years.

Bin collection and grounds maintenance

In February 2021 the city council took back the bin collection service in all but name as it's wholly owned company Canterbury Environmental Company (known as Canenco) took over the service from Serco. A number of teething problems have occurred, and it has taken a while to get to a relatively stable service. In addition, the grounds maintenance contract, which was also previously overseen by Serco, was brought back in to Canenco early. If you have any problems with the service reporting online is helpful or contacting Councillor Andrew Cook who as Lead Member, and possibly Cabinet member, for waste.

Housing

About a decade or so ago the council decided to put its social housing into an arms-length management organisation (ALMO), known as East Kent Housing. However, after years of management issues matters came to a head when a number of legal requirements were not being met. As such the council took the decision to break up the ALMO and bring housing back in house. For the past 18 months the council has been working to ensure the service has the right level of staffing, technological solutions and management to not just survive but hopefully thrive.

Office Move

Prior to the pandemic the city council had announced it was moving offices to Wincheap Industrial Estate. However, with the shift of working from home sped up as well as financial challenges the council has rescinded its previous decision. It is now progressing a move to various vacant spaces within Whitefriars.

Management Changes

The new Leader, Cllr Fitter-Harding and his administration, decided to restructure the management team at the city council in conjunction with a number of other changes including the Chief Executive's resignation. We now have three new statutory offices at the council. They are Tricia Marshall (Head of Paid Service), Jan Guyler (Monitoring Officer) and Nikki Mills (S151 Officer) in addition to newly appointed directors for People and Place.

Governance Changes

The new Leader and his administration decided that after 7 years of making council decisions through the committee system, where all councillors and parties are involved in taking major decisions through the service committees, that “accountability should be improved” by moving to a cabinet system. Six councillors will be given areas of responsibility and collectively they will take the major decisions for the council.

Parish Matters

The review of the concurrent functions funding has been back and forth over the years. This is the funding to reimburse parish councils for the expenditure on activities such as grass cutting that the city council spends in urban areas. A short-term two-year deal has been struck with a review pending and councillors on a working group will examine future proposals.

The Parish Charter, an agreement between the city council and parishes with regards to rights and responsibilities, has been delayed for a significant period of time. The exact date for the revised charter to be agreed is still yet to be agreed.

Local Improvements

While much of the above has taken up the much energy of the council there have been some additional items to note. These include new Changing Places toilets coming to Reculver and within the city centre with three additions recently announced.

Personal Role

As you may be aware after the local elections in May 2019 I became Leader of the council. That was relatively short-lived and I was replaced in September 2020. The pandemic was also a particularly difficult time personally due to family tragedies. Upon some soul searching I have reached the conclusion that I must step down from the council in May 2023.

With that said I have been throwing myself into many initiatives not just as a city councillor but also at Kent County Council following a by-election after John Simmonds sad passing. My duties have included:

- Chairing a Select Committee on Affordable Housing
- Appointed Chair of Policy and Resources Committee
- Appointed Chair of Kent Pension Board
- The city council’s representative on East Kent Spatial Development Company, a local authority regeneration company providing offices and industrial units.
- A member of the cross party Kent Plan Bee Members Group
- And working with colleagues to support the Wilder Blean project
- A trustee of Active Life, which oversees the council’s leisure provision in Canterbury
- A trustee at Canterbury Relief in Need, a charity that provides financial assistance.

Moving forward I shall be doing my best to fulfil my duties to the best of my abilities. I am also grateful for the way that your new Kent County Councillor, Mike Sole, has thrown himself into the role. While no stranger to local government I know his division covers 16 parish councils and so it must take a lot of dedication and organisation to ensure all the communities are well served. I was delighted to hear that Mike has managed to work with Kent Highways to potentially find a way to reduce the speed limit on a section of Stone Street.

Finally, a well done to all the community groups, the parish councillors and of course the clerk on all the achievements in the past year or so and I wish you all success in the year to come.

Useful links

Kent Local Resilience Forum www.kentprepared.org.uk

Local Plan www.canterbury.gov.uk/planning-and-building/new-local-plan-2040