

Dover District Council 2020/2021 Report to Parish Annual Meetings

In a year like no other in living memory our council activities have been dominated by Covid 19. At the same time we have sought to maintain front line services and continue to work on the regeneration and future of our district by keeping going with our key pipeline projects aimed at increasing growth and investment. Before going into detail, it is right to offer a huge thank you to DDC officers who have performed outstandingly in rising to the new and unexpected challenges which faced us. They have demonstrated flexibility, determination and resilience, as well as a willingness to work long hours in often unfamiliar activities.

Covid response: Within hours of the announcement of the first lockdown DDC established a Community Hub staffed seven days a week. This operations centre masterminded the Council's response to the crisis and was able to function because of the redeployment of many officers. At the peak of the crisis some 120 officers, around 40% of our entire officer establishment, were working through the Hub. To date 8078 vulnerable residents have been contacted by a variety of means with support provided as required and working with partners in the public and voluntary sectors over 1800 food parcels have been delivered. From our own resources we set up an emergency fund to support community groups helping with the Covid response, quickly releasing £300K. As the pandemic continued the Hub maintained contact with residents and the wider community with weekly Covid updates. There are now over 36,605 subscribers to Keep Me Posted, with 9000 followers on Facebook and Twitter and we have issued some 100 Press Releases with updates.

Of course, the pandemic has had a huge impact on businesses of all kinds across the district. As weeks and months went by the Hub took on the additional role of supporting businesses and over the past 12 months has managed the dissemination of Government Covid Support grants totalling £36.6 million, involving 7256 payments to hundreds of businesses, small and large, covering retailers, hotels, B&Bs, restaurants, pubs, gyms etc. Some 12 months on, the Hub continues to operate, albeit at a lower level. We are, frankly, very proud of all that our people have achieved.

Finances: Lockdown had a huge effect on both our costs and our income, and at the halfway stage through the year we were very concerned about how we would end up by year end. However, we have been supported by a variety of Government grants and have had the reassurance of a sizeable General Fund Reserve which has been built up over several years through prudent financial management. This was indeed the proverbial rainy day. As a result, we have been able to maintain all front-line services and still end the financial year with a small surplus, as well as being able to budget for 21/22 with a manageable deficit and fully fund our three-year Capital programme. We have also been able to maintain our position as the lowest council taxing authority in East Kent, restricting the 21/22 increase to 2.6% or £4.95 for a Band D property.

EU transition: One major problem we did anticipate at the beginning of the year was the effect on our district of the UK leaving the EU. Our ability to plan was not helped by the delays in finalising the nature of the trading relationship, but we worked throughout 2020 with a wide range of partners with the aim of keeping Dover and Kent clear of traffic following the end of the transition arrangements. The arbitrary French decision to close the border just before Christmas caused chaos and gridlock in Dover and the surrounding roads for several days. Our new CCTV network, together with the local knowledge of DDC officers, was a huge help to the authorities leading the UK response. Freight traffic levels have now returned to normal. A major problem for DDC was the volume of litter and other unwelcome detritus on the sides of the major roads in our district. This had been a growing issue throughout 2020, but the blockade exacerbated it. We are now working with Veolia, who have performed very well during the pandemic, and with Government support to clear this.

Also, as part of the new arrangements the Government has announced it will be setting up an Inland Border Facility near Whitfield, now due to open in early 2022, to monitor inbound HGV traffic. This customs clearance facility for up to 900 vehicles at any one time will create new employment facilities including a new DDC Port Health Authority requiring 100 new staff. We are working with the relevant authorities to seek improvements to the road network around the facility, and to provide the best possible screening of the site for the benefit of residents. The site is due to close in 2025.

Local Plan and Regeneration: Given all the difficulties associated with the pandemic in terms of face-to-face meetings we have been delighted with the response to the consultation which ended on 17 March. Some 10,502 people have visited the Local Plan website. Facebook posts have reached 70,000. There has been a series of on-line meetings with towns and parishes and high levels of engagement via e-mails and calls on the dedicated hotline. Feedback will now be assessed over the coming months. This is a hugely important piece of work which is key to underpinning the District's growth and investment agenda while meeting the Government's targets for new home building. Our regeneration projects include the Dover Market Square Coastal Community Fund with £2.44 million from MHCLG and the Welcome Back Fund which provides £170K to help re-open businesses as lockdown eases. We also expect to hear imminently that our bid for £3.2 million from the Future High Street Fund has been confirmed. Work on the Maison Dieu and Kearsney, funded by the Heritage Lottery, has continued and the re-making of the Sandwich Guildhall forecourt is also planned.

Climate Change: Two initiatives have started to help towards DDC's stated aim to be carbon-neutral by 2030, both aided by Government grants. During the year we will be installing 49 EV charging points across the district and a programme has begun to de-carbonise the DDC offices at Whitfield. In addition, KCC has given planning permission for the Dover Fast Track bus service which will be financed by a Government grant of £16 million. This will link Whitfield and the Connaught Barracks housing development with the town centre and Dover Priory. This will lessen the need to drive into town as well as stimulating visits to the High Street shops.

Dover Lottery: This has been running for two years now and in total nearly £68,000 has been given to 129 local organisations. We have also continued with our regular programme of Community Grants.

Social housing: On 1 October we, and the three other 'parent' councils, took back in-house management of our housing stock from East Kent Housing, which had been performing so poorly that we were in danger of failing in our duty of care to tenants. This has resulted in a major change programme involving the setting up of new DDC Housing and Property Management teams with some 50 staff transferring 4318 rented dwellings, 888 garages and 439 DDC-leased dwellings back into our control. There has been a major task to complete in cleaning up data, but we are gradually clearing the backlog of outstanding maintenance jobs and complaints are declining. Again, great credit is due to our staff for their hard work in this area. We have also continued with our plan to build 500 social housing homes over the next few years.

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