

ANNUAL REPORT

BOROUGH COUNCILLOR JOHN PERRY

The past year has been one of the strangest in living memory; not since 1918/19 has this country experienced a pandemic on this scale. Many have experienced personal tragedy and we all have had to endure lock downs and changes in our every day lives. Nevertheless, in spite of everything the pandemic has brought out the best in many people. Both the Borough and the Parishes have worked closely together to ensure that vulnerable residents were looked after. And I would especially like to express my thanks to the Parish Council and its staff and residents who provided this invaluable support.

Maidstone Borough Council like many organisations had to find new ways of working and operating. Working from home became the norm and both Officers and Councillors soon became well versed in the mysteries of Skype, Zoom and Microsoft Teams. This meant that with the legislation being passed to allow virtual meetings, Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) could continue with its Committee and Group Meetings. And in fact, despite some changes in the way we have had to organise the meetings, there has been surprisingly little disruption. For example, the major statutory committees like Audit, Licensing and Planning have carried on almost as normal.

Turning to some of the key issues, possibly the highest profile is the Local Plan Review. This is now required to take place every five years and is a major resource issue for the Council involving both Officers and Members. A call for sites is required and there is a detailed evidence base to analyse and assess. A list of preferred sites has been subject to consultation and a final consultation is planned for later this year before a proposed Local Plan finally is presented to an Inspector for approval. The timetable is very tight but it goes without saying that the Borough must have an agreed Local Plan; without one it would be left extremely vulnerable to unplanned development.

Another issue that became high profile was the future of the Hazlitt Theatre. Councillors from across the parties were concerned that a much-loved institution and one that was important to the economy of the Town was in danger of being lost forever. Hopefully this is not now the case.

Infrastructure in general remains an issue. KCC and MBC have set up a joint working group to address these matters. It is made up of Senior Councillors and Officers and by working together should help to achieve the positive outcomes needed in the Borough. Our Members of Parliament also attend or are represented. I believe everyone recognises that the current traffic situation in the Borough has to be addressed.

Surface water and foul water drainage remains a major problem in the Borough, especially in low lying areas like the Low Weald. We are working closely with the Environment Agency, the Upper Medway Internal Drainage Board and KCC to tackle the problem. Clearly investment is needed but work is also needed to ensure that landowners exercise their riparian responsibilities to maintain ditches in what is a complex drainage system.

Finally, MBC retains close links with the Parish Councils through the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC). As the MBC Member responsible for liaising with Parishes, I attend all the Maidstone KALC meetings as well as the KALC/MBC quarterly meetings and we are working closely together to address issues of joint concern.

In summary, despite everything it has still been a very busy year, we have been able to make use of technology and use virtual meetings. This is set to discontinue after the 6 May and having lost the recent High Court case it looks as if Council and Committee meetings will now have to revert back to meeting face to face. Nevertheless, there are some major positives. We now have a bright new Sainsbury's in operation, and special thanks must go to my fellow Borough Councillor, Louise Brice and to the Parish Council, especially its Chairman Councillor Paddy Riordan, for keeping this project alive. And with the success of the vaccination programme, we can hopefully return to a more normal way of life.

John Perry (Cllr)

Representing Staplehurst Ward at Maidstone Borough Council