

# Report from District Councillor David Wimble

## Independent Party

Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Communications and Tourism



Well, it seems a long time since I have given an actual report to the Town Meeting thanks to Covid! In fact, apart from the first meeting after I was elected this is only the second time I have had chance to do so in person.

So, instead of reading out how many meetings I have attended (which for the record in the last 12 months is 43 in person and 91 on zoom), I thought I would give you a little overview of some of the things that I have pushed for during the past two years.

*When I stood for election*, I made a promise that, if successful, I wanted to do something for businesses across the district and in particular support for new businesses and in the form of mentoring.

I was able to secure a position on the Cabinet, in which for me is the best position, that of cabinet member for 'Economic Development' along with Planning and Licensing and Tourism and Heritage Assets. Having run my own businesses over the past 30 years I know just how hard it can be and at times when you feel that there is no one to offer help.

One of the first things that I was able to put in place was a grant that was already secured for the Folkestone regeneration scheme, the initial grant was for £2.2 million for Folkestone town centre businesses. I managed to secure a further £800,000 for the rest of the district for support of High Street Grants.

These can take many forms but typically range from £5000-£30,000 for businesses to use to make changes to their businesses and make them viable for the future. Typically these are used for things like new windows and signage and general usability of shops. And along with the Mayor of New Romney we visited every shop in the high street and informed owners of the grants. I am pleased to say that so far New Romney has had 7 businesses take advantage of the scheme.

Unfortunately because of Covid applications were put on hold throughout the pandemic, but are now open again with a further 5 funding pots being in the pipeline for the town.

Since we started the fund over £1.3 Million has been allocated and I have just had permission to extend the original period of High Street Applications for a further 2 years or until the funding has gone.

Another election promise, is that I wanted to get some support for start-up businesses. I worked



closely with officers and identified a site on Mountfield Road, that was originally intended for another potential use but with no current funds available. Through the superb Economic Development team we were able to secure some match funding to enable a small business hub to be built. In particular I would like to thank Magnox and the East Kent Spatial Development Company for match funding this excellent project. We have in a very short period of 2 and a half years, designed and passed planning stage, secured a contractor and built what is a superb facility, costing over £2.6 million.

These units provide space for new businesses to have an easily accessible option at affordable rents, complete with all services, including a board room that is available to hire not only for these businesses but anyone on the Marsh.

The units are on a rolling lease, with the view that these are ideal as incubator units, which hopefully will lead to businesses expanding and taking on larger commercial units.

In the last few weeks we have secured some additional funding to help furnish the units with office furniture along with business mentoring from an accredited supplier.

Also, you will have noticed Mountfield Road Estate's new phase is almost finished, with the roadway and drainage and utilities finished off in the next few months. And I am happy to also announce, after members of the public contacted me about the shutting of the footpath, a new fit for purpose footpath will also be introduced to this site.

On being elected, the first meeting that myself and Councillor Rolfe attended, was with Dr Susan Priest the Chief Executive, who spoke about plans to build a new traveller site in our town, with three main sites being put forward. One on the KCC Yard at Running Waters (not a good introduction to the town) another behind the Pentland Homes site on Cockreed Lane and a third option on Station approach.

I worked hard with both the planning department and the entire senior officer team to find an 'out of town' site just outside Old Romney, which the Penfold family have



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undertaken and fulfilled our legal obligation to the traveller community. Despite initial concerns I think this has proven to be a success and looks very smart.

The next big fight we undertook on behalf of the town was when FHDC wanted to build 28 homes on the car park at Littlestone. Along with strong representations from the Town Council and in particular Cllr Tillson, we got this stopped despite a former New Romney district councillor actually voting for this!

The planning officers thought it was a done deal as it was identified on the local plan, and one even stated before the planning meeting *'we know you will have to be seen to put up a fight, but we need these houses'*. But after impassioned pleas and some planning law research, we managed to overturn the officers recommendation.

The very next day I had a call from the leader of the council stating 'that I had just cost him about a million pounds and how was I going to find a way of getting that in to the site?'

My answer was simple, put fit for purpose beach huts in along with new toilet blocks and beach kiosk and make the car park and beach front a destination and get an annual income from them.



I can happily say that by the summer of next year there will be 108 new beach huts with a boardwalk and access for disabled people, plus a resurfacing of the car park. And a new toilet block suitable for everyone and a kiosk shop.

Some people may not be aware of the Local Plan, which includes identification of sites and land use for the following term for the building of new homes. Another thing that I was totally unaware of when I stood for the council, having stated that I was against building on Green Field sites.

Central Government cross party policy demands that as a district we build 785 new homes every year for the next 17 years!

This is the reason that Otterpool Park is being built. So that it can be a sustainable, 'New Town' with infrastructure such as schools and doctors built from the outset.

Over the next 25 years at today's costings it is estimated this will bring in a £300 million pounds to the council which will be spread across the whole district for capital projects.

I have long argued that New Romney has been over developed with more houses being built on the Marsh

over the past 10 years than any other part of the district and furthermore, until this term on the council, we have had nothing to show for it. No swimming pool or investment into our infrastructure. And unfortunately, we have had a site that was again put forward in the previous local plan at the end of Victoria Road passed for outline planning.

I really did fight against this and we did get some concessions that, for example the site should be 50% green space. And many other planning objectives. This made the site as it was, not feasible with the developer who owned the site and he is now selling it on. This means that a new application has come forward. Something that I will again fight.

My other big issues I have had to deal with, included the outbreak of the pandemic, within a week of lockdown Folkestone and Hythe DC were the first council in the whole of the South East to have found a way of delivering 'Covid Grants' to businesses and within 14 days, had paid out an initial £28 million.

These grants undoubtedly stopped many businesses going bankrupt and the ED team worked round the clock to get this done.

I along with Cllr Jenny Hollingsbee, Councillor Rolfe and members of the Economic development team set up the Community hubs across the district and made sure that the money and support was there so that people like Jon Wilson and his superb team could make such a difference to our community.

As some of you will know I also spent a quite few days at the vaccination centres at both Lydd Airport and The Old School and more recently at the Folca Centre in Folkestone as a volunteer helping to marshal the people.

I would also like to thank the Community Centre for their help in collecting items for the Ukrainian relief fund.

Having worked with a large number of Ukrainian people when working on cruise ships, I wanted to get involved with this as soon as possible and along with what we personally did with The Looker Newspaper and the generosity of a number of local transport firms we helped fill 7, 40

foot lorryloads of essential aid over to Poland.

I have also helped FHDC produce a very handy support booklet for people from Ukraine who are being relocated at this difficult time. It is written in English, Ukrainian and Russian (which for many is still their mother tongue) and explains about how to get help, within our district and community.

