

South Hams District Councillors' report to Diptford Annual Parish Meeting

Guy Pannell & Peter Smerdon

Covid

The Coronavirus pandemic has remained the most significant event in terms of impact on the running of SHDC over the past year. It continued to place many additional strains on the operation of the council, and on its officers and staff. Fortunately these are at last beginning to ease. It placed extra duties on officers by requiring them to manage the system for the payment of Covid grants to thousands of businesses and individuals across the South Hams, and to implement and oversee the various legal requirements for shops and public places. Staff were also having to put in a huge effort to cope with the absence of colleagues through sickness. In 2020 the Council swiftly moved to set up systems which allowed staff to work from home. These proved highly effective and were a major factor in allowing the council to maintain many of its services at an acceptable level. Home working continues to be popular, although it is no longer necessary, and is likely to become the norm for many people, who will only come into their offices when necessary for meetings etc. All the indications are that this has not led to any diminution of the effectiveness of the workforce, and in fact has proved beneficial in some areas.

The Council and its Committees have been required to meet in person again since the end of May 2021, although some informal meetings continue to be held over Teams where this is allowed. Members are also allowed to speak at Full Council and Committees via Teams, although not to vote.

Over the two years of the pandemic SHDC Officers have administered the distribution of £85.7m in Government Grants to businesses, and just under £60,000 through the Household Support Fund.

Waste & recycling

This service was in crisis during much of 2021 due to the effects of the Covid pandemic, which created continual staff sicknesses, coupled with the after-effects of Brexit and the consequent shortage of HGV drivers. This was compounded by shortcomings in some of the reorganised rounds adopted by our contractors to accommodate the new weekly recycling service using boxes. As a result the brown bin collections of garden waste were suspended. There were thousands of reports of grey bins not being emptied and recycling bags not collected across the district. Your councillors worked hard to remedy those many problems which had not been addressed despite being reported on the council's online or telephone services. At times we were in daily contact with each other and with senior officers to resolve these issues. At last the contractors seem to be getting a grip on the system, and more used to dealing with our scattered rural communities, which were often the worst to suffer. Brown bin collections resumed at the end of March and in general collections are going more smoothly. We do not yet know when those areas which have not switched to the box recycling system will do so.

Finances

Funding settlements from central Government continue to be problematical, often coming at short notice, and with no medium term certainty of what will happen in subsequent years. Nevertheless the council has managed to produce a balanced budget, with an increase in Council Tax for the SHDC portion of £5 per year for a Band D household. This is the maximum allowed without putting the increase to a referendum of South Hams residents. Reserves continue to be held at a prudent level.

The Government has increased the amount of grant funding for councils to help those families and individuals struggling particularly hard in the present circumstances of rising energy, fuel and food costs. SHDC will also administer the £150 rebate to properties in the A to D council tax bands provided by the Government. For those who pay Council Tax by direct debit this will appear as a refund in their bank account.

SHDC has agreed to invest up to £5m in the establishment of the Plymouth and South Devon Freeport. In addition to the hub in the South Yard of Devonport Dockyard this will have qualifying sites at Sherford and Langage in the South Hams. This is expected to create up to 3,500 jobs, primarily in the marine, defence and energy industries, including the development of a green hydrogen plant at Langage. Total investment is expected to be £65m from Central and Local Government (Plymouth, Devon and South Hams) and £250m from the private sector. South Hams will borrow money from the Public Works Loan Board to fund its investment and will recoup this from the additional business rates payable, as well as making an ongoing income from this source.

Your Councillors

Peter and Guy continue to attend the seven parish councils in our ward on a regular basis, presenting a monthly report on current issues involving SHDC. We are at the end of our third year in office for the current council, with elections due in May 2023. We think it is fair to say we enjoy our visits to parish councils and appreciate our friendship and good working relationships with Members and Clerks.