

Parish Council Annual District Council Report – May 2021

In my first year as a District Councillor and I know for David's previous term also we would spend much of our time visiting people in our ward. When problems or issues occurred, we could call out and deal with them on the spot. We look forward to visiting Parish Council meetings and being involved in person – and it's very much why you want to become a Councillor - but the last year has been a strange time to be a District Councillor.

I know we've spent no less time helping people. In fact, due to the ease at which meetings can now be called and everyone be expected to be there I suspect we've both spent a lot longer in meetings than ever before and I've spent a lot longer on the phone or replying to emails which is great. The issues of residents have been slightly different. Especially under the first lockdown there were a lot of Covid related questions, especially around the rules and what people could safely do. We would have reports of people not following rules and a big increase in the number of reported planning infringement as more was done without planning whilst people stayed at home and more people noticed it going on ... as they stayed at home.

The Council completely changed with people moving to home working and the way it which we operated at the Council house completely changing. Our meetings went fully online and viewable on YouTube. Whilst people stuck at home run out of things to watch on NetFlix we found meetings more widely watched.

Over the last year the ability for residents to tune into planning committee meetings that affected them or watch them back has been a real plus.

As the first lockdown went and we re-opened at the start of July we entered a strange summer where people were incentivised to eat out, mask wearing was still pretty new, and numbers of new infections were falling. For the council things didn't really alter. Our panel on Covid recovery got under way highlighting business support and support for the most vulnerable as areas of concern as we came out of Covid.

Business support was good with a superb response from the council to send out grant funding from the government to local businesses. All businesses were dealt with quickly and this along with business rates being paused, VAT support and the Furlough scheme supported local businesses including those most hit on our high streets, our tourist sector and those food stores not offering take away. Of course, we knew we would unfortunately see a rise in unemployment which we have done.

The recovery panel reported on what was needed in terms of economic development and communities support and as we move towards the end of the third, and hopefully final, lockdown a lot of those actions will now be swinging into action with a significant boost to Economic Development.

It will be good to get back to face to face Parish Council meetings whilst I don't think, between us, we've missed many Parish Council meetings throughout the year. It was also good to be involved in local groups supporting those isolated throughout the various lockdowns. It was also good that through the pandemic our communities' team were able to link up with so many more residents and resident organisations which has created some long-lasting links with villages.

To help us get there we are seeing a good role out of the vaccine. Over 70% of people over 16 have had at least one dose of the vaccine in Malvern Hills with people over 45 now able to book. The three counties showground is also fully operational as a vaccine centre.

Infection rates are at their lowest since August and we're heading towards Step 3 on May 17th when indoor leisure/entertainment and hospitality is due to re-open with restrictions on numbers and mixing.

We are working with colleagues from Public Health to support the vaccine rollout programme looking at tackling vaccine inequality and hesitancy amongst certain parts of our community

On meetings, a court hearing has taken place in the High Court to hear arguments for allowing councils to continue with virtual meetings after 6 May. It would seem madness for us not to be able to continue to meet remotely until the vaccination program has been a little wider.

The case is being brought by Hertfordshire County Council, Lawyers of Local Government and the Association of Democratic Services Officers. They are arguing that councils already have the powers available to legally hold virtual meetings and do not need the Government to introduce legislation.

A judgement in the case is still awaited but is expected to happen sooner rather than later given the timescales involved.

We continue to prepare, at MHDC, for the fact virtual meetings may not be possible after 6 May.

As we come out of the third lockdown and for many the most difficult our recovery plans start.

We have been allocated just over £70,000 to support people returning to high streets safely and to help build back better through the recently announced ERDF Welcome Back Fund. The fund can be used by local authorities towards the following:

- Boost the look and feel of the high streets by investing in street planting, parks, green spaces, and seating areas to make high streets welcoming.
- Run publicity campaigns and prepare to hold events that will boost footfall and encourage people back into the high streets and thereby supporting local businesses.
- Install and refresh signage and floor markings to encourage social distancing and safety.
- Improve green spaces on high streets and town centres by planting flowers or removing graffiti.

For more information, please read the Welcome Back Fund Guidance.

Over the coming year we will report more on how we continue to support economic development in this ward and across Malvern plus how we support the most vulnerable in society, of which numbers have increased through joblessness and other issues linked to Covid.

In terms of economic development our executive committee have just agreed that £500,000 is allocated from council's priorities reserve to support the implementation of economic recovery activities.

Taken directly from the Economic Development report:

1.1 The Covid pandemic has created unprecedented disruption on the community but also a significant and long-lasting effect on the Malvern Hills economy and its workforce. A global and UK recession, changes in working practices, furloughed staff, and significant increases in unemployment (particularly amongst young people) plus introduction of social distancing measures has drastically affected a number of sectors but especially those on the high street, hospitality and leisure businesses.

1.2 Malvern Hills also shares other economic challenges common to many areas, including creating the skilled workforce for the future, digital connectivity, impact of Brexit, effect of climate change and need for businesses to be more sustainable, along with tackling persistent pockets of deprivation.

1.3 Over the last year the Economic Development teams work has been dominated by economic recovery activity. The Council has promoted, liaised and supported on the delivery of grants totalling well over £30 million to thousands of businesses across the district since the start of the pandemic as well as producing business and tourism e-bulletins received by over 2,500 businesses regularly with the latest news and regulations.

1.4 We have developed a Town Centre Recovery plan, secured Reopening High Streets Safely and now Welcome Back funding to support our five town centres and appointed a Town Centre Recovery Officer to focus on this area. The Reassuringly Local campaign and other promotional activities such as Christmas trails have been launched to encourage local shopping in build up to Christmas and beyond.

1.5 Apprenticeship and graduate grants targets have been met despite Covid-19 impact on many businesses and a new apprenticeship bursary scheme has been established to help young people overcome barriers to training.

1.6 We have launched the new Visitor Economy Action Plan. Updated the Visit The Malvern's website including blogs promoting local businesses during Covid The website received over 300,000 sessions/visits, with over 1 million page views.

1.7 It is clear the shock of Covid on the economy will be felt for many years to come and we must support business to adapt to meet future needs and opportunities. The allocation of reserves to the Malvern Hills Economy Recovery Fund will enable the Council to play its part in supporting its local businesses, workforce, and communities.

The Malvern Hills Economic Recovery Fund (MHERF) will provide the financial resources to deliver the following programme of initiatives -

- (a) Future Workforce Initiative – Grant programme to support businesses to take on apprentices, graduates, and other trainees. This will also include provision of bursaries direct to young people to help overcome barriers to taking up training, apprenticeships, and jobs.
- (b) Event Development Budget – Funding to support new events development across the District with a focus on generating footfall to town centres and attracting visitors to the area. This funding could also be used to match crowdfunding opportunities for new events.
- (c) Town Centre Transformation Scheme – Development of town centre plans and bringing forward investment opportunities. Delivery of grant support scheme for high street traders to support investment in shop frontages, E-commerce set up, and development of marketing plans and rebranding.
- (d) Community Broadband Fund – Reserve funding to enable the Council to act as the legal entity to assist in unlocking gigabit capable local Community Fibre broadband schemes across the District.
- (e) Economic Development Team Graduate placement – Providing annual year in industry placement opportunity to a graduate to support across the ED Team and deliver recovery related project activity.
- (f) Low Carbon Economy support – Funding to support the delivery of support initiatives to the Malvern Hills low carbon economy identified from the findings of the emerging Worcestershire Low Carbon Economy Study.
- (g) Sustainable Tourism Development Fund – Funding will be used to support development of sustainable tourism products, a green tourism grant scheme and introduction of a local green mark accreditation.
- (h) Marketing The Malverns Fund – Raising awareness and developing The Malverns brand to encourage more overnight stays and increased visitor spend in the local economy.
- (i) Growth and Innovation Advice Programme – Working in partnership with Worcestershire LEP and the Growth Hub provide an additional resource to target local businesses providing guidance on support and funding available to assist their business growth and innovation of new products and services.
- (j) Rural Business Development Scheme – Grant support scheme for rural business growth and investment leading to employment plus investigation of rural business hub facilities across the District to support home and flexible working practices.

Our better links with communities and this economic recovery fund will be part of the answer to Covid as we not only look to recover but also build upon some of the things we have learnt through the pandemic.

Planning has had an interesting year, with more pressure on it as I said above but we are continuing to put more resources in to cope with a continuing higher demand on services.

The Government has announced that it is proposing to change the law to enable mobile network operators to increase the width (by up to either 50 per cent or two metres) and height (up to a maximum of 25 metres) of existing mobile masts without the need for council planning approval. New masts will also be able to be built up to five metres higher - meaning a maximum of 30 metres in unprotected areas and 25 metres in protected areas, subject to prior approval on siting and appearance by the planning authority. The consultation will run until 14 June. In a previous consultation response on this issue, the Local Government Association expressed strong opposition to the

weakening of local planning controls and stressed that the best way to deliver improved digital connectivity for communities and businesses is for Government and mobile operators to work with councils.

Rushwick has been dominated by planning applications and appeals but also by great people coming together and supporting each other through Covid. On development there was a delay in the next stage of SWDP_r due to Covid and now we expect to see the next stage and public consultation in Autumn of this year. I am pleased that the Parish Council have now had a chance to see plans as they are now – which I've been lobbying for a long time – but I have also been lobbying for the plans as they are currently to be shared with the public given the delays but this has not yet been accepted. I continue to want residents of Rushwick to be involved in this as early as possible – to see proposals not just on housing but also on proposed new infrastructure.

In Lower Broadheath Earls Court Farm/ West Worcester is about to get under way this year and discussion over that development which was passed as part of SWDP have been ongoing for the last year. Beyond planning the community in Lower Broadheath came together through the pandemic and special praise has to be given to The Bell and The Lower Broadheath Community Store. Both deserve a lot of credit.

Within Broadwas and Cotheridge enforcement seem to be constant throughout the year with sometimes as many as eight ongoing enforcement cases. We're now left with issues around drainage in Church Lane which we will sort this year and I believe better communication with the Parish Council and planning.

It has been a pleasure to serve as District Council for the last 12 months, however odd it's been. I feel that we've been able to remain reactive and proactive despite circumstances, but I know we're both very much looking forward to things returning to normal. I've tried to cover some of the things that have happened over the last 12 months but also what we're now looking at going forward. With Parish Councils hopefully returning to face-to-face meetings soon we can put Covid behind us and look at a lot of the good things that are happening – returning to a re-vamped Broadwas Village hall, hopefully getting to visit Lower Broadheath school again soon and speak to the children and see the new part of the school, even get to visit the Garden Club in Rushwick again and the arts festival weekend in Cotheridge. It all feels like a long time ago.