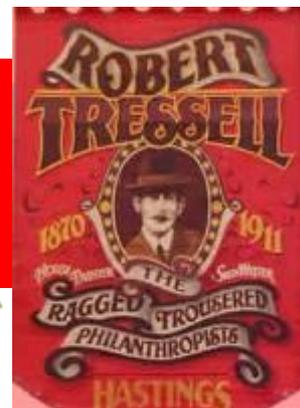


Tressell Ward councillor's report

from Peter Chowney

9th December 2020



Hastings Council Issues

This report deals with Tressell Ward issues, as well as a summary of issues arising from my cabinet portfolio, for finance and property.

As the council leader, Cllr. Kim Forward has introduced a number of ways you can keep up-to-date with what the council's up to. Kim does a weekly video blog which you can see here:

<https://www.hastings.gov.uk/news/vlogs/>

Or there's now a weekly Hastings Council newsletter by email, which you can sign up for here:

<https://www.hastings.gov.uk/news/newsletter/>

And of course, Kim still has her fortnightly Hastings Observer column, as I did when I was leader.

Tressell Ward Issues

We carry out a weekly (weather permitting) 'walkabout' in Tressell Ward, where we stroll around the ward, usually on Tuesday mornings. If you'd like to come along to those, let me know (email via the Tressell Councillors website). I've set up a 'Tressell Blog' on the website, where we report back on what we found on our walkabouts, and invite comments.

The Tressell Councillors website is at: www.tressell.org.uk. Please promote it to anyone you know who lives in the ward (or indeed anyone else!).

November Walkabouts

We suspended our walkabouts during lockdown, so we didn't do any in November. We restarted them this week though, in December, and will try to fit in at least one more before Christmas. Here's a few key issues from that walkabout, and an update on some of the problems I've previously reported on.

Potholes and Pavements



They're still there. There was a bit of Priory Road that was particularly bad this time, at the southern edge of the ward. Tania Charman will take that up with East Sussex County Council (as the county councillor) but I suspect it's not going to be bad enough for them to do anything about it, yet.

Halton Estate

This estate is owned by Optivo Housing Association, which includes all the planted areas, grassed spaces, footpaths and roads within the estate perimeter. This makes it easier to determine who's responsible for problems (it's less complicated than Farley Bank Estate) but the council has less influence on the standards there, as it's not formally involved.



I've seen the estate a lot worse in terms of rubbish and litter – most of the grassed areas and play areas were reasonably clean. But there was a lot of litter and



flytipping around the domestic refuse bins. Although the council isn't formally involved in keeping the estate clean, our waste team officers do visit the estate and take up any problems they find with Optivo. If nothing gets done, there is legislation the council can use to force Optivo to clean up the estate by serving a Community Protection Notice. This has been threatened in the past, which has always resulted in improved cleaning. The problem, as ever, is

making sure those standards are maintained. At the moment, they seem to be slipping. We'll keep an eye on it on our walkabouts to see if the situation improves after council officers get onto Optivo.

Ore Business Park

I reported a couple of months ago that I was concerned that the new owners of the former Ore Business Park were intending to build the second phase of the development without completing the road through the first part (which is already

occupied) and building the end of a greenway cycle route that's required in the planning permission. They had told local residents in the occupied part of the site (Bishop Avenue) that they had no intention of finishing their section of the road,

which has never been properly surfaced or had functioning drains installed.



A council planning enforcement officer has now visited the site and made it clear to the developer that they needed to fulfil all the planning conditions, not just the ones pertaining to the bit of the site they were developing. They were served a notice requiring them to submit detailed plans for the outstanding work within two weeks,

but they haven't done that. So enforcement action will now follow – a fixed penalty notice I think, or a fine. If they still don't do it, the council can issue a Stop Notice, requiring all work to cease until the plans are submitted. Hopefully that won't be necessary.

Hastings Council: Finance and Property

Grants to Local Businesses

These get ever more complicated! For each new lockdown period, a new scheme is introduced, some of which are governed by statutory rules, some of which are local discretionary schemes devised by each council to distribute a government grant, so are different in different areas.

For the statutory schemes, the council has no influence over the amount paid out, it's governed by national rules. For the local schemes, the council has to devise a set of criteria for grant funding to spend as much of the government grant money as possible – without overspending it, as that would have to be funded locally (for which there is no money).

Here's a summary of the story so far:

First National Lockdown

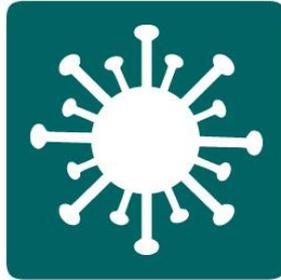
1. Small Business Grants & Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grants (Statutory)

In March the government announced a total of £12.3bn of support through Small Business Grants and Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grants. The Council started making grants to eligible businesses on the 1st April 2020. The government allocated the Council £27,782,000 with any balance returnable to the government. The Council received 2,143 claims and 1,742 grants were paid out - totalling £20,235,000.

2. Local Authority Discretionary Grant Scheme

In May 2020 a further £617m was made available by government to support small businesses through the Local Authority Discretionary Grant Scheme for those falling outside of the main grant scheme. The government allocated the Council £1,153,000. The Council received 213 claims. 128 grants were paid out, totalling £1,152,988

Covid-19 (Coronavirus) Support for Business



Second National Lockdown

As part of the second national lockdown (5th November – 2nd December 2020) two grant schemes were introduced:

1. Local Restrictions Support Grant (Statutory)

The government allocated the council £2,028,708. As at 7th December 2020, 852 applications have been received, 726 have been completed and £1,063,072 has been paid out.

2. Additional Restrictions Grant (Discretionary)

The government allocated the Council £1,853,220. The first tranche of funding for the initial assistance scheme was £200,000. As at 7th December 2020, 84 applications have been received, 38 completed and £42,148 paid out. This represents a pretty low take-up so far, so we'll be looking to see whether we can modify this discretionary scheme to broaden the application criteria.

Details of these grants, and application forms, are on the council website.

From the 3rd December there are two further support schemes for businesses.

These are:

3. Local Restrictions Support Grant (Statutory)

4. Local Restrictions Support Grant (Discretionary)

The detailed arrangements, conditions, and funding criteria are still awaited from government at the time of writing but will cover 2-week periods at a time.

5. Wet Pubs Scheme

There is also a £1,000 additional payment to 'wet-led pubs' (ie those that don't serve 'a substantial meal', so something more than a Scotch egg! The definition of a 'substantial meal' is actually well-established in licensing law, and defines the difference in the licence you get for a pub or for a restaurant).

Covid-19 Test & Trace Payments Scheme

The council also administers a grant scheme for individuals in low-paid jobs to allow them to claim £500 for each period they're required to self-isolate, following a

positive test result. It's aimed at those who are in receipt of working benefits. Again, there are two schemes: statutory and discretionary.

The government provided £52,500 funding to Hastings Council for the statutory scheme, and £31,699.38 for a discretionary scheme. As at 7th December, 54 applications have been made for the main scheme and 27 for the discretionary scheme. Eleven payments have been made on the main scheme totalling £5,500 and three on the discretionary scheme totalling £1,500 (a total of £7,000 for the two schemes). Most of the applications so far have been invalid, because of the somewhat strict criteria. The low take-up of the discretionary scheme is concerning, particularly if a lack of financial support is contributing to the increased levels of infection. We're going to review the discretionary scheme too to see if we can relax the criteria.

This limited level of uptake for these grants appears to reflect the national experience. Eligibility criteria are quite tight, and the scheme applies to those on lower earnings, and who are not supported by their employer. This national scheme is due to finish at the end of January 2021.

12-13 York Building (Millet's Building)



This is a property that's been owned by Hastings Council for many years – it was probably acquired decades ago for some sort of town centre redevelopment or road scheme that never happened. The property is Grade 2 listed – not because the building itself has any architectural merits, but because of the black and white 'mathematical tiling' on the front.

However, because the building is listed, any works to any of it have to be carried out to a much higher standard, using traditional materials and maintaining or restoring original features. For this reason, the upper floors of the building have been long abandoned, because the costs of doing anything with it were too high.

A couple of years ago however, the council decided it wasn't reasonable to leave the building abandoned, and that it was possible for the council to convert the upper floors as housing, providing six new flats in the town centre. We did try marketing the building, but there was no interest – there was little or no profit in the project. This was a regeneration project, not an income generation project.

Inevitably with a building of this type, costs have continued to rise as the project has progressed – the Covid lockdown didn't help either, adding to the costs of scaffolding for example. More and more problems have been discovered with the building, with the contractor's surveyor reporting that the building seems to have been constructed by someone 'with no understanding of structural principles'. However, while the costs have escalated, a lot of the additional works would have been necessary, just to

make the building safe, as well as weatherproof (the roof and all the windows were leaking for example), whether we were converting it to housing or not.

The project is funded by borrowing, with rental income from the new homes used to cover the loan repayments. Fortunately, borrowing costs have gone down during the course of the project, so the project is still viable, in that it will break even. At the last council cabinet meeting, it was agreed to increase the budget for this project by £166,000 to £1.01m. That's a lot for a project of this size, but reflects some of the problems with the system of building listing. Although the building itself is of little or no conservation value, the interior has to be restored to 'conservation standards' because of the tiling stuck to the front – which is very expensive to do.

Still, it now looks like we will end up with a restored, weatherproof building with six new homes, at no net cost to the council, which seems like a positive outcome.

That'll do for this month – Season's Greetings and a Happy New Year! Let's hope 2021 will be at least a little better than 2020 ...

