

Downs and Mereworth - Annual Borough Councillor Report – March 2022

Whilst not on the scale of previous years, the past 12 months have once again been disrupted by the effects of the pandemic. Service are beginning to return to that of pre-COVID levels, albeit sometimes in a slightly different form. Officers are returning to work at Gibson House in Kings Hill although many continue to work, at least in part, from home.

In November 2021, the borough took part in a joint scheme with other Kent councils to tackle the scourge of fly-tipping – something that we in the rural villages are acutely aware of. Operation Assist involved police and Council Officers intercepting vehicles that were carrying waste and checking vehicle documentation as well as waste carrier licences. The initiative proved promising and was repeated in February of this year and a number of vehicles were reported for a variety of offences. Catching fly-tippers red-handed is always going to be a difficult task but schemes such as Operation Assist will hopefully send the message to the offenders that Tonbridge and Malling is not a safe borough to engage in this illegal activity.

Staying with the subject of waste, we welcome the much-needed reinstatement of the garden waste collection service. We appreciate the inconvenience the absence of this service has caused residents and thank you all for your patience with this matter. Rest assured, we will continue to closely monitor the performance of the contractor in the coming weeks and months. Please note that all garden waste subscription will be extended appropriately to reflect the period that the service was not operating.

We are also pleased to report that the new Household Waste Recycling Centre at Allington will be opening shortly. The new site, scheduled for opening in May will help relieve the pressure from other sites in the area. In a recent survey, Tonbridge and Malling were at the top of the list with the best recycling rates in the whole of Kent.

The Council's commitment to the environment has been furthered with the roll out of electric car charging points across the Borough. Up to 32 new charging points are scheduled and it is hoped that this will help support the switch to electric vehicles and the wider goals set out in its climate change strategy. Other initiatives include tree planting schemes and providing discount solar panel installation.

With the rejection of the borough's local plan last year, officers are continuing to review the evidence base for the replacement local plan. The call for sites ended in February and the new timetable schedules the Reg 18 consultations for August to October 2022 and Reg 19 for the same period in 2023. It is anticipated the local plan will be submitted for inspection in January 2024. Final adoption of the plan is estimated to be July 2025.

With the recent changes by the Boundary Commission to the wards within the borough, the Downs and Mereworth ward will cease to exist. The number of Councillors is reducing from 54 to 44 and this has meant changes to the wards across the borough. Addington and Trottscliffe form the new Pilgrims with Ightham ward. Birling and Ryarsh become the Birling, Leybourne and Ryarsh ward. Offham joins with East Malling and West Malling to form a new ward and East Peckham, West Peckham, Mereworth and Wateringbury do likewise. Although these are the final recommendations submitted by the Commission, they are subject to parliamentary scrutiny before being implemented.

It is a pleasure to represent the villages as your Borough Councillors and we will continue to work with you into 2023.