



APRIL - MAY COUNTY MEMBERS REPORT

Two more months of lockdown so I feel another report is due. It took the County Council a little while to get its act together. They decided that Microsoft Teams would be the online format we used. I had an online training session on 8th of May and my first online meeting on the 9th.

The first Committee meeting in the form of a briefing was held on the 20th.

By then we were conducting a lot of Parish Council activity on Zoom. The first of my Parish Councils to trial a virtual meeting were Newnham on the 9th, followed by Selling. Within a few weeks my diary returned to something approaching normal with four or five meetings a day. I fell into a routine of spending about 90 minutes online early every morning answering overnight queries from residents and Parish Councils. This would often entail chasing action or information from Council Officers all working from home. Then a mixture of gardening, dog walking etc and increasingly joining online meetings.

By the beginning of June 12 of my 23 Parish Councils had held virtual meetings, all but one using Zoom. Four of them Newnham, Selling, Doddington and Graveney had met twice to be joined by Tunstall on 1st June. Several others have scheduled their first virtual meeting for early June.

One of the first virtual County meetings held was the Commissioning Advisory Board which I Chair to consider ideas going forward for the Highways Maintenance Contract work. We were joined by the Leader, Highways Cabinet Member and senior Officers to hear the views of the maximum possible number of backbench Members. We also held a meeting of the Health Overview & Scrutiny Panel to question the East Kent Maternity Service.

Another meeting of great relevance locally was a presentation on the Medway Estuary and Swale Flood and Coastal Risk Strategy from the Environment Agency. Just a few days before the cliff fall on Sheppey took two homes into the sea.

Now we need to look forward with the lockdown slowly to be eased. We had a representative from Selling School senior management team attend the May online

meeting to tell us their plans for partial reopening on 8th June and the difficulties this entailed. I know I am not alone in missing contact with close family, in my case children and grandchildren especially. The chance of a sociable chat and drink in the local would also be most welcome. Many of our local pubs have provided all manner of support to their Communities, not just providing take away food. It would be unfair to name any of them individually as so many are doing their bit.

It has been an absolute joy walking the dogs, so little traffic or noise especially in the early weeks. I have never heard the birds and bees sound so loud and clear. The air also felt much cleaner and wash-time proved this was more than just an illusion.

As the economy starts up again, very necessary not just for mental health but to provide the taxes to meet the huge debts Government and Councils have run up supporting people and business, we need to strive to capture as many of these gains as possible. A return to how we lived pre Covid cannot be allowed. Home working, less commuting and hanging on to the greater community spirit we have experienced must be just the first of our aspirations.

I have to end on a sombre note, the end of May brought two great blows. Firstly, the passing of Mark Radford, my last Chief Executive at Swale. Mark and I both joined Swale Borough Council in 1987, in his case as a rating and valuation officer. He worked his way to the very top, a modest but determined and very able Officer who became a close and valued friend.

Secondly, we had the ghastly news that the Secretary of State had endorsed the Planning Inspectors advice to grant the obscene Solar Power Farm at Cleve Hill, Graveney.

Born and brought up within view of the site I did much of my growing up on those sea walls and salting's. The negative impacts on landscape and the environment would be bad enough, but the reliance on the world's largest ever Lithium-ion Battery storage to make the scheme financially viable, totally untested technology on this scale, is potentially even worse.

I have been proud to speak and write against this scheme from day one and appear at the various enquiries etc. I feel especially sad for the stalwarts of the GREAT campaign group and our MP Helen Whately who have worked so hard despite the impact on their lives, families and potentially their careers.

Andrew Bowles
KCC Member – Swale East