

September News from your District Councillor

Dear Resident

By the time you read this update, I hope you will have enjoyed the summer; be prepared for autumn and that some seasonal rain will have finally visited us after such a prolonged period of dry conditions.

As your elected councillor at Lewes District Council (LDC) and representative from LDC at the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA), I have been asked on several occasions how I spend my time at the Council. In particular, residents have enquired about the balance between local issues taking place across the ward villages and my wider responsibilities across the Lewes District as a Cabinet Member.

Within the Co-Operative Alliance run District Council, under the leadership of my Liberal Democrat colleague James MacCleary, I serve as the Lead Member for Housing. In this role I am responsible for our tenants and LDC's housing stock. There are about 3,750 houses, flats and maisonettes across the entire District representing a significant number of local homes and families, including a small contingent here in the village of Kingston.

Our housing portfolio is showing its age so improving our housing stock, whilst simultaneously building more council homes, has been my key priority since becoming the Member for Housing in 2019. The condition of our stock is the result of many years of inadequate investment, which I am seeking to address, but it has undoubtedly been exacerbated by so few new homes being built in LDC until 2019.

We have now commissioned several new schemes, like the 12 new homes that were built by successfully converting a former redundant and derelict council building, Saxonbury House, on the road into Lewes from Kingston. I was particularly proud to see this scheme finally delivered in 2021 as it represented evidence of the first significant new council homes built in the town for decades. I have taken it as a complement, to both Officers and myself who worked on this project, that all the other political parties have now publicly praised the development, even those who had initially opposed it when I first presented it for approval in 2020.

However, despite the success of this and other schemes some 1100 people remain on the council house waiting list. Like many local authorities, we are confronting a significant lack of available affordable homes on a daily basis. This is why our aim has been to build more new council homes in just four years (the lifetime of the current administration) than were built during all of the previous 20 years. This is all the more remarkable in the context of unavoidable delays and problems we have experienced including: the Covid pandemic during 2020/21; rapidly accelerating inflation and supply issues within the construction industry; a lack of affordable land / sites to develop and even the availability of the skilled staff required to implement the council's ambitious homes targets. I have worked with dedicated Officers at LDC for over three years to overcome these and other challenges. Recent progress means we are well on the way to achieving our target of 200 new homes in the four year period to May 2023.

The new developments in Ringmer, Plumpton, Hamsey, several sites in Newhaven and as already referenced in Lewes have been reported in local media. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that the villages within the SDNPA boundaries have not proved such fertile ground for new affordable homes despite the efforts I have expended in Rodmell, in Firlie (a Community Land Trust) and especially here in Kingston. There are complex reasons for the limited progress made within the SDNPA but I continue to follow up any opportunity that arises. At the time of writing there may be better news for affordable housing in Kingston during 2023.

As the Lead Member for Housing I have also been working with colleagues on a project to decarbonise our housing stock. We have limited financial resources at present at local level. Success will ultimately depend on how far the Westminster government is prepared to focus on this issue on a national basis as both need and urgency is better understood. Currently, we are looking at practical and cost effective ways to make our new and existing homes more energy efficient and more affordable for tenants to live in. This we hope to achieve using a combination of improved insulation, wider use of solar panels and as technology advances installing more sustainable non carbon intensive heating solutions. Whilst this work is ongoing, it is encouraging that since 2019 we have been in a position to embark on these projects in earnest.

I trust the above forms a helpful guide to some of my activities and interests as your councillor. It is in the nature of the role that it is sometimes difficult to convey via local media and other outlets just how complex this can be. Please email or phone me, contact details listed below, if there is anything you would like to discuss regarding housing or any other issue you may have. I would be very pleased to speak to you or simply receive ideas from you.

I hope to provide further outlines of my activities at LDC and the National Park in future updates, including my support for projects directly relevant to the Ouse Valley Parishes. These projects go well beyond the emails I regularly receive concerning planning, pathways and potholes. Whilst these three issues are important and are known to dominate the attention of many local councillors, they form only a part of my activities. I trust this update has helped demonstrate this.

I wish everyone a good September.

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