

Stroud District Councillor Report for Kingswood Ward

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Introduction

I have now reached the end of my second year as Stroud District Councillor for Kingswood Ward. Following the final go-ahead for the Chestnut Park Development in late 2016/early 2017 it does not seem like a momentous year for Kingswood however there have been more noticeable events in the District as a whole.

The Stroud District Council (SDC) Annual General Meeting was held on 18 May 2017 where the new Council Chair, Councillor Gary Powell and Vice-Chair, Councillor Jenny Miles were elected. The meeting formally confirmed that the Council will continue to be run by an alliance of Labour, Liberal-Democrat and Green Councillors under the leadership of Steve Lydon (Labour). The Conservative Party remained the largest single group on the Council.

All Committee Chairs and Vice-Chairs were re-elected (no changes from last year) and the committee members confirmed with no change from last year.

Unfortunately in January 2018 Steve Lydon had to step down as Leader of the Council due to ill health. Councillor Doina Cornell was proposed for the role and accepted without a vote with no other candidates being proposed.

The key posts are therefore:

- Steve Lydon – Strategy and Resources Committee Chair, replaced by Doina Cornell from January 2018.
- Simon Pickering – Environment Committee Chair
- Mattie Ross – Housing Committee Chair
- Steve Robinson – Community Services & Licensing Committee Chair
- Tom Williams – Development Control Committee (DCC) Chair
- Nigel Studdert-Kennedy - Audit & Standards Committee (ASC) Chair

I continue to serve on the DCC and the ASC.

Three areas of Council business impacted on Kingswood over the last year:

- Local Development and Planning Applications
- Recycling and refuse collection
- Budget and Council Tax

Local Development and Planning

In early 2017, the committee met to explore why we seem to have so few planning applications referred to DCC. We will be encouraging more local referrals by clarifying call-in rules. Call-ins for planning evaluation is encouraged in order to ensure transparency in the planning process and to provide opportunity for interested parties to be heard by the committee of elected members who you can hold to account.

It is interesting that Stroud has approved applications for *three* “discount food stores” with residential space in 2017-18 for Stroud town. My voting preference tends to promote retention of industrial zoning to provide capacity for local jobs/employment however when business does not adopt these spaces it is better to redevelop for mixed retain/residential and help to relieve pressure on greenfield sites. As a planning organisation we do not choose between retailers. It will be up to the market to decide which move ahead first, or even at all.

The Penn Wood Lodge planning application for new buildings on the edge of Kingswood was referred to DCC in March 2018. I did not see any strong Kingswood opinion for or against the development however I voted with Council Officers recommendation against the application on the basis that it is not compliant with Stroud District Plan or Kingswood Neighbourhood Plan and to me the adopted plans should carry dominant weight in any decision. The vote in the end was a majority in favour of the application. I think that Pennwood Lodge is and will continue to be a good neighbour in Kingswood however I am concerned that the local plans were not given more prominence in the decision making process.

Recycling and Refuse disposal

In July 2016 a new refuse collection agent, UBICO, started operations. One of the most visible SDC developments was the November 2016 change in the refuse and recycling operations in order to increase the amount of material recycled rather than buried as landfill.

Resident recycling collections were revised to a two-weekly collection of a bottles/plastics/metals “wheeley” bin and paper/cardboard tubs plus a new weekly collection of food waste in specially provided tubs. A garden waste recycling service, using another wheeley bin, also provides a two weekly collection service from February to November but this incurs an additional cost and has not been taken up as widely as expected. This has produced another increase in recycled materials collected with a rapid local adoption of the new food waste service.

Despite some initial local problems on introduction the new service now seems to be working, **however your views are welcome.**

The Environment Committee meetings in mid 2017 identified that the Recycling campaign for Stroud District proceeds well however it was noted that the forecast for the environment committee’s budget showed a net overspend.. In brief, while the new system has been well received and the results are the best in the County it is well over budget. The original assumptions used by Ubico to estimate the costs appear incorrect and communication with Ubico to discuss the contract proved difficult. Part of the problem lies in the reduced prices paid on the world market for raw materials produced by the scheme.

Budget and Council Tax

A significant issue at the start of 2017 was the decision by the controlling coalition on the Council to spend more on public housing stock in the next four years, exhausting the reserve

funds by 2020, making maximum advantage of annual council tax rises and using some general funds available for housing stock (capital) expenditure.

While a desire to increase housing stock spending to accommodate the Stroud District waiting list is understandable and there were elements of the total budget which were laudable (eg investment in revenue/jobs generating business-parks and the canal restoration project), the Conservative (opposition) group voted against the overall capital budget plan on the basis that by 2020 all funding sources would be exhausted and the sources for subsequent spending is unclear. Ongoing close monitoring of spending is required.

In July/August 2017 it was announced that Stroud District Council will be seeking to balance the emerging hole in its finances from 2021 when reserves will have been used up.

This will have a substantial effect on Council services including a reduction in council staffing levels. An initial phase in 2017 was to not fill posts open for the previous six months. The areas affected include Finance, Legal, Human Resources, Asset Management, Elections, Land Charges, Regeneration, Community Facilities, Environmental Health and Planning Strategy. Following on from this into 2018 there will be restructuring affecting Customer Services, Community Services, Public Spaces, Finance, Planning Strategy (Regeneration) and the Museum in the Park. Further phases will follow with an objective being around 20% reduction in the workforce over 4 years.

In early 2018 during the SDC Council meeting the capital programme and medium term financial plan were debated at length. The Conservative opposition proposed an alternative budget plan. It involved a £2 million reduction in capital spend on housing to be replaced by (among other things):

- £1 million spent on homelessness reduction
- Electric vehicle incentive schemes
- Discretionary spending scheme for councillors
- Removal of plans for town centre parking charges
- Retention of some money in the general fund to “future proof” against uncertainty in future years.

The amendment was not accepted and the original budget plan voted through by majority.

The council tax levels for 2018/19 were voted through by majority following debate.

One point of interest is that in late 2017, SDC agreed to be part of the 100% Business Rate Retention Pilot. The Council agrees to be part of the Gloucestershire bid for business rate pilot status for 2018/19 whereby the Council retains local business tax but forgoes some central government grants.

Holding to account

The Audit and Standards Committee role is to hold SDC to account in following its legal and procedural requirements. We are trying as a committee to be more active in this role particularly with respect to risk mitigation and the effects of the coming reduction in staff levels on required levels of service.

For example in July 2017 the Procurement Review (PR) 2017/18 was debated. This is intended to consider the actions required to further improve the Council's performance in relation to adherence to procurement procedures in contract placement and value for money in contract management. This theme will be followed up in the coming months with Key Performance Indicators promised by Council Officers.

In October 2017 there was review of Stroud District Council operating procedures in the area of procurement contract placement, contract enforcement and value for money. This is an area that we will increasingly challenge as we move into an era of squeezed spending and possible limits on recruitment at the Council.

In February 2018 the Audit and Standard Committee addressed an update report on risk management prompting a discussion on how the list of risks would be mitigated i.e. risks are listed but no concrete management plan exists for most of them. It was decided that the category of each risk would be reviewed by officers before every ASC meeting and that those where an acceptable improvement has not been made would result in the chair of the committee being asked to attend the ASC meeting to discuss.

Stroud Subscription rooms

During the latter months of 2017 a significant topic of discussion in Council was the fate of the Stroud subscription rooms in the centre of the town. This facility costs Stroud District a significant sum of money to run every year and a cross-chamber "Task and Finish Group" was set-up over a year ago to consider options on the future with a view to saving money while still retaining the public amenity. A draft report from this Group was available in November 2017 with an SDC meeting the same month to consider the outcome and ask questions about the decision making process and the conclusion with a routine Strategy and Resources Group meeting in December to make a decision on the report.

The conclusion of this Group was to sell the freehold ownership of the Subscription Rooms to a private company who would in turn guarantee ongoing public access to the rooms for arts and social events. This conclusion was unpopular in Stroud with many Council and public voices raised against loss of ownership of the facility.

It was announced in December 2017 that the decision of the "Task and Finish Group" set up to consider the way forward would not be adopted. The Subscription Rooms will now be retained in public ownership and a new leasing arrangement sought to minimise cost going forward. In my opinion this is a good decision. This is a community asset which the Council should be able to manage as effectively as a private organisation purchasing it.