

Annual Report – District Councillor

Boundary Review

Plans are underway to reduce the number of Councillors from 38 to 31, as part of a boundary review for the District. The new wards will consist of 1, 2 and 3 member wards, with Upton for example reducing to a single member ward, alongside Ripple and Longdon.

The final decision on ward boundaries is due to be published this summer, with elections taking place next May, (2023).

South Worcestershire Development Plan

There looks likely that there will be a further delay to the South Worcestershire Development Plan. Malvern Hills is particularly exposed here as Malvern are having challenges showing a five year housing land supply. This means that developer will try to have developments agreed under the Nationals Policy Planning Framework (NPPF), rather than the local plan. The NPPF has a presumption in favour of development, and leaves rural locations exposed.

We asked 12 months ago for a “plan B” for Malvern, where we could look at what steps we take locally to ensure planning remains in our control, but unfortunately, this was not actioned. Additional requirements on developers for Ecological and Green initiatives have seriously undermined the viability of local schemes, making it more likely that developments now go ahead without these enhanced green initiatives, further putting pressure on the environment.

Malvern College

After 12 months of inactivity, MHDC finally voted to respect the covenant on the Malvern Hills College building. Although the building is owned by Warwickshire College Group, the building has a covenant which means that any sale must be for educational purposes, blocking the sale of the building for something like housing. Conservative Leader Jeremy Owenson forced the council to vote to respect the covenant, and all but one Councillor voted in favour of the college. A single Democratic Alliance Councillor voted to against the motion to save the college.

MHDC is now considering providing funding to the educational trust that is looking to buy the building, to make sure that education can continue at the college.

Malvern Theatres

MHDC had previously agree to part fund the Theatre Extension. The Conservative Group asked that the work be started during lockdown, since the theatre was already shut. The Theatre stated it could not risk spending the money, and MHDC were asked, but we not prepared to underwrite the additional cost. MHDC could have put an additional £1m on the table, which would be repaid when it could be afforded by the Theatre. This offer was not made.

In a post-covid world, building costs have increased since the end of lockdown, and the theatre costs have increased by £1m, which now MHDC have been forced to pay. Going forward, we should be looking to government funding to complete this type of work, under it's “Build Back Better” fund.

Town Planning

Nearly four years after announcing the review of the Town Centres, MHDC has just published the review of the town centres. This covered Malvern, Malvern Link, Barnards Green, Tenbury and Upton Upon Severn.

Unfortunately, budget is limited on what can be achieved, as MHDC was unsuccessful in getting any money from the initial “Build Back Better” funding from the government. Kidderminster and Bromsgrove were both successful in securing millions of pounds on new investment. In addition, we were unable to exploit local developments like the building of the new Morrisons in Upton, where the Council failed look at redeveloping the Hanley Road Car Park at the same time, with the opportunity to build a new road connecting Hanley Road to New Street.

Going forward, MHDC needs to develop a series of “shovel ready” plans to tap into government money to enable us to develop our town centres, play areas and tourist attractions.

Gravel Extraction

Companies still keep applying for more and more gravel extraction in the area. It won't be long before we are all covered in dust, looking like we live on the moon. Gravel Extraction is a County Matter, with District only being asked for their views as a consultee. My view is that enough is enough, and it is time to start winding extraction down, rather than winding it up. The key for me is to ensure that the land after use is returned to full public ownership, with Town and Parish Councils being enabled to take on the land, and to be given the funding to look after the land in the long term.