

**Report from Your Huntingdonshire District Councillor Jon
Neish Ward member for Holywell-cum-Needlingworth
2019/20**



I hope you are all keeping well, staying safe in the situation we all find ourselves in which none of us could have imagined just a month or so ago.



When I took over as your District Councillor 2 years ago, I had not even heard of Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Now I sit in, from the comfort of my home (as many of you are having to do) partaking in meetings with some 250 plus Councillors and Cabinet Ministers from around the country on weekly briefings. Seeing them struggle with technology is interesting and then the seamless way (well nearly) our Parish Council have conducted its virtual meeting was a revelation. HDC held its first Virtual Development Management Committee (DMC) on 18th May. This is fundamental in continuing our democratic processes with planning applications and to try and kick start the economy when allowed.

We reach the start of yet another month of significant interruption to normal operations for all of us and HDC. I am pleased to report that most of our services are fully operating.

We are still maintaining 100 per cent service on all waste streams, street cleaning and grounds maintenance. This means that HDC is one of just five per cent of all local authorities in the country that are still providing 100 per cent service provision of this nature. This compares nationally to only 20 per cent operating street cleaning normally, and 41 per cent operating a garden recycling service normally.

Economic Development, Finance and Revenue & Benefits officers have also been working flat out and completed nearly all the £10k and £25k grant payments to eligible businesses and all the applications for our new council tax deferral scheme. We are still trying to reach around 600 small firms that have yet to apply!

We are now about to move onto the second phase administering support for the new discretionary grant scheme which will be even harder. Over 2,500 households have applied to defer council tax payments until June.

The Huntingdonshire Community Hub has now been operating for nearly 2 months with about 7,000 phone calls made to vulnerable residents, 600 food parcels delivered, and 700 prescriptions. The County Council is responsible for providing help and support to those residents who have been deemed 'clinically extremely vulnerable' and placed on the shielded list. The residents that HDC has contacted so far are people we have identified through other means as being vulnerable and possibly in need of help that they would not get from CCC or the Government because they're not on the shielded list. The work that is going on from the hub is really making such a difference to the people throughout the district.

HDC have been keen not to step in, and potentially tread on anyone's shoes, where support groups have sprung up in villages like ours.

Social media, for all its faults, has proved a lifeline for many. Street volunteers have sprung up within villages who are all doing a vital role of supporting those that cannot go out.

One Leisure Tennis Courts

The tennis courts at One Leisure, California Road, St Ives have been reopened to the public on a pre booked basis only. Residents can book courts via www.oneleisure.net or the One Leisure app on a pay as you play basis or take advantage of an annual pass. Please see the attached press release for full information.

Skateparks

Our skate parks in St Neots – Riverside and St Ives – Hill Rise, remain closed to minimise the spread of the virus and keep our residents safe. Our parks and open spaces continue to be open for use, but we encourage everyone to follow social distancing guidelines.

Country Park visitors

With the recent relaxing of rules and glorious weather, Hinchbrook Country Park and Paxton Pits have seen a staggering increase in visitors. Whilst social distancing within the parks is practical, we are reminding residents to please be mindful of these rules, especially within the carparks. Where possible please walk to the sites or cycle.

We have seen the same issue within Holywell-cum-Needingworth. I would remind everybody within our village to keep to the, ever-changing Government guidelines, on social distancing and report any concerns through the correct Police channels.

Testing or Swabbing for COVID-19

Testing or swabbing is an important part of the COVID-19 plans to ensure that people can return to work as quickly as it is safe to do so and take the appropriate actions if they test positively.

For all of the latest information about who is eligible to access a testing, and how to book a test at one of the national testing facilities located in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough please visit <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-getting-tested>. There are two drive through sites within the District but please note, all tests must be booked in advance. New centres at St Neots and Huntingdon One Leisure sites.

The next few weeks, months and years will be exceptionally challenging in so many ways for all of us.

I am currently working with the Leader and Officers, as his Deputy, on recovery plans to support Town centres to open safely.

HDC are committed to assist our residents and support businesses back to whatever normality is. We will use the opportunity to improve our ways of working but it will be financially testing. Our income has been dramatically reduced. Just one example is car parking charges, which we all like to complain about. Our losses in income is nearly as much as it costs to run our waste management in its entirety. Without these types of income streams council tax from our residents would have to be far higher than they currently are.

We have also invested heavily in alternative incomes from a range of property portfolios that are still holding up well.

This is why we have agreed, at our additional costs, to take over all the County Councils grass cutting (not highway verges I may add) within our village to ensure our 'pride of place' agenda is expanded. It will not please everyone as a few prefer less cutting, but we will cut at least 6 times a year and not just the apparent three as existing.

As Executive Councillor for Strategic Planning I have responsibility for planning in Huntingdonshire. Our village has seen several applications that have not always been welcome, except for those that need houses. The number of affordable housing within the village will see an increase and the Rural Exception site has now restarted giving a real opportunity for our own residents to finally get on the housing ladder. I will continue to challenge unsustainable and non-policy compliant applications in the knowledge that we now have a strong Local plan. This growth will undoubtedly increase the workload of the Parish Council but also brings opportunities with new residents who I know will be welcomed. They will help support our fine local school and businesses within the Village

Finally, I would like to say a big thank you to all your Parish Councillors and its Officers. Your Parish Council has stood up to the Challenge and continued to work as normal as it can. The office has been fully staffed despite the cramped difficulties; the grass cut with bins emptied. Nearly all the normal Parish Council activities have continued. On top of this the additional challenges of this pandemic have created a monumental amount of behind the scenes extra work. They have still managed to meet all their commitments (some even virtually).

Stay safe and well

Warmest regards

Jon

Jon Neish

Deputy Executive Leader, Vice Chairman of the Cabinet, and Executive Councillor for Strategic Planning

District Ward Councillor for Holywell-cum-Needingworth

