

27 May 2021 - Independents and OLRG Alliance Group annual Council policy speech.

I am delighted tonight to bring a new administration to Tandridge District Council - for the first time an administration of Independent Councillors.

Our key aim, as it always has been, is to put residents first. We want to do our absolute best to make serving the community the overriding priority in everything that this Council does.

And by “the community”, we mean all Tandridge residents both in the south and in the north to the same degree. Tandridge Council exists for the whole District and we aim to work for the benefit of the whole District.

We are keen to do things differently: we want to listen, we want to adapt, we want to put the Council on a stable financial footing, we want to bring openness and transparency to Council business, and we want to rebuild an organisation that delivers high quality, responsive services to residents and businesses. For the first time, our group is in a position to properly explore and review the way the Council has been operating.

It is no secret that we are inheriting some major problems in the Council’s finances and in the delivery of key services. It will not be an easy task to address these problems and to get the Council to a place where it can perform in the way that residents deserve.

As we take up the role of the administration, we have four major priorities:

1. Crime and anti-social behaviour: crime and the fear of crime is a concern to many Tandridge residents. We are already in discussions with the police to implement new measures in the District to deter criminal activity and to improve community safety.

2. Planning: Planning is a hugely important service to residents. On the doorstep, residents told us they are worried about development pressures in the District. They told us they wanted planning breaches to be dealt with promptly and firmly. They told us they are concerned about the large infrastructure deficit and they want new infrastructure to be secured before new housing is built. They told us there is a lack of affordable housing and that more affordable housing needs to be provided in housing developments.

Last year, we secured additional funding for the Planning Department and we need to ensure that is used wisely so that the Council can deliver the service that residents deserve. We want to give the Department the support it requires.

3. Business recovery and help: As an Oxted Councillor, I have received great feedback from business owners following our success in achieving two hour free parking and I am keen that as a group we build on that success to support local businesses across the District as they recover from Covid. We want to expand our focus beyond the local high streets and encourage new businesses throughout the District.

4. Rebuilding a functional organisation: we are faced with a situation where the Council's finances are in a parlous state. As an incoming administration, we now have the opportunity to scrutinise the finances carefully in a way that we have never before been able to do.

With the knowledge we currently have, we believe the primary reason for the finance problems is the decision by previous administrations to embark on a hugely expensive change programme called Customer First. It was supposed to make savings but has gone millions over budget. It has also meant the loss of many experienced Council employees. The new Local Plan has also gone well over budget.

In February, the Council submitted a balanced budget, but now there is the much bigger task of actually delivering it. The Council has to make savings this year of at least £2.7m.

And we cannot call upon financial reserves to help. In March 2017, the Council had £8.6m of reserves to call upon in times of need. Three years later, more than half of this reserve was gone. All this before the pandemic hit...

As you can see, there is a lot that needs doing. Given the difficult financial situation that we are inheriting, hard choices are going to have to be made, and so we must explore all avenues to deliver good services, including combining services with other Councils to achieve better value for residents. We have to be flexible and willing to adapt, to put aside old practices if necessary and to openly acknowledge past mistakes, and to do whatever it takes to deliver core functions well.

We look forward to working creatively with our new Chief Executive, David Ford, who joins the Council in a few weeks' time, to achieve these goals. There is now an opportunity to address the problems and to clear away the uncertainty and drift that has come with them.

We hope to bring stability to the Council's employees, to be a positive supportive leadership and to improve staff morale which, we are very aware, has been badly battered by the bruising Customer First restructure project and its fallout.

I should say here that we are also fully aware that we are a minority administration and that we need to show respect to, and engage with, the other groups who make up this Council in order to achieve these ambitious goals.

In closing, our group are not traditional politicians and that means we are free to do things differently.

We are not afraid to say we don't have all the answers or we could do that better. We want to talk to those outside of Tandridge who are successful so that we can bring the best ideas back home to improve what this Council has to offer to all of our residents.

We wish to be as inclusive as possible to others and would welcome suggestions and joint working, irrespective of political grouping. We hope that all groups can agree that Tandridge Council should be about serving its residents – and nothing else. We look forward to working together to deliver the very best for all of the residents in Tandridge.