

An Interview with.. Cllr Ben Chapelard, Leader of the Council



Ben Chapelard was first elected in 2010 to represent St James' where he has lived for 16 years, having previously lived in Park and Culverden wards. Ben is married and he and his wife have two sons. As well as being Council Leader Ben works part-time as a French and Spanish teacher at a Kent secondary school.

You have set up a new administration known as the Borough Partnership, with new priorities for the Council, what's the vision?

Our vision is unfortunately constrained by the financial situation we have inherited. Therefore, we aim to do a lot of smaller things that will make a difference to residents, and which correspond with our priorities called the Focus On Five. Cabinet members are now busy putting together their plans to deliver on these priorities, which we will share as soon as we can.

Tell us more about the Focus on Five, why these five?

1. Safeguarding finances
2. Vibrant and safer towns and villages
3. Carbon reduction
4. Genuinely affordable housing and social rental housing
5. Digital access, transparency, and local democracy

A decade of austerity has squeezed the Council's finances and the impact of the pandemic hasn't helped; this has resulted in a budget gap deficit of £944,000 this year. However, with inflation increasing and Council Tax capped at 2 per cent, we realised early on that an In Year Budget Review was needed quickly. If we do nothing the budget gap deficit will grow each year, this is unsustainable, so we need to act now. A consultation was held over six weeks during July - September to ask residents for their views about increasing car park charges. We also asked for residents' suggestions for alternative ways of raising more income. Safeguarding the Council's finances is vital if we are to protect the services which residents tell us they value.

The traditional high street can compete with the internet, but we must also adapt to the reality of the digital age. We want town centres we can all be proud of, where we transform the way we live and where walking and cycling are part of how we get around.

Climate change is real, the recent dry, hot weather is just one example of what is happening. Climate change poses an existential threat to us and the clock is ticking. We must all act locally if we are to win the fight globally.

Many of our residents enjoy living in some of the most desirable postcodes in the country. For too many, however, quality housing remains unaffordable, denying them the lifestyle they deserve. This Council can play a transformative role in the lives of some of the most needy residents.

Residents have told me they have felt unheard and disempowered about the biggest decisions in our borough. We must never lose sight that this Council works for residents and should strive for the best for the borough.

Which challenges lay ahead due to the limited budget?

The Council is spending more money than it has coming in. We cannot keep raiding the Council's savings account to plug the deficit. We have four options: borrow money, sell off property the Council owns, increase prices we charge for services or make cuts to services.

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Will you cut services to safeguard the finances?

I was honest with residents when I became Council Leader. I said that there were difficult choices and difficult decisions to be made in order to safeguard the finances. By taking urgent and decisive action, starting with the In Year Budget Review we are hoping that we can protect as many services as possible.

What changes can residents expect to see?

Hopefully residents are already starting to see some changes, we are taking our Cabinet meetings out on tour. We have already been to Cranbrook and Sandhurst, and Paddock Wood is next. It's great to talk to residents after the Cabinet meeting and answer their questions. That's important to all Cabinet members; we want to hear resident's views and concerns. You'll see a fresh approach, new ideas, new priorities, and a new energy!

In post for just under four months, and as a teacher, what has been your biggest learning experience so far?

I have enjoyed the challenge of working with Lib Dem colleagues along with TWA and Labour for the good of the borough. The Cabinet consists of a group of highly-talented and enthusiastic councillors who are working tirelessly for our residents. Working together as a cross-party administration has been a steep but enjoyable learning curve and so far it is working well. I'm learning new things each day, which as a teacher, I enjoy and am passionate about. My students would be saying the boot is definitely on the other foot right now!

And finally, you have said that listening to residents is important, what's the best way for someone to get in touch with you?

Email, phone, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.