



"ALL CHANGE!"

Janine Gardner, Town Clerk to Cranbrook TC, reflects upon her council's first term

Cranbrook is a town being developed from scratch in East Devon on land which was green fields in 2011. The following year, the first residents moved in and by 2019 the town had grown to approximately 4,500 residents occupying 1,900 or so properties. East Devon District Council's Local Plan makes provision for the delivery of circa 8,000 homes by 2031.

Cranbrook Town Council was created on the day of the local elections on 7 May 2015 and was made up entirely of members who had never held a councillor position before. Within its first year, the council recruited a full-time clerk and part-time administrative support, became heavily involved in the master-planning of the town, adopted the General Power of Competence, established a community grants scheme, set up a Community Partnership which later evolved into a Local Action Group, launched a citizen of the year award, established daily working contact with the consortium of developers and achieved many improvements to existing and future infrastructure, became active on numerous outside bodies, leased a defibrillator for public use, and so on.

The town council also commissions its own youth service and has been managing its first allotments site since March 2019. The council will see many more services and assets transferred to it over the coming years, including community development work and a Country Park Ranger managing a 30-hectare country park and nature reserve.

The development of the town follows a commercial delivery model – the appropriateness of which for a development of this scale is a debate in itself – and the entire town was subject to an estate rent charge which developers levy onto each household in perpetuity in



order to cover the maintenance of all public open spaces and communal areas across the town. This is a common arrangement for new developments across the country.

However, the town council took the view that this charge lacked accountability and transparency. Discussions commenced in 2016 to cease the estate rent charge and to transfer the maintenance and freehold ownership of all public open spaces and communal areas to the town council. The latter had, in part, been envisaged by the Section 106 agreement anyway.

Following extensive negotiations, the estate rent charge ceased on 31 March 2018. On 1 April 2018 the town council assumed responsibility for the maintenance of all public open spaces, including the Country Park and play areas. The town council also started to manage a litter picking and bin emptying contract. This change provided the opportunity to have direct control over these costs which in turn delivered and will continue to deliver savings for residents, despite the council's precept having seen a tenfold increase.

The town council carried out public procurement exercises in 2018 in order to ensure best value for public money. The contract for grounds maintenance was above the threshold for EU tender regulations. The council awarded a five-year agreement to a grounds maintenance contractor at a substantial net cost saving compared to the previous contract – despite maintaining a larger area.

Explaining this journey to residents has never been easy. Many have been struggling to understand the differences between the estate rent charge and the council tax, and why there were two different charges and now there are not, and why the precept rose so sharply in 2018-19, and why it has taken a long time to release the individual households from the rent charge deed. The residents' expectations of the town council are, rightly, very high. Despite now being a sizeable organisation in financial terms, the council still only employs 2.7 full-time equivalent staff and maintaining effective community relations while keeping on top of the day job can sometimes be a struggle but I think, all in all, we're doing a good job.

FACT FILE: CRANBROOK

🏠 Population 4,500 & growing

£ Total Annual Budget £474,068 & growing

£ TC precept at Band D £256.03 (stable)

👥 Staff (FTE) 2.7 & growing