

Annual Report of Cllr Chris Jarman JP

Independent Councillor for Totland and Colwell Ward

Isle of Wight Council 01May2023-30Apr2024

Having spent two challenging years as a member of the Alliance Group and having successfully delivered my second Council annual budget as Cabinet Member for Finance, it became increasingly clear that my ability to represent the diverse needs and expectations of my residents were at variance with the majority in that group. Specific issues of policy differences related to financial transparency, delivery of much needed relocatable housing and social rentable accommodation, provision of on-island mental health facilities for children, cross-group working of Councillors to ensure best use of all available talent, prioritisation of housing delivery so as to protect greenfield sites and many others. I was not alone in these concerns and my only available recourse was to follow others leaving the Alliance Group and help establish the politically neutral Empowering Islanders Group where I was asked to be their inaugural Leader. Being mindful of the need to maintain sound Financial oversight I offered to continue as Cabinet Member. My offer was refused and on 26th July 2023 the decision of the then leader Lora Peacey-Wilcox was published for my removal from Cabinet retrospectively effective 19May2023. I continue to believe her decision was not in the best interests of our Island.

My IWC focus has continued on delivering the correct form, location and pricing structure for homes that the majority of Islanders can afford within the draft Island Planning Strategy. Together with other Members and with the support of our MP Bob Seely, we have secured provision in the combination of the new levelling-up act and subsequently updated National Planning Policy Framework for our Island to claim Exceptional Circumstances. This critical provision, if successfully claimed, enables greater flexibility in our planning strategy so that we can establish a direction against further empty and second homes and prioritise rental homes commensurate with the household income of those Island residents in greatest need. There remains considerable opposition against claiming Exceptional Circumstances as it has the potential impact of binding the hands of developers and those who may have different profit-maximising financial goals.

Having completed three years as Chair of the IWC Pension Committee the results are broadly positive. The fund has been very well managed with structural investment reforms enacted to provide greater resilience and better performance with the result of a now fully funded pension scheme. The pension team supporting this work have been exemplary and frequently praised, but their diligence and performance has not seen the personal rewards necessary to retain them and critical members have sadly departed. Replacing them and training their successors is a lengthy and expensive process and alternative models of remuneration to recruit and retain such unique skill sets is urgently required.

Being independent, and with the political independence brought by the Empowering Islanders Group, I and they are able to work with all 39 elected Councillors “irrespective of the colour of their respective underpants” to ensure a wider base of inputs to, and understanding of, important issues, and to reach balanced decisions openly and transparently. Whilst this can be a more complex process to manage, it does ensure the opportunity for the representatives of all residents to play an active part in decision making. To enshrine this more democratic and open model in future IWC decision making, I as the Empowering Islanders representative, have been

an active member of the working group over the past year evaluating a change to a proportionally balanced committee system. The working group has examined alternative models elsewhere and sought knowledge of best practices that can strengthen the governance model of IWC. Their recommendation was brought to an Extraordinary Full Council where the change was agreed, including my amendment to separate the roles of Leader of the Council from the position of Chair of the Policy, Resources and Finance Committee, although the implementation was delayed until May 2025. I believe such a system-change is necessary given the 'hung' nature of our IWC and to enable a democratic system rather than the present autocratic model where a Leader and Cabinet, all from the same minority Alliance Group of only 13, have sole effective control. As with most change there are those who see themselves as 'winning' or not from such change, and I trust all will be able to put aside personal considerations for the long term betterment of our Island Governance.

A secondary advantage from being in the politically neutral Empowering Islanders Group has been the opportunity to work on specific topics with those from other groups. The majority have welcomed and embraced such openness but a few others regrettably declined, possibly due to their seeing it as eroding their personal position.

Generally my neutrality and that of Empowering Islander Group has been used to investigate matters more thoroughly, building up a substantial database of issues and evidence with which to progressively challenge questionable practices and decisions. There is no doubt that our activities have and continue to make some uncomfortable, particularly our challenges to claimed confidentiality where we start from the premise that IWC funds are public monies and as such residents have the right to expect detailed disclosure and transparency – something most local authorities and politicians promote but few practice. My personal view is that every Island resident should have the right to see where funds are raised, where they are spent, and to challenge when they disagree.

Specifically an offer was made by Empowering Islanders to all Groups to work together on a common budget. Given the extremely challenging financial situation of IWC we believed a joint approach was appropriate. Most Members agreed to work together with us with the result we sought to use a provision in the IWC Constitution to prepare and present our own full alternative budget for 2024-25. Sadly the provisions of our constitution were frustrated and despite substantial efforts from October 2023-January 2024, our initial goal was thwarted. Those actions and those involved remain active considerations before internal committees and are now subject to external examination. Our best effort 'Plan B' was to bring forward a 28 page budget amendment to that of the minority administration. Our amendment was passed by the majority of Members but brought the wrath of the minority administration who immediately and publicly declared they were not bound to follow it. We can only trust that, should a proportionally balanced committee system be implemented, that they will, henceforth, embrace and respect democratic decisions.

My Councillor role, family relationships and past employment enabled me to attend the official IW-Coburg anniversary visit which I funded personally. Their celebration of all things Wight in the historic town of Coburg in Bavaria was breathtaking and followed their visit to us earlier in the year. Victoria & Albert themes adorn their picturesque and historic town where Town Hall, museums and even cafes are adorned in remembrance of that great love.

Locally, I:

- Hold local Ward surgeries most Thursdays at the Totland Parish Office on the Broadway.
- Spend considerable time as Ward Councillor assisting local residents with their concerns – the majority being accommodation, personal finance or infrastructure related (roads, coastal erosion, sewage, transport etc).
- Continue to provide practical support to key local facilities and support groups including our Horticultural Society, West Wight Sports and Community Centre etc.
- Fund raise for Island charities involved in cancer prevention, detection and supporting treatment management services such as patient transport and end of life care.
- Volunteer each week as Walk Leader of West Wight Walking for Health Group.
- Provided support and advice to Freshwater Bay Residents Association, Sustainable Freshwater, IW Prostate Group Testing Days, Wightlink User Group, Mountbatten Hospice, FYTBus, Freshwater Library (FOFL), IW-Coburg twinning Group and more.
- Continue to host a third Ukrainian family with young children and support others I previously hosted into employment and independent living. My wife and I have recently sponsored a fourth family of a mother and baby and we look forward to their safe arrival.
- Built on our relationship between civic and police authorities by attending the senior police visit to Ryde and joined a squad of Hants&IW Police for a stretch night shift to experience, first hand, the issues they are called to deal with and the manner with which they conduct themselves.

My local government roles May 2023-2024 include:

1. Elected Independent Councillor for Totland and Colwell Ward
2. Totland Parish Councillor
3. Freshwater Parish Councillor
4. Chair IWC Pension Committee
5. Chair Freshwater Parish Council Finance Committee
6. Member – IWC Full Council
7. Committee Member – Audit and Governance Committee
8. Committee Member – Appointment and Employment Committee
9. Attendee – Corporate Scrutiny Committee
10. Committee Member – Licensing Committee (part year)
11. Attendee – Policy and Scrutiny Committee Health & Social Care
12. Attendee – Policy and Scrutiny Committee Neighbourhoods and Regeneration
13. Attendee – IWC Local Pension Board

IWC Meetings Attendance 89%, apologies due to conflicting meetings 11%.