

Work as therapy

Many councillors are dedicated, but few perhaps would continue to discharge their duties from a hospital bed in the early stages of recovery from a life-threatening illness, during which they admit they lost the will to live at times. Mark Smulian reports.

Warwickshire County Council's portfolio holder for improvement and workforce Martin Heatley says he found his work "the best therapy possible" as he lay in hospital recovering from bone cancer treatment and unable to raise his upper body by more than 20 degrees.

Regular visits from officers and colleagues, and an arsenal of technical aids, allowed him to still oversee the council's staffing changes during a difficult period as spending cuts bit.

He has now returned fully to work, but he cannot resume his previous all-action life in climbing, running, flying and diving.

"My extreme sports days are past, and I will have to find something else to do," he says.

Martin has combined these daredevil activities and a career in farming with local government work since the late 1970s, when he was involved in a dispute over his son's access to a school bus.

He contacted a councillor friend, who persuaded him to join the Conservative party and stand for Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council.

Martin was elected to Warwickshire in 1993, initially in opposition, where he decided to see if he could achieve something through the scrutiny system, and became chair of the overview and scrutiny board.

"I quickly realised that you had to be in there or you'd just be a backbencher, and that's never been me, and I still believe scrutiny is one of the best tools a councillor has for bringing the cabinet into line."

He says his main achievement then was a scrutiny that led to rejection of navigation on the Upper Avon because of safety issues.

As a farmer, initially in dairy, then arable and now of grassland, Martin takes a close interest in environmental issues.

He has chaired Warwickshire's waste partnership with Coventry and Solihull and is keen on recycling.

"Most local authorities, if they do not want to be penalised out of existence by the landfill tax in a few years' time, need to encourage both

rural and urban areas to do far more composting and recycling," he says.

"Recycling almost everything ought to be a matter of local pride. Also, I see places in Europe where every farm has a wind turbine, whereas here we are just picking at it because of nimbyism."

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Flying, and not just in passenger planes, was a passion. Martin has become "everything short of a qualified pilot", and flown in an aerobatics team.

He has also sailed tall ships, including to the now-uninhabited St Kilda island, had been a keen diver and as a marathon runner has lost count of his appearances in the London event.

The most unusual run he did was the Everest marathon, to raise £4,000 for Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institute.

"We flew to Kathmandu, then to Namche Bazaar and then yomped to Gorak Shep, the last village before the Mount Everest base camp, where we climbed to a plateau then ran a measured marathon back to Gorak Shep," he says.

"I'd hoped to climb the highest peak on each continent but will now not be able to."

After all that, grappling with Warwickshire's staffing change management programme might seem a little mundane, but Martin thrives on work.

His treatment involved operations on his spine, thigh and hip and he lost almost half his 13st weight during it, though is now gaining weight.

"If you ask if I lost the will to live the answer was 'yes' at times, and if you ask if my faith was shaken the answer was 'yes' too, though my faith in the medical profession increased greatly."

He concludes: "I was tired of lying in hospital counting spots on the ceiling, and work was the best therapy."

"If you are dedicated you can do anything. I don't like wasting time, or time wasters." 

