

Kent County Council Update

April 2023

It has been a real honour and privilege to represent the residents of Maidstone Rural South in County Hall for the last 2 years. This last year has seemed like a much more significant challenge than the first year. The rapid rise in inflation, the war in Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis all have had very significant impacts on our service delivery and our unit costs. “We have some very difficult decisions to make” is a phrase I have heard throughout all layers of Government for many years, but it has never been starker or truer than it is today.

I have written this report in two sections:

A more localised report relating to me and the division and then a section which goes into much greater detail of the more strategic issues affecting the whole of the county for those who are interested:

PART 1

As I have said budgetary issues have been significant and funding has been difficult and stretched across the board. I meet regularly with one of our division MPs Helen Whately and this is an opportunity to express community concerns and express national issues that have an impact on us locally, a very simple example of this is poor Primary care, which leads us to problems downstream with adult social care.

Highways issues remain a significant concern for residents, across the Borough, however we have spent around £1.8 m on potholes and patching alone.

Areas of concern are the closure of the Leeds Langley road for 6 months over the summer. I am still liaising with local councillors and officers for a safe and efficient diversion to minimise disruption but thus far it seems that the diversion remains at Willington street

New single lines will be put down in Pattenden Lane in Marden and double yellows at Gybbon Rise in Staplehurst.

Early in the year we got additional signage at the Hawkenbury bridge, but this does remain an accident hotspot.

Over the course of the year, I have worked with MBC to ensure that section 106 monies totalling in excess of £324k for Staplehurst could be allocated to a possible scheme delivering an improved bus shelter and a pedestrian crossing over the Cranbrook Road approaching the Quarter. I think this would be an invaluable piece of infrastructure for the village.

Cameras at Plough Wents -These cameras are related to some work we’re doing on freight movements and volumes, we’ve chosen Leeds/ Langley B2163 as demo area. The cameras

have been commissioned for 1 week to observe the purpose of freight journeys within a zone area (hence the multiple cameras on the approaches) so we can better understand how many oversized vehicles are passing through the area for legitimate access. The technology is a more innovative version of the standard counters as the findings should be able to clarify the journey times from entry to exit in the area. This is a bit of a trial, as there isn't specifically a product on the market which meets what we've been looking to find out. We hope the results will be useful, either way these will be shared with the road safety team on our internal system for all Kent officers to review.

Collier Street residents approached me several months ago regarding a dangerous dog situation, this ended up encroaching into my role as a Borough Councillor, however this enabled me to liaise with the community protection team and Kent Police. It was a highly emotive situation and required lots of communication with residents, other councillors and the relevant authorities. What this highlighted is that sometime the law doesn't do what it should, or what we would want it to, but we worked with the powers we had, and the situation now appears to be under control.

There have been several flooding issues in Langley, Chart Sutton and the Boughton Monchelsea borders some of which remain on going but I am working on them.

I am delighted that after sustained pressure, meetings with KCC and our MP Helen Grant Marden Primary school will be expanding in September offering 20 additional places. The capital works will be undertaken by the Leigh Academy trust.

PROW are often of interest and I have a rather detailed email including MAPS if anyone is interested (let me know) but see a brief summary

there are 196 issues currently in chain or requiring attention. Of which:

103 are allocated and in chain.

8 are awaiting allocation

15 in progress – ie being worked on currently

24 are subject to landowner action. Eg stile repairs, crop reinstatement and are live – ie they've been notified, requested to act and will be subject to follow up

2 have work scheduled – in both cases bridge repairs/ replacements

19 reports have been added to the forward maintenance plan. We tend to group works by type and area and send out works packages when there is sufficient to ensure that the work will be efficient and viable for our contractors.

25 relate to long term obstructions. These are usually matters that relate to past development – often outside of the planning process – for example permitted agricultural development pre 1992, for which no Public Path Order (PPO) was made to divert the affected PROW or orchards planted pre 1991 where no provision was made for PROW. Most of the orchard issues are resolved as they are grubbed and replanted, or the land used for other crops. Those relating to development are being resolved by means of PPOs. Usually prompted by the sale of the property.

Vegetation clearance - Boughton Monchelsea – 1148 metres x 3 cuts

Marden 861 metres x 3 cuts

Staplehurst 2273 metres x 3 cuts

Applications to amend the Definitive Map or to divert PRow –: Currently 1 which is exceptionally low in comparison with the rest of the County although quite a few have been made historically.

Number of surfacing schemes in the area awaiting funding: I believe it is three with a total estimated value of £20K (which isn't too bad considering but reflects local geography and use)

Graham Head of PRow is more than happy to come and talk to the Parishes to share and talk about the work he does if you promise to let him speak early on!

We have had 2 voluntary village green applications in Boughton Monchelsea go through our regulation committee which I was delighted to support.

Community Services Consultation (Jan – March 26th) Proposed closure of Marden's children's centre

Since the consultation launched.

- I have met with MPC to listen to their concerns and views
- I have met with ward Councillors
- I have had meetings with KCC officers to express the impact this will have and to try and get answers as to what it will be replaced with.
- I have worked with senior officers at Maidstone Borough Council to shape and formulate an extensive response to the consultation highlighting gaps in data and areas that have not been considered
- I have then taken this response to our Communities Housing and Environment Policy Advisory Committee there I took feedback from fellow Councillors to add more weight and information to the response
- I took the revised response to our MBC executive meeting on 22nd March where it was signed off and subsequently sent to KCC
- I have submitted my own personal response as the County Councillor.

In short, I have and will continue to pull every democratic procedure lever available to keep our Children's Centre in Marden. I have also advised the leader of my position on this matter as it may end up being in conflict with what is recommended by the cabinet and subsequently to the full council.

I regularly assist individual residents with personal issues and concerns ranging from fighting to get SEND home to school transport reinstated, elderly residents having problems with bus passes, or advising parents on the Kent travel saver scheme whilst these are not big-ticket items, they are a vital part of what I do and if I'm honest one of the things I enjoy most.

Member Grants – Below are the monies I have spent this year. I allocate the money as evenly as I can to my 6 parishes if it appears uneven or unfair its simply that I had a lot of money unspent from the previous year, and I am carrying over more this year into next. Understandably due to the severe financial pressures our member grants have been cut from £10k to £3600 for next year, my unspent

money will be carried over. To be honest I think we are exceptionally lucky to have any going forward.

CMG SPENT: £9920 CMG REMAINING: £7,350

- Staplehurst PC - Youth Club start-up - £1000 – **Grant Status: Completed ref 22-MA-8**
- Slide Away – Website Renewal – £300 – **Grant Status: Completed ref 22-MA-12**
- Langley PC – Clock Restoration- £1500 – **Grant Status: Completed ref 22-MA-13**
- Sutton Valence PC – Platinum Meadow Scheme - £1820 – **Grant Status: Completed ref 22-MA-15**
- Staplehurst Under 5 Playgroup – Fencing for garden - £500 – **Grant Status: Completed ref 22-MA-21**
- Marden Parish Council - Marden Summer Play Scheme - £300 - **Grant Status: Completed ref 22-MA-28**
- RBL Sutton Vallence - Sutton Valence & District Branch RBL 100 years anniversary event - Reuniting people - £1000 - **Grant Status: Completed ref 22-MA-38**
- Boughton Monchelsea Parish Council - Energy efficiency improvements to Boughton Monchelsea village hall - £3000 - **Grant Status: Completed ref 22-MA-43**
- Chart Sutton PC - Kings Coronation Big Lunch - £500 - **Grant Status: Completed ref 22-MA-53**

Finally, to finish on a lighter note, early in the year the leader advised us he had 2 nominations to make for the entire county for the Kings Garden Party. As members we were invited to put forward and make a case for 2 people. I am thrilled to say one of the people I put forward was chosen, and I can't think of a more deserving person to receive this honour, He is a very humble person and not a fan of the limelight so I shall keep his identity secret for now...

PART 2

The Budget:

The budget was agreed at county Hall in February of this year, but the challenge will now be to deliver it and at the same time start work on the 2024-2025 budget. For the first time ever, we will have an overspend (estimated at around £53.7m at month 9 monitoring) although this is coming down, it will have to be met in part from the 25m risk reserves that we put aside, but anything over and above will have to be met from general reserves. The main factors were rapid increases in adult social care costs notably older people's residential care. Growth and increase in school transport costs in particular SEND students and sharply higher placement costs, reflecting the challenges in foster care recruitment and higher costs

for more specialist placements, in children's services. On the capital side, we are seeing the impact of severe inflationary pressures.

Shortly before the Autumn Statement, the Leader of Hampshire and Roger Gough, leader of KCC, wrote a well-publicised letter to senior ministers setting out concerns about the unsustainable financial position confronting councils such as ours. KCC have recently held a very useful meeting with Lee Rowley, a member of the DLUHC ministerial team, to investigate further the issues raised in our letter and look forward to these discussions continuing

Help for Residents:

We have a strong record in supporting our residents through the crises and pressures of recent years, which began with a commitment, ahead of much of the sector, to delivery of Free School Meals in the half term in October 2020. Since that time, government has brought forward a series of programmes, running from September 2021 as the Household Support Fund. In the first two rounds of funding, over 450,000 awards have been issued to Kent residents. This has covered areas such as food vouchers for Free School Meal eligible families, energy vouchers, support with water bills, funding passed to District and Borough Councils and more. The third round of the Fund is currently being delivered, while a £22 million fourth round (announced recently) runs for a full year to March 2024.

Alongside this, we have run our own Financial Hardship Programme, which includes and has built on the Helping Hands Scheme, launched in February 2021 with £10 million from the Covid Emergency Grant. The innovative schemes have included the Money Advice Hub, the strengthening of Referrals and Data Sharing between councils. Much of the focus is on ensuring that services and support are available to the residents already entitled to them, and that we help residents build their financial resilience

Migration, asylum and UASC:

2022 saw a large number of small boat crossings and as part of this the number of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) referred to KCC was a record 1,390. (There have been 266 so far this year). However, because of the agreements that we reached with government in 2020-21:

- Better financial arrangements mean that the Kent council taxpayer is not exposed to these costs.
- The National Transfer Scheme was made mandatory, and some 1,640 UASC young people have been transferred under this scheme since June 2020 to other councils.
- We have around 500 UASC in our care, just above the 0.1% level set by the 2016 Immigration Act and provide a Reception and Safe Care service for 120 UASC before they go to other councils.

The large overall number of asylum seeker arrivals, along with other schemes and the national backlog in processing claims, has meant that we have seen 5 hotels for accommodating asylum seekers, 3 'bridging hotels' for Afghan families and 2 UASC hotels open in the last year. This, coupled with concerns over how plans for increased asylum

accommodation in the south east is to be reconciled with other duties such as homelessness, led all 14 Kent council leaders to write to the Home Secretary in November. KCC have since met the Immigration Minister, Robert Jenrick, and have worked with our District and Borough colleagues to oppose unsuitable proposals for use of hotels, in some cases with success.

Government has this week announced plans to end the reliance on hotels in accommodating both asylum seekers and those on the Afghan resettlement schemes. The Illegal Migration Bill, currently making its way through Parliament, will also raise important challenges, notably in relation to UASC.

Ukraine:

Kent has welcomed the biggest number of refugees from Ukraine of any area in England. The initial tasks of carrying out checks, establishing systems and making payments were very challenging. In the year since guests started arriving under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, 3,274 guests have come into the County (and all told 4,271 have been matched with hosts in Kent – not all have yet arrived). 1,506 ‘programme leavers’ have moved on – 46% into rented accommodation, many of the rest returning to Ukraine or neighbouring countries – but at present there are 1,767 guests staying with 854 sponsors. There are 349 Ukrainian children in our primary schools and 234 in our secondary schools.

We have responded to the challenge of potential sponsorship breakdown, especially as many Ukrainian guests reached the six-month minimum sponsorship stage. Moving ahead of government and many other councils, we announced in October that, for the rest of the financial year, we would pay a higher rate to hosts and further increase payments linked to the number of guests. The ending of sponsorship arrangements, which was anticipated to be at around 60% of the total, came in at 9%. We have extended these higher payments for another year while working with our District council colleagues on longer-term housing options.

SEND:

The Ofsted/CQC revisit in September produced a deeply disappointing outcome, with inspectors concluding that the Kent area had made insufficient progress in all 9 of the areas of weakness identified in the 2019 Written Statement of Action.

With new leadership on both the officer side (Sarah Hammond as Director of Children’s Services, Christine McInnes bringing Education and SEND back together) and politically (Rory Love as Cabinet Member for Education with SEND leadership responsibilities), we have produced a comprehensive plan of improvement to address the long-running challenges in this service.

We have also reached agreement with the Department for Education regarding the Safety Valve to address the accumulated deficit on High Needs Funding, estimated to reach around £142m by the end of this financial year. The agreement aims to bring High Needs Funding into balance by 2027-28, with £140m of the cumulative deficit reached by that point (forecast to be £222m) covered by the DfE and £82m by KCC. This accompanies our plans to deliver major service change that can both serve children and families better and put us on a financially sustainable path.

The DfE published the latest round of Safety Valve agreements, including Kent's, on Thursday 16 March. A summary of the Safety Valve agreement is published on KCC's website and a letter was issued from Rory Love to all Members.

We are undertaking this programme of change, meeting the challenges of both the Safety Valve and the Ofsted/ CQC revisit, at a time when the government has published the SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan. There are many features of the Plan that are welcome, though it is doubtful if it goes far enough in helping establish a sustainable system.

Buses and BSIP:

We had major challenges last summer over bus services; while we were still taking forward the £2.3m reduction in subsidies agreed in the 2022/23 budget, the bus industry was facing a crisis brought on by higher fuel costs, staff (especially driver) shortages and falls in usage. This was a national issue but had particular salience in Kent because of the high usage of commercial bus services for school travel and the usage of the Kent Travel Saver. Our Transport team did a remarkable job in working with operators to reduce the impact of route cancellations, especially on school journeys.

Members were briefed on 17 March on our Bus Service Improvement Plan funding award. After very long delays (we were first given our indicative allocation of £34 million over 2022-25 a year ago, we now have agreement to deploy just under £19 million (representing the first two years' funding) over the next year, with a roughly two thirds/ one third split between capital and revenue. While this has taken an inordinate amount of time and is not on the scale or in the form that we might have hoped for, it can deliver some real improvements and help protect and sustain the network, in particular school transport, as well as offsetting the proposed increase in the cost of the Kent Travel Saver. David Brazier has taken a semi-urgent decision to accept the funding, and we await decisions on the remainder of our allocation.

Nationally, the announcement in February of an extra £155 million government funding to extend support (such as Bus Recovery Grant) until 30 June buys time to establish a somewhat longer-term package, but the sector remains under severe pressure. We still have major questions to address about the best way to secure our network, and school transport in particular, and on that basis, established a cross-party Member group to review and advise on the way ahead. The group, chaired by Nick Chard, has held its first meeting.

Roads and potholes

Winter weather has taken its heavy toll on our roads. In the December/ January period, highway reports were five times the level of the same period a year ago. While constrained by tight funding and inflationary pressures, we have since January been stepping up the pace of repairs; Residents will, I think, have observed the increased number of local road closures that reflect highway works. 14,000 potholes have now been repaired and 68,414 square metres of road has been patched.

The budget announcement of £200 million for roads funding, meaning some £6 million for Kent, is a welcome addition and we are looking to deploy it as quickly as possible.

Borders, Brock and EES:

We experienced two major incidents of disruption at the border last year, with the all too familiar impacts on traffic and travel, affecting our residents, communities and businesses. The first was an after effect of the P&O crisis and had a major effect around Easter; the second (in July) resulted from non-attendance at the port by the French border authorities, the PAF. After a period of greater calm, and with the Easter break being our second consecutive holiday period without the Brock barrier being put into force, we have now seen further disruption as PAF capacity has not matched the number of coaches needing to be processed.

This confirms that the threat of disruption is never far away; the biggest longer-term risk is the potential introduction of the EU's External Entry System. EES has been scheduled for introduction at various points, most recently this spring – but now delayed to at least the back end of this year and it is widely believed that it will not now be introduced until late 2024. But it remains a serious challenge and was recognised as such in the final communique after the Prime Minister's recent summit with President Macron.

Work continues with the Department for Transport on developing short, medium and long-term responses to the border issue and we expect reports back in the summer. In the meantime, an important first step has been our securing £45 million for improvements to the configuration and fluidity of the Dover port under round 2 of the Levelling Up Fund. (This successful KCC bid came alongside successful District bids; taken together, this brings £123 million in LUF funding into Kent). This is not a solution in itself, but can support greater resilience at the border, raising the threshold for when measures such as the use of Operation Brock are required.

Staying with longer-term plans for strategic road investment, the Department for Transport announced shortly before the budget that construction of the Lower Thames Crossing will be delayed for two years until 2026. Transport Secretary Mark Harper nonetheless stated that 'We remain committed to the Lower Thames Crossing.' Reflecting the same pressures on the DfT budget, RIS3 schemes including Dover access and Brenley Corner, have also been pushed back.

Environment and Waste:

On 23 March DEFRA issued the long-awaited regulations and guidance implementing provisions of the Environment Act 2021, covering a range of issues from consistency in waste collection to responsibility for Local Nature Recovery Strategy and Biodiversity. Most districts in Kent already have a separate food waste collection but the Environment Act requires that all councils must do this. KCC will be the lead authority for the Kent and Medway Local Nature Recovery Strategy and were expecting extra funding for this and for our new Biodiversity duties. We will be further assessing the implications of these regulations and delivering them.

KCC has won its bid for £1.83m from the latest round of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme, which is to part fund new heating systems, double glazing, LED lights and Building Management Systems at five KCC buildings. The grant is a real saving to KCC's hard pressed building maintenance budget and will also reduce ongoing energy costs.

KCC has launched a third round of the SolarTogether scheme which uses collective buying power to get a good price on solar panels and batteries for Kent households. The first two rounds of the scheme have been very successful. All Kent districts and Medway are joining with us to promote the scheme and registrations are open now.

<https://solartogether.co.uk/Kent/landing>

It is over a year since, following a big response to our public consultation, we confirmed that we would keep the booking system for our Household Waste Recycling Centres. Our surveys of customer satisfaction get a big response. The results are on the KCC website and show 96% are satisfied or very satisfied with their visit and 95% find the booking system easy or very easy to use. Same day bookings are increasingly popular and 65% of customers say they've booked on the day itself. KCC has been shortlisted for an LGC award in the Digital Impact category for the booking system.

Last May we opened our new HWRC at Allington, which is highly energy efficient and environmentally advanced. It is next to our existing Energy from Waste plant, which along with high recycling rates, ensures that only an irreducibly tiny amount of Kent's waste goes to landfill.

