

## **COUNCIL UPDATE 3.2026**

### **JOINT TRANSPORT BOARD**

The Board met on 3<sup>rd</sup> March. Key issues included.

- Work has been completed on Quantock Drive between A292 and Malvern Road. Work on the remaining section is unscheduled.
- Work is planned on Canterbury Road from Spearpoint to The Street, but a date is yet to be allocated.
- Design work is in progress on a new “Deflection Island” on Bad Munstereifel Road (A2042 section rather than A2070), delivery in autumn 2026.
- Installation of new infrastructure to allow for remote CCTV enforcement of existing traffic prohibitions on Bluebell Road (overbridge across A2070) on hold. Scheme requires legal agreements with Network Rail and Highways England to allow for enforcement on their assets.
- There was “nothing to report” on Active Travel Funding for development work regarding a footway in Chilmington crossing from Ashford Prep School to the new secondary school.
- Improvement at Simone Weil junction with A28 is in technical audit stage with no scheduled date yet.
- Flood Street bridge strengthening is under a technical audit process with delivery still scheduled in 2026. The street cleaning team do not operate when roadworks is in place which is in point here. Also, road sweeping services were suspended while the Waste Transfer Station at Cobbs Wood was closed (the alternate site was in Dover and the distance to travel was prohibitive).



- The Cycle Track footbridge from Beaver Road to Bowens Field is due for painting and repairs Summer/ Autumn.
- KCC was made aware on 5th December 2025 that it will be receiving a further Bus Grant funding allocation for the years 2026-2029. The

funding will be for capital projects (e.g. ANPR cameras installed at both Beaver Road and Sackville Crescent were paid with this in previous years) of £11.6m for 26/27, £11.9m for 27/18 and £12.2m for 28/28. Revenue allocation is £14.2m for each year (to be allocated to subsidise “at risk” services).

- Ashford has been awarded £132,136 for bus shelter replacements. QR Codes are being installed at all marked bus stops. Real Time Information screens are also being installed at Park Street and Ashford International with plans also being finalised for other locations such as the William Harvey Hospital and Bank Street.
- In discussing the extension of the 502 to Finberry, we were told “There is reasonable expectation that separate detailed applications for both the local centre and for the development of the sports and community facilities will be submitted to the Council in 2026.” Specifically on the 502, KCC have said that Automatic Number Plate Recognition (‘ANPR’) cameras would be required to ensure only busses (and hackney carriages) use the “bus only route” between Damara Way and Avocet Way. ANPR provision requires public adoption of roads by KCC from the developers and ABC has pressed both developers and KCC Highways for this. Street lighting required by KCC has been holding up adoption at Bridgefield. Various issues at Finberry such as crossings, surface quality and drainage issues have held up adoption on the Finberry side. Extending the 502 appears to be viewed by Stagecoach as being commercially realistic. The Church Commissioners advise that there has been some recent progress on Finberry adoption issues. I will continue to press for regular progress updates.
- The s106 for Finberry and Waterbrook provide for the delivery of an ‘all-movements’ bridge over the East Stour River between the sites. ABC currently has a live application for that. The build-out of the Waterbrook Park development has been slower than expected but development at Waterbrook potentially creates scope for a bus service (extending the 507?) into Waterbrook. There is potential to link that into Finberry via the new bridge.
- The Planning Inspector confirmed on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2026 s106 Chilmington developer (Hodson) obligations regarding the A28 Chart Road dualling were still required to avoid severe cumulative impacts on the highways. The Inspector said that removing an obligation to provide a bond to ensure KCC’s costs of dualling were reimbursed by Hodson would not be accepted. From the date a bond is provided, KCC is likely to require a minimum 12 months to re-engage with stakeholders, including Network Rail, to obtain necessary approvals and procure a contractor before commencing work. ***A legal challenge by Hodson through a judicial review to the planning inspector’s decision was made by the 3<sup>rd</sup> March deadline.*** In October 2025, KCC and ABC commenced High Court action to seek a permanent prohibitory injunction to prevent Hodson occupying or permitting occupation of any

more dwellings at the Chilmington Green site until the bond is provided. As such, at the current time, the 400-unit restriction remains in place. However, Hodson submitted a defence document to the High Court at the beginning of December; the Court will schedule a timetable for the production and exchange of evidence leading to Court hearing in 2026.

## **STONESTREET SOLAR**

Aldington and Bonnington Parish Council, with support from Mersham PC and the Aldington & Mersham Support Group, have put in a lot of hard work on the campaign to investigate a judicial review (JR) of the Development Consent Order (DCO) given to Stonestreet Green Solar. The following update has been issued:

*On Friday, 27th February, we received Notice from the High Court. It confirms our request for an Oral Permission Hearing and says that: "The hearing is to be listed on the first available date after 13 March 2026 with a time estimate of 2.5 hours, including submissions by the parties and an oral judgment by the judge."*

*We have to submit further evidence and a witness statement within the next 7 days. Hopefully we will soon be told when our Permission Hearing is. The outcome is crucial. If the judge dismisses our case, then we can do no more. If our case is considered to 'have merit', i.e. it is a legitimate claim, then we go on to a second Hearing where our legal team will contest our case with that of the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero.*

## **FORMER KENT WOOLGROWERS & CIVIC CENTRE**

I attended the public consultation on 3<sup>rd</sup> March regarding the proposals to redevelop these sites into affordable social housing. The redevelopment of these derelict sites is important and is part of a plan for the Borough Council to get "spades in the ground" on projects such as Park Mall, Elwick Square redevelopment as a leisure hospitality, Swanton House and the Former Mecca/Odeon Cinema before it abolished, expected in May 2028. Key issues include.

- Protecting the viewing corridor from St Mary's Ashford towards Willesborough/Sevington.
- Ensuring the Gun Room and Storage Sheds in the curtilage of listed building Whist House are redeveloped while Whist House itself is protected as part of the redevelopment as it is listed.
- Ensure there are privacy screens on the balconies.
- Ensuring there are places where electric bikes and scooters (assuming these may become legal) can be charges outside the dwelling areas in the flats due to the fire risk of charges.

- Providing social and amenity spaces for public and a place where social tenants of the council can discuss issues with their housing in private with officers.

## **COMMUNITY SAFETY UNIT**

The Unit met on 5<sup>th</sup> February. Key issues included.

- The number of stray dogs has reduced.
- There has been no increase in fly tipping (or waste collected in doorstep collections) during the Cobbs Wood closure. Op Assist has target vehicles with waste to ensure they are licenced.
- There has been an increase in family gold being targeted in thefts.
- There has been a resurgence of organised car meets at Asda and Bad Munstereifel Road.
- Singleton Lake PSPO is due for renewal – these are rule setters for behaviour / public safety in a certain area and can be tailored, promotion is key. Nighttime fishing and rough sleeping (housing for the individual has been identified) are issues resulting in additional patrols.
- Temporary accommodation is very restricted where the homeless has dogs.
- The gaming bus was given good feedback on engagement with target groups. The cost is £800 and can be used outside the town centre (such as Bockhanger on 27<sup>th</sup> May) Funding is an issue, but the Community Council could be approached along with ward member grants for funding.
- The number of HMOs / flats in the town centre was discussed including the way that waste is collected (often only every two weeks as management companies do not offer recycling) and fire safety due to chargers and electric scooters. A debate on housing is scheduled for September. The HMO officer will attend.
- Outside the formal meeting, Kent Police reported they “have been hearing about problem lorries and ASB in Sevington for some time”. I have asked them to access CCTV from HMRC so they can see what residents have been dealing with. A complication arose that when police attended the site and requested CCTV footage, HMRC were unable to provide them with footage on the spot as all requests to view or release CCTV must be formally authorised. If the police wish to review footage from the IBF for historical incidents, they must submit a DPA (Police form) to [estatessystemsdatarequests@hmrc.gov.uk](mailto:estatessystemsdatarequests@hmrc.gov.uk). The HMRC/Sodexo team managing this inbox will review the request and notify both the police and the Security Manager for the site, indicating approval or rejection along with the reasons. Once approval is granted, the team will support the police in reviewing and downloading the relevant images. Subject Action Requests (SAR) must be made by individuals seeking access to their own personal data, and not for law enforcement purposes.

## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT REVIEW**

Ahead of the Report Stage of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, peers expressed strong support for key amendments affecting local governance on 11 March 2026. These amendments include **requiring** a community governance review in each new unitary authority area, with the expectation that new parish councils would be created where appropriate. They also aim to clarify the role of Neighbourhood Area Committees, including ensuring their members are elected and include representation from parish and town councils.

## **INLAND BORDER FACILITY – PLANNING CONDITIONS**

Councillors met with the DfT/HMRC/DEFRA/JLL to discuss progress on the planning conditions put on the IBF by the Planning Inspectorate on 11<sup>th</sup> March. Key issues included.

- Instructions to the landscape consultants (Mott McDonald) are in progress and will be shared. Technical workshops will be arranged in due course.
- Lighting strategy proposals have been communicated to the parish councils.
- Emergency use strategy has been developed, and a list of residents is being compiled to ensure that everyone who wants to be notified will be provided.
- KCC and DfT have reviewed the signage strategy which has not yet been received. The Parish Councils have sent in their views on the old (2023) strategy.
- National Highways and the Parish Council have asked for additional litter management along the A2070 and the DfT will liaise with ABC on what is possible. It is therefore under review how and where resources can be deployed.
- A sign has been installed on how any conflict between traffic and passengers is to be reported. A QR code is not possible as HMRC have issues with them following recent incidences of fraudulent QR codes being used on signs.
- Technical updates on noise are being prepared and a workshop including ABC officers will be arranged.
- The fee proposal for the Information Boards is approved, and an implementation plan needs to be developed with a meeting to be arranged.
- Drainage Consultants (Waterman) have developed a strategy which is being audited. KCC will be engaged with as the drainage authority.

Next meeting Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> April.

## **FORMER ODEON / MECCA BINGO SITE**

Councillors met to discuss plans at this site on 12<sup>th</sup> March.

Considerable work, ideas, surveys, and studies have been commissioned since the former Odeon / Mecca Bingo site (33-37 High Street) was acquired in 2018. This involved a development project aimed at transforming the area into a vibrant mixed-use town centre regeneration scheme including the Vicarage Lane car park and proposed the creation of a cultural venue, significant residential developments, and enhancements to the public realm.

This scheme did not progress, but ABC must avoid the risk of it being mothballed permanently with the progression of Local Government Reorganisation. This could result in further deterioration of the property and permanent loss of the building. Work has been undertaken by Haworth Tompkins Architects and initial Business Plan Report by Sarah Dance Associates.

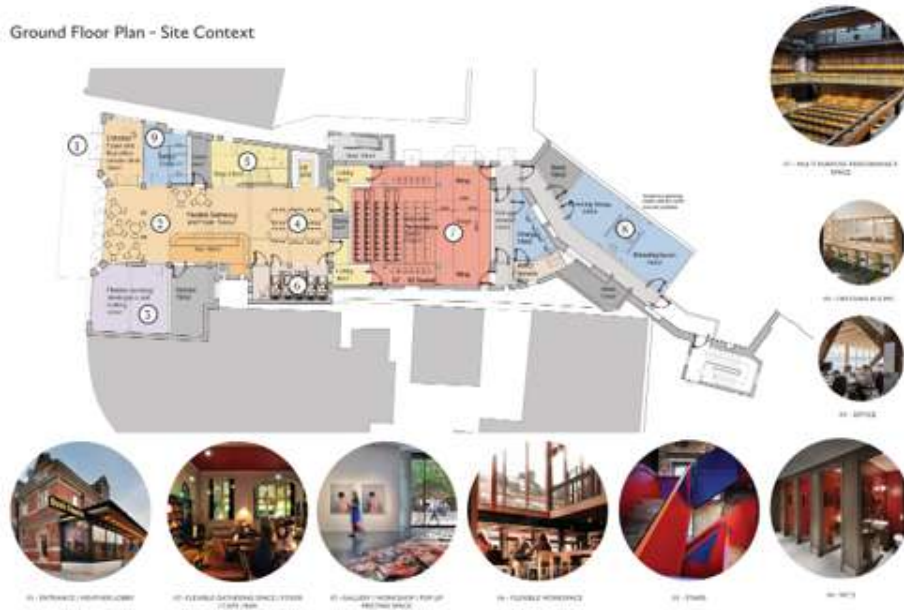
The architectural work proposed includes

- Restore and celebrate the 1930s Art Deco High Street façade as a local landmark, reinstating period features and sympathetic signage.
- Transform the front section of the building (High Street frontage, foyer, and front first floor areas) into a vibrant, accessible arts and cultural hub suitable for small scale theatre performances (150-200 capacity), gigs, workshops, exhibitions and community gatherings. It will have a balcony and backstage area including dressing room facilities.
- Flexible gathering foyer area with café, bar and workspace facilities.
- Ensure the proposed front section will work independently of the rear auditorium which may be developed in the future.
- Create adaptable spaces for arts studios, creative office, rehearsals, function rooms (yoga and pilates), community use, and commercial opportunity on the first floor.

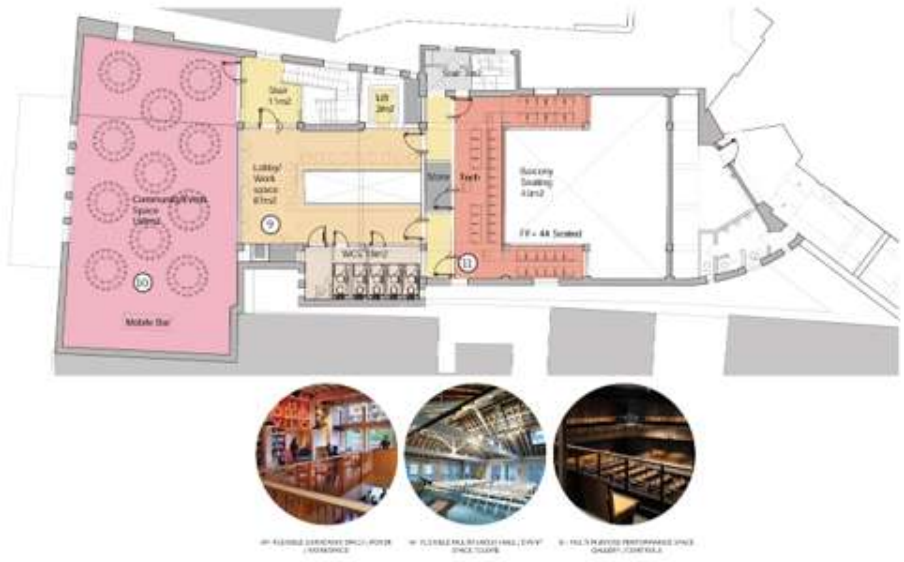
The estimated cost is up to £7.5m with up to £2m of this funding proposed to come from the Business Rates Pool.

Work on the initial business plan and operating model highlights a clear demand and market interest in this scheme. Ongoing public sector revenue investment is likely to be required in the set-up phase and continued operation, from a mix of council and other grants (Arts Council, Lottery) to ensure long-term sustainability. It is forecast to be around £111,000 in a start-up year, moving to £81,000 in a stable year of operation and in subsequent years. This revenue investment will be after ABC has been replaced by a unitary council as opening date is not scheduled until June 2028.

Ground Floor Plan - Site Context



First Floor Plan



## **PANNA CAGE FOOTBALL – UPRISING**

Panna Cage Football is a street based social event for young people. It pits players in 1v1 2-minute games and has been used in the town centre from time to time. I had a meeting on 13<sup>th</sup> March with Andy from Uprising who provides it in Ashford. It was delivered weekly in the Town Centre during summer 2025 with only very occasional additional events (there was an ad hoc one during w/c 2<sup>nd</sup> March).



We discussed the benefits of continuing this for 2026 and expanding it beyond the Town Centre in a modest way. The starting point should be that Panna Football is provided weekly during the summer holidays 2026, funded by the CSU through PCC grant (expected to open for applications in April 2026). I assume that this will continue.

Because of the ability that Panna Football has in engaging with young people (40+ can be expected at each event), there are benefits of doing more and we spoke about twice every 6 weeks including Easter. Panna Football has been set up in Bockhanger before, and we discussed it being set up during the Bockhanger "Community Action Day" on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2026 - possibly 11am to 3pm. In terms of additional visits to the Town Centre, we discussed if Community Funding Grants could be accessed. It is also likely that ABC will provide a funding pot for the Shadow Town Council assuming that is created but that is unlikely to be until June at the earliest.

## **LOCAL CYCLING AND WALKING INFRASTRUCTURE PLAN (LCWIP)**

11 cycling routes and 7 walking routes have been identified to enhance and extend the existing active travel network.



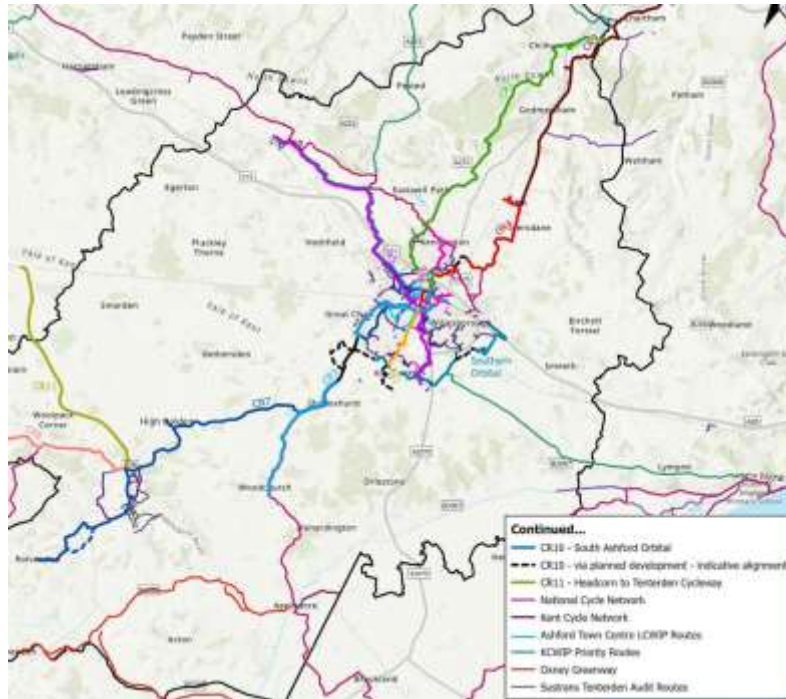
**Table 1.0: Cycle Route Prioritisation**

Cycling Route	Prioritisation Rank
CR3: Woodchurch to Queen Mother's Park	1
CR7: Victoria Park to Rolvenden	2
CR4 Ashford Town Centre to Wye Railway Station	2
CR8: Tenterden to Cranbrook	4
CR5: Charing to Kingsnorth	5
CR1: Kingsnorth Developments to Ashford International	6
CR6: Ashford International and Willesborough Schools to Kennington	7
CR9: Wye to Canterbury	8
CR11: Headcorn to Tenterden	9
CR10 : South Ashford Orbital	10
CR2: Chilham to Kennington	11

**Table 2.0 Walking and Wheeling Route Prioritisation**

Walking and Wheeling Route	Prioritisation Rank
WR6: Kingsnorth to Ashford International	1
WR5: Kennington to Ashford International	2
WR4: Kennington Town Centre	3
WR1: Tenterden Town Centre	4
WR2: Wye Village Centre	5
WR3: Charing Village Centre	6
WR7: Hamstreet Village Centre	7

There is so much more than can be done to ensure that developers who have commitments to enhance the walking/cycling routes between new developments and the town centre in a timely basis. The footpath from Finberry / Bridgefield to South Willesborough (under the A2070) has only just been completed with consent for Finberry having been granted in 2002. There is no meaningful indication of the obligation that the developers have to replace the at grade Ashford/Hastings railway crossing (inaccessible to many) to be replaced with a bridge. The new LCWIP will give ABC the ability to leverage developers through s106 contributions. The DfT did respond at the planning enquiry into the IBF that they would support a bridleway from Mersham to Aldington when the "opportunity arises".



There is funding (£65k) to design and develop the top three identified routes CR7, CR 4, WR 6. A Steering Group has been created to identify these, I have joined the Group, and it met for the first time on 17<sup>th</sup> March. A counter has been put on the cycle route from Bowens Field into Beaver Road to assess its use.

## **ASHFORD PARKS FOUNDATION**

The Friends of Victoria Park hosted their Spring Public Meeting on Wednesday 18th March in the Community Room behind Harpers Cafe. This gave an opportunity to celebrate their recent win of Kent Wildlife Trust's Wilder Kent Gold Award.

ABC is pursuing the development of a Ashford Parks Foundation. It has the objective of delivering additionality and added value for parks and open spaces. The Foundation will focus on supporting, enabling, and facilitating local communities, volunteers, and Friends groups in delivering their aspirations for enhancing local parks. The Foundation will be well placed to deliver citizen science programmes, ongoing monitoring, volunteer activity, engagement with nature, and educational events. It will be a separate legal entity and will give the ability to levy in additional funding.

## **CHANNEL RADIO**

Channel Radio is an Ashford based (Wootton Road) community radio which broadcasts on the internet (<https://www.channelradio.co.uk/>). It is a Kent and Medway focused enterprise which has a daily show highlighting business networking opportunity. It also gives an opportunity for independent new

artists to showcase their talents, Channel Radio Youth Academy, creating a local hub for youth voices and providing pathways into the creative industries. The Studio is available for young people to provide hands-on training for young people (ages 14-25) in Ashford and the surrounding areas, focusing on radio presenting, digital content production, and media ethics. The Academy is built on the success of our 2025 pilot program (The Terence Starr Academy), which saw local students thrive and discover a passion for broadcasting.

I met Terrance on 18<sup>th</sup> March to talk about any support the Council can offer. An opportunity arises for Channel Radio to provide support for Ashford College's courses modules that feature radio media ("Youthful Trailblazers").

### **BYBROOK WASTEWATER TREATMENT PLANT**

The Environment Agency (EA) have shared correspondence with Southern Water dealing with the increased number of complaints the EA received in 2025. Their view is that they are related to increased storage of limed digestate on site because the highest number of complaints were received in the hotter months. The trial of the addition of powdered lime appears to have led to poor-quality digestate being held on site for extended periods of time.

The addition of powdered lime is contributing to the negative effect on residents. Previously liquid lime was added in an odour-controlled environment (air was removed to the odour control unit). Addition of powdered lime outside of odour-controlled area means that there is no such abstraction of offensive air and this may be why recent odour complaints have been more widespread.

SW have proposals to construct an Advanced Anaerobic Digestion Plant which should deal with this but that will not be completed until 2028-2030.

In the meantime, the EA have advised these actions to mitigate odour.

- Using powder instead of liquid lime
- Manage the storage times of un-limed cake
- Take steps to reduce the amount of digested cake stored on site to an amount that can be removed in a timely manner.
- Carry out the liming activity within a building with odour abatement or covered storage area.

### **SOUTHEAST COAST AMBULANCE SERVICE**

I completed an "Observation" Shift on 20<sup>th</sup> March. The purpose is to observe how the ambulance service is operating with patient treatment and conveying patients to A&E where appropriate and then tell decision makers what issues arose. My issues included.

- Reasonable Adjustments to staff working conditions may only be progressed when they have entered “Stage 2” disciplinary having missed shifts, regardless of any legal rights due to protected characteristic due to disability. It is easier to accommodate changes where staff choose a more flexible working pattern.
- Kent does not have a dedicated “falls team” to deal with falls. Falls often do not need the patient to be conveyed to hospital (2/3rds of the falls call during my shift were conveyed to A&E). Nearby areas do have a falls team which frees up paramedics to higher category calls such as heart attacks and strokes.
- Welfare meetings for staff should be carried out formally outside the appraisal process, ideally on a 6-week basis.
- Sat Nav directed journeys can be idiosyncratic, a trip from Ashford to St Michaels too us through Woodchurch not the A28.
- Charging on handheld devices used by staff would not last all shift.
- QR codes providing paramedics with patient history can only be accessed when the ambulance travels at less than 7mph.

## **ROBIN ROAD**

I was delighted to see work starting on the footpath outside number 40 Robin Road on 25<sup>th</sup> March. I contacted Crest on 13<sup>th</sup> February and realistically this is probably as soon as contractors could be commissioned.



## **ASHFORD COMMITTEE - KENT ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS (KALC)**

KALC met on 25<sup>th</sup> March. Key issues included.

- Ch Insp Rivett has been posted to north Kent; new Ch Insp will be appointed for Ashford.
- Crime numbers are comparable with rest of the County. Burglaries are targeting rural communities, insecure vehicles and, in the town, family gold.
- The CSU offers crime prevention visits.

- Retail crime, VAWG, fly tipping and drugs are key concerns along with the new extended PSPO in the town centre covering catapults and scooters.
- Kent Action for Communities in Rural England's (ACRE) aim is to deliver hubs for many kinds of outreach. Kent ACRE is now launching a crowdfunded programme spearheading the evolution of village halls into vibrant community hubs, ensuring essential services reach rural areas.
- The Government is expecting Councils to submit a draft local plan by end of 2026 for it to be dealt with under current rules. The deadline means that ABC may need to prepare the plan under new rules, as the 2026 timeline is too tight. Parishes are encouraged to obtain informal feedback at this stage even though there is no indication at this stage what the new planning regulations will support, the map for Mersham and Sevington showing the sites submitted is below.



### **FINBERRY COMMUNITY CENTRE – WHO WILL RUN IT?**

I had discussions with ABC deputy CEO on this on 26<sup>th</sup> March.

HML (the estate management company's contractor) are not appointed to manage the centre by Crest (the shareholder of the management company). This is because the s106 requires that ABC runs the Centre.

Exploratory discussions with Repton Connect some time ago suggested that they may be interested in managing Finberry on behalf of ABC but will need a draft contract/lease from ABC if they are going to be involved, their view was that capacity at Repton is limited and the Trust would benefit from a satellite site. Neither Repton, Parish Council (who stand by to assist) or ABC have any idea of the running costs of the new community centre; notwithstanding the fact that a planning consent is being prepared the nature of the utilities etc is unclear (will it be gas, will there be solar panels, will there be heat source pumps etc.) There is also the issue of any sinking fund for repairs, and any operator will need to be clear on what endowment is provided by Crest under the s106 or ABC as the freeholder.

### **KENT WIDE KALC MEETING**

The Group of Kent wide Chairs/Vice-Chairs met on 27<sup>th</sup> March. Key issues included.

- The Minister will issue a “minded to” decision on local government reform in Kent & Medway in July 2026, prior to parliament’s summer holiday. Elections to the shadow authority will take place in May 2027 (with district and parish elections). “Joint committees” of new and existing councils will operate from September 2027, when the Structural Change Order is expected to be laid; they will last until the new authority comes into existence in April 2028. These joint committees will do the groundwork on themes how the new council will operate and how Council Tax is equalised.
- In Hampshire/IoW 5 new councils have been recommended along with boundary changes including to 14 parish councils. In Cumbria the boundaries were “along historic lines”.
- Each new unitary will need its own plans for services and development in the future, although there should be areas in common and some joint services (e.g. in Ashford waste contract is managed with Maidstone and Swale and Ashford may not be in a unitary with these).
- In Lancashire parish councils were encouraged to take on free (not paid for) car parks. No parish council received any cash endowment, so the cost was met from the parish precept. In Kent any “assets” that transfer (which are liabilities due to long term running costs) must come with funding.

### **INTEGRATED CARE PARTNERSHIP (ICP)**

The ICP met on 31<sup>st</sup> March. The meeting was convened to discuss outcomes from the Mental Health Summit to discuss how the NHS can meet increased demand, acute points of care, strengthen prevention, community support and ensure clearer, more consistent access to support.

The data shows the growth of mental health illness (255,000 in Kent and Medway). There is an unmet need in primary care/community help, with prevalence in east Kent coastal communities. Patients are being seen too late, typically when there is a crisis rather than focusing on early help and prevention. Rate of suicide and self-harm is higher in Kent and Medway compared to the rest of England. Funding is lower now than it was in 2016.

Partners propose establishing a Kent and Medway Mental Health System Leadership Programme with clear time-critical actions and outcomes for “Right Help/Right Place”; it will be embedded with lived experience. This will address the problem of many partners (Councils, KMMHT, ICP, GPs and VCSE) each having an element of responsibility to deliver mental health services. It will:

- Shift the system from reactive response to proactive prevention.
- Community supported recovery will be central.
- VCSE is underused.
- Public understanding has improved but further work is required.
- A consistent definition of “distress, mental health and behavioural need” is required. Inconsistent definitions drive incorrect referrals.
- A new mapped pathway from prevention to acute care will be built with follow up.

The project will start in April 2026 and be completed by September 2026, meeting bimonthly.

Other issues to note included:

- The school’s immunisation team was used to deliver Men B vaccinations in March (and will need to deliver the second vaccination in April). Work is ongoing to ensure the work they should have been doing will be carried out.

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