

I met with the KCC PROW officer on 8th January to discuss the quality of the work undertaken. I asked about (i) raising the level of the footpath between Finberry and Waterbook out of the floodplain which would need Environment Agency approval, (ii) access to Cheesemans Green Lane by foot from the new circular footpath around the proposed housing development at Waterbrook, and (iii) reopening the footpath from Cheesemans Green Lane to Finberry (AE658).

BOCKHANGER LANE

Following further reports of potholes on Bockhanger Lane, KCC have confirmed their responsibility as the section between Hurst Road and the bend at Briar Close. They have “fixed” the area they maintain. Areas not maintained by KCC and privately owned are for the owner to carry out repairs.



The results of KCC’s “repairs” on their managed section are mixed and an explanation has been requested.



COMMUNITY SAFETY UNIT

The unit met on 4th January. Key issues were:

- The town centre PSPO order has been consulted on being extended to include Elwick Place as there have been “quite a few instances” recently. It has also been driven by future proofing for business and the new flats planned for Elwick Road.
- A CSU Meet and Greet session has been proposed at the Designer Outlet for 25th March at 1pm to 3pm.
- A street drinking initiative (“safe space”) is being run each Thursday at St Mary’s Church to provide for all agencies to attend and meet to tackle street drinking in the town centre. The issue seems quieter than unusual, but evidence is needed as to whether the problem is ongoing or not. Adult Social Care are seeing an increase in demand to support vulnerable, dependant drinkers.
- The policing teams have been augmented by a new Child Centre Policing Team (since 1st December 2023 – 2 PCs and 2 PCSOs), and a Neighbourhood Task Group (NTG), both covering the whole district. These two teams provide targeted support for specialist issues across Ashford District. They supplement Beat Officers who manage specific wards. Three new Beat Officers and one more NTG officer are in the process of joining Ashford.
- Speed enforcement has been carried out by Special Constables in Singleton with 5 tickets being issued.
- An event is planned on 14th April at Victoria Park for 4 structured hours to tackle ASB in the Park. It will include Kent Fire & Rescue, SECAM and Kent Police.
- Access to the Flour Mills is still being made. Kent Fire and Rescue have key for access to respond to incidences, but the situation continues to be monitored.
- There are three KCC Wardens covering Ashford, but this is being reviewed and numbers may change from April 2024.
- Ashford Partnership Against Crime (APAC) has expanded to get more productive use of domestic and international station (when staffed) to turn away travelling shoplifters moving from the town centre to Designer Outlet Village (DOV).
- The only other defib units in town centre (outside the DOV & County Square) are at Tesco’s and Ashford Volunteer Centre. More are needed.
- There are 250 on the waiting list for Adult Social Care in Ashford, but four new recruits to the service have been secured. This means that only those at the highest risks are being tackled. Lower level triaging needs can be triaged by local charities, Kent Wardens, Kent Police, ABC Housing and Kent Fire & Rescue who can do low level welfare checks.

KENT ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

The meeting was held on 4th January. The issues arising included:

- An anti-ASB week of action was scheduled for 22nd January. It will include bike marking by KCC Warden Service and a VAWG event in Stanhope.
- Noise disturbances are generally the responsibility of ABC (not Kent Police) unless there is a public order issue outside a private property.
- The Ashford Bus Forum has had its first meeting (ABC Leader, KCC & Stagecoach). The output will be reported to Cabinet.
- A new charity is being set up called Action with Communities in Rural Kent (ACRK). If successful it will take over rural housing and village hall planning.

REPTON HIGHWAYS

I have reported a further loose manhole cover on Repton, opposite the Primary School on Laurens Van Der Post Way. (ref 771216)



ESSELLA ROAD

I have reported a pothole at the bottom end of Essella Road, near the garage. (ref 771217). It was filled quickly by KCC Highways.



CENTRAL ASHFORD COMMUNITY FORUM

The Forum met on 8th January with ABC Officers to discuss the Town Centre reset. The issues included:

- **Update from CSU on Town Centre Ashford Partnership Against Crime.** – see above. Extension of PSPO order was discussed. It was recommended that APAC users provide signage in shops that use the system. Kent Police have recruited an additional officer to cover Victoria Ward.
- **Update on action on Street Drinking.** – see above. The initiative at St Mary's was discussed, reports over the last month have been minimal. The homelessness issue is getting more challenging due to cost-of-living crisis, the Henwood temporary accommodation is planned for completion during 2024 (but this seemed ambitious).
- **Parking Review.** - Work is being undertaken to look at the Bank St barrier. Street parking enforcement is under review by KCC. A street parking review has been initiated to discuss the timing of restrictions in residential areas. Work has also started with external consultants on ABC off-street car parks including pricing, use and availability, they will consult the Forum as a stakeholder. Park Mall's future is still under review although the "fix" has not solved the structural issue, further investigations are underway.
- **Town Centre Market** – This work has just started, the scope and nature of the work of the group was discussed.
- **Work on the new local plan that affects the Town Centre, such as a shop front policy and sites brought forward for development.** Areas in need of development include the Lower High Street, external funding is required, and this will take time. Park Mall will be redeveloped probably sooner rather than later due to Wilko having closed. There are concerns over the time that major developments will take.
- The group discussed how the **Forum could gain a higher profile**, other Forums are considering applying for perishing.
- The feedback from businesses (particularly food and drink) of the Carnival of the Baubles was discussed, some businesses interreacted with it but it was a challenge for others. A different approach is being tried with the food and drink promotion, more localised in conjunction with KE.
- Two more defibs are proposed for the town centre.
- The problems with the sewers in North Street was discussed.
- A budget of £600pa was requested from ABC for the Forum out of the Lottery funding that is used to fund the Friends of Victoria Park.
- The Forum to be set up as a statutory consultee for ABC planning applications.

KINGSFORD STREET DRAINAGE

In response to my request for clearing the drain towards Blind Lane, I have had the following response from Highways (ref 737239):

Due to the recent heavy down pours, our Drainage department have been experiencing an exceptional high demand on our services which has also stretched our resources.

We are recovering from the impact of the persistent rainfall and are not operating under business-as-usual conditions.

At this time, we are prioritising reports of floods that are a risk to safety for highway users or internal property therefore it will take longer to investigate other drainage reports and delay our usual response times. We apologise for this delay and appreciate your understanding and patience.

KCC's Highways Drainage Team have been working hard to develop and implement a cyclical maintenance regime for all roads in the county. This allows us to attend more of our assets in a proactive and cost-effective manner each year. The scheduled cleansing programme covers an annual drain cleanse for our Strategic Network and a 3-yearly drain cleanse on our Minor Network. The programme is in its second year, and over time we are confident this will reduce the need for reactive attendances.

NEW WASTE COLLECTION SERVICE

The new service begins at the end of March 2024 and will bring in new technology and industry improvements, whilst retaining large parts of the existing service. Fortnightly collections of waste and recycling will continue across the borough, with one green wheeled bin for recycling, alongside the regular weekly food waste collections. The new contract offers the chance to increase recycling rates, more efficient routes, lower emission vehicles and better technology to keep residents up to date on collections. The new vehicles are being funded directly by the council to help save costs and will be more modern vehicles that use electric bin lifts. This will help reduce the consumption of diesel dramatically, helping lower the services' carbon footprint. The street cleansing service will also be delivered by Suez. The new contract includes proposed improvements to the level of cleansing in rural and residential areas, as well as quicker response times on removing fly-tipping.

Key questions about the new service

What will the service look like?

Waste and recycling collections in the borough consist of a weekly food waste collection, a fortnightly recycling collection, a fortnightly general waste collection and an OPTIONAL paid-for fortnightly garden recycling collection.

When will the new contract start?

From Sunday 24 March.

Will the frequency of collections change?

No. The frequency of collections will be staying the same, with fortnightly recycling and waste collections, and an optional fortnightly garden waste collection. Food waste will be collected weekly.

Will my collection day change?

Although the frequency of collections will be staying the same, it is likely that after Sunday 24 March 2024, your collection day will alter. We will notify residents of any changes well in advance of the new contract start date.

Why are collection days changing?

The changes are being made to make a more efficient collection schedule. Half the borough will have their recycling bins collected while the other half of the borough will have their refuse bins collected. This will be easier to process at the waste processing centre and will also mean it is easier to catch up on any missed collections.

Will the items collected for recycling change?

No, the same recyclable items will still be collected in the green wheeled bin.

Will the collection crew staff change?

No. There is a requirement for staff to move from one contractor to the next. The majority of staff are local residents and know the area well.

Who is our new contractor?

The new contractor is Suez. They employ more than 5,000 people in the UK and have been managing waste contracts for local authorities since 1988.

What if I forget what day will my bin be emptied?

Use the look up calendar online at www.ashford.gov.uk/recycling-waste-and-bins/bin-collection-calendars/

Recycling collection (fortnightly)

Together we can recycle more. Please use your green wheeled bin to put all loose recyclable materials in. Please flatten cardboard boxes and plastic bottles to maximise space in the bin. Where possible, please rinse clean recycling to avoid food contamination.

Please include: paper, magazines & cardboard, plastic bottles, tubs & containers, tins & cans including sweet biscuit tins, glass bottles & jars, kitchen foil trays, plastic meat trays, ready meal trays, fruit/veg punnets, yoghurt pots and empty aerosol cans.

Please do not include: plastic or black bags, light bulbs, textiles and food waste, nappies or sanitary products, pet waste, garden waste, polystyrene and electrical items.

Almost all recyclable waste collected is processed and separated into individual materials for recycling at local Materials Recycling Facilities. Contamination means recycling go to waste. These main culprits which contaminates recycling are plastic bags, black bags, nappies, dirty packaging and food waste. Nappies, dirty packaging, plastic and black bags go in the general waste bin. Food waste goes in the food caddy.

General Waste collections (fortnightly)

Please use the grey wheeled bin for general waste that cannot be recycled. Place the items in your bin loose or you can use black sacks or carrier bags. The bin lid must be closed, and ABC will not collect ANY side or extra waste not placed inside the closed bin.

Please include: any waste that does not go into your recycling bin or food caddy, nappies, pet waste, polystyrene, used tissues and general waste from your household.

Please do not include: food waste, electrical items, paint tins, garden waste, DIY waste, hazardous materials and clinical waste & needles.

General waste is not sent to landfill, it is sent to an Energy from Waste Plant to be used to generate electricity.

Food Caddy (every week)

Empty food waste into the black/orange collection caddy when required, which should be placed outside for collection. The orange lid can be locked with the handle to prevent pests or animals accessing it. You can line the caddy with newspaper or special compostable liners or bags.

Please include: all cooked & raw food including meat, fish & bones, fruit & veg including peelings, teabags & coffee grounds, bread pasta & pulses, eggshells, dairy products, solid butter lards, leftovers from meals and foods past their sell by date.

Please do not include: plastic bags, liquids or oils, any packaging, pet waste or litter and garden waste or clippings.

All food waste is taken to an anaerobic digester in Kent to be turned into biogas. The biogas is fed to the national grid as well as powering the plant itself.

Large item collections

These will be re-used where possible, with Suez partnering with Demelza, so that items that can be re-used rather than go to waste. ABC will collect large household items such as: furniture, white goods and electrical appliances. Items need to be put out by 6am on the day of collection on the boundary of your property and be clearly visible for the crews collecting. White goods are collected separately to other large items. Alternatively, you can take your waste free of charge to Kent County Council's Household Waste and Recycling Centre in Cobbs Wood or visit our website for some re-use ideas. To book a large item collection at www.ashford.gov.uk/recycling-waste-and-bins/large-item-collection/ or call 01233 331111.

Textiles & small electrical items

Textiles and small electrical items (WEEE) will no longer be collected at the kerbside. Instead, you can take them to roadshow events, recycle them elsewhere, or take them to the Household Waste and Recycling Centre in

Cobbs Wood. You will be able to book a collection of textiles or your small electrical items free of charge when booking a paid for large item collection. Batteries need to be placed in a separate clear tied bag.

Garden waste service (fortnightly)

You can register for ABC subscription fortnightly garden recycling collection. When you sign up, you will receive a separate collection calendar and a 240-litre brown wheeled bin. The garden waste service operates on a rolling year basis. This means you will renew your service annually exactly one year from the date of joining. Register at: www.ashford.gov.uk/garden-waste. The service is entirely optional so that people who do not have gardens do not have to pay for the service. You can pay for more than one bin or share one with neighbours. ABC will only collect from properties that have paid for the service. Garden waste can also be taken to the Household Waste Recycling Centre on the Cobbs Wood Industrial Estate. All garden waste is composted down to be used as an agricultural soil improver.

IBF

ABC expect to begin fully using the IBF for its Border Control Port work in April 2024. ABC will (if they can find them) have a staff of 149 working 7 days a week 24 hours a day on staggered shifts. This is an increase of 54 posts currently. On 31st January health certification starts on imports from the EU of medium risk animal products, plants and plant products, high risk food and feed of non-animal origin and new checks and controls when moving Irish goods from Irish ports directly to Great Britain.

New shiftwork patterns are being rolled out at the IBF from 4 March 2024 following a restructure implemented by the new FM operator Sodexo (replacing Wincanton). This restructure involved a reduction in staff on site from 252 to 150. This should not affect ABC operations but if these changes results in more noise from the site due to reduction in traffic marshalling etc, please advise.

I have asked for information to be provided at the March JTB on this and (i) M20 / A2070 signage, (ii) traffic light operation on the entrance and (iii) biodiversity planting.

TREE ON FINBERRY

There is a tree that holds a bat roost that forms part of the basis for Crest's limited 4m wildlife corridor from Captains Wood. The limited width of this may choke off the ancient woodland from surrounding areas of countryside. The tree in question is located near the Southern link Road and near where a wildlife crossing is required but resides outside of the TPO area of Captains Wood.



An Arboricultural Impact Assessment shows that the oak was historically not located and identified correctly when planning consent was obtained. Sadly, it is appearing to be in the line of an approved road. I have asked Crest to submit an application for them to remove the tree if that is what they wish to do.

KENT & MEDWAY CIVILIAN-MILITARY PARTNERSHIP BOARD

The strategic aims were discussed at KCC on 11th January. They included promoting, publicising and co-ordinating events that increase the visibility of the Armed Forces Community to the civilian population:

- By holding the 10th Annual Armed Forces Covenant on 4 June 2024 at 1RSME – Brompton Barracks, Chatham.
- By building on the granting of the Freedom of the County to HMS Kent.
- Hold twice-yearly meetings with Task Force Commanders, Armed Forces Champions, and Covenant Lead Officers.
- A Recognise & Remember Task Group will publicise the military events calendar (including veterans' activities) in conjunction with the Lieutenancy Officer to commemorate D-Day 80, Armed Forces Day 2024, Kent Reservists Day on 10 September 2024 and Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday 2024.
- The Children & Youth Task Group will continue to raise awareness of military life and the impact for families amongst schools with only a few service children.
- About 4.6% of Ashford's population have served in the forces and we discussed barriers they have in accessing NHS services including GPs. KCC offers Armed Forces Awareness Training for Adult Social Care staff and I am keen to extend this to GP staff through the Local Medical Council. By asking "did you serve" it enables signposting to further support which may be available.



GODINTON PRIMARY SCHOOL

I met with the headteacher and Peter Feacey on 18th January to agree actions to deal with school parking during drop off and collection times. The following will be taken forward as part of my Highways Improvement Plan.

- Consideration needs to be given to improving crossing facilities at the junction of Lockholt Close and Springwood Drive either in the form of the reinstatement of a road crossing patrol (removed 9 years ago) or the introduction of a wide dropped curb to facilitate a crossing point and deter motorists from parking. This is because penalty notices can be issued for parking across a dropped curb.
- Consideration needs to be given to putting yellow zig zag lines (i) outside the school in Lockholt Close to prevent motorists parking in front of the school gates and obstructing access to garages; and (ii) on Loudon Way where the majority of parents access the school via the footpath that leads down to the school (this is also where the road crossing patrol is located).
- Road markings on the garage entrance near the school need to be reinstated. We will ask if parking bays can be painted in Lockholt Close.
- Consideration also needs to be given to signage on the estate to alert motorists to the location of the school as this seems to be inadequate.



M20 UNDERPASS

Work has been completed on making good damage to the grass verge either side of the footpath approaching the M20 underpass between Heathfield Road / Queen Mothers Park and Kinney Lane. At the same time, the markings on the cycleway have been refreshed making it clearer for all users.



FLYTIPPING

I have reported fly tipping of a bag full of clothes on the footbridge between Essella Road and Camden Terrace (ref 19257489).



ROAD CLOSURES

The impact of road closures was discussed at KCC on 22nd January. This stemmed from ongoing delays to work being completed by SGN on Somerset Road / New Street which coincided with work on Elwick Place by SEW (the diversion route). It also coincided with a three-week period of a lane being closed on the Drovers Roundabout for bridge testing by Network Rail.

The issue stems from “emergency” closures by utilities for which KCC are not given advance warning. Providers are only required to tell KCC within 2 hours of starting. SEW seem to be a “serial offender” rather than SGN or Network Rail but progress by some utilities is often glacial (North Street is another example). It was agreed that there will be increased dialogue between utilities and KCC in a non-adversarial way but requires an approach to government following their recent announcement that this requires action

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-crack-down-on-disruptive-street-works-to-cut-congestion-and-improve-roads>

NOISE AT COBBS WOOD

Historically, complaints were received, relating to noise and dust arising from the Cobbs Wood Industrial Estate. An audit of waste users on the estate was carried out and operators had been advised both of their obligations in terms of the relevant consents and of the repercussions of non-compliance. Only one isolated noise complaint was received in the latter half of 2023. KCC have confirmed with local environmental health officers that there have been no additional complaints made to the borough council.

GREEN SOCIAL PRESCRIBING NETWORK

Councillors had a presentation from Surrey County Council on 23rd January about the health and wellbeing creation work that they have been doing. They funded wild swimming as a one off and it has since become established by the swimmers without Council support, the council see their role as empowering people to create their own wellness opportunities.

A digital option has been created for those who have difficulty accessing open spaces. VR headsets were purchased with a live fee from a RSPB bird feeding station.



A new therapy garden was built in one CYPMHS settings. It was created by 10 young people who gained City & Guild qualification.

Separately, Sevenoaks DC has started offering forest bathing (shinrin-yoku) at Darent Valley walking trails. Spending time in a forest has been reported as boosting the immune system functioning, reducing blood pressure, reducing stress, improves the mood and ability to focus, increases energy levels and sleep, allows deeper and clearer intuition, an increased flow of energy and an overall increased sense of happiness. KCC has a “Wilder Wellbeing” programme nearby in the Valley. Funding was made available from Public Health Suicide Prevention Fund and the team are on the lookout for future funding opportunities.

- More businesses in the towns treat parking as an issue than visitors.
- Cost gives the council the opportunity to manage parking.
- Pop-and-shoppers might be offered the first hour free in Ashford's Lower High Street, Bank Street and North Street as they are in Tenterden. In other words, remove the Bank Street barrier.
- Ease of access and egress to and from the car parks is critical.
- Finding and paying for a car park can cause delay and impacts visitors desire to travel by car – real time information on parking may be required.
- Enhancing EV opportunities is essential as the nature of cars used changes.
- Setting the parking traffic is essential to maximise footfall vrs optimising revenue – convenience and availability of spaces can drive users more than prices.
- Residents in our town centres so not have equal access to on street parking. The timing of the parking permits that are on offer (do there need to be more?) needs to be reviewed.

DOVER PLACE

I have added a request for “Keep Clear” road markings at the exit on to Station Road from Dover Place and the Dover Place Car Park to my Ashford Central Division Highways Improvement Plan.



HML

I had the opportunity to speak about the issues facing residents with the Management Company on Radio Kent on 29th January. Here are the notes I used.

There is a new emerging scandal on how Estate Management companies seem to be fleecing residents and are simply not delivering on what they promised. Management companies fail to understand what the developer sponsors have said they will do, how much they charge residents and are failing to communicate with their customers.

As part of the planning approval process commitments were made but there seems to be a lack of willingness to put these in place.

Bills are not issued for months and in some cases years, and when they do arrive on the doormat, there is no detail on how it is calculated and what the Finberry Management Company has done for the payment. There is no transparency. Unless residents pay up quickly, they are sometimes hounded with threats of County Courts judgements and debt collection which will cause damage to their credit rating at a time when they might be renewing their mortgage payments. It might not be on the Horizon Accounting level, but the amounts are significant for many, I have heard examples on Finberry of catch up bills in the thousands. It is another example of poor corporate governance. It seems beyond the management companies' ability to simply be clear on why they are charging what and issuing regular monthly bills.

In the cost-of-living crisis it is vital that those paying know how much is due and the services they can deliver. Residents need to understand the billing so they can dial down the costs when they cannot afford them. It is creating anxiety and stress which is avoidable and is not necessary.

Finberry's management company is failing to deliver promised services with the developer. Litter bins are not getting emptied, grass is not being cut, weeds are not being removed, graffiti is not being cleaned up, simple steps are not taken to keep residents safe by meeting basic health and safety measures such as providing lifebuoy rings at the balancing and fishing ponds.

Ashford Council will ensure delivery of negotiated improvements to the Management Plan. These will include asking for a Finberry Resident's Group and eventually Finberry Resident Directors to be phased in, a commitment towards consultation, engagement and feedback with residents, ensure that residents are kept up to date, have a site presence for the management Company to enable residents to provide feedback easily be involved in and steer the management and maintenance they are funding and a commitment for yearly open meetings to enable any issues to be resolved. The Council do not want to resort to legal options to enforce this, but we will if we must.

REPTON AVENUE

Following reports on the road surface, the Operations Engineer has inspected the entrance to Repton (off the A28 near the traffic lights) recently and agrees with findings of the Highway Stewards and Inspectors that the defects are wearing course not potholes. However, this is a location on a priority list for

permanent patching works once Highways receives confirmation of whether or not they will have access to any of the funding that the DfT is providing to Local Authorities. The funding is now with KCC but details are not yet available as to how that will be used/allocated. In the meantime, if there are any safety critical defects that warrant intervention these will be addressed with temporary repairs. The location is being monitored closely and Stewards will continue to inspect on site in response to all enquiries received.



COMMUNITY SAFETY STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT

The work to develop a three-year plan setting out priorities to make Ashford a safer place to live, work and visit was started with a meeting on 30th January. The historic priorities that were discussed were:

- Reducing serious violence, including youth violence, county lines, organised crime, violent extremism.
- Tackling violence against women and girls, including domestic abuse, sexual offenses.
- Reducing ASB and concerning behaviours, including substance abuse misuse and neighbourhood crime.
- Restoring confidence, supporting communities, including location hotspots, offender management.

It was noted that the increase in patrols in Victoria ward have resulted in a reduction in ASB incidences in the ward. There has been minimal awareness of the work of Community Wardens which has left to poor take up of their services. No youth engagement events are planned for the February half term in the town centre; previously a pop-up café was opened in Park Mall. The gaming bus has 5 visits scheduled for Kent but none were planned for Ashford, and I asked for an Ashford visit by the gaming bus during the summer holiday.

Key to tackling crime and ASB is offering the public the reporting tools that ensure effective communication so that resources can be deployed. ASB remains high with nearly 700 reports of rowdy or nuisance gathering in public last year. It was agreed that hate crimes (including transgender) need to be added to the priorities. E-scooters need to be licenced.

KCC HIGHWAY PLANNING POWERS

KCC Councillors had a briefing on 30th January on how planning rules on highways have changed. KCC no longer have powers in this area but are consulted on developments by the Borough Council. KCC deal with 4,063 applications and has 21 days to respond. 12% get a holding objection requesting further information with only 4% objected to.

KCC are required by the NPPF to work with developers to make a development proposal acceptable in highway terms but there is a "presumption in favour of development". This means that via a pre-app service, KCC try to iron out any highway related issues prior to the application being formally submitted. This is why KCC are rarely able to object since they have already done the hard work before the application comes in.

During the Local Plan "call for sites" process the district/borough council will make comments on each site normally requiring additional infrastructure being delivered. This requires traffic modelling that is subject to review at the public inquiry.

Development can only be prevented or refused on highways grounds under NPPF if there would be an unacceptable impact on highways safety or the cumulative traffic impact would be **severe** (but there is no definition). Hard evidence is needed, the focus is on sustainability, safety, sight lines etc. Congestion and journey time delay no longer is a consideration for a refusal unless it infringes on highway safety; highway safety can become compromised if driver frustration results in drivers gap seeking at junctions where insufficient gaps exist.

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