

COUNCIL UPDATE 2.2026

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:

"Since we met at the first public meeting on 10th November, legislation has been changing due to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. One of the key changes has been the removal of the Paper Permission Stage in the process for challenging NSIP (National Infrastructure Projects). The initial 'paper' stage for permission to bring a judicial review is now removed and all applications for challenges to DCOs must now go directly to an Oral Hearing.

Our only option to find out whether we have case to challenge the Decision to grant Stonestreet Green Solar a DCO is now to go to an Oral Hearing. This inevitably means additional legal costs. In November we told you that it was an option, held in case we were declined a JR request on paper. We promised not to commit you to additional costs without consultation. So, we held a public meeting on Tuesday 27 January to discuss the new costs. Those present (66 donors and members of the parish) voted unanimously in favour of continued support for the Parish Council.

Legal costs to date for issuing a PAP letter to the Secretary of State and Evolution Power and drafting and filing our case are now payable. The Oral (Permission Hearing) doubles the costs for finding out whether we have a substantive case but is the only way we can continue with our challenge. The community and donors at the public meeting, voted that funds from this campaign will be used to enable us to carry on. The costs are now a reality but, with your support, the Parish Council will continue to the Permission Hearing."

KENT POLICE UPDATE

PS Daniel Edge has given the following update.

"The Community Safety Unit (CSU) team has expanded with the addition of two new PSCOs which will provide additional support to the Neighbourhood Task Force. Kent Police has assisted with obtaining a Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO) for Ashford Town Centre which includes prohibiting the use of catapults and e-scooters. Kent Police is also having discussions with Tenterden Town Council to see whether a PSPO would be suitable there. Possession of catapults is not an offence but that a PSPO gives additional powers to make it illegal to use

them in public spaces. Several Acceptable Behaviour Agreements (ABAs) have been issued across Ashford to a number of young people in possession of catapults. There has been the normal seasonal issue of burglaries over Christmas; someone has now been arrested for a burglary that took place in Wye. Kent Police continue to focus their efforts on fly tipping and have had some success.

Kent Police are striving to improve the attendance of Officers at Parish Council meetings and asked for any specific requests for attendance or suggestions on how to meet with Officers to be submitted so they can be accommodated.”

KENT AND MEDWAY BETTER HEALTH NETWORK

The Group met on 3rd February, with a theme on community cohesion and how that can support mental health. Key issues included.

- We heard about new developments taking place by the Live Well Kent & Medway team (supported by Porchlight and Shaw Trust for the last 10 years). They develop Care Support Plans and provide housing support and have helped 26,000 people. Release The Pressure is a 24/7 helpline on 0800 1070160. A new Perimenopause support group start(ed) on 9th February. An improved domestic abuse mental health support group is starting.
- The Mental Health Inequalities Toolkit was presented which is being piloted in Thanet to support the services that understand the impact of inequalities in mental health service access and experience. It highlighted that the barriers are with groups including parents with young children who struggle to access support due to lack of access to transportation and support with their children.
- In the Sikh Community, cohesion has been improved by language classes, walking groups which aids talking and giving shared experiences.
- KCC have carried out a Health Outcome Inequality review into the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Community in Kent. The challenges arise from differences in culture including low literacy levels and that health services find it hard to reach the Community. A site in Faversham has been piloted by creating a family hub. The Chilmington site in Ashford is built on historically contaminated land which can affect health outcomes. A KCC project will include addressing site maintenance such as surface management which can prevent the Heath Bus visiting.

LITTER MANAGEMENT AT THE IBF

The DfT have issued the following map with the areas with the dark green line showing where litter needs to be managed, particularly around the layby along the A2070 link road. A request has been made to extend this along the A2070. Litter picking is informally done by IBF staff when they have “downtime”, but the arrangements need to be formalised.



LOW INCOMES TAX REFORM GROUP (LITRG)

LITRG is part of the Chartered Institute of Taxation which is an educational charity and has an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee on which I sit. Since 1998, LITRG has been working to improve the policy and processes of the tax, and associated welfare systems, for the benefit of those who are least able to pay for professional advice.

HMRC are seeking powers to obtain data from third-party data holders on an ongoing basis. The LITRG thinks that smarter use of third-party data has the potential to improve the taxpayer experience with HMRC and supports the principle of using third-party data to that end. However, there needs to be appropriate safeguards in place, transparency around the data and robust processes for taxpayers to challenge any defects or errors. New legislation gives HMRC the power to impose a standing obligation on certain third-party data holders to provide data to HMRC on an ongoing basis. The legislation will initially apply to bank and building society account information, as well as card sales data. The LITRG have the following comments.

- People who do not have a National Insurance number should be allowed sufficient time to obtain one. If they are not eligible for one, they should not be prevented from having a bank account for this reason.
- The LITRG thinks there is a risk that financial institutions may deny interest-bearing accounts to individuals who are ineligible to apply for a National Insurance number.
- The Treasury should use its power to require data holders to provide a copy of the data that they provide to HMRC to the person to whom the data relates, and to do in an easily understandable format.
- Taxpayers must be able to easily challenge, amend or correct data provided to HMRC by a third party.

NEIGHBOURHOOD COMMITTEES / LOCAL COMMUNITY NETWORKS / AREA BOARDS (TOGETHER REFERRED TO LCNs)

I attended a discussion on 4th February. The Government is looking at “Organisational Structures” for the new unitary council to give local areas powers to take decisions at a local level (ref: English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill section 60(1)). LCNs are one such option although the Bill is not prescriptive (but some structure will be required).

A common method is to cluster parishes in an LCN. Parishes should be involved in setting the boundaries, representation and terms of reference.

Issues to consider (maybe in pilots) include assets and service devolution, local highways & flooding, active travel, ASB & working with the police, economic regeneration, affordable housing, children and young people and health and wellbeing. Note that planning may need to be done outside the LCN structure but could be dealt with by the unitary sub-committees based on old district boundaries.

Membership could be open to all organisations including parish reps, unitary councillors, policing team, health service, fire & rescue, education providers, business representatives and bigger third sector groups active in the geographic area. Public participation is expected. Consensus is expected but otherwise it could be “one organisation: one vote”. They are expected to be a working group making recommendation to executive or scrutiny committee of the unitary.

LCNs would be the voice and focus of their communities, working together to solve the problems of the area. In Somerset (for example) they cover 30,000 populations but that is up for review; they are larger in Cornwall.

COMMUNITY SAFETY UNIT

The Group met on 5th February. Key issues included.

- 200 have now signed up for the WalkSafe App, further promotional events are needed.
- The enlarged Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) came into effect on 26th January, it now includes Queen Mothers Park & Henwood.
- 15 Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN) were issued in January in the old PSPO.
- 114 fly tips were reported in January, much higher than usual. Op Assist is planned in February/March (a multi-agency approach to fly tipping) during the tip closure.
- 8 out of 11 year 9 roadshows at schools have been completed setting out responsibilities for pupils.

- Priorities for 2025/26 were (i) reducing serious violence, (ii) tackling VAWG & Domestic Abuse, (iii) ASB and (iv) dealing with hate crimes. These priorities will roll into 2026/27 but there will be an increased focus given to public safety following societal changes due to rise of e-scooters, political change, cost of living and catapults. The new approach will focus on safer places, safer people and protecting communities by building community cohesion. ABC do not promote all the good things happening in Ashford - a stand / event "Coffee with a Cop" could be incorporated into the Makers Market on the first Saturday of the month.
- 191 homeless approaches made to the Council; temporary accommodation placements 220 (from 290).
- 2pm 8th March International Women's Day March from town centre to Stour Centre.
- Knife Bins are being refreshed and rebranded as Amnesty Bins that will accommodate catapults; I suggested the Park Mall bin going to Victoria Park Car Park.

ASHFORD BC BUDGET 2026/27

Councillors met to discuss the council budget on 12th and 26th February. The Chancellor's November Budget had an unexpected increase in Business Rates income (£667k) for ABC which was not anticipated. Recent Pension Valuation has resulted in a saving to the council of £1.223m (£683k for the general fund) of pension fund contributions. Additional grant income of £99k has been provided towards homelessness and domestic abuse prevention.

These windfalls could be have been used to freeze Council Tax which would have costed £285k.

The result is therefore still an increase of £5.79 Band D council tax (of 2.99% to £199.37 – ***the full amount permitted by law without a local referendum***).

Further savings arise from HM Government's Warm Homes Scheme which provides funding to reduce energy costs. This scheme renders the Council's £1m Green Homes Scheme otiose. The results of the budget consultation shows that Waste Collection and Economic Development are supported over Climate Action, Environmental Protection and Democratic Services – **67.9% disagree or strongly disagree with an increase in Council Tax.**

Average increase in council home rents will be 4.8%. The staff pay award is also yet to be determined but 4% is allowed. The fee charge for Allotment Perch's has remained frozen for 2026/27.

WASTE & RECYCLING						
Item	Description/Comments	VAT Indicator	Charge 2024/25 €	Charge 2025/26 €	Charge 2026/27 €	% Increase
Waste Collection						
Bulky Collection - General approved items	Base Charge (1 to four items excluding white goods)	NB	38.00	42.00	43.50	0.04
Bulky Collection - White goods	White goods - for each item (each for televisions, computer monitors and white goods, including microwaves, washing machines and tumble dryers)	NB	26.00	28.00	29.00	0.04
Garden Waste Bins	Wheeler Bin for Garden Waste - Previously agreed by Cabinet	NB	60.00	62.00	64.00	0.03
Full household bin set (new developments)	Set of one recycle (240L), one refuse (180L), one food caddy (23L) and one silver kitchen caddy (5L)	NB	99.00	132.00	140.80	0.04
Recycle bin (New development)	Green (240L)	NB	51.00	53.00	57.00	0.04
Refuse bin (New development)	Black (180L)	NB	51.00	53.00	57.00	0.04
Kitchen food caddy (New development)	Silver (5L)	NB	10.50	11.00	12.00	0.09
Food bin	Black with food signage wrap (180L)	NB	47.25	49.00	51.00	0.04
Replacement resident refuse bin	Black (180L)	NB	31.50	33.00	34.00	0.03
Replacement resident recycle bin	Green (240L)	NB	31.50	33.00	34.00	0.03
Replacement resident internal food caddy	Silver (5L)	NB	0.00	5.00	5.00	0.00
Bulk refuse bin (New or replacement) (Includes signage on bins)	1100L steel/black lid	NB	395.00	415.00	430.00	0.04
Bulk refuse bin (New or replacement) (Includes signage on bins)	1100L steel/black lid (each additional bulk refuse bin in same delivery)	NB	380.00	399.00	420.00	0.05
Bulk recycle bin (New or replacement) (Includes signage on bins)	1100L full green	NB	395.00	415.00	430.00	0.04
Bulk recycle bin (New or replacement) (Includes signage on bins)	1100L full green (each additional bulk recycle bin in same delivery)	NB	380.00	399.00	420.00	0.00
Food bin	Black with food signage wrap (180L)	NB	47.25	49.00	51.00	0.04
Bin store/compound recycle information sign (A2)	Colour signage on diamond board per sign - Bin use improvement	NB	50.00	60.00	62.00	0.03

Parking fees will be reviewed in October 2026.

From 1 April 2025, ABC was given the ability to add a Council Tax premium to second homes (properties that are unoccupied and furnished). An exception is given for residents who have left a property unoccupied due to the fact they are fleeing domestic violence.

Capital expenditure projects were listed:

Project Name	Total Approved Budget	Spend at 31/03/25	2025/26 Forecast Spend	Future Forecast Spend	Total Spend	Project Variance
	€'000	€'000	€'000	€'000	€'000	€'000
Place and Space						
Planned Minor Capital Works for General Fund Assets	2,000		500	1,500	2,000	0
Ellingham Roof	1,800	52	1,748		1,800	0
International House Decarbonisation	803	3	800		803	0
Solar PV (various sites)	3,500	106	3,394		3,500	0
Stour Centre Solar PV	6,800	26	6,774		6,800	0
Civic Centre Relocation Phase 2	849		911		911	62
Newtown Works - Phase 1	262,535	11,935	600	250,000	262,535	0
Newtown Works Levelling Up Fund	14,774	12,117	2,657		14,774	0
Park Mall Redevelopment	9,388	2	100	9,286	9,388	0
Ninn Lane	3,763	918	120	2,725	3,763	0
Single Grants Gateway Fund	300	75	75	150	300	0
Conningbrook Lakes Country Park development	2,353	165	950	1,238	2,353	0
Walking & Cycling	500		500		500	0
Tenterden Leisure Procurement	2,100		2,100		2,100	0
Waste Contract Vehicle	282		282		282	0
Housing Services						
Disabled Facility Grants	3,017	987	990	1,040	3,017	0
Nutrient Neutrality	1,708	634	1,074		1,708	0
Customer Tech & IT						
Digital Transformation	650	325	325		650	0
Port Health - Installation of AI	400		300	100	400	0
Community Safety & Wellbeing						
Automatic Number Plate Recognition	320	149	171		320	0

A considerable proportion of the infrastructure works have been completed at the Newtown Works including remediation, restoration, site preparation, utilities, and archaeology. The Studio project has been abandoned and it is now to be a residential led scheme of just over 800 units together with commercial and community space subject to a planning approval later this year.

Ninn Lane is expected to be redeveloped into an ABC Direct Services depot, allowing the Council to provide a robust service for the borough so freeing up industrial units and prime land which could be developed into light industrial units at Carlton Road Business Park. Ninn Lane is suitable to host ABC Direct Services; Aspire Landscape Management, Housing Repairs and ABC Electrical.

A planning application for the demolition of the Park Mall shopping centre and carparks and the construction of a temporary surface level carpark in the location of the Edinburgh Road multistorey car park has been approved. It is proposed 200 parking spaces with 10 accessible and 12 EV spaces will be provided. Whilst this site is being demolished, a market testing exercise will be completed to identify potential development partners for the long-term redevelopment of the site.

Three medium sized housing sites are now in progress with Oakleigh House (59 units) and Mabledon Avenue (20 units) started on site. The third site; Tile Kiln Road (14 units) now has a contractor who will be starting on site very soon. A further two larger sites are to be submitted for planning within the next few weeks: Kent Wool Growers (170 units) and Civic Centre refurbishment (50 units) with ambitions to be in contract and arranging start on site during 2026/27.

ASHFORD BC FINANCIAL RESULT Q3 2025/26

Councillors received a report on the financial year 2025/26 to the end of December 2025. An overall deficit of £650,000 is forecasted which is broadly in line with previous forecasts. The key movements include:

- £347,000 reduction in temporary accommodation and homelessness costs.
- £96,000 additional income from Parking due to an increase in off-street parking.
- £130,000 in Environmental, Property & Recreation costs mainly from an increase in business rates liability.
- £300,000 additional forecast of enforcement costs.
- **Hubert Fountain restoration project has been included within the Council's capital programme for several years; however, the**

project is no longer considered deliverable within the current programme, and no spend is forecast for the remainder of the financial year. It was therefore proposed that the Hubert Fountain scheme be removed from the capital programme at this stage. The opportunity for future restoration remains, and it is anticipated that this may be more appropriately taken forward by the Parks Foundation should external funding or partnership arrangements become available. The last quotation ABC had for works was in 2021 for £613,000, which may have increased by 20% now with inflation, there was an expectation for a crowd funding exercise.

- There is new £36,000 grant which is to be used towards the implementation of the Renters Right Act coming into effect on 1st May 2026.
- There is a salary saving of £65,000 in the monitoring centre as some Officers have “moved to new opportunities” before its transfer to Swale BC in April. The number of public space cameras being monitored will remain the same under the new partnership arrangement with Swale. Monitoring will continue to operate 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.
With regard to the Housing Estate CCTV, these have not transferred to Swale and there is going to be a review and audit of the Cameras to determine the best way forward.
- There is a cost of £38,000 at Elwick Place relating to business rates due to the Council taking possession of 3 vacant units. An increase in the support required for Ashford Cinema is shown as £342k.

HOUSING SERVICE CHARGES AND REPAIRS

Service charges are billed 18 months in arrears; therefore, the money that is being collected now relates to previous years. As more accurate and up-to-date information is now available compared to when the budget was originally set, additional income of £137,000 is expected this financial year.

Awaab’s Law, which sets new, legally enforceable rules requiring social housing landlords in England to fix serious hazards, especially damp and mould, within strict time limits, has contributed significantly to an increased workload. ***I asked if is it wise to defer the re-roofing works at Brookfield Court until 2026/27 in the light of this?*** It is also noteworthy that there has been a £38,000 increase in legal fees because of the litigation of housing disrepairs (presumably action against subcontractors) and £35,000 increase in compensation payments driven by an uplift in complaints because of seasonal (winter) issues such as leaks, damp, and heating. Housing is still experiencing a high level of complaints predominately due to repairs - ABC have seen a significant increase in the number of payments being made by the repairs team where we have admitted fault. ***Does a “new Compensation Policy to regulate and set payment amounts” mean that there is going to be a curb on payments to tenants currently due under the Compensation***

Scheme? In previous Ombudsman outcomes ABC have been found to have not offered enough money throughout the process, the Ombudsman expects ABC to learn from previous findings, and this has resulted in ABC offering more compensation along the process.

Officers are looking to upgrade the repairs service telephony system and convert standard telephone calls into live video calls. ***If the tenant does not have a smart phone and is unable to carry out a video call they will have their property inspected the same way they currently do within the timescales set out in our repair's handbook.***

CHILMINGTON SECONDARY SCHOOL

KCC have funding through Active Travel England (ATE) for development work regarding a footway in Chilmington. The funding is to investigate a potential footway and crossing from Ashford Prep School to the new secondary school and KCC are looking into the feasibility of this route. However, KCC do not have any funding for construction at the moment.

PARK MALL REDEVELOPMENT

Practical issues linked to the demolition and hoardings are starting to emerge.

The proposed escape route at the rear of the Tank Cafe cannot be accomplished without a degree of civil work first; hoarding to the rear of the Tank car park and the Prince of Wales eatery may block off the right of way for the cafe, enjoyed for 23 years. If not carefully designed, it would create a 40-metre secluded alleyway across the rear of both the cafe and the Soul Food eatery. This may become a magnet for rubbish dumping, ASB and severely increase security issues for both premises. In addition, will KF&R approve of this as a safe exit route in an emergency - has a full fire and emergency risk assessment been carried out?

This all needs to be resolved before any hoarding is erected. The council are currently reviewing the issues in particularly how the access and fire escape concerns can be mitigated ahead of works commencing on site. The demolition company will have a full public engagement process and will contact the owners of all affected businesses. I have been told the demolition contractor will only require the left-hand side of the car park as a site office, leaving the right hand-side available for businesses but this remains to be seen.

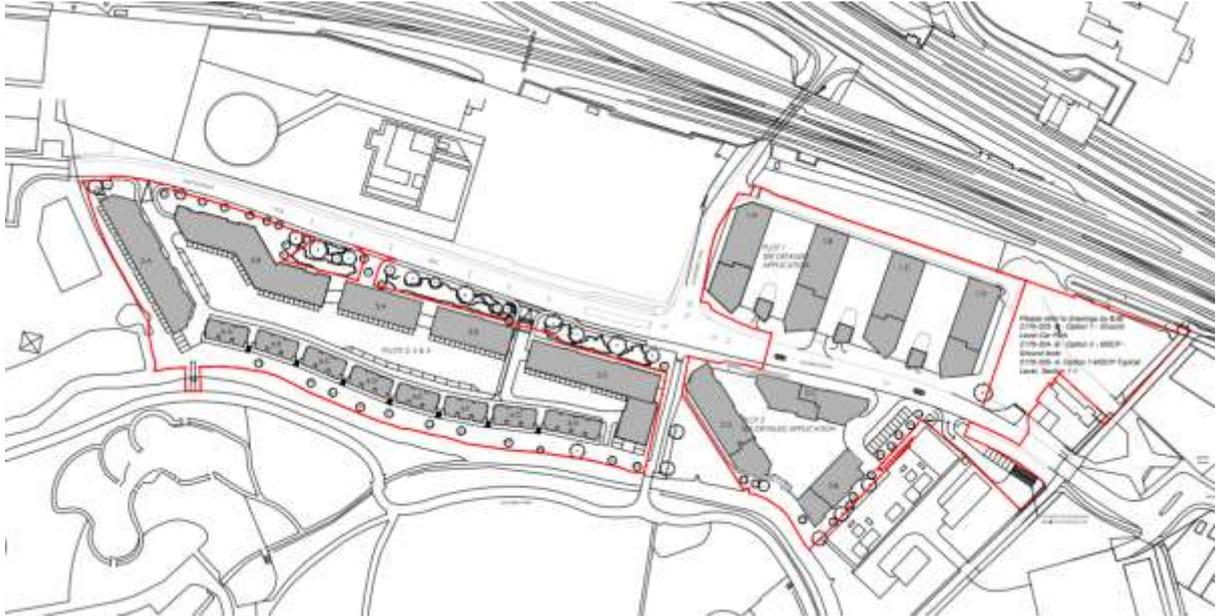


GASWORKS LANE/VICTORIA WAY FLATS

I have investigated if there is any news about the stalled construction site on Victoria Road. Below is a plan of the overall development which shows the Plot numbers. Plots 3-5 have been completed and occupied for some time now. The construction company for Plots 1 and 2 of the development (Vidi) went into administration in September last year. The developer's agent has said that they now have a new contractor who will shortly resume building out Plots 1 and 2 to completion.

Plot 2C was completed prior to September 2025 and is occupied but Plots 2B and 2D are not yet completed - these are close to completion which may have given the impression that they are ready for occupation but will take roughly 4-5 months to complete. Plots 1A-D are at an earlier stage in their construction and they are hoping to complete these in 12-18 months.

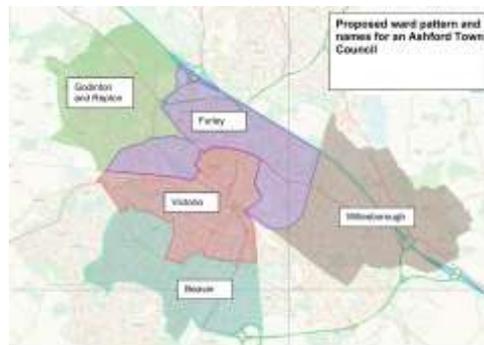
There is no 'planning' reason why the development can't be built or occupied. The work stopping is solely due to the construction company going into administration.



NEW ASHFORD TOWN COUNCIL

Recommendations for the next step in the process were agreed as follows at a meeting on 12th February:

- A parish of Ashford be established.
- The boundary of the parish of Ashford will be:



- The style of the established parish be that of a town (which will enable a town Mayor).
- The name of the town council should be Ashford Town Council.

A further round of consultation will take place on warding arrangements and number of councillors. There will be no referendum on the proposal.

ROBIN ROAD

I have contacted Crest about vehicles taking an unauthorised exit to/from Robin Road using a footpath right opposite number 42 Robin Road. The vehicles exit the footpath opposite the front door of number 42 after using the track to the left of the plot and then turning sharply. Taking this 50-metre shortcut means drivers don't have to drive to/from the A20 at Smeeth via A2070/J10a, saving around 5 miles.



The cars have meant the grass is being churned up badly.



Crest are assessing if there was a requirement in the first place to install a bollard in the first place. I have alerted ABC planning team.

No footpath has yet been built from Robin Road to Jay Walk as shown on the sales particulars, I have asked if this was a planning requirement.



FINBERRY COMMUNITY CENTRE

I requested an update on when a planning application might be expected for the Community Centre. Absent an application, I will ask planning officers how long Crest have to submit an application as a “Reserve Matters” to the original planning consent to Finberry. If they miss this deadline the application will need to be a new planning application which means the building will have to comply with recent Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) requirements.

IBF PLANNING CONDITIONS MEETING

The team from the DfT/DEFRA/HMRC/JLL met with Sevington & Mersham PCs on 18th February. Key issues include.

- The team are meeting with ABC Environmental Health team during w/c 23rd Feb to discuss noise concerns.
- National Highways and KCC are in the process of providing comments on all signage to the IBF to identify any gaps which need additional signs and improvements in the wording etc used. The PCs will review this ahead of due date for submission to the LPA by 17th March.
- HMRC (who manage Sodexo the facility manager of the site) must consider how they manage the damage that is done to properties in Church Road (and elsewhere) when HGVs try and access the IBF through the staff entrance. They have stated that under the Commissioners for Revenue & Customs Act 2005, all HMRC data (e.g. CCTV footage of damage to off-site properties by HGVs), whether personal or not, can only be released under limited circumstances. There is a legal gateway with another government department or for criminal proceedings to the police, among others. Unfortunately, this means it is not permissible to release any CCTV coverage of damage to third parties without a legal basis.

- Residents will be told when the "Bravo" & "Tango" (overflow lorry parking) are intended to be used so residents are aware of the lighting and noise. Overflow parking is activated only when specific operational pressures occur such as
 - i. On-site systems failure limiting throughput.
 - ii. Dover, Eurotunnel, HMRC or Defra I.T. issues.
 - iii. Significant repairs or maintenance impacting primary parking capacity within main parking areas.
 - iv. Traffic Disruption on A2070 and M20 J10A.
 - v. Operation Brock- preventing tailbacks on the strategic road network.
 - vi. Surges in operational demand.
 - vii. Unexpected volumes or issues with custom clearance documentation.
- I have provided contact details of the KCC bridgeway team to ask if signage can be installed on their gates to the bridgeway either side of the staff entrance providing details of where to contact if there is an incident on the zebra crossing.
- Further work is being carried out with the landscaping, a workshop will be commissioned to cover enhanced soft landscaping and ecology management.

LITTER AT ASHFORD INTERNATIONAL

I have reported the litter accumulation near to Ashford International station under the bridge road next to car park C.



SOUTHEAST COST AMBULANCE SERVICE (SECamb)

Governors met on 19th and 26th February. Key issues included.

- All ambulance crews now contact maternity services on a "red phone" rather than using personal mobiles. This is to ensure that theatre and obstetric support are pre-alerted and ready to receive time dependant maternity emergencies.
- SECamb are seeking stronger representation at small local Pride events. I gave them the date of Ashford Pride, 20th June 2026.

- The Annual Member Meeting will now be done online only. It is confirmed that the statutory element (laying accounts, approvals etc) can be done online with the remainder of the virtual meeting geared to the public engagement on SECAMB's work.
- We discussed fuel price increases and noted that the capital cost of new fuel-efficient fleet was nationally funded.
- It was noted that efficiencies are dependent on rolling out "Virtual Care / Hear and Treat" to reduce conveyances to Emergency Departments. This means patient needs are thoroughly assessed by a senior clinician remotely enabling patients to be cared for directly or referred to the most appropriate care provider (which may not be conveyance to A&E). There is risk related to securing virtual care clinicians as it remains stubbornly below target. The numerical workforce is in line with operating plan, but the strategic element linked to virtual care has progressed slower than expected; the skill mix needs to support virtual care. ***This can be achieved by recruitment fairs & apprenticeships – Feb saw National Apprenticeship Week (gives an opportunity to focus of social mobility as a key DEI strategy; SECAMB is a wellbeing career and can offer social mobility for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds), March (2nd to 6th) sees Careers Week allowing SECAMB to showcase the diversity of its work which is intellectually challenging, delivers real societal impact, better packages and educates and supports the public to access services in the right way. Bringing people who have left SECAMB back into the organisation can be achieved by paying for updated qualifications.***
- Integration of SECAMB with South Coast Ambulance Service (SCAS) will start with Digital Infrastructure, AI and CoPilot along with Cyber Security Assurance.
- SECAMB is almost fully compliant with the NHS Violence Reduction Standards. Incidence of violence and abuse towards staff is reducing for the first time since 2021.
- The NHS Understanding Sexual Misconduct in the Workplace is delivered as an on-line training module. Some behaviour has become normalised and there is an ongoing challenge to undo the mindset by reinforcing the right standards.
- Significant progress has been made with the intensive work to improve the response to patients who are experiencing suicidality in Sussex and Surrey. Similar work to be replicated in Kent before May 2026 with single points of access to mental health support.
- Changes in Local Government are coinciding with the Ambulance Service in Southeast England "merging", the NHS 10-year Plan, the Community Trusts in Kent & Medway joining together which are three big changes in how NHS services work. Additional resources in SECAMB may be needed to liaise with a greater number of unitary councils rather than one county council in Kent when rolling out virtual

care and developing the relationships needed with new social care leaders in local government. Staff redundancies in care homes are having a direct effect on the number of calls to SECamb.

ALLOTMENTS S106 FUNDING

Approximately £51,000 has been allocated for allotment-related improvements

Henwood Allotments

£41,149.50 – Capital allocation to be used for fencing, gates, improvement of water and electricity, and provision of outdoor furniture. (planning application 16/01512/AS) and £10,526.62 for maintenance of above.

Repton / Westrees Allotments

£10,299.68 – Parking, security & access (17/01511/AS) with £2,634.80 maintenance of above.

Ashford Allotment Society is expected to complete a s106 application, but the Planning Officer for the Henwood application has considered opening discussions with the developer on the possibility of a Deed of Variation (DOV) in respect of the spend in relation to Henwood with the funding being transferred to Westrees. The DOV route is a time-consuming process and could be risky as to whether the developer accepts any change. Once the s106 remains unspent after 10 years, ABC may have to return it to the developer. It seems to me that given the application was in 2016, improvements at Henwood should be identified ASAP.

NATIONAL PLANNING POLICY FRAMEWORK

Two meetings were held to discuss response to HM Government's consultation on a new NPPF on 20th and 25th February. Consultation closes on 10th March. Key issues are as follows (my comments in brackets).

- The NPPF is intended to achieve a default yes to sustainable development on brownfield land and within settlements but restrictions outside settlements (but no restrictions around stations). ***This could result in unsustainable development around remote stations e.g. Pluckley and Ham Street as the proposed density rate is to be 40 per hectare - the existing density rate in Ham Street is 28 per hectare***
- It will make planning applications shorter and simpler. ***(Good)***
- There is support for increased density. ***(This could be an issue of development within rural settlements where greater density will be out of character)*** The NPPF says that suitable locations for large scale development should be identified. ***(Note that Chilmington has demonstrated the problems of bringing suitable large-scale developments forward. Also, the stalling of Victoria Way Flats have demonstrated the problems of bringing forward high density developments near stations exacerbated when the buildings are***

more than 18m high due to additional fire safety requirements post Grenfell)

- It aims to “conserve and enhance the natural environment”, addresses landscape, biodiversity and trees. It refers to “opportunities” to enhance and potentially fund this by developments s106. **(This is fine, but at what cost as developments still need to fund infrastructure and affordable homes)**
- Neighbourhood plans should include land allocations “to meet identified housing requirement” (proportional to population). **(This may result in Neighbourhood Plans being less attractive to develop as areas without a Neighbourhood Plan will have their land allocations to meet its proportionate identified housing requirement for the whole of the Local Planning Authority’s (LPA) need. That said, having a Neighbourhood Plan may give areas with them protection if that Neighbourhood is delivering on its 5-year land supply and the LPA is not)**

CENTRAL ASHFORD COMMUNITY FORUM

The Forum met on 23rd February, the following issues arose.

- A question was agreed for Full Council on 23rd February. “Access to the High Street from the new temporary Park Mall car park was discussed at the Central Forum on 26th February. Businesses in the Town are keen to explore of additional access / egress from the temporary car park to the Upper and Lower High Street and County Square in addition to the only proposed route to St Georges Square. Please will the Portfolio Holder provide his views on this and agree to meet with town centre businesses in conjunction with interested councillors.” It is noted that the Parking Strategy included as one of its Key Priorities “Supporting Town Centre Regeneration and Business Growth and the Local Economy”; it also refers to “accessibility”.
- Access to St Georges Square will be blocked off from Sturges Road during demolition of Park Mall. We have explained to the owner the arrangements intended during construction and asked if these are not delivered to contact councillors / the Forum.
- Planning application PA/2025/1837 (6 one beds HMOs) to be called in to the planning committee. It is important that the new local plan includes restrictions on HMO in Furley, Victoria, Beever and Stanhope wards.

BOROUGH COUNCIL REPORTING METRICS

Councillors met on 24th February to discuss performance indicators. Key issues included increased vacancies in the town centre and falls in parking income.

Code & Short Name	Description	Q1 2025/2026			Q2 2025/2026			Q3 2025/2026			Latest Note
		Value	Target	Status	Value	Target	Status	Value	Target	Status	
KPI.PLACE.005 Ashford town centre vacancy rate	Ashford town centre vacancy rate	18.3% (April 25)			20% (July 25)			21% (October 25)			The area surveyed is the High Street, Middle Row, New Rents, North Street, Bank Street, Tuffon Street, County Square, Park Mall and Elwick Place. This is surveyed manually quarterly

	All areas - including County Square, Park Mall and Elwick Place	Town Centre Streets - excluding County Square, Park Mall and Elwick Place
Vacant Units	74	33
Total Units Surveyed	344	237
Vacancy Rate	21%	14%

Surveys are a snapshot on the day, meaning that upcoming openings and closures are not factored in. With the upcoming relocation of Park Mall tenants, it is anticipated that the vacancy rate will reduce. Additionally, there are a number of properties, where there are live Planning issues, offers being negotiated and absent landlords, which are not able to be taken up at present.

Code & Short Name	Description	Q1 2025/2026			Q2 2025/2026			Q3 2025/2026			Latest Note
		Value	Target	Status	Value	Target	Status	Value	Target	Status	
KPI.PLACE.016 Parking usage	Parking usage Ashford and Tenterden	275,090			272,446			257,619			Made up of 163,265 from Ashford town centre car parks & 94,354 from Tenterden car parks

Part of the work in tackling this is to make the town centre feel safer. Anti-Social Behaviour Awareness Week (July 2025) saw a partnership pop-up-stall in the town centre including ABC Housing & ABC Safeguarding Leads, the Police, Ashford Mediation, Victim Support and KCC Wardens. Safeguarding information was also available, with relevant signposting taking place. Extensions to this work could include further pop-up events including Listening to Our Community (Safeguarding and Community Safety) and Raising Safeguarding Awareness in Adult Safeguarding Awareness Week.

BYBROOK WASTEWATER TREATMENT WORKS

I attended Sojan Joesph MP's community engagement event on 28th February.

Southern Water (SW) are planning £8-9bn of upgrade works across the 5 counties they operate in their next 5-year plan to 2030. This is up from £4bn from their last 5-year plan.

Recent activity in Kent includes (i) work by the "Clean Rivers and Seas" team to reduce/delay overflows into swales by creating new wetland channels, (ii) new lids on the tanks into which waste is discharged into, (iii) minimising "miss-connections" where sewerage is discharged into surface water systems and (iv) better control of methane discharges which enables improved energy recovery. A real time reporting system has been created where discharges into rivers and seas are reported publicly.

At Bybrook recent projects include.

- £4.5m improvements in 2022.
- Odour Control Unit improvements started in 2025 with phase I completed in November 2025 and the next phase awaiting a start date although it is fully funded.

- Other work in 2026 will reduce the amount of dried, compacted waste (“Cake”) which is the source of odour – less will be kept on site and a more robust treatment system introduced.

One issue is that SW are not a statutory consultee to new housing planning applications and if developers are granted consent, SW **must** connect the new homes into the WWTW system. They are working with developers to ensure that design minimises the impact, I advised them to make a representation in NPPF consultation to change this obligation to connect.

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