

Kent County Council Annual Report to Parishes - April 2024

Looking back over the past year a significant number of my monthly reports to Parish Councillors have centred around money, **more specifically the lack of funding for local government** and the escalating costs of almost every service Kent County Council provides and I will return to that topic at the end of this report, but I want to focus first on this issues that Councillors and residents have contacted me about most frequently, I anticipate they will come as no surprise.

After the wettest winter on record for almost 200 years and with the driest summer of '22 still in our memory and increased traffic both local and national **our roads are undoubtedly showing the pressure they and the Council are under in maintaining them**. The number of reported potholes has escalated and the weather makes the repairs more difficult. Some additional funding from Government, £8.6 million, and an allocation of £50 million ringfenced in the KCC budget for this should begin to make a difference over the next few months, additional area based contractors have been commissioned and that work has begun and will gather pace as the weather (hopefully) improves. I understand that road closures for this purpose can be inconvenient and the Streetwork Teams do take into account the local patterns of travel and times of closures, an increasing number of closures requested by the utility companies make this more challenging. Many of those requests are for urgent closure and the Council is legally required to allow that, there is a work stream in progress considering this issue and looking for better solutions. With the increased rainfall and changing rainfall patterns surface water flooding has also been significant, increased volume in a short period of time mean that the existing drainage does not always cope and increased silt washing into the drains because of the intensity of the rain makes them much more difficult to clear in the usual way. I have regular conversations with our District Highways Manager highlighting urgent issues and checking on progress.

Safety on our roads is a concern of Councillors and residents that I share, I understand the frustration of Councillors when suggestions about reduced speed limits made through the Highways Improvement Plans are not supported by the technical highways advice, we have had some success though in achieving 20 mph in some of our villages and I will continue to support the efforts where we haven't been able to achieve that yet. Just as I continue to support the A257 Group in their efforts to improve the safety of the stretch of road from Gobery Hill through to the White Mill roundabout, sadly a number of accidents along this stretch of road have given this campaign greater emphasis, a new Cabinet Member for Highways was appointed last year and Neil Baker came to meet with the Group and listen to concerns in the autumn. Across Kent various different strategies have been tried to reduce speed, knowing that putting up signs alone does not reduce speed significantly, effective enforcement is needed. I am very encouraged that our new local PC's have joined forces to carry out several speed checks across their areas, not only have they stopped drivers for speeding they have also been checking and finding drivers without valid road tax or insurance, I also want to thank the Speedwatch volunteers for the work that they do to help reduce speeds (their work can help enormously in making the case for police speed checks and 20 mph limits).

Last year, both on the ground and at the decision making level, I supported the very effective local campaign to **retain the Household Waster Recycling Centre at Richborough**. I am pleased that there are no changes to the sites in this year's budget and although the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP)

mentions savings in 25/26 there is considerable work ongoing to look at other economies and income streams connected to recycling material taken to the sites.

The Council continues to host a range of **environmental initiatives** including the local Nature Recovery Strategy – Making Space for Nature; Plan Tree which has planted 60,777 trees across Kent this autumn and winter and 223,634 since October 2019, recently a number of specifically Dutch Elm resistant elm trees have been planted at Pegwell Bay Country Park as part of rebuilding the numbers of elm across the county; the collective buying scheme for solar panels Solar Together (delivered in conjunction with District Councils) opened for its 4th phase this month; LOCASE the low carbon initiative across the South East has just finished its 7 year project and there are some fantastic outcomes. Details of all these projects can be found on the Environment page of the KCC website.

A very significant part of Council business remains the **delivery of adult and children's social care**, both of which are statutory duties for the authority, returning to the finance theme the delivery of these services are taking 50% of the council expenditure in the current budget. The cost of placements both for adults and children has risen exponentially over the past few years not just in Kent but nationally and that situation is proving very challenging for councils nationally. The Leader of Kent County Council has communicated this to Government both individually and collectively with other Councils very strongly and there has been a very limited response in financial terms although the recognition of the situation is, I think, well understood both by Government but also more generally.

Our Adult Social Care team continue the efforts to both innovate and improve systems and services to help people remain independent and at home for as long as possible as this is what most want. There is significant work being done on the use of technology to help people remain at home safely but the emphasis remains on providing the right care whether that is at home or in a residential facility. There is increased emphasis on working with health partners to provide a more joined up approach, for example on hospital discharge. The recently reviewed Integrated Care Strategy is a step forward in this.

Our children's social care is still at the outstanding standard judged by Ofsted in 2022, we had a focused visit from Ofsted earlier this year and the outcome of that was very positive. Finding placements for our children in care remains a challenge (as it does nationally) and we continue to do our best to meet our legal responsibility for all unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) arriving in Kent as directed by the Court last July. We are working to improve our services for children and families with special educational needs and disabilities central to which is to ensure that a greater number of children can be included in schools nearer to their home with the right support.

As always I have followed up on a wide range of issues for local residents ranging from issues with social care to enquiries about public rights of way and will continue to do that, I very much welcome the opportunity to join Parish Council meetings and both give information and listen to local concerns.

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