

2018 Annual Report

Annual Report to Town and Parish Councils 2018/19

Kent County Council activity over the past few months has been focussed on the budget and Brexit. Never before, in my long experience, have we had to set a medium-term budget with so much uncertainty beyond year one. We are optimistic that the Fair Funding review will give counties a bigger slice of the cake and that KCC will benefit significantly. However, the whole organisation has risen to the challenge of finding another £73m to fund rising pressures in the coming financial year.

Highways maintenance, both capital and revenue combined, has risen from £70m in 2017/18 to £89m in the current year and will rise to £95.7m in 2019/20. This figure does not include the very welcome £28m recently received for highways improvements materially affected by Brexit Preparedness.

To balance the budget and retain and maintain the comprehensive range of services it has been necessary to raise council tax by 3% plus the additional 2% adult social care levy.

Despite this we are able to continue to deliver many non-statutory services, so highly valued by us all. We are not having to revert, as so many other authorities are, to deliver only the core, minimum, statutory services. We will continue to deliver the following non-statutory services:

Subsidised bus services - £6.2m

Economic Development - £2.3m

Housing related support for the most vulnerable - £7.1m

Community wardens, arts and culture, country parks - £6.4m

Children in need of family support - £9.8m

Young Person's Travel Pass - £8.1m (ability, in the coming academic year to pay in eight instalments)

For Brexit we have been planning for some time, focussing on three main areas: transport, trading standards and resilience. On transport, we have been working with Highways England to minimise disruption to the road system in Kent. The plan is to absorb the expected build up of lorries delayed at the tunnel and ports by increased parking space at Dover, a new contraflow system on the M20 to allow the motorway to be kept open while still parking a large number of lorries, using Manston Airport to park vehicles and, in extremis, to use the M26.

Trading standards are a major concern as we need to prevent illegal and unsafe goods entering the country. We have already recruited extra officers and, in the event of a no deal, may need more. Any use of alternative ports will exacerbate the problems.

On resilience, KCC has been overhauling all its business continuity plans and providing advice to other businesses. We are looking at the option of working from home or using remote work sites such as libraries. We are also looking at the possible problems of major road disruption to schools, hospitals and vulnerable residents.

We have just launched our three year strategy on libraries. This includes some reductions in opening hours due to the financial challenges but, crucially, keeps all our libraries open. Many other authorities are planning wholesale closure of libraries.

Bus services are run by commercial companies. KCC does subsidise some services but we are aware that some communities, especially in rural areas, are poorly served by public transport. A bus consultation took place from 22 January to 19 February about proposed changes to the 58 bus service. The consultation overwhelmingly supported the need for this service to go to Maidstone Hospital direct without the need to change. The pilot will run for 12 months, starting in June this year. We hope it will prove popular and thus be continued.

In May this year I will have been your County Councillor for 30 rewarding years. Thank you. I am still Deputy Cabinet member for Communities and Regulatory Services and represent KCC on Kent Music, Turner Contemporary, Kent Community Foundation and Rochester Bridge Trust. I am a member of the Kent and Medway Fire Authority and KCC's Governance and Audit Committee.

The issue which concerned all of us last year was the refresh of the Kent Minerals and Waste Plan and its inclusion of the Ryarsh site for sand extraction. There was a very well organised campaign against the inclusion of the site in the new plan. I tried to make sure that members of KCC visited the site and that the views of residents and neighbouring communities were listened to. In December KCC excluded the site when submitting the plan.

A more recent cause for concern is a commercial decision by a bus company to no longer fetch school children from Addington and Trottiscliffe. I am currently trying to find a short term solution as well as a long term one.

Traffic, rat running and speed, as well as quantity of traffic and inappropriate parking, all remain important local issues. Offham's scheme is almost complete and other parishes are working together to find possible solutions. I have finally managed to have the speed limit on the A228 between the M20 and Holborough reduced to 50mph and have worked with Medway who have also reduced their section to 50mph. This enables the design of the new, and much needed, toucan crossing to go ahead and I hope it will be in place later in 2019. I have, however, failed to have the speed limit on the A20 reduced. Nor have I managed to have various roads in Snodland re-surfaced.

My member grant has also been spent on improvements to several village halls and other smaller community schemes.

SARAH HOHLER

KCC Member for Malling North, March 2019