

Annual Report to Parish and Town Councils 2024

Sarah Hohler, Member for Malling North, Kent County Council

1. Preamble

In my last annual report I forecast that we faced some uncertain years ahead. This proved to be all too true in what has been a most difficult year. The international picture remains bleak with war continuing to rage in Ukraine and now a dangerous escalation of violence in the Middle East. At home slow progress was made in preventing illegal migration and the financial turmoil became the dominant factor for government, both national and local.

2. Finance

Last year for the first time in my 35 years on the Council we overspent on the budget requiring a contribution from reserves to balance our books at the end of the year. We simply could not control the soaring demand and rampant inflation in our statutory adult's and children's services which pushed us into overspend.

Early this year it became apparent that despite a prudent provision for rising costs in the budget we were again not able to control the in-year spend to keep within the allocated financial envelopes. Following this early warning we have sought savings wherever possible including, sadly, some sensitive areas but, with the statutory social care responsibilities now swallowing over 70% of the budget, generating savings from the rest has not been easy. We await the final end of year outturn but are currently forecasting, once again, an overspend which will mean another call on reserves. Clearly this is not a sustainable situation and we have joined with other top tier authorities across the country

to lobby government to review urgently the funding arrangements for local government. It does not make sense to burden local authorities with the huge and largely uncontrollable costs of social care to the severe detriment of their ability to deliver local services.

A few weeks before we set the budget we did receive welcome extra funding of some £13million in recognition of our social care responsibilities. On 19th February we set our budget for 24/25. It contains some painful savings in sensitive areas and a 5% rise in Council Tax but it is a prudent and viable provision for the year ahead, provided we can control the social care costs. This remains our biggest challenge.

3. Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)

Following the favourable High Court judgement regarding our Judicial Review proceedings against the Home Office we continue to press for the operation of a comprehensive and effective National Transfer scheme which would significantly reduce the burden on Kent. However, no transfers can take place until the Home Office have resolved the court order last July requiring Kent to look after all UASC arriving in the county. In order to comply with this judgement we are establishing 9 reception centres across the county.

4. EU Entry Exit System (EES)

We have long warned about the risks that EES introduction, expected in the autumn, poses to travel, business and the visitor economy in Kent.

With no option for advance registration, all tourist traffic heading through the port of Dover and Eurotunnel will have to register for EES the first time they cross the Short Straits. There is an impressive amount of preparatory work taking

place at Eurotunnel. However, pressures on the Port, with little or no space for registration, are likely to be severe and spill over on to the highways network.

We will continue to press central government and others to get this right and understand the severe and sustained impact on Kent if they do not.

5, Roads and Transport

The state of the roads at the moment, following very wet weather, is very poor. To bring our highways network up to the standard we would like would cost more than £700 million. In that context the government's announcement last year of a backloaded grant of £134 million spread across 10 to 11 years, while welcome, is certainly not transformational. We will be using the allocation from the grant this year (about £6.5million) to undertake a pothole blitz starting in March and running through to August. The government funding is at least helpful in giving us some degree of confidence in setting longer term plans and so getting the most efficient outcome from the funding available.

After potholes the biggest source of residents' exasperation are utilities roadworks. We are conducting a deep dive into these roadworks to see what we can do better and perhaps more importantly what needs to change at a national level so that we can have the control over our roads that we need. In that context I am pleased to say that central government is increasingly aware of the absurdity of a system which allows a utility company to self-define an emergency and close a road without giving us advance warning, thus disrupting residents' daily lives and making a mockery of the work undertaken to plan the necessary closures.

Oakwood House

Last year we completed the refurbishment and transformation of Oakwood House in Maidstone. This new facility will now provide accommodation for the Kent Coroners Service including dedicated court rooms. The building will also have a new Ceremonies suite with a range of venues for weddings and citizenship ceremonies. The site offers extensive parking and an attractive garden for wedding photographs.

Conclusion

As I said at the beginning of this report it has been a tough year for the County Council. However, we have not become insolvent nor sought government assistance as have a number of top tier authorities. We have had to make savings in many areas and raise Council Tax by the maximum permitted but we continue to deliver robust and effective services to the residents of Kent.

The future, I am afraid, continues to look uncertain with national elections on both sides of the Atlantic and no end in sight to the violence in Ukraine and the Middle East.

However, the economic signs are more hopeful and in due course we may perhaps see some improvement in our challenging financial position.

I am very much enjoying representing you at the County Council and look forward to serving you for another year.