

Kent County Council Members Report to Annual Parish Meetings 2021 Sandwich Division

Reducing the activity of KCC over the past year into a shortish report is quite clearly somewhat of a challenge and we need absolutely no reminder that it has been totally overshadowed by the Covid 19 pandemic.

However, I think it is very much worth saying that the year and the unprecedented situation has also shown very clearly the effectiveness and ability of local government to rise to the challenge and deliver on the Government's instructions for a huge range of support to residents, business and the care sector. That, of course, is not just the County Council but Dover District and Sandwich Town Council as well, the partnership between all levels has been vital to achieve delivery, solve problems and above all keep residents as safe as possible. The Kent Together helpline, which is still operating, provided a service that helped those who were in need of help and support during the pandemic, this was linked to Dover District Council's support services and community organisations.

Our community and voluntary organisations, local businesses and a huge number of individuals were absolutely amazing throughout and I would just like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who played their part in providing care and support to those who needed it during the pandemic. Throughout the year the challenges for Kent County Council have included sourcing and distributing PPE (which we did so effectively in Kent that the military came to see how we had done it) both for our own staff, but also for GPs, Care Homes and many more. Extending our IT systems to ensure that every member of staff could be connected to work from home. Developing protocols to ensure that face to face meetings with vulnerable adults and children could and did continue as safely as possible. Providing advice and guidance for schools and Headteachers. Virtual School Kent and The Education People developed a huge range of online learning and guidance that was available to all schools. A website that was updated continually with Covid advice, advice on financial support, advice for parents.

KCC Public Health played a huge role in monitoring infection, advice to the public, setting up testing both symptomatic and symptom free testing and more recently the surge testing. Symptom free testing is continuing in Sandwich in the Guildhall through til June.

The total amount of Covid grant from Government to KCC has been £139.1 million, some of which has been distributed and delivered as support by the Districts.

In addition, all the implications of Brexit have had to be planned for with transition due to commence on 1 January this year. In fact, we dealt with a different completely unforeseen consequence of Covid when the French closed their borders for 48 hours and then required evidence of a negative Covid test before re-entry. The Kent Resilience forum planning for the new year was implemented but there were additional problems which have all been well documented. Manston has been in use since that time for Covid testing for HGV drivers but has now been decommissioned which was welcome news. From the outset I spoke out about the use of Manston and the impact on our local communities and continued to get action taken on carriageway repairs and roadside litter (together with District colleagues). Overall, the commercial activity across the 'short straits' is now back to expected levels.

There has also been 'business as usual' activity to keep our roads repaired and drains cleared, despite reducing government funding, this is an ongoing challenge particularly given weather conditions earlier in the year, but the response has improved. The five-year highway maintenance plan has been published, anyone who is interested can look on the website and see what is planned for their local area in terms of renewal and maintenance. The pothole blitz continues to operate, please do report potholes through the website.

The past year also included the somewhat larger project to completely refit and refurbish the Sandwich Toll Bridge, the £500,000 project was completed last Autumn and I would like to thank all local people for their patience during that time. The historic bridge now has new mechanism and paintwork to see it through another 25 years at least, with regular maintenance!

I have worked with parishes to develop and progress their Highways Improvement Plans, which prioritise the improvements they would like to see in their parishes. I have also been part of the A257 Group, supporting their ambitions for improved safety along that road. There are, of course, some local highways issues that continue to concern residents and I will persevere with efforts to find workable solutions.

The recent consultation on the Vision Zero Strategy which is the plan to reduce fatalities on Kent roads to zero by 2050, but importantly to achieve a year on year reduction in serious accidents and to make sure that local communities feel safer using their local roads is an important step to address the concerns that I know are shared by many in our villages.

Our social services teams, both for adults and children, have worked under difficult conditions to keep people safe and work with the increasing number of those in need of help, including seeing many residents face to face with the appropriate protection. Many people have spoken to me about their concern for children following the past year and I was able to announce in March our Reconnect Programme for all children and young people in Kent for the next year and beyond. The idea behind Reconnect comes from young people who told us they would prefer a positive programme focusing on opportunities rather than emphasising the 'damage' that may have been done to them or their futures by the pandemic. The programme aims to help them reconnect to:

- Health and happiness
- Learning missed
- Family, friends and community
- Sport, activities and the outdoors
- Economic wellbeing

There has been some significant environmental work done during the past year with the Net Zero Action Plan which commits KCC to reducing greenhouse gas emissions from its estate and wholly owned traded services to net zero by 2030; it's worth noting that KCC have reduced their greenhouse gas emissions by 54% since 2010. I was also a member of the working group that developed the Plan Bee pollinator action plan for Kent, which is designed to do what it says on the tin and take the lead and encourage local communities to improve habitats for pollinators. Through my members grant funding I have been able to support Gazen Salts Nature Reserve in Sandwich and it is good to see the recent work that has been done to restore the habitat there, a beehive in St Clement's churchyard, a small verge nature reserve in Ash, the cemetery in Stourmouth, all of which contribute to our local environment. Whilst a slightly different environmental project, it was very exciting to see the sweeps turning on the Chillenden windmill last autumn after restoration, the first time since 1949 they had turned under wind power.

Finally, our budget for 21/22 is focussed on maintaining frontline services despite the unprecedented financial context, and has regrettably had to include a rise in Council Tax of just under 2% and an additional 3% which is ringfenced for social care, where we are experiencing substantial increases in both costs of care and demand and complexity of care. Social care accounts for 47% of the total budget and is a priority for the Council but was also identified as a priority by residents, both for adults and children, in the consultation that was carried out in the preparation of the budget.

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