

Kent County Council Report to Wingham Annual Parish Meeting, April 2023

The past year for the Council has been dominated, unsurprisingly, by the **financial issues** we face and your Parish Councillors will have heard that message in my reports throughout the year. Financial monitoring at the nine month (end of December) stage of this financial year, reported to the March Cabinet shows a projected 2022-23 overspend of £53.7m. This is gradually coming down, and part of it will be met by the £25m the Council set aside as a risk reserve at the start of the financial year. Nonetheless, it seems almost inevitable that we will, for the first time in more than twenty years, see a significant overspend at the close of the financial year, which will have to be met from reserves.

The biggest factors in the overspend were: cost pressures in adult social care, notably older people's residential services; growth and increasing costs in school transport, in particular for SEND students; and sharply higher placement costs, reflecting the challenges in foster care recruitment and higher costs for more specialist placements, in children's services. On the capital side, we are seeing the impact of severe inflationary pressures. Shortly before the Autumn Statement, the Leaders of KCC and of Hampshire wrote a well-publicised letter to senior ministers setting out their concerns about the unsustainable financial position confronting the majority of councils.

The budget for 23/24, which was agreed in February, included proposals for necessary savings, whilst the decisions to include those savings were difficult the challenge of delivering the budget in the current economic climate will be greater.

We are very aware of the **continuing financial pressures that residents are also facing** and continue to offer support, we have a strong record in supporting our residents through the crises and pressures of recent years, which began with a commitment, ahead of much of the sector, to deliver Free School Meals in the half term in October 2020. Since that time, government has brought forward a series of programmes, running from September 2021 as the Household Support Fund. In the first 2 rounds of funding, over 450,000 awards were issued to Kent residents. This has covered areas such as food vouchers for Free School Meal eligible families, energy vouchers, support with water bills, funding passed to District/Borough Councils and more. The 3rd round of the Fund is currently being delivered, while a £22 million 4th round (announced recently) runs for a full year to March 2024.

Alongside this, the Council has run its own Financial Hardship Programme, which includes and has built on the Helping Hands Scheme, launched in February 2021 with £10 million from the Covid Emergency Grant. The innovative schemes have included the Money Advice Hub and strengthening of Referrals and Data Sharing between councils. Much of the focus is on ensuring that services and support are available to the residents already entitled to them, and that we help residents build their financial resilience.

Roads, traffic, speeding and travel issues are an important issue for many residents in Wingham and I was very pleased that the past year has seen the implementation of the 20mph zone through Wingham, delivered as the first priority on the Parish Highways Improvement Plan, but the work of the A257 Group over the past few years contributed to this significant improvement. Further improvements to the junction with Preston Hill are now at the planning stage and there is ongoing discussion concerning the Shatterling stretch of the A257 where there continue to be concerning accidents.

Winter weather has taken its heavy toll on our roads. In the December/January period, highway reports were five times the level of the same period a year ago. While constrained by tight funding and inflationary pressures, we have since January been stepping up the pace of repairs; 14,000 potholes have now been repaired and 68,414 square metres of road has been patched across the County, I continue to encourage residents to report potholes online; the reporting tool is effective and dangerous potholes (there are criteria about depth and severity) will be prioritised. The national budget announcement of £200 million for roads funding, meaning some £6 million for Kent, is a welcome addition.

Unsurprisingly residents tell me that they are very concerned about **health care, care of the elderly** which is a significant part of our Adult Social Services being a particular worry. 42 **Integrated Care Systems (ICS)**, aimed at joining up health and care, came into being on 1 July last year. Kent and Medway is an ICS. The Leader of KCC chairs the Integrated Care Partnership (ICP), I am one of the three KCC Member representatives, which is centred on the NHS, Medway Council and Kent County Council but which brings together a broader group of partners concerned with the health, wellbeing and care of the population. The ICP was required to develop an Integrated Care Strategy to a deadline of the end of last year; this was successfully delivered, but of necessity is being developed further and is a starting point for more detailed and specific plans.

Over a hard winter, the Council worked closely with the NHS to seek to manage the pressures on both of our services, using technology to reduce the risk of crisis, increasing care and support at home and developing Integrated Hubs to manage transfers of care. Much of this is, however, work in progress and the severe pressures have meant that we still see far greater reliance on short-term beds than we would wish (and which contribute to our budget pressures). Nonetheless, the Council continues to develop local work on integration, and at a national level we await the publication of Dame Patricia Hewitt's review of integrated care systems, which we have reason to hope can strengthen the truly local nature of health and care systems.

July saw our **Children's Services rated Outstanding** by Ofsted. Ofsted stated that "Children are at the centre of Kent County Council's culture and practice. ... Outstanding practice is evident for children in care and care experienced young people as they clearly benefit from the support they receive and make good progress." As the Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services this was a very positive highlight in the year and is testament to the hard work of all those involved in care for our children, particularly our social workers working 'on the front line'.

In February KCC was designated one of 14 'trailblazer' councils for developing in the government's **Family Hubs programme**, which is designed to provide integrated support for families and children. This gives access to £183,000 initial funding and to more than £10 million transformation funding for implementation of the model over the next 2 years. This is linked to the Community services consultation which ran from January to the end of March focusing on how we deliver services to communities. A decision on next steps is due to be taken by Cabinet in July.

In contrast the Ofsted/CQC revisit of **Special Educational Needs and Disability** services in September produced a deeply disappointing outcome, with inspectors concluding that the Kent area had made insufficient progress in all 9 of the areas of weakness identified in the 2019 Written Statement of Action. There is a comprehensive plan of improvement to address the long-running challenges in this service.

2022 saw a large number of small boat crossings and as part of this the number of **Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)** referred to KCC was a record 1,390. (There had been 276 at the end of March this year). However, because of the agreements that we reached with government in 2020-21 I can report the following:

- Better financial arrangements mean that the Kent council tax payer is not exposed to these costs.
- The National Transfer Scheme was made mandatory, and some 1,640 UASC young people have been transferred under this scheme since June 2020 to other councils.
- We have around 500 UASC in our care, just above the 0.1% level set by the 2016 Immigration Act, and provide a Reception & Safe Care service for 120 UASC before they go to other councils.

The Leader and I met recently with the Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick and we will await the outcomes of the recent announcements and the Immigration Bill in the coming months.

The environment and climate change are issues that I know local residents care deeply about, as a Council we continue to focus on our own contribution to that agenda. On 23 March DEFRA issued the long-awaited regulations and guidance implementing provisions of the Environment Act 2021, covering a range of issues from consistency in waste collection to responsibility for Local Nature Recovery Strategy and Biodiversity. Most districts in Kent already have a separate food waste collection, including Dover District which has a particularly good record for collection and recycling rates, but the Environment Act requires that all councils must do this. KCC will be the lead authority for the Kent and Medway Local Nature Recovery Strategy and we are expecting extra funding for this and for our new Biodiversity duties.

Kent's Plan Bee continues to contribute with information and advice, regular newsletters and influence, residents can subscribe to the newsletter. The green roof on the bus shelter in Wingham is an example of real practical contributions.

I continue to support your Parish Council and local residents with issues, to follow up enquiries and provide information wherever I can, you will find my contact details at the end of this report.

Finally, I want to thank all the volunteers in our Community who contribute so much, this includes your Parish Councillors who work so hard on your behalf.

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