

ANNUAL REPORT TO PARISH COUNCILS 2015 - 2016

BUDGET

Four years ago the County Council budget was in excess of £1.1 billion but has now reduced to £890 million, a 20% reduction of our budget. This budget contains demand pressures on our services, predominately beyond our control, amounting to some £230 million. There have been no service reductions and we have, in many cases, improved the quality of our services with £430 million of savings delivered. KCC will continue its efficiency drive with 150 job losses on top of over 2,000 (20% of our non-school staff) in the past five years.

Demand for our services has predominantly been in learning disability, adult social care and children's services, as well as increases in concessionary fares and school transport costs. The aging population is growing at 2% a year and growth in the school rolls and the number of young people entitled to school transport also. As a result, we have raised council tax charges by 1.998% in addition to the 2% social care precept, yielding an increase in council tax receipts of £37.7 million, leaving us with the challenge of finding £81 million of savings.

KCC is investing in quality preventative services that avoid, wherever possible, expensive interventions, such as taking children into care and supporting independence for adults, helping them to remain in their own homes for longer.

COMMISSIONING

KCC is committed to ensuring that the services we provide are of the highest possible quality and represent best value to the taxpayer. Almost £800 million of our annual £1.2 billion annual spend is through third party providers, £125 million through the voluntary and community sector in Kent. Given the range of services we provide, we have always needed to deliver them through a range of providers across the public, private and voluntary sectors, alongside our own in-house services. Since 2010 we have saved almost £500 million in direct costs and resisting spending pressures whilst doing our utmost to protect and maintain front line services. This recent Local Government finance settlement will mean that significant pressure on our budgets will remain until at least 2019. In response to this ongoing financial pressure our overall strategy is to become a 'strategic commissioning authority', to ensure we plan and design our services well, ideally with service users themselves and other public sector partners, and commissioning those services from the best provider available, irrespective of whether they are from the public, private or voluntary sector.

STREET LIGHT LED CONVERSION

Changes have been consulted on, and decisions taken by members on, the street lighting policy, including the introduction of optimised all night lighting as new LED streetlights are installed and commissioned on the Central Management system. Tonbridge and Malling is in Phase 3 of the upgrade, September to November 2016.

COMMUNITY WARDENS

Our wardens continue to be very popular with members of the public. Twelve parish and town councils have agreed to take part in a scheme to find volunteers to work alongside KCC's community wardens. There are now eight volunteers learning new skills so as to provide valuable support to local communities.

LORRY PARKING

Kent has suffered from issues resulting from HGV parking for many years and the increasing numbers of lorries is only making the situation worse. We want to explore expanding the trial carried out in Ashford, looking at enforcement of existing regulations including the cost. We are also very mindful of the risk that any measures taken could result in a transfer of this problem to residential areas. The government has allocated funding for a lorry park on a site (consulted on) close to Junction 11 of the M20 to help alleviate the consequences of Operation Stack. This will result in increased overnight parking capacity and KCC are considering how lorries can be encouraged to take advantage of the increased capacity.

TRAFFIC BOTTLENECKS

Highways England has been consulting on plans for the extra lane on the M20 over bridge at Junction 4 and work should start this year. There is also a consultation on a proposal to provide a new M20 junction 10A and link road to the A2070 at Ashford with a new dual carriageway link road to the existing A2070 Southern Orbital and also connect to the A20 Hythe Road. Extra capacity will also be provided on the central gyratory in Maidstone.

LOWER THAMES CROSSING

Highways England is consulting on options for a Lower Thames Crossing. Currently there are 50 million crossings a year and traffic volumes are increasing. The crossing was designed for 135,000 and the western tunnel is 50 years old. Over 300 times a year the crossing is partially or fully closed, on average, for around half an hour and it typically takes between 3 to 5 hours for the roads to clear. Highways England has rejected the option for a further bridge or bored tunnel adjacent to the existing Dartford Crossing as it would cause chaos (as there is no alternative convenient route) and the cost benefit is low. What is proposed is a tunnel crossing (two and a half miles) under the Thames east of Gravesend and Tilbury. There are three route options north of the river and two south of the river.

BUSES

Contrary to what most people think, KCC directly supports comparatively few bus routes for social or economic reasons. The vast majority of bus routes are run by commercial operators. There are 58 million bus journeys a year, 17.2 million of which are made by OAPs. Where supported bus services are very expensive, per passenger, usually in the evenings or at weekends, there will be some reductions, but not in the division I represent.

MY ROLE

The Boundary Commission has reduced the number of County Councillors and re-drawn some ward boundaries with the aim of an average electorate per County Councillor of 14,000. Stansted and Fairseat have been removed from my division from May 2017 for the KCC elections. Currently, I am a KCC appointed trustee on the Kent Community Foundation, Turner Contemporary, Kent Music and the Rochester Bridge Trust. I am also a member of the Kent and Medway Fire Authority. I am Deputy Cabinet Member for Communities, which covers community safety, youth, trading standards, registration services, archives, libraries, arts and culture and several other services.

GRANTS

In this financial year I have supported Snodland at Christmas, the Malling Parkrun at Leybourne Lakes, traffic surveys in Trottscliffe and Snodland, and various signing and lining projects in the area. The major issues for most of you are still traffic speeds and congestion, and the damage this causes.

Sarah Hohler
KCC Member for Malling North