

## Annual Report KCC Report to Town and Parish Councils 2021/2022

The County Council election took place on 6<sup>th</sup> May last year. I was re-elected as the member for Malling North and I look forward to representing you for another term. I have retained my position as Deputy Cabinet Member for Community Services and I am still a member of the Kent and Medway Fire and Rescue Authority, a Trustee of Kent Music, Turner Contemporary and the Kent Community Foundation, and an Assistant of the Rochester Bridge Trust.

Covid has hit hard across the County and changed how people use a whole host of KCC services. This has brought hardship but also driven innovation to ensure that residents could access our services.

The library service saw many changes during the pandemic along with a significant uptake of online and outreach services. Libraries were initially closed then a Select and Collect service was introduced followed by a phased re-opening with all 99 libraries now open. Mobile libraries delivered the Select and Collect book offer during the pandemic and we now have smart new mobile vehicles. The new vehicles are greener and smaller than the old ones but they can hold more stock. Birth and death registrations were initially halted during lockdown but are now fully operational. Weddings and civil partnerships were not allowed and, even when restrictions were lifted, there were limitations on numbers attending. Ceremonies have now resumed, and we are expecting a very busy year.

The Kent Community Warden Service continued to identify, support and reassure those vulnerable people most in need during the pandemic and have proved to be an invaluable service.

Kent Country Parks have performed exceptionally well during the pandemic and remain popular with residents. They have recently received £1.1m of Public Health Covid-19 recovery funding to improve existing play areas and the installation of new play equipment. I have chaired a cross-party working group on the future strategy for our parks and we are about to go to public consultation on the document.

Our Public Rights of Way network has seen a huge increase in use and has taken a real pounding, not helped by the heavy rain last year. We have managed to secure additional government and KCC funding to restore many of the damaged areas and hope the increased use will continue now residents have discovered our splendid network. A 47 mile section of the England Coast Path was officially opened on the 12<sup>th</sup> January between the Woolwich Foot Tunnel and the Isle of Grain. This section completes the Thames Path National Trail from source to sea. There are now three national trails in Kent – the North Downs Way, the England Coast Path, and the Thames Path, further extending recreational opportunities for our residents.

After a public consultation we have decided to keep the booking system introduced during the pandemic for our household waste recycling centres (HWRC). Booking a slot online is easy and 97% of bookings are made this way although it is possible to book by phone on 03000 41 7373. 24% of bookings are for the same day (a request from residents), 40% for the next day and reducing to 2% for a slot 6 days ahead. This system has helped with queues on access roads and on site and has proved to have been a big improvement for all. The new HWRC in Allington is still on track to open this May. The site has many environmental innovations; electrical components used have been specified to minimise the use of power, these include all lighting with efficient projection to reduce light pollution. Energy consumption on site is low and supported by an array of solar panels on the roof which will produce enough energy to power the site and spare energy will be sent to the National Grid via a connection to the energy from the waste site. The aggregates used to construct

the on-site road and kerbs contain recycled plastic. And with rainwater harvesting and planting for pollinators as part of the design we believe it will be one of the most advanced HWRCs in the country. More to the point it will also provide a much-needed facility for the local residents, relieving pressure on the very busy Tovil site.

A lot has been going on with our green agenda, including a visit from the UK's Climate Change Committee in March. The Kent REVS electric van free trial scheme has proved very popular: over 170 businesses in Kent have already taken advantage of the opportunity to try an EV for up to two months. Businesses can enquire by emailing [REVS@csltd.org.uk](mailto:REVS@csltd.org.uk) and start creating a greener tomorrow. There has also been a strong surge of interest in our collective buying scheme for solar panels and battery storage. The scheme was open to community buildings and small businesses as well as householders. Registration closed on 15 March with over 10,000 people registering their interest. The March meeting of the Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee included a report on our proposed Heritage Strategy, a paper on the opportunities for Kent in the Green Economy, a proposal for a solar farm which will reduce KCC's carbon emissions by 30% and reduce annual energy costs by around £760,000 a year. Last, but not least, the Performance Dashboard shows KCC is continuing to beat its carbon emissions target and is on track to reach carbon neutrality by 2030.

Schools were closed for long periods during the pandemic and tests and exams were not held in the usual way. Ofsted started full inspections of schools in September 2021. Based on the last inspection data, 91% of schools in Kent were rated Good or Outstanding, compared with the national figure of 86%. Primary schools judged as Good or Outstanding were 92% (national figure 86%) and 87% of Secondary schools (76% nationally). The percentage for Special schools was 96%, six points higher than nationally.

Adult Social Care continued to be delivered in an increasingly busy environment during the pandemic. There has been an increase in the number of contacts and an increase of new long-term services needed from residential and nursing services as well as community-based services and there are continuing increases in the number of people in receipt of services with a Mental Health need.

Brexit caused much delay and disruption at Dover, greatly to the frustration of travellers and motorists. The situation has now stabilised but remains fragile. We have had to increase our Trading Standards staff at the Ports in order to cater for the increased inspection requirements of our departure from the EU. We are still in a transition and full customs controls have not yet come into force, so there is still a degree of uncertainty over the final impact that this will have on the Trading Standards Service.

In the 32 years I have been a KCC member the 2022 budget has been, by some margin, the most difficult budget to seat. We were facing a perfect storm, with a reduction in government support in many areas: significant cost increases as inflation started to bite and, worst of all, large demand pressures, particularly in adult and children's social care. In January this year we were facing a multi-million pound black hole with no easy answers on how to fill it. However we did manage to set a viable budget in February but had to make some very difficult decisions on savings. We have had to increase Council Tax by the maximum of 2% plus 1% for Adult Social Care while making savings in sensitive areas. It has not been easy, but we must set a balanced budget.

Sarah Hohler, KCC Member for Mallings North

