

ANNUAL REPORT TO TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS 2014-2015

KCC has had a challenging year, yet again, with savings of over £90,000,000 needed in order to deliver a balanced budget. As part of finding these savings KCC reviewed every area of its activities. This does not mean that services will be out-sourced, though this is one of the options, particularly for back office functions, but more about how better services can be provided more efficiently. Any major change has to follow a public consultation. Budget savings had been sought, for example, in the community wardens service but a huge response to the consultation meant that the wardens have, in the main, been retained.

An extensive 12 week public consultation on our plans to modernise our libraries, registration and archives service by the creation of a charitable trust has begun. The trust concept, our preferred option, would give the service more freedom and flexibility to grow and develop, generate additional income and seek additional grant funding which is not available to KCC. Under the proposals, KCC would remain accountable for the services and would contract with the charitable trust to provide the existing services to all Kent residents, with free access to books and ICT facilities, while also maintaining the historic archives.

Hard work in Kent's primary schools is paying off as results in Key Stage 2 SATS are showing significant improvement. The percentage of pupils reaching the appropriate level in every category - reading, writing, English, spelling, punctuation, maths and science - at Level 4 and above has gone up in the last year. The combined figure for reading, writing and maths in Kent has improved by 5%.

We have decided to press ahead with converting our stock of 120,000 street lights to LED with Central Management System technology. This will reduce our street lighting energy bill by around 60%, meaning that we can return every residential area to all-night lighting, which may be dimmed a little after peak hours. The new technology will also enable lights to be monitored remotely so faults can be detected as soon as they develop. It will also be better for the environment. Conversion to LED could start later this year or early next and take three years to complete and will be done in two phases, starting with residential areas.

A lot of work has been done since the devastating floods of just over a year ago. An army of flood wardens has been trained, work has started on how best to increase the capacity of the Leigh Storage Barrier and specific schemes are under way.

We have told the Airports Commission that we do not think there should be a third runway at Gatwick and we are lobbying to reduce the impact of those living in West Kent whose lives are blighted by the changes to where flights into Gatwick are now routed. At last work is under way on the A21. And the extra carriageway on the M20 over bridge at junction 4 is keenly anticipated. We also await a decision on providing extra capacity at the Dartford Crossing, or a new crossing, our preferred option.

On schools, we have funding for three new primary schools at Leybourne Chase, Holborough and Kings Hill and we are awaiting a decision from the Minister about the development of a grammar school extension in Sevenoaks, to relieve some of the pressure on the excellent schools in Tonbridge. The need for the M26 slip roads to serve Sevenoaks has also come up the agenda once more.

For me it has been an interesting year as I was appointed as Deputy Cabinet Member for Communities a year ago. I am also a trustee or director of Kent Music, the Kent Community Foundation, the Rochester Bridge Trust and Turner Contemporary, and a member of the Kent and Medway Fire Authority. I remain very committed to supporting the arts and culture (in the widest sense of the words) and the essential role they play in the health, education, regeneration and happiness of our communities. We need to take a strategic view and work with existing organisations and volunteers, across the sector, to make sure the money we have is spent well.

This financial year, my grant allocation has been spent as follows:

Defibrillators for Addington, Birling and Trottiscliffe. Water project for Leybourne Riding Centre for the Disabled. 2014 summer activities for young people in the Borough. Play equipment for Stansted playpark. Community centre refurbishment, under floor heating for the new scout centre, Christmas lights and tree, parking provision for the cemetery, all for Snodland. Streetlight updating for Ryarsh.

On highways, I have cleared and cleaned signage on the A20, made safety improvements on Oxley Shaw Lane and Rectory Lane South in Leybourne, finally got a flashing speed sign for Offham and tried to alleviate the pressure of long-stay lorry parking at the A228 Ham Hill layby.

Sarah Hohler
Member for Malling North