

Annual Report to Parish and Town Councils 2023
Sarah Hohler, Kent County Council Member for Malling North

1. Preamble

We have experienced a most turbulent and testing year which saw the final throes of the pandemic; major war in Europe for the first time since 1945; a resultant energy crisis followed by rampant inflation and financial meltdown leading to a cost-of-living crisis across the country. Add to that political instability on both sides of the Atlantic and we had the perfect storm. Many areas of local government were severely affected by these events, and we face an uncertain few years ahead.

2. Recovery

We started the year on an optimistic note. The pandemic at last seemed to be in retreat and the emphasis was the recovery of our own services and help to those businesses and individuals still struggling with the effects of the pandemic. We have made good progress during the year.

Library visitor figures for the latest quarter show that visits have increased by 35% on last year, and are at 72% of pre-Covid levels, which is higher than the national average. Electronic issues remain high, and physical issues are at 87% of pre-Covid levels, which means that total issues continue to surpass pre-Covid levels. Death registrations are sadly still high but on a happier note our wedding ceremonies have never been busier.

Our Country Parks and Public Rights of Way have seen greatly increased usage, much of which has been sustained. They are recovering very well helped by significant government Covid recovery funding and I am delighted that Country Parks have retained all their Green Flags.

Our Capital programme saw the completion last year of the Amelia Cultural Hub in Tunbridge Wells and the Creative Quarter in Ashford. These projects, which were delivered with great difficulty in the teeth of the pandemic, will significantly improve the cultural offer in the county.

3. Highways and potholes

The very hot spell in the summer, followed by heavy rain, and severe weather conditions before Christmas have led to a fivefold increase in pothole reports. Officers are working flat out to respond to this, although some more lasting repairs cannot be made during winter weather conditions. Nonetheless, work is under way to address the damage within the severe financial constraints we are facing.

4. Ukraine

One year on, Kent has responded to this humanitarian crisis, with 3,209 Ukrainians having been hosted in the county (at present, 1,889 are staying with 905 sponsors; others have already moved on into other accommodation or returned to Ukraine). KCC has played a vital role in supporting this, and we continue to do so. Given the uncertainty over the course of the war, we are working with our District and Borough colleagues to secure longer-term housing options for our Ukrainian guests. In addition, before Christmas we brought forward a package of enhanced support for hosts, moving ahead of many other councils.

5. Levelling Up

We recently received welcome news of a successful £45m bid to the government's Levelling Up Fund to improve traffic flow to the EU through the Port of Dover. Special enhancements will include site reconfiguration, additional border control points and a new exit route, which will not only have a positive impact on Dover and the surrounding area but on Kent and its economy as a whole.

6. Budget

The budget, which includes a 4.995% rise in Council Tax to protect and prioritise vital services to the most vulnerable people in Kent, was approved by the full Council on 9th February 2023. 2% of the rise in council tax is ringfenced specifically for adult social care services. The budget takes into account a £217m rise in the cost of services, fuelled by inflation and market conditions, along with the need to save £55m over the next financial year to balance the budget.

The budget is set in the context of extraordinary global and national economic circumstances, which have had a significant impact on public spending and borrowing and have hugely impacted local spending. The 2023-24 budget has to include both the recurring impact of the extraordinary inflation seen in 2022 and forecast higher inflation rates than the government 2% target into next year, with no indication that prices will fall back to pre-2022 levels soon.

7. Cost of Living Crisis

The latest challenges we all face are the huge cost of living pressures due to soaring inflation and energy costs. KCC now has an extended package of investment that will help those most in need to access additional support, including help with energy and water costs and free school meal vouchers for eligible families. KCC continues to work with partners to develop a comprehensive and nationally commended Financial Hardship programme to support people struggling with heating their homes and feeding their families throughout the coming months. The 'Kent Together' approach was rapidly developed and adopted during the pandemic, seeing partners across the county coming together in a coordinated effort to deliver the right support in the right places. This strong and efficient network that includes the district, borough and parish councils, community and voluntary groups, the emergency services and the NHS, will

remain a vitally important helpline and support service throughout the winter and the cost-of-living crisis.

A number of services within KCC are already providing support where they can, to help people stay safe, healthy and well this winter:

- Kent Libraries provide open and warm spaces that offer a range of free services including books, activities, ICT, WiFi, e-books/e-magazines/e-newspapers.
- Our Public Protection team is dealing with a steady increase in scams aiming to exploit the cost-of-living crisis. The service is already seeing sophisticated scams targeting heating cost reduction, council/government financial support grants, fake employment opportunities, and cheap food – financially devastating to those who are caught out.
- The Kent Community Warden Service provides an essential lifeline for many of our most vulnerable residents. Our wardens are equipped with the knowledge of benefits available to help residents access support and can identify residents in hardship who would be eligible for council tax reduction. They are also identifying and engaging with homeless individuals, helping them into accommodation,
- Alongside our community services, KCC's social care services (adults and children's) will be working with vulnerable families many of whom will be at heightened risk of struggling with the cost-of-living crisis.

For more information of the support available please visit [KCC's Kent Together information on our website](#).

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