



Shellina Prendergast – Kent County Councillor for Maidstone Rural East

Annual Report May 2022

Dear Resident,

This time last year we were all, Parish, Borough and County Councils, meeting virtually and recognising how important those restrictions still were despite the successful first few months of the vaccination programme roll out and continuation of the very comprehensive testing programme put in place by Kent County Council. As many of you will know, support for residents and businesses impacted by Covid and lockdowns continued throughout the pandemic with schemes such as Kent Together and Helping Hands designed to support the most vulnerable amongst us.

The May 2021 elections for the County Council took place under some very challenging circumstances due to the restrictions, and I am immensely privileged to have been re-elected as the County Member for Maidstone Rural East – as a local resident myself, I know first hand that not only are we so fortunate to live in one of the most beautiful rural areas of the County but that we are a resilient community who can support each other through the most difficult times – something that fills me with great pride and for which I thank each and every one of you. Following the election, I was delighted to be asked by the Leader of Kent County Council to take up the post of Cabinet Member for Education and Skills – an immense responsibility for the education of our children and young people in Kent and for those post 16 and beyond in acquiring the skills which will be needed for the future to rebuild the economy after some turbulent times.

Looking ahead, there is much work being done at County Hall – far too much to detail in this report but I have highlighted below the areas that many of you have raised with me in the past and those that might be of interest:

UKRAINE

KCC continues to work closely and effectively with our District and Borough colleagues to deliver the Homes for Ukraine scheme. As of 20 May there were 3,062 matched applications of Ukrainian nationals to 1,235 sponsors in Kent; so far 1,281 have arrived in Kent. Tunbridge Wells, Sevenoaks and Maidstone have the largest numbers of applications. DBS checks, home checks, welfare visits are all going ahead though there is significant pressure on the capacity of both KCC and of Districts and Boroughs. Whilst a huge amount of progress has been made in the last couple of months, there are major concerns (across

the Country) concerning the interaction of the Family Scheme with the Homes for Ukraine scheme, the scope for rematching when placements break down, funding arrangements and more; and we continue to raise these with the government minister. There is growing interest in the need for school places for Ukrainian children - 331 school age children have been notified to our in-year admissions team, of whom 226 are known to have arrived in the county and 90 have accepted places. Places are generally being found within 2-3 weeks, but one of the biggest challenges is that the Schools Admissions Code still operates and so a place has to be found in the nearest school with a vacancy. Over time, numbers may well increase substantially, which will present very different challenges.

COST OF LIVING

With many of our residents experiencing severe pressures from the rising cost of living, KCC received a further grant (announced by the Chancellor in his Spring Statement in March) of just over £11m from the Household Support Fund Extension, which we are allocating to Free School Meals for the May half term, as well as a £50 flat rate assistance for the summer holidays, along with support for vulnerable residents' energy and water bills and other help to those experiencing financial hardship.

INFRASTRUCTURE

The Queen's Speech - on 10 May included a number of Bills of importance to KCC, most notably the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill and the Schools Bill (which I will address further down). Provisions within the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill give substance to February's Levelling Up White Paper, through the scope to create Combined County Authorities (CCA - bringing together one or more counties and/ or unitary councils).

The Bill also sets out proposals for an Infrastructure Levy to supersede CIL and (except in the largest and most complex developments) S.106 agreements. Proper funding of infrastructure where development takes place is of vital importance to us and there is a lot still to play regarding the Levy, since the vital detail will be established, after consultation, through regulations rather than primary legislation.

EDUCATION, SKILLS AND CHILDRENS SERVICES

The Schools Bill - continues the drive for all schools to become academies and encourages them to join MultiAcademy Trusts - but also strengthens the regulatory framework for academy trusts and enables local authorities to establish Multi Academy Trusts. As the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, and knowing how important our small rural schools are to us, I have worked closely and effectively with the DfE and ministers and we have expressed an interest in piloting work concerning a local authority MAT.

Independent Review of Children's Social Care - The report highlights problems of the sector across the country, and it is welcome to see that many elements of its programme for change reflect KCC's existing focus and priorities, such as early help and development of a family hubs model. Sticking with children's services, over the last few weeks, Ofsted have been conducting a routine inspection of our Children's Services under the ILACS (Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services) framework. When we were last inspected, in 2017 (under a different framework), we were rated Good. The outcome of the inspection will be announced on 5 July.

We continue to develop longer-term plans in key policy areas. On 28 April, we launched our 16-19 review and action plan, developed in close collaboration with schools, colleges, training providers and others to enhance opportunities for our young people. This

complements the work of our Employment Task Force and reinforces the council's focus on skills and on building partnerships that can deliver in this area.

ADULT SOCIAL CARE

People at the Heart of Care White Paper - On the adult social care reforms set out in the white paper, KCC continue to have concerns, in particular in relation to the adequacy (or otherwise) of the government financial support for the proposed scope for self funders to access care on council buying terms. Both the Leader and the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care are working tirelessly to address these issues with government and I hope to be able to report progress in the near future.

HIGHWAYS AND TRANSPORTATION

Operation Brock - The Kent Resilience Forum confirmed recently that Operation Brock will remain in place until the end of the Platinum Jubilee weekend. I and my colleagues at KCC have long argued that current arrangements are a sticking plaster at best and that much more significant changes are needed and are working with local partners – including our Kent MPs - on proposals for change.

At its meeting on 19 May, Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee (ETCC) endorsed the recommendation to the Cabinet Member for a three year pothole blitz programme of £7 million per year. The same meeting considered the feedback on the bus subsidy reduction consultation. A fuller, more route-specific paper will go to ETCC's meeting in July. Without knowing the outcome of this decision, I want to assure residents that I am fully sympathetic to the need for adequate transport infrastructure for our rural communities and will continue to work with you, the parish councils and the Council on this matter.

WASTE AND RECYCLING

The new Household Waste Recycling Centre at Allington opened on 5th May. Less than a fortnight later, Allington – a state of the art facility - won the Best Use of Design & Technology in a Waste Management Facility award from Letsrecycle Awards for Excellence.

Finally, the Platinum Jubilee holiday is approaching fast, and KCC has been vigorous in supporting the celebrations across Kent. We were one of the first authorities in the country to waive fees for road closures to facilitate street parties; we have received 595 applications and have approved 575 of them. There are many other ways in which KCC are supporting the Jubilee, including the 70 hours of volunteering by Members. I have a number of volunteering activities in the pipeline but please do let me know if there is anything within your local area that I can help with.

I hope this report has been of some help in identifying some of the key issues facing Kent residents and how they are being addressed. Please do let me know if there is anything else I can help with – I am always happy to hear from you.

All the best wishes

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