

Annual Parish Meeting 2023: Hever

Report from Councillor Margot McArthur

Budget - a vexed subject this year

KCC will, for the first time in more than twenty years, see a significant overspend at the close of the financial year, which will have to be met from our reserves.

The biggest factors causing cost pressures are in adult social care, notably older people's residential services; the growth and increasing costs of school transport, in particular for SEND students; and sharply higher foster placement costs.

Children's Services

July saw our Children's Services rated Outstanding by Ofsted after a journey of a little over a decade from being rated Inadequate

Migration, asylum and UASC

Last year saw a large number of small boat crossings and as part of this the number of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) referred to KCC was a record **1,400**

However, because of the agreements that we reached with government in 2021 - the Kent council tax payer is not exposed to these costs.

We have around **500 UASC in our care**, and we also provide a Reception and Safe Care service for **120 UASC** before they go to other councils.

The large overall number of asylum seeker arrivals, has meant that we have seen 5 hotels open in the last year for accommodating asylum seekers, 3 'bridging hotels' for Afghan families and 2 for UASC.

Ukrainians in Kent

We have welcomed the biggest number of refugees from Ukraine of any area in England. The initial tasks of carrying out checks, establishing systems and making payments were very challenging. In the year since guests started arriving under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, 3,274 guests have come into the County

There are 349 Ukrainian children in our primary schools and 234 in our secondary schools.

Buses

We had major challenges last summer over bus services; while we were still taking forward the £2.3m reduction in subsidies agreed in the 2022/23 budget, the bus industry was facing a crisis brought on by higher fuel costs, staff (especially driver) shortages and falls in usage.

This was a national issue, but particularly chimed in Kent because of the high use of commercial bus services for school travel and the popularity of the Kent Travel Saver. Our

transport team did a remarkable job in working with operators to reduce the impact of route cancellations, especially on school journeys.

KCC continues to provide free home to school transport for those children attending their nearest school.

We have major questions to address about the best way to secure our network, and school transport in particular, and on that basis, we have established a cross-party Member group to review and advise on the way ahead.

Roads and potholes

Extreme winter weather took a heavy toll on our roads. In the December/ January period, highway reports were five times the level of the same period a year ago. While constrained by tight funding and inflationary pressures, we have since January been stepping up the pace of repairs; you will, I think, have noticed the increased number of local road closures that reflect highway works. 14,000 potholes have now been repaired

The government's budget announcement of additional roads funding, meaning some £6 million for Kent, is a welcome addition and we are looking to deploy it as quickly as possible.

Environment and waste

It is over a year since, we confirmed that we would keep the booking system for our Household Waste Recycling Centres. Our surveys of customer satisfaction get a big positive response.

Last May we opened our new HWRC at Allington, Maidstone, which is highly energy efficient and environmentally advanced. It is next to our existing Energy from Waste plant, which along with high recycling rates, ensures that only an irreducibly tiny amount of Kent's waste goes to landfill – less than half a percent.

Book donation banks are being rolled-out across the network of HWRCs.

You will now be able to leave your books for reuse in a dedicated container, rather than sending them for recycling or energy recovery. The books are checked and if they can still be read, they will be sold to retail and wholesale customers. The Group also donate books via literacy programmes to promote reading. It's a great initiative with far reaching benefits and the next step in KCC's reuse initiative.

Furniture reuse at Allington HWRC

Following the success of a furniture reuse trial, the scheme has been installed at Maidstone HWRC.

KCC is partnering with a charity, which supports individuals and families who find themselves in crisis through homelessness, domestic abuse, addiction, financial need, unemployment, relationship breakdown and more. People using the HWRC can deliver unwanted furniture such as chairs, tables, wardrobes and bookcases, and after being assessed by site staff, reusable items are placed in a dedicated container. This furniture will

be sold in the charity shop to raise funds for the charity and their outreach work. Many of the items will also be 'gifted' to local people in need

It is hoped to roll this out to other HWRCs once it is running smoothly

Margot McArthur, May 2023

KCC Member for Sevenoaks Rural South

Covering Cowden, Hever, Edenbridge, Leigh and Chiddingstone Causeway, Penshurst, Fordcombe and Chiddingstone.