

Report to Fawkham Parish Council Annual Parish Meeting 2021

I am very sorry that I cannot be with you this evening. I am taking the few days holiday with my family that I planned in 2019.

For Kent County Council this has been a year like no other. Kent is the gateway to Europe, and the consequences of Brexit for transport and the movement of goods and people fell heavily upon the county, and the Council has had to deal with them. Firstly we have had to ensure that delays on the roads were kept as few as possible and to be certain that disruption to the everyday lives of our residents were kept to a minimum. The situation has been complicated by the Covid-19 epidemic, of which more later. It has been necessary to create the Kent Access Pass, without which HGV drivers should not enter Kent en route to Dover or the channel tunnel, and they cannot head towards the continent without evidence of their freedom from infection. Because of the additional formalities brought about by Brexit we have had to construct, at lightning speed, an Inland Border Post at Sevington, near Ashford, assemble with Highways England, the Brock traffic separation system on the M20 and make the old Manston Airfield suitable to receive vehicles when all other vehicle storage systems were full. It was necessary to make sure that HGVs did not try to avoid queues on the M20 by using local roads and KCC obtained government permission for an Emergency Traffic Regulation Order to prevent vehicles over 5 tonnes from stopping in unserviced laybys for longer than forty-five minutes in seven of Kent's twelve districts. Offending vehicles have been clamped, over 3,000 to date, and not surprisingly this has caused a backlash from the freight industry.

After some teething troubles, not all unrelated to strained Anglo-French sentiments, the arrangements have worked well, and today there are very few delays and few turnbacks.

Coincidental with the Brexit transition has been a flood of illegal migrants on Kent's beaches. While this largely a matter for the Home Office, KCC has a statutory responsibility for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and in 2021 the authority had no further capacity to accommodate them and advised

the Home Office of its intention to act unlawfully and refuse further applicants. Fortunately government responded and many of the 1,600 children were relocated to other parts of the UK.

Covid-19 hit Kent hard and the County Council responded by supplying its own stocks of PPE to hospitals and doctors' surgeries. We also opened, two to each district, non-infected testing stations and have funded humanitarian activity to protect the elderly and vulnerable throughout the county. Currently elected members have funding available to relieve distress when it presents itself.

Government has generally reimbursed the costs KCC has incurred in Covid-related work and, indeed, the revenue settlement received for the forthcoming twelve months has been better than for some years. There is now a regime of three year settlements, although it is very clear the government expects the bulk of local authority funding in forthcoming years to be derived from local taxation. Residents can look forward to 5% increases for the foreseeable future.

Kent is returning to normal. Libraries are re-opening; those not yet open will become so in July. The powers allowing KCC to hold statutory meetings virtually have expired and not been renewed so that, having held our AGM with social distancing in a leisure centre, we shall, after June 18th, return in some degree to County Hall.

After the recent election the Conservatives have been returned to County Hall with a handsome majority, as have I.

The new administration has a substantial programme of policies and measures for the next four years but local issues are very much at the forefront with better highways, flytipping and clean Kent very much on the agenda.

I, personally, have been appointed Cabinet Member for highways & Transport, a job universally known as "the poisoned chalice". I will have responsibility for the highways term maintenance, the Active Travel programme budget for cleaner and healthier travel, and the National bus Strategy, which, if the government is to be believed, will lead to better and more frequent buses, better

facilities and better penetration of the rural villages by public transport. Part of the strategy is Demand Responsive Travel (DRT) which will enable passengers to summon a bus instead of relying on a sparsely populated timetable. Obviously buses will not run where there is no demand, but smaller buses will be able to serve villages like Fawkham if the demand was there.

I am very glad to be back to serve you for another four years. I have lived in my patch for forty years and my heart is here. I am always glad to hear from any of "my" residents.