

Report to Fawkham Parish council Annual Parish Meeting 21st April 2022

This is my 25th year as a County Councillor. I have represented Sevenoaks Rural North East (as it is now called) division since 2005. I am currently Cabinet Member for Highways & Transport, with a budget of £240m and approximately 450 employees.

There have been many changes that have affected Kent since the beginning of the Covid-19 epidemic.

Covid caused enormous expense for the authority, although, in large part, the government covered this.

Covid caused a virtual collapse in public transport, with bus operators reporting a tiny proportion of pre-pandemic patronage. Even now, bus users constitute 70% of what they were. Although many residents of Kent believe that the County Council “runs the buses”, this is not so. In the UK, the bus industry is deregulated and in the hands of private companies that seek profits, and when services become unprofitable they do not hesitate to withdraw them. It is my estimate that bus operators will withdraw as many as 100 services in 2022.

The law relating to public transport describes County Councils as Local Transport Authorities, with powers to subsidise bus services that would otherwise be withdrawn. Paradoxically we are under no obligation to do so but nonetheless currently support over 150, mostly rural, ones. We have been out to consultation with programme of subsidy reductions amounting to £2.2m and affecting 48 services. If subsidy is withdrawn, it will have a devastating effect on some isolated communities with their children travelling to school and the vulnerable elderly. Although Fawkham has no bus services, it might be affected by the buses to Dartford and Gravesend. Arriva are seriously curtailing the timetable for the 423 and the County Council is withdrawing the 489 Sunday service to Gravesend.

Government’s attempt to revive the bus industry led, in 2021, to a National Bus Strategy. This is a complex subject but its essence is that KCC received £35.1m for new bus infrastructure, but will be unable to spend any of the grant to support existing services.

The County Council's fortunes have been greatly affected by the growth in statutory provision for SEND children and Adult Services, which means that balancing the annual budget has meant many painful savings.

There is some good news, however. Government gave Kent a grant of £11m to resurface 111 miles of highway and I have repurposed some capital funding to provide £7m for each of the next three years for dealing with potholes. These will be fewer this year following the mild winter. Notwithstanding this, highways operates at about 50% of its standstill income with a maintenance backlog of about £650m.

I have invested £500k in a new regime for rural verge cutting, which will affect Fawkham and will permit biodiversity and the proliferation of bees and other pollinators.

Fawkham gives rise to interesting problems for me to solve, one being that of the various ancient ponds, in use by right for highway drainage but in no recorded ownership. I am taking legal advice on this subject and will advise further.

I am intending to stand down as your elected County Member in 2025, bloody but unbowed. Meanwhile, I am always glad to hear from the Parish Council and individual residents.