

Good evening, everybody

The last few years have been quite extraordinarily difficult for all upper-tier local authorities and no less for Kent County Council.

The principal problem has been the exponential growth in demand for the services we provide, particularly in the area of Adult Social Care and the education of children with Special Educational Needs. Many people are living longer than hitherto, although not necessarily healthier lives, so that greater periods in care are necessary. The situation with SEN children has become difficult through the increase in demands for Education, Health & Care Plans. It is very easy to offend people by discussing these, so I won't do that. However, nearly 7,000 children need to be transported across the county every school day and providing this service is costing the Kent Council Tax payer upwards of £20m per annum.

Most people will know that the County Council provides both statutory and discretionary services. A statutory service would be education, or care of the elderly, while a discretionary service would be the Kent Travel Saver bus pass for children going to, say, selective schools that are not the nearest appropriate ones. Some services are a mixture of statutory and discretionary, libraries where we are required by law to provide library facilities but by no means the 99 libraries we currently have. We have made considerable reductions in what we spend on subsidised buses and this has meant that the operators have withdrawn the service. To many older people living in the countryside this means there is no way for them to get to their nearest town, unless they can use the Kent Karrier taxi-bus service. We are considering closing several of the County's HWRCs, or "tips", as the public insist on calling them, and we are in the process of disposing of historic County Hall in Maidstone, with its vast backlog of maintenance issues and general unsuitability for the modern age.

Several authorities like Nottingham, Birmingham, Northampton, Croydon and Thurrock have virtually gone broke and are now run by His Majesty's Commissioners, but this has generally been due to unwise capital schemes and poor administration. Now they can't embark on new spending and have to commit to an affordable budget. This means selling off assets and greatly reducing the range and extent of services to residents. KCC is not broke, having balanced its budget for 2023/2024, and has not issued a dreaded s.141 notice. We have had to commit to considerable savings and there will be many more. An example of a recent saving is the Council's financial support of the Gravesend – Tilbury Ferry, which has had to cease from the 1st April.

What has happened? Well, as I've already said, there has been a very significant increase in demand, and government has made it clear that it does not wish to provide revenue support grant to councils, expecting local government to be funded by Council Tax. We have asked residents of Kent to pay a 5% increase in Council Tax. Birmingham is asking for 21% over the next two years. It does seem, however, that government has at last noticed the situation of local government and has offered support, although nothing like enough, since the beginning of the year.

So, for the foreseeable future KCC will be there for you, although in very changed form.

We will continue to have “tips”, to support bus services and get children to school, to educate children albeit in poor buildings, build new schools where there is housing growth, do our best to maintain our 5,000 miles of roads, look after the elderly and improve the lives of the residents of Kent where can. It’s not all doom and gloom, however; there is a new bus service from New Ash Green, Hartley and Longfield to DVH and Bluewater five times a day, and I launched this on Tuesday this week.

I maintain a substantial workload of enquiries from residents and Parish Councils. I now have a Member Grant of £3,500 per annum only.

My own ambitions are for local government to abandon the three tier system of local government and take the unitary route. Unfortunately if it does, it will be some considerable time in the future and without me as I shall be retiring next year after 28 years service as a councillor and ten of them in this patch.