

## **COUNCIL UPDATE 3.2025**

### **HIGHWAYS REPORTS**

I have reported the raised access cover and depression in the road in Magazine Road (ref 864614). The road repairs were carried out but officers advise that the raised cover is a Southern Water asset who have been contacted for action.



### **WAVE COMMUNITY BANK**

I met with Wave Community Bank on 3<sup>rd</sup> March. Wave Community Bank was launched in 2000 to provide ethical financial services to those living in Brighton. It now covers the whole of East Sussex, Brighton & Hove, Kent, Medway and the London Borough of Bexley, and members of Unite the Union in the Southeast Region. Its 25-year anniversary is on 8<sup>th</sup> August this year. The work includes providing loans in place of expensive payday loans and financial education for those who need it. I will be in contact with ABC, KCC, KCHFT and KMPT to discuss how the work of these (as large employers) can link up to Wave Community Bank.

### **JOINT TRANSPORT BOARD**

The Board met on 4<sup>th</sup> March. Items of interest included:

- A petition was submitted on the speeding and traffic congestion in Church Road, Mersham. The issues derive from the lack of parking places, pavement and streetlights. The situation is exacerbated when the village is used as a “rat run” to Bridgefield when the A2070 is congested. The Parish Council is exploring a speed reduction to 20 mph.

- Secondary legislation giving KCC the power to enforce moving traffic offenses such as making banned turns, exceeding weight limits, pedestrian controlled zones and stopping in yellow box junctions came into effect on 31<sup>st</sup> Mar 2022. There is no weight limit condition on the east of the A2070 Church Road, Sevington but given that steps have already been taken to prevent HGV access (signage and narrowing of the road) enforcement should now be considered. KCC will be asked to consider the suitability of this site for a ANPR camera.
- Penalty notices were issued at the Beaver Road Bus Gate from 1<sup>st</sup> March to unauthorised vehicles.
- A new street work closure inspector has been added to the east Kent street work team. The aim is to coordinate works by utility companies, telecommunications providers and developers to reduce disruption. The Transport Select Committee launched an inquiry into the impact of street works by utility companies. KCC's submission is below and the link to further evidence is at <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/136070/pdf/>

**Kent County Council's submission to Transport Select Committee Inquiry on Managing the Impact of Street Works**

I am writing to make you aware of Kent County Council's (KCC) submission to the Transport Select Committee on the impact of street works, which are works on the highway network undertaken by the utility companies.

You will no doubt be aware that this is a significant area of concern for our residents, not just in terms of the immediate disruption to their day-to-day journeys but in the impact on the structural integrity of the highway and any subsequent costs to the taxpayer to carry out repairs. It is also a concern for us at KCC, particularly the overuse of emergency permit requests.

In 2023/24 29% of all permits for works on Kent's Road network were for emergency (immediate) works. We consequently have no opportunity to carry out our coordination function or ensure the proper planning of these street works. We, like other Highway Authorities, have found that often these works need not be carried out on an emergency basis (for example, to repair a water leak that has been ongoing for some time) but that the permit system is too open to improper use of this category. A key recommendation in our evidence is that there is a change to the definition of 'emergency' works so that we have the best opportunity to enact our Traffic Management Duty.

[kent.gov.uk](https://kent.gov.uk)



I encourage you to [read our evidence to the Committee](#), which fully explains the situation as we see it in Kent and how we recommend the management of these works could be improved. This includes further research into the economic and societal impacts of both street works and road works to determine if there is a case for changes to working practices to be mandated. This would be justified where the economic benefits of reducing street works/road works duration outweighs the costs of undertaking works more quickly. We would also welcome a pilot on the A25 in Kent to support this research.

I trust you will find the evidence self-explanatory, but I would be very happy to further discuss any of the points raised, should you wish.

Following that letter KCC was invited to give further evidence on the disruption from street works in front of the Government's Transport Select Committee on 19 March.

Distinct from works done to repair and maintain the road itself, street works are works carried out by utility companies to install, repair or maintain their services, including water, gas, electricity and communications including broadband. These works usually involve digging up roads or pavements, causing disruption to the travelling public and can affect the surface quality, integrity and lifespan of the road and pavement. KCC does not have the power to prevent utility companies carrying out planned or emergency works on Kent roads. The limited powers the council does have is to minimise disruption wherever possible through co-ordination of all works in the highway to avoid conflicts.

The Transport Select Committee investigated on 19<sup>th</sup> March ways to help limit the damage and disruption to roads and pavements carried out by utility companies and other providers, and the effectiveness of fines that councils, like KCC, can impose on them if their works are mismanaged. Katie Lam MP is a member of the Committee.

KCC requested that the government amended the legal definition of emergency works and promoting technology to reduce the length of time roads are occupied. KCC asked to see significant change in this area, in the past six months, Kent had almost twice as many emergency closures carried out by utility companies, telecommunication providers, and developers, compared to those carried out by KCC for emergency road repairs.

KCC reported the meeting was positive, marking the beginning of a long process. Coordination of street works is a complex issue affecting the entire country. Making changes to this does not solely rest with one organisation – it must be a collaboration of willing parties and may require government to make changes in law. The Select Committee will now review the evidence and may invite utility companies to respond to the information provided by KCC and the other participating organisations. Members of the Select Committee will then create a report with a set of recommendations which will be issued to the Roads Minister for consideration.

- KCC's Pothole Blitz funding for 2025 will be £14.5million (slight caveat that the DfT can withhold money if KCC don't spend it well, but KCC will spend it well). This is an increase of about 68% from the £8.6million Pothole Blitz 2024. Overall spend on highways assets (pavements, lights, bridges, drains, etc) will be more than £80million - Pothole Blitz forms just part of that. KCC is considering the flexibility of other funding pots from the DfT to try and get even more money into improving roads. After all, buses need roads to run on. Potholes are the endpoint of a failing road, and the number of defects reported on Kent's roads remains exceptionally high. To really make a difference, KCC needs

the Government to dramatically increase funding for larger-scale resurfacing and road maintenance programmes. The Government's reliance on funding announcements each spring of short-term pothole fixes clearly isn't having the desired effect. The annual headlines rarely make clear that the money awarded is for maintaining all highways assets – including assets such as drains, bridges, pavements, and streetlights – not just our roads. There needs to be a national discussion about how we are going to improve things across the whole country and a complete overhaul of government road funding. Councils need more funds to plan large-scale, long-term road maintenance and rebuilding. This will help tackle potholes, keep our economy growing, and ensure the people of Kent can move about as they demand.

- Work on A2042 approaches to Victoria Road starts on 10<sup>th</sup> April to finish on 2<sup>nd</sup> May including the bridge over the railway.
- Quantock Drive work is scheduled for 2025/26.
- Streetlights are due to be replaced in Hythe Road, Mace Lane, Churchyard, Canterbury Road, Loudon Way and Somerset Road.
- Bellamy Gurney Scheme – A2070 / Finberry – National Highways are yet to adopt.
- Delivery of Flood Street Forstal bridge works scheduled during 2025/26.
- Further Southern Gas Network work on Godinton Road scheduled to take place 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2025 to 31<sup>st</sup> August 2025.
- The quality of pothole repairs by Amey was questioned. KCC carry out monthly audits and Amey are required to attend if faults are found.

## **STANHOPE ROAD DISPOSAL BY KCC**

The potential sale of this land owned by KCC was discussed on 5<sup>th</sup> March. The site consists of two parcels. First, land south of Stanhope Road which comprises a car park and dilapidated buildings which formerly comprised the South Kent College and Linden Grove Primary School/John Wallis Academy (previously known as the Duncan Bowen) and the site of the former Ray Allen Children's Centre (demolished in 2023). The second parcel of land sits to the west, adjoining Stanhope Road, is open space known as Oak Field. Pitchside and Courtside are fenced off multi-use sports and grass football pitches, used by both the John Wallis Academy and community-based sports teams.

Outside of the disposal site, the buildings comprising the current John Wallis Academy school is to the south, with KCC owned playing fields in between.



In 2017/18 an outline planning application for the site was submitted by KCC for redevelopment, to provide 205 residential units, 64 extra-care beds and a replacement Ray Allen Centre. But this has been on hold, pending a resolution being found on nutrient neutrality. ABC accepted that there would be no affordable element to the residential part of the scheme (normally 20%), on grounds of viability.

What has changed is a replacement of the Ray Allen Children's Centre is not required by KCC as space has been found in Stanhope library and is there no current requirement for extra-care beds within Ashford (I questioned this and think that it is more accurate to say that there is no developer prepared to construct extra care facilities).

It should be noted that Courtside/Pitchside sports facilities would continue following the sale as the disposal will be subject to the leases that are in place. Oak Field requires a consultation to be carried out to inform any decision. The start date of this was 10 February 2025, with comments due by 24 March 2025 (note Oak Field was not included in the recent ABC Call for Sites).

This was my response to the consultation (repeated in the KCC meeting) "I wish to ensure that any new planning application that comes forward for the redevelopment of the sites (like that in 2017) will protect Oak Field from development. My point is that with KCC the developer one can expect a responsible approach to protect these important green spaces but the same may not be the case if the site is sold to a new developer. Similarly, it is important that the Pitchside/Courtside is protected from development so I would like to see a protection for that." The link to the consultation is here <https://letstalk.kent.gov.uk/disposal-of-open-space-land-at-stanhope-road-ashford>.

## DOMESTIC ABUSE

KCC has allocated £4,031,222 for 2025-26 Domestic Abuse Duty Safe Accommodation funding, which is an uplift of £796,559 and demonstrates its commitment to half violence against women and girls. The 'Domestic Abuse Framework' is to be extended from 2025 to 2027 which determines activity and spend of the funding. It includes a Domestic Abuse Duty Safe Accommodation grant, in line with the MCHLG Framework for adults and children. Additional safeguarding is given for continuing education for affected children although the priority is for their safety.

## DEVOLUTION

National Association for Local Councils (NALC) advise the following actions by Parish and Community Councils:

- Assess what assets could be taken on the future.
- What are the potential areas for service that you might wish to take on.
- Would you wish to share responsibilities with neighbouring councils.
- What are the preferred boundaries for future unitary authorities.

NALC contacted Jim McMahon MP (devolution minister) expressing concern that recent guidance to local authorities failed to include parish and town councils in a list of local partners, stakeholders and public bodies they should engage with. The minister said, "This government absolutely values the crucial role played by parish and town councils in local government" and clarified that "I expect local leaders to seek views from their MPs, as well as ensuring wider engagement with other local partners and stakeholders, residents, workforce and their representatives, and businesses. This should include parish and town councils in the spirit of that guidance". **KCC have been engaging with KALC and exploring ways in which we can devolve greater powers, funding and responsibilities to Parish and Town Councils.** The future role of Town & Parish Councils is a matter for further work.

The following issues have been identified with fragmenting Kent into 3 or 4 authorities:

- Will the new authorities responsible for the ports of entry have the resources to manage the impact of Brock and find alternatives?
- Will the new authorities responsible for the consequences of small boats and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have the resources to manage this?
- Will the geographies of the new authorities take account of such planning constraints in the context of planning delivery targets and be able to agree an approach to addressing issues of viability and nutrient neutrality which act as impediments to housing delivery?
- The groups responsible to The Community Safety Partnership are mostly Kent wide: Kent Fire and Rescue, Kent Police, Kent CC and



Kent and Medway Integrated care, The Probation Service. Only one organisation (ABC) operates in Ashford only.

- Some authorities merging have high levels of debt and some are debt free. How will legacy debt be managed, apportioned and ensure that residents are not disadvantaged through their Council Tax by the associated debt interest payments?
- The working group set up to implement proposals for moving to new unitary authorities should have representation from parish/town and community councils.
- Councils have different approach to housing – a third have hived off their housing to a housing association with the rest owning their council houses. How will this amalgamation be managed?

ABC reports (page 30 of the Full Council / page 42 of the Cabinet Papers for the meeting on 20<sup>th</sup> March, Para 1 of Section F on Local Engagement) that “all Councils have undertaken extensive staff and Councillor engagement, and many (but not all – ed.) have utilised existing forums to engage residents, partners and businesses (e.g. Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), meetings of parish chairs and local strategic partnerships).”

We may rue the day that we fragment the County Council without any strategic powers across the area.

## **PLANNING ENFORCEMENT**

I attended a presentation on the latest policy on 5<sup>th</sup> March.

- ABC receive more than 1 report every day of a planning infringement there is a case load at ABC (for 3 people to work on) of 500 cases.
- The choice of whether to enforce (by issue of a notice) against a planning infringement or not, is a discretionary for ABC (not statutory). It receives no fee and can be costly, lengthy and resource intensive.
- Any action by ABC needs to be proportionate, not punitive – it needs to be rectified in a proportionate manner.
- ABC has a series of priorities. Priority 1 are work on trees subject to a TPO, listed building and work in a conservation area.
- A notice of a breach of planning can be issued up to 10 years after the development has been substantially completed. Listed buildings enforcement has no time limit – liability rests with the property not the owner of the building at the time of the breach of planning.
- The recipient of a notice can appeal to the planning inspector (possible grounds might be that the development is under permitted development rights). Evidence given at these appeals is given under oath to the inspector.
- Enforcement appeals to the planning inspector have a timescale of 52 weeks before written representations are required and 100 weeks before a hearing. The point is these things take time.

- Prosecution will only result where there is failure to meet the terms of a High Court Injunction Order that ABC has sought from the High Court which is the last resort (there has been two of these in the last 12 months).
- Development at Chilmington Green include the installation of garage doors on car ports when being built. This is being investigated.

## **ACTIVE TRAVEL FUNDING**

The KCC Walking and Cycling Group met on 11<sup>th</sup> March. £1.886m has been allocated for Further Active Travel Schemes. The schemes to be supported are those that can be matched funded by Borough/District councils. The schemes being considered include from Great Chart to Chilmington, a “smart survey” is now required to be carried out. This is not part of the developer requirements but will improve access to the school which opens in September 2025. In Tenterden, there is a proposal to improve the footway at Colonel Stephens Greenway. Ashford Borough has a Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) for Ashford Town and are working on a LCWIP for the villages.

## **DEMENTIA DIAGNOSIS**

Councillors met on 12<sup>th</sup> March to review Dementia Services. There are 32,230 current sufferers in Kent and Medway which is expected to rise to 38,040 by 2030. To increase diagnosis capacity, 9 GPs have been accredited within Kent Mental Health Primary Trust (KMPT) to support diagnosis; there are 52 accredited dementia supporters across Kent and Medway. The aim is for sufferers to be signposted to a wide range of social activities including sports, learning new skills, companionship, friendship and other forms of social interrelation. In June 2024 six new stand-alone memory assessment service units were created, wait time is 17.8 weeks (national wait time 21.6 weeks).

## **URGENT AND EMERGENCY MENTAL HEALTH PROVISION**

The same meeting discussed emergency mental health provision. There are nine Safe Havens across Kent and Medway provided by the Mental Health Matters Charity, Ashford's is based at WHH. The Safe Havens provide a community based, non-clinical crisis service offering individuals experiencing mental health or psychological distress in a safe physical space staffed 24/7 by mental health workers. They are not secure facilities and patients can “take their own leave” although they are assessed by KMPT for move to a clinical setting which does have enhanced security. They provide psychological support, de-escalation interventions and peer support from other attendees with stays up to 24 hours.



A new Crisis Recovery House opened in Ashford in November 2024 which allows stays for up to 7 days for those who do not require inpatient services but who's condition makes it unsafe to remain at home.

Both Safe Havens and Crisis Recovery Houses allow rapid escalation to clinical care is available if it is needed. To support these facilities the ICB has a bespoke conveyance and sit-and-care service. All units are open to SECAM and Police for conveyance.

## **ADULT ADHT**

The meeting discussed Adult Neurodivergent Services in the NHS. Following increases in adult demand for neurodevelopmental (autism and ADHT) services since the pandemic, the waiting time assessment is 7 years. This is a significant demand on the NHS. New accredited providers have been added so patients can now choose from an increased number of private providers under the NHS Right To Choose. This will create additional financial pressure on the NHS so to combat this KCHFT (the key NHS provider) will expand its offer through additional keyworker capacity.

## **HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY (HOSC) WORKPLAN**

I have asked for two additional workstreams for the HOSC committee, (i) how the ICB assessed population health needs to ensure that future NHS capacity meets the needs of the growing population of Kent & Medway, and (ii) how work is progressing on the extension of walk in GP services for over 75s at New Hayesbank to the rest of Kent.

## **ASHFORD CRIME REDUCTION STRATEGY**

I spoke at the "Coffee and Chat with a Councillor" on 17<sup>th</sup> March about the 2025-2027 crime reduction strategy has been drafted for comments. The strategy includes:

- Prepare by increasing personal and social skills programmes to improve community networks and support neighbourhood watch.
- Protect by accessing intelligence on ASB families at risk to give early support and diversion activities.
- Prevent by targeting potential perpetrators with intensive support.
- Pursue by acting against perpetrators for immediate enforcement delivered by assisted reporting and then delivering neighbour support.

Ashford has 410 food and drink enterprises (the highest of any Kent district) meaning that Ashford is attracting more visitors to the area, supported by the diverse retail and leisure scene. The population has grown by 10% recently due to the £520m of investment in new business and leisure/retail destinations. What you can do:

- Data must be collected so there is a clear understanding of what causes or sustains fear of ASB, crime and violence. Share information to

identify violence related hotspots and inform commissioning and grant giving opportunities.

- The authorities need to understand from those with lived experience so they can design their interventions.

What the Council can do:

- Regeneration scheme designs can create safe spaces for all to enjoy.
- Information from organisations across Kent such as Domestic Homicide Reviews, Child Safeguarding Reviews and Safeguarding Adult Reviews will now share information across partners to give a combined data picture.
- Increase the youth offer in Ashford and work with the schools to increase the opportunities for young people.
- Cut back overgrown shrubbery that prevents clear lines of sight.
- Improve lighting and CCTV which make people feel safer.
- Develop the “Best Bar None” scheme that reduces alcohol related crime through responsible customer service.

### ***Economic Abuse***

4.1m women (15%) experienced “economic and financial abuse” in the past year. 1/3rd affected were between 18 and 24. Given the scale and the fact that much is unreported and hidden, **MOST OF US WILL KNOW A FRIEND, FAMILY MEMBER OR WORK COLLEAGUE AFFECTED.**

Property and pensions are our biggest assets, and all agencies need to safeguard potential victim’s information and signpost them to specialist support if they think they are at risk. The solution requires giving possible victims financial confidence - lack of understanding creates lack of confidence.

Staff at Bank and Building Societies, Domestic Abuse workers (including KCC) and Police specialists understand and can recognise economic abuse. They can signpost you to these agencies: Surviving Economic Abuse (<https://survivingeconomicabuse.org/>) and Money Advice Plus (<https://www.moneyadviceplus.org.uk/>).

### **HOUSING ASSOCIATION COACH HOUSES**

I spoke to one of Sojan’s caseworkers on 18<sup>th</sup> March who has been asked to investigate this issue. I have emailed Sojan.

“Coach House” properties are ones where there are bays parking for the Coach House or neighbour underneath the house. One Housing Association, Orbit, insist that their Coach Houses “must be leasehold”, when it has been confirmed by other Coach House residents that they have a freehold when they bought outright from market developers (e.g. Crest). A freehold interest

(typically a flying freehold) is not being applied to these properties when the owner staircase to 100% ownership.

This is extremely disappointing as successive governments wording of the 'dream of home ownership' is intertwined with people getting on the property ladder through shared ownership and they will be disappointed to learn of how the Housing Association are not allowing the freehold purchase. There are many issues with owning a leasehold rather than a freehold including ongoing rent and maintenance charges along with restrictions on what the "owner" can do with the property in terms of carrying out improvements.

## **PENSION POTS AND INHERITANCE TAX (IHT)**

KCC's Pension Committee met on 19<sup>th</sup> March. One of the issues discussed was the change to include pension pots within the scope of IHT from 6 April 2027.

Described as closing a "loophole", making IHT "fairer". It will apply to all pension wealth that is transferable on death, but the implication is the government views pensions as vehicles for tax avoidance not saving for retirement. This means uncrystallised Defined Contribution (DC) pensions, crystallised DC pensions not invested in annuities and lump sum death benefits from DB pensions. If it includes benefits passed down by way of an income the question is how the lump sum tax will be paid as the recipient will have no access to increased income to pay it.

A consultation is currently open seeking views on what processes would be required to implement this change. In terms of impact on the Kent Pension Fund, the proposed changes would mean that death grant payments made from 6 April 2027 become subject to IHT. It would be the personal representative's responsibility to calculate whether IHT is due and pass that information on to the County Council. KCC would then use that information to deduct and report the IHT to HMRC at the point of paying the death grant. It is felt that it should be the responsibility of the deceased person's estate to report and pay tax directly to HMRC and KCC should be removed as an intermediary.

Some DC schemes could be seen as being used to accumulate transferrable wealth; however this argument appears fundamentally flawed for anyone who dies as an active scheme member or before their pension due date as they have not been able to access their pension rights before death, yet are still becoming liable to a tax charge. Given the assisted dying bills and associated arguments for and against would this not 'encourage' anyone with a serious illness to consider terminating their life early to avoid the pension being included in IHT?

There would be no impact on survivor pensions under these proposed changes. These would continue to be payable to eligible survivors of scheme members and taxed through Pay as You Earn (PAYE) Income Tax.

### **BILHAM FARM NON-MATERIAL AMENDMENT TO 09/00081/AS**

09/00081/AS involved a small parcel of homes at Bilham Farm which included certain elements of highway infrastructure beyond that parcel. This application on 2009 was the first planning application received after the grant of outline permission and followed Crest having been selected by the Church Commissioners (CCE) as its developer. Whilst infrastructure work (i.e. development excluding the homes) was carried out after the application was granted, construction of the homes element has only been quite recent.

Crest's position is that subsequent planning permissions for the development have provided the details sought by the conditions attached to application 09/00081/AS so there is no need to submit the same information. As such, Crest are seeking to remove the conditions so there is no doubt left hanging about their status.

### **UK GOVERNMENT GRANTS TO ASHFORD**

The ABC Cabinet on 20<sup>th</sup> July heard an update on government grants. Since 2022 Ashford Borough Council has been administering its allocation of the Government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF). The funding has provided numerous avenues of support for residents, businesses and organisations across Ashford. The Government has announced a further round of UKSPF for the financial year 2025-26, to allow Local Authorities to transition to a new funding regime yet to be detailed. Ashford has been allocated £332,548 for next financial year.

UKSPF is expected to be used for Eat Well Spend Less & Wellbeing Roadshows, Crime Prevention with Charlton Athletic Community Trust, Ashford Town Centre Improvements (such as improve the public realm, reduce crime and anti-social behaviour, and reduce the number of vacant commercial units), Walking or Cycling Infrastructure Support, Community Cohesion Support, Skills Outreach programme and Screen Ashford Digital Skills programme.

### **TOWN CENTRE WORKSHOP**

Councillors met on 24<sup>th</sup> March to discuss the future of Ashford Town Centre. The current policy says, "we will work to support and revitalise the town centre". The new Local Plan for Ashford is to draft site allocations – there will be some that the council will need to rely on for delivering public realm improvements, housing or new commercial uses and others that are aspirations. The themes included:

- Greater green spaces in the town centre – we have two parks close to the town but not in the centre (Queen Mother Park & Victoria Park) and they are only accessible across barriers such as the railway and ring road. This links into improving the public realm and could Park Mall be turned into a green pro social space with a landmark public access building? Park Mall will be a cleared site owned by the Council during 2026.
- Parking strategy. We need to understand what residents need in terms of parking and where to include the number of spaces allocated to residents and visitors. There are 0.6 cars per dwelling in Ashford Town but is that due to affordability of cars and/or availability of car parking permits?
- Traffic patterns – the ring road operates as a barrier and prevents access to the town centre even if you are visiting areas very near to the town centre such as the designer outlet and even Lidl.
- Our two major employment drivers in Ashford are healthcare and retail and ABC policies need to support these. The designer outlet is the biggest retail employer; it has 3m visitors pa with three-quarters coming from over 30 miles away – we must find a way to encourage them to visit the town and improve the offering for “teens and tweens”, we have great schools in Ashford but not shops to attract them in but there are 17% vacancies in town.

## **BETTER MENTAL HEALTH**

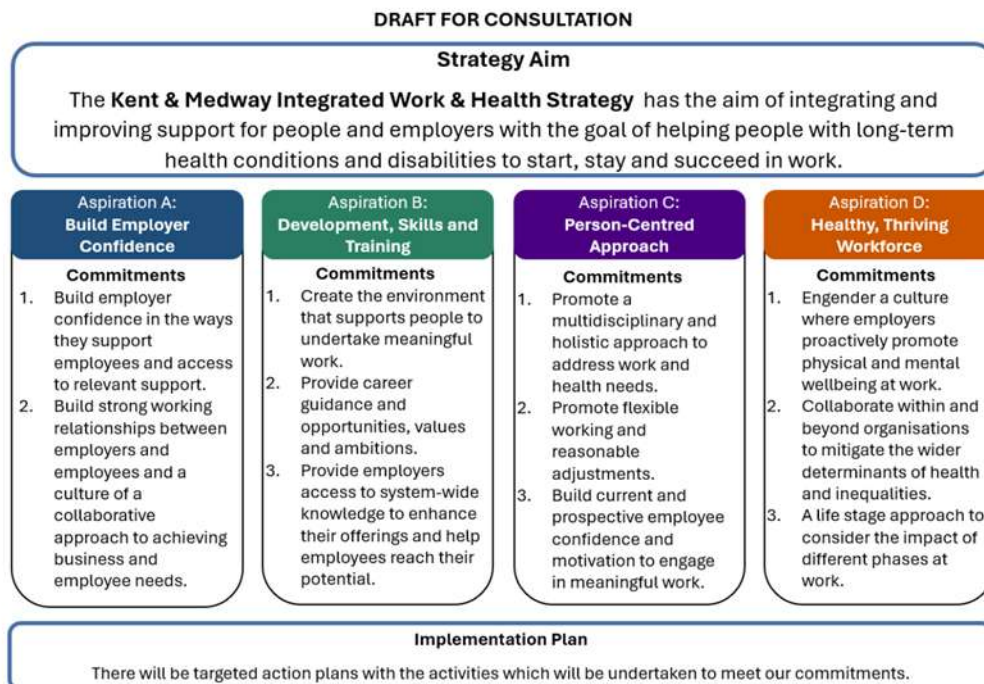
The Integrated Care Partnership met on 25<sup>th</sup> March and discussed the “Prevention Concordat for Better Mental Health” and the work to deliver a “Work and Metal Health Strategy” to 2030. Data from the Department of Work and Pensions suggests that over 750,000 working age people are not in work due to a long-term mental health condition. 44% of these people believe they would be able to work in the future if their condition improves and with the right support. The Concordat is a prevention-focused approach to improving the public’s mental health. The Kent and Medway Listens campaign started in 2021 and has highlighted the issue of mental health inequalities and identified areas of local need by listening to in each area of Kent and Medway. This influenced the creation of the Better Mental Health Network (of which I am a member), which has over 320 members from across sectors including Public Health, local authorities and VSCEs.

Better Mental Health Network members collaborate to provide and agree the content featured in the Prevention Concordat for Better Mental Health Action Plan by identifying relevant work taking place across the system. Organisations are now working together, cross-sector to listen to, and support public mental health using national expertise. It will achieve demonstrable improvements in mental health and substance misuse. It is an important piece of work to raise the profile of the interconnection between mental health

conditions and substance misuse. Much work has been done across Kent and Medway in raising awareness, however there is further work still to do. There is a focus on children and young people and their mental health, particularly related to self-harm.



## The Kent and Medway Work and Health Strategy 2025-30



### WORK ON MENTAL HELP

The Samaritans met with Community Councillors on 26<sup>th</sup> March. Key issues from the meeting included:

- Actions on suicide locations can only be tackled if they are known. The press is asked to not publicise locations as it can accelerate actions and thoughts by others if their accessibility is publicised.
- The Samaritans have a “high risk” location plan that they share with Highways England and National Rail. The interventions require capital and signage (although this may not be enough) – the gold standard is restricting access but not possible on public highways. We asked about Ashford sites (if any) on this list.
- The coroner is expected to ask if the location in Ashford has a history.
- “Prevention of Future Deaths” reports by the coroner will be helpful in asking Highways England for future funding for barriers.
- The Samaritans have a workplace training department which can deliver bespoke training for large employers (or a group of small employers).

This can focus on the wellbeing of individuals and spotting signs of crisis.

- The signage used in Ashford is out of date and we will liaise with the local branch to have it updated.

## **NEW HOUSING IN VILLAGES**

Councillors met to discuss new housing in villages on 26<sup>th</sup> March. ABC have been told that a housing number (greater than just local needs) will need to be met. The numbers of new homes envisaged in villages should not be disproportionate to the size of the villages within the tier and will reflect many of the considerations already embedded in Policy HOU5 (Residential Windfall Development in the Countryside).

The debate was about where ABC might want to focus new housing growth that could be termed as being more 'organic' or 'incremental' in scale – i.e. how a village might be expected to evolve over time.

In broad terms, higher housing growth was earmarked towards the larger and more sustainable rural villages of Tenterden, Charing, Hamstreet and Wye (the latter three all have a train station). This approach was 'proportionate' to the village's size, their services, facilities, environmental constraints, and issues such as proximity to Ashford, and to a lesser extent Tenterden.

In the last plan, Sevington was removed from Policy HOU3a (those small villages not expected to take significant housing unless additional infrastructure could be provided) as it was regarded as forming part of the Ashford Urban Area – therefore would be assessed under Ashford rather than a separate standalone settlement. My argument was that Sevington should now be regarded as three areas, Highfield, Finberry and Sevington South. HOU3a perfectly accommodates Sevington South as it allows development to be brought forward if new infrastructure can be provided such as Orchard Way.

## **ACTION FOR COMMUNITIES IN RURAL ENGLAND (ACRE)**

ACRE presented to Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) – Ashford District on 26<sup>th</sup> March. They provide Village/Community Hall Advisory Services (amongst other things) including advice to Community Halls where they do not have proper legal or governance structure. ACRE can provide services that support existing and new organisations. Most of the weaknesses in existing Community Halls are cultural rather than financial.

The Membership Fee for 2025/26 is £150pa. It gives access to 40 information sheets, access to legal templates, and access to discounted specialist services. This could be something for the new Community Halls at



Bockhanger and Finberry? Contact is [kerryoutlaw@kentacre.org.uk](mailto:kerryoutlaw@kentacre.org.uk) / 07771744820.

## **SK8SIDE**

Deborah and I met with Dedrie to discuss service provision following the news that the 6 sessions have been cut to 3. The £10k ABC financing no longer covers what it did three years ago when the grant was set up. In general funding pots are smaller and more organisations are competing for the reducing sum. The lottery is no longer accepting bids and timing requirements on PCC funding no longer make an application viable.

KCC's Family Hubs now cover years 0-25 and are delivering specific / targeted cohorts rather than open access. This approach means that referrals from open access groups where youth workers spot young people at risk can no longer be made. In other words there is no general continuing relationship with whole age cohorts which previously enabled workers to identify and engage with those who need interventions. The new Hall in Bockhanger could require open access youth provision to remedy this.

It was agreed that:

- The ABC Youth Council briefing on 10<sup>th</sup> April will provide an opportunity to ask what the younger people require out of a new Hall in Bockhanger.
- The results of engagement surveys carried out in 2019 and 2022 in support of the Hall and the CHESS project in 2023 should be brought together to support a planning application for the new Hall.
- ACRE now offer a service to support the delivery of new Halls (see above).
- The target date for the planning application should be Q3 2025 so it is in place well before the new unitary council is operation and it represents a project that the new council cannot back out of.

## **HML**

I have asked the Community Safety Unit to address how Management Companies can be influenced to maintain safety rings at open water places. They have been damaged at Finberry but how can the CSU ensure the Management Company (HML) puts things right? When the installations at the new wetlands at Victoria Park were damaged, it fell to ABC (Aspire) to put right. Is this "two tier" treatment by ABC?



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