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Dear Member

COUNTY COUNCIL - THURSDAY, 12 SEPTEMBER 2024

Agenda Item No

6 **Questions (Pages 1 - 14)**

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ben Watts', is written over a horizontal line.

Benjamin Watts
General Counsel

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COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 12 September 2024

Question by Mr Steve Campkin to Mr Neil Baker
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

Question

As a Community Councillor for South Willesborough and Newtown and in my capacity as Member of this chamber for Ashford East I have been working for over three years now on improvements to the road structure in my area. After delays due to Covid, a restructuring of the Highways department and implementation of the HIP, we finally managed to submit a HIP in September 2023. To date, we have heard nothing since. What plans are there to speed up this process so that residents can walk, cycle, drive and park in their own neighbourhoods easily and safely?

Answer

Answered by Mr David Robey, Deputy Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

Thank you for your question.

Our Highways Improvements Team for East Kent has been working with the parish council on their HIP and have recently met them (including Mr Campkin) to discuss their requests. They have a live Highway Improvement Plan.

Whilst I appreciate Mr Campkin's frustration that things can take time to implement but with over 300 parishes and one of the largest and busiest networks in the UK, I hope he can appreciate that our funding and staff resource are not unlimited. I am entirely satisfied that the officers are doing their very best to provide a service to him which is not offered in any other major shire Authority of Kent's size.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 12 September 2024

Question by Mr Alister Brady to Mr Rory Love
Cabinet Member for Education and Skills

Question

What number of children have blank Section I's in their EHCP, why is this the case and how long can this section legally be left blank?

Answer

The Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice sets out that Section I of the final EHC Plan should state:

'The name and type of the school, maintained nursery school, post-16 institution or other institution to be attended by the child or young person and the type of that institution (or, where the name of a school or other institution is not specified in the EHC plan, the type of school or other institution to be attended by the child or young person).'

It is lawful to leave Section I completely blank when a child or young person cannot attend any educational institution and is Educated Other Than In School or College (EOTISC). In these circumstances, the arrangements for education are specified in Section F of the EHC plan. Currently 334 plans (1.6% of the total) have Section I blank for this reason.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 12 September 2024

Question by Mr Barry Lewis to Mr Dan Watkins
Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health

Question

How many outstanding blue badge applications are in the system and how long is it taking to process these applications from the time they are received? Can the Cabinet Member also clarify what actions are being taken to reduce these wait-times for Kent's residents?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

In total there are 9353 applications in the system.

7500 applications are at the screening stage to check for supporting documentation. Some applications in this group are pending screening. Some applications have been screened but are missing information, which the team has requested from individual applicants. The oldest application in this group is March 2024.

Based on the application numbers that we have received for Blue Badge applications the first quarter of the calendar year, we are anticipating a 29% increase in Blue Badge applications for 2024. This has been impacted by changes in eligibility criteria by the DfT to include non-visible or "hidden" disabilities.

Where all supporting documentation is received for applicants who are 'automatically eligible' Badges are usually issued within four to five weeks.

1853 applications have progressed through the screening stage and progressed to the 'subject to further assessment' pathway because they are not automatically eligible under the Department for Transport's Guidance. The oldest application in this group is May 2024. The service is forecasting around 4000 of the 7500 currently at the screening stage to be 'subject to further assessment'.

The current published wait time for applications to be processed is four months. During the past few months, the service has experienced some workforce challenges, resulting in a build-up of applications in the system. This will ultimately mean that some applicants will wait longer than 4 months for their applications to be processed. Despite this in July 2024 the service issued 3514 Badges and achieved an average processing time for applications of 53.13 days.

Actions taken to reduce wait times:

The service has now recruited to all posts. Some new starters have completed the screening training. Further screening training is scheduled on the 13 September 2024. Service Review meetings are held regularly to target the most pressured areas of the service to support recovery. In addition to this the service is in the process of recruiting two additional clinically trained assessors to support with the 'subject to further assessment' applications going forward. Interviews are planned for the 18 September 2024.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 12 September 2024

Question by Ms Jenni Hawkins to Mr Rob Thomas
Cabinet Member for Environment

Question

The Performance Report for 2023/2024 for Resource Management and Circular Economy states that 99.9% of waste has been recycled, composted, or used for energy generation.

Given that energy generation through incineration is a less preferable option to recycling and should be a last resort, could the cabinet member give us a breakdown between the waste that is recycled and composted and the waste that is sent to the incinerator?

Answer

During the period 2023 / 24, the 99.9% indicated in the performance report was broken down as the following;

- 21.6% of waste was recycled/ reused
- 19% was composted
- 57.5% was sent to RDF or WTE (Refuse-Derived Fuel/ Waste-to-Energy)
- 1.7% was sent for treatment (Highway Mechanical Arisings i.e. street sweepings)

The remaining 0.1% was sent to landfill (Asbestos & Large Animal Carcasses)

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 12 September 2024

Question by Mr Paul Stepto to Mr Neil Baker
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

Question

Kent residents regularly complain about the state of the major roads in our county. These complaints focus mainly on overgrown roadside vegetation, reflective devices and white lines obscured by dirt, and, of course, litter. Although most of these roads are owned and maintained by National Highways, many residents are not aware of this fact, and the reputations of KCC and lower tier councils are at risk.

Will the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport lobby the government to take its responsibility to our residents seriously and maintain a reasonable level of tidiness, functionality and safety on these roads?

Answer

Answered by Mr David Robey, Deputy Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

Thank you for your question.

National Highways is responsible for the maintenance and enhancement of motorways and A Roads ensuring they are in good condition including their appearance. National Highways has a dedicated website for reporting litter and provides information on various campaigns they support, similar to local authorities.

Although KCC is not a waste collection authority, we work collaboratively with National Highways and district councils who are responsible for litter collection, to address litter issues on major roads. We have a comprehensive approach to road maintenance, which includes regular inspections, cleaning and maintenance of road markings and managing soft landscaping to ensure visibility and safety for drivers and other road users.

As part of our Highways Asset Management approach our Highways Team undertake a yearly High Speed Road programme on our network collaborating with District Councils who litter pick within this programme and identifying issues that need to be addressed against adopted service standards.

If your constituents do have specific concerns, I would ask Members to guide them to the Highways Fault Reporting tool on our website pages. This is the most effective way to report issues to ensure they are addressed effectively and efficiently.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 12 September 2024

Question by Ms Mel Dawkins to Mr Rob Thomas
Cabinet Member for Environment

Question

Minster Marshes and the surrounding area's, including Pegwell Bay in Ramsgate are special places for biodiversity. The Marshes and nearby area's include a RAMSAR site, and a SSSI, all of which contain red-listed species which are now endangered because of National Grid's Sealink project. What action are KCC taking to ensure the biodiversity of Minster marshes and the surrounding area's are safeguarded and preserved for future generations?

Answer

Since 2022, Kent County Council has been involved with the Sea Link Project, providing input as a consultee. The project's impact on local habitats and species is a key concern, and any application will need to show how it plans to avoid or reduce these impacts. While the final decision is made nationally, residing with the relevant Secretary of State, we have no powers as such to safeguard and preserve the area's biodiversity. Strategies such as Making Space for Nature will be used more widely to reverse the decline in nature, both habitats and species across the county. We will however continue to engage as the project progresses and raise concerns, as appropriate, on unmitigated impacts of the project upon the marshes and the wildlife they support."

COUNTY COUNCIL**Thursday 12 September 2024****Question by Ms Kelly Grehan to Mr Dan Watkins**
Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Public Health**Question**

Ahead of the closure of the Sure Start Centre in Greenlands last year, residents were reassured that expectant mothers would receive care in other expanded centres. However, residents have reported to me that they have had to attend Greenlands Darent Children's Centre for midwife appointments since its closure and have described the building as being 'essentially derelict, with no reception staff, cleaning services or proper plan in place'.

Therefore, can the Cabinet Member please explain what process should be being followed at Greenlands, why patients are being expected to visit a closed and filthy centre for appointments and what KCC intends to do to ensure that expectant mothers in Greenlands get the care they require?

Answer

The property identified by Cllr Grehan is a former Children's Centre. Its closure was an outcome of the Kent Communities Programme and the adoption of our new Family Hub operating model.

KCC was one of just 75 local authorities successfully awarded Department for Education funding to design and implement Family Hub model, a model which focuses on improving outcomes for babies and the first 1,001 days of a child's life, while bringing together internal and external service partners to deliver a whole-family service for our residents.

Prior to the adoption of the new Family Hub model extensive consultation was carried out with service users and key stakeholders. This consultation was supported by robust data on demographics and local needs, to ensure any decision put the right County Council services in the right locations.

KCC commissions the health visiting service through public health. This service is required to provide a range of activities including a universal offer of five mandated health and wellbeing reviews. To support delivery of these, whilst some children centres closed at the end of May 2024 and amendments were made to some of the buildings to be family hubs, it was agreed that the health visiting service could retain some regular access to this site to provide their services for the local community. It is intended that this provision will move to Oakfield Family Hub. The timing of this will take account of the advance notice period of invitations for appointments.

Whilst KCC no longer delivers its services from this building the County Council has allowed the trust to remain in occupation temporarily while they develop alternative

arrangements to ensure they can provide continued care to their patients. While regular building compliance continues to be undertaken, the areas of the building not actively being used for service delivery have been de-scoped to ensure appropriate use of public funds.

I am pleased to confirm that officers in the KCC property team are actively working with the NHS trust on a proposal to lease the entire building to the trust. Should this proceed, it will enable the NHS trust to expand the health offering provided from the building and provide their own reception functions for their patients, while also ensuring prudent use of County Council's finite resources.

Question 9

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 12 September 2024

Question by Mr Chris Passmore to Mr Rob Thomas
Cabinet Member for Environment

Question

KCC use significant quantities of weedkiller which contains Glyphosphate to control vegetation. Glyphosphate is known to have significant adverse environmental impacts, including being harmful to pollinating insects, adversely affecting soil fertility and the overuse can lead to the development of 'superweeds' which will be harder to control and potentially require even stronger herbicides with even greater adverse impacts. Does KCC know how much Glyphosphate is being used each year in the county and does it have plans to reduce its use?

Answer

We follow UK legislation and the guidance of the Chemical Regulations Directorate and Health and Safety Executive for the safe application of herbicides, which are authorised as safe for public and private spaces.

Our records show a decrease in herbicide usage due to stringent contract management and improved district collaboration in street cleansing, from 7,000 litres in 2020 to just under 5,500 litres in 2023, although weather conditions significantly influence this trend.

Kent County Council Highways continues to explore and trial alternative weed control methods to reduce herbicide reliance. While we strive to find sustainable and cost-effective alternatives, current options have not proven viable compared to glyphosate, some of which are less environmentally friendly to current methods and pose risks to bees and pollinators.

Our landscaping services across KCC buildings prioritises mechanical over chemical methods, such as glyphosate and neonicotinoid sprays, to minimise environmental impact. 'Stay Wild' areas are designated where feasible, aligning with our landscaping strategy to

limit weedkiller use. Nonetheless, glyphosate, specifically 'Round Up Pro Vantage,' is utilised when necessary,

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 12 September 2024

Question by Ms Sarah Hudson to Mr Neil Baker
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

Question

Would the Cabinet Member assure me that the long promised widening of the A228 at Kent Street will happen within the next 12 months, given the scheme was programmed for this financial year during the 2023 public consultation?

Answer

Answered by Mr David Robey, Deputy Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

Thank you for your question.

The Kent Street junction improvement scheme is a developer funded project being delivered by KCC via a S106 agreement. It is aimed at improving visibility exiting Kent Street and not specifically aimed at widening the A228. Land is required beyond the existing Highway limits to facilitate this. Negotiations with the adjacent landowner have included an additional measure to include localised widening between Kent Street and a point near Beech Road.

The land agreement has not yet been completed but officers and our solicitors are doing all they can to progress this as quickly as is practicably possible.

The intention is for the work to start in February 2025, but this will rely on the completion of the land agreement and overall project costs being within the remaining budget. Work is being undertaken to understand the full costings.

I am therefore, at this time, unable to confirm whether this project will progress until these elements are confirmed but I hope to be in a position to provide that assurance in the next month or so. I understand officers are keeping Mrs Hudson up to date as and when there is progress to share.

In terms of long term strategic improvements to the A228, this is a priority in our draft new Local Transport Plan which is currently out for public consultation. The draft Local Transport Plan outlines what needs to happen next in that an A228 corridor plan needs to be developed by KCC, to ensure that the site-specific pressures, arising in part from local growth are addressed in a co-ordinated way to deliver a sum greater than its parts. KCC should develop proposals within a single continuous programme for the corridor for development and delivery subject to securing developer and government funding. This should include a further review of the case for a Colts Hill bypass. A bid was submitted to the sub-national transport body, Transport for the South East, for development funding towards feasibility work for the A228 corridor as it is also a scheme in their Strategic

Investment Plan. However, the fund was oversubscribed and so our bid was unsuccessful as development funding was allocated to other schemes in the South East outside of Kent.

Question 11

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 12 September 2024

Question by Ms Jackie Meade to Mrs Clair Bell
Cabinet Member for Communities

Question

Folkestone Library at Grace Hill in Folkestone is now coming up to the 2nd year anniversary of it closing due to maintenance issues. Despite having served as a library for 135 years (the longest in Kent) and being a beautiful Grade 2 listed building, KCC have now completed a public consultation which states that they are looking at permanently closing Grace Hill and are looking at moving the library into the Folca building (owned by District council), although the District council have stated publicly that they would prefer the library to remain at Grace Hill and that no agreement is in place for the library to move to Folca. I hope I am assuming correctly, that the 3500 plus petition from residents seeking to save Grace Hill library will be taken into consideration in this consultation report and have full visibility of the results for the residents of Folkestone.

Can the Cabinet Member please confirm that if a charity were to come forward to discuss a lease to repair the building and provide a space for the library in Grace Hill building, that KCC would be prepared to meet and discuss, as it would essential save the building for public service, provide the library in the area where it has most benefit and also provide vital community space ?

Answer

We have just completed the public consultation on the Folkestone Library proposal, this eight week consultation ran until the 11th September 2024. No decision has yet been taken. The consultation document outlined how KCC had come to its preferred option. KCC remains committed to securing a town centre location for Folkestone Library.

I am very mindful of the feedback from local residents and the depth of feeling towards the Grace Hill building and that includes the submitted petition. I very much hope that any charity which may wish to propose a lease of any nature of the building or submit alternative ideas was able to use the opportunity to complete a response to that consultation.

Feedback from the consultation is being analysed and will be carefully considered before any decision is taken, following discussion at Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee. The report of the findings from the consultation will in due course be published on our website, as is standard for all KCC consultations.

Alternative proposals that have been made in response to the consultation will be advised to Committee, and be considered as part of the next steps. The Council will of course consider any request to discuss any specific proposals.

I recognise all the support locally promoting the consultation and appreciate the time of everyone who took time to submit a consultation response.

Question 12

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 12 September 2024

Question by Mr Antony Hook to Mr Roger Gough,
Leader of the Council

Question

Is the Council, as a member of the NHS Integrated Care Board, aware that in Kent, pre-school or infants school aged children with common hearing problems, for example as glue ear, which can be resolved with straightforward treatment, such as insertion of grommets, face a typical wait of well over a year to be seen by a specialist and a further wait to receive treatment? This is an extraordinary long time in the life of an early years child during which hearing difficulty will delay their social, mental and educational development.

What can the council do about this?

Answer

In 2022/23 the coverage of the newborn hearing screening programme in Kent was 98.6% [15,899] which was similar to England 98.5%. The aim of this programme is 'to identify permanent moderate, severe and profound deafness and hearing impairment in newborn babies.' We do not commission the new born hearing screening programme NHS England do, but the health visiting service specification requires the Health Visiting service to have regard for this programme. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/newborn-hearing-screening-programme-overview>.

As part of the public health commissioned school health service, we require that the service conduct a hearing screening programme with school entrants i.e. reception year children [4-5 years] which aims to identify permanent hearing loss. This is an offer which parents can opt their children out of. This may pick up children who were not born in this country and not had a newborn hearing screening programme or identify children who since birth have developed some hearing loss. There are some populations who are more likely to have hearing loss.

The method that is used to screen reception aged children's hearing has found an increasing proportion of 'failed' tests during the 2022/23 and 2023/24 academic years. The equipment used, the programme used to test, and distractions which may impact on concentration have all been reviewed or considered. The conclusion, which has been drawn from the service who conduct the hearing screens is that the development of cognitive skills to undertake the test is different to what it has been. Observation of children reaching developmental milestones during the covid pandemic was slower and the ability to do the hearing screen is a possible example of the impact. Following a 'failed' test the child's parent is offered the opportunity to bring their child for a second hearing screen after a three-month period. This period provides time to recover from colds or other infections which may have impacted on their ability to hear in the first test. The second screen may result in a failed test. This may lead to referral to audiology services.

Public Health are not responsible for commissioning Audiology services or the delivery of treatment as this is role of the ICB.