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Dear Member

COUNTY COUNCIL - THURSDAY, 22 MAY 2025

Agenda Item No

10 **County Council Questions (Pages 1 - 18)**

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ben Watts', is written over a faint, circular official stamp.

Benjamin Watts
General Counsel

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Question 1

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 22 May 2025

Question by Mike Sole to the Chairman of Kent County Council

Throughout the last term of this council, the LGBTQ Pride flag flew above County Hall during the month of June to mark Pride Month. Many members of this council and residents of the county were dismayed to hear the Chairman of Reform UK say that Reform controlled English councils will move at speed to resolve that the only flags permitted to be flown on or in its buildings will be the Union Flag and the St George's flag, and that no other flags will be permitted to be flown on its flag-poles, balconies, reception desks or council-chamber walls.

Please can the Chairman of the Council confirm whether this council will fly the Pride flag this June, and not seek to change the flag flying policy of this council that has seen not only the Pride flag, but also, amongst others, the Kent Invicta flag, Ukrainian flag and Armed Forces flag fly from KCC property?

Answer

Under Kent County Council's existing governance, the decision on which flags are flown is at the discretion of the Chairman of the Council.

I can confirm that the Pride Flag will not be flown on or in Kent County Council buildings.

As the newly appointed Chairman I have reviewed the flag-flying policy and can confirm that the only flags that will be displayed on or in this council buildings are as follows:

- The Union Flag
- The Flag of St George
- The Flag of Kent
- The Flags to celebrate or commemorate the Monarch and Royal Family or the Armed Forces (including the Merchant Navy).

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 22 May 2025

Question by Rich Lehmann to the Leader of Kent County Council

Against a backdrop of a £144m budget deficit, a crisis in SEN, continuing increases in the costs of adult social care and a £1.3bn backlog of highways works, the new Leader of the council chose her first press contact after being selected as leader to focus on the removal of Ukraine flags and symbols from County Hall.

Does the Leader of the council agree that the 80th Anniversary of VE Day was an insensitive time to row back on support for a European nation defending themselves from a foreign invasion?

Answer

If my friend opposite had been paying attention to my first media round after becoming leader, he would have noticed that I was merely answering the questions put to me by the journalists, as is the custom when being interviewed.

There is nothing insensitive about wishing to focus the attention of this Chamber on the people of Kent.

After all it is they who put us here and it is they we are here to serve.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 22 May 2025

Question by Alister Brady to the Leader of Kent County Council

On the 13th of February 2025, the previous administration all voted for the 25/26 budget – opposition members voted against it. The budget included proposals to:

- Increase the charges given to disabled people in Kent meaning they will pay more for support
- Further cut the community warden programme meaning residents are less supported in communities
- Cut family hub services at Millmead and Seashells Children's centres and only offer £27k of support reducing the provision in Sheppey and Thanet
- Increase the Kent 16+ Travel Saver above inflation and continue to charge for post 16 SEN Home to school transport which will create barriers to access education for this cohort.

All these decisions negatively impact the most vulnerable people in Kent.

Can the Leader say whether their Administration will reverse these decisions made by the previous conservative administration and develop a new budget?

Answer

Well, speaking about negatively impacting the most vulnerable people in Kent, I would argue that it's my friend opposite's Government that knows all about that with their sudden cancellation of the Winter Fuel Allowance just before last Christmas!

The previous administration had four years to work out their Budget, and Opposition Members had the same time to come up with alternatives. We have been in power for just a few weeks. We are still working our way through understanding the current Budget. We do not believe that it currently reflects all of our priorities and there are efficiencies to be made. That's why I'm creating a Department for Local Government Efficiency.

That work will take time. And we will not be making any knee-jerk financial decisions. We realise, for example, that for all of the areas identified in Mr Brady's question, we would need to understand where the balancing savings were going to come from.

So, we will develop our new budget strategy, but this will be primarily for 2026/27. We may make some relatively small changes to this year's Budget, where we can. If so, we will present this to a subsequent County Council meeting. Meanwhile, we look forward to working with all political Groups to deliver the best possible services, at the least cost, to all Kent residents.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 22 May 2025

Question by Mr Stuart Heaver to the Leader of Kent County Council

Residents in my division repeatedly raise the issue of marine pollution as the major threat to their local environment, public health and the coastal economy. There are a range of issues contributing to marine pollution – such as the 6,300 sewage discharges last year (for the Environment Agency to manage) and KCC responsibility areas such as drainage issues and development activity. The negative economic impact undermines the Economic Development investment made by the Council in various coastal areas. Marine pollution threatens the future of Kent's magnificent 350 miles of coastline. Many parents in my division tell me they no longer allow their children to swim in local bathing waters and one fisherman told me recently that the local Dover Sole fishery is almost completely depleted.

Can the Administration explain what they are will do to prioritise tackling marine pollution within the Kent Environment Strategy and how they will work with key partners to deliver improvements for the residents of Kent?

Answer

Whilst KCC is committed to improving the marine environment, as already mentioned in the question, the responsibility of regulation, enforcement and monitoring of water quality remains with the Environment Agency. However, concerns about the impact of sewage discharges and other pollution events on our coastal and marine waters are shared by the authority.

KCC, through its role as responsible authority in the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, has spent the last 12 months working with a huge range of stakeholders in order to understand the nature recovery priorities for the county and develop a comprehensive strategy for a better, bigger, and more joined up natural environment. Water quality, and its impact on marine life and the economies and activities that rely on this, were a concern that was regularly raised during the work.

As the wider issue of water quality is a regulatory matter, it is not something within the scope of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy to address. However, where poor water quality is impacting coastal habitats and species, measures have been identified to minimise, mitigate and reverse the impacts on coastal habitats and species. The more far-reaching impacts of water quality on the wider marine environment does not fall within the remit of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

However, KCC is in the process of developing a framework and strategy for joint action that will take advantage of the strong partnerships developed with coastal and marine stakeholders to tackle this and other challenges facing our marine environment. The strategy, known as Plan Sea, will look to fill the gap left by the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and ensure that our marine environment receives the same attention as our land-based habitats, and benefits from the same collaborative and joined-up approach to

delivery that the Local Nature Recovery Strategy supports. The draft of Plan Sea is scheduled to be ready by Spring 2026.

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Thursday 22 May 2025

Question by Richard Streatfeild to the Leader of Kent County Council

Sevenoaks Town has gone some way to improving road safety through the use of targeted 20mph areas. So far it has brought an average saving of £161 per resident in car insurance premiums and a projected £70,000 reduction in costs to the public purse per year in serious accidents.

Does the Leader support 20 mph 300m around schools?

Answer

Kent County Council (KCC) does not have a “one size fits all” policy for 20mph zones. Instead, we use the Department for Transport Circular 01/2013 ‘Setting Local Speed Limits’ as a guide. We established this approach in 2013, and it was last reviewed in 2019 at the Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee. We adopt a targeted approach to implementing 20mph speed limit schemes, focusing on areas where there is clear evidence of safety benefits and community support.

KCC evaluates the feasibility of 20mph zones based on several factors:

- Existing Traffic Speeds: Areas where average speeds are already close to 20mph are more likely to be considered suitable.
- Road Design: New housing developments are encouraged to incorporate self-enforcing road designs that naturally limit speeds to 20mph, reducing the need for additional signage or enforcement.
- Community Support: Public backing is essential. Schemes generally only proceed following consultations that demonstrate local approval.

KCC also considers the economic aspects of implementing 20mph zones. While such schemes can be relatively low-cost, enforcement remains a challenge. We often rely on self-enforcing designs and community initiatives like Community Speedwatch to monitor compliance.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 22 May 2025

Question by Stuart Jeffery to the Leader of Kent County Council

Given that Kent's reception centres for young asylum seekers lost vulnerable children more than 160 times between 2022 and 2024 and given that Reform's election leaflets criticised the provision of driving tests for refugee care leavers but failed to criticise the same provision for British born care leavers, can the new Leader of the Council tell us how the new administration will prioritise improvements, conditions and support for all these vulnerable children while meeting the requirements of the Equalities Act, i.e. improvements delivered in an equitable and non-discriminatory way?

Answer

Whilst KCC experienced 177 missing episodes of UAS children between 2022 and 2024, the number of episodes per year has fallen substantially since 2023. Almost a third lasted less than 1 day and most episodes are now closed with the child safely located. As a proportion of all children in KCC, KCC experienced the lowest levels of missing activity for UASC compared to national rates of UASC missing.

As far as the free driving lessons are concerned, the law currently states that ALL care leavers in Kent, regardless of their origin, must be treated equally.

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Question by Paul Stepto to the Leader of Kent County Council

Would the Leader briefly describe the internal and external audit processes that are in place for the Council, and provide the dates and costs of the most recent audits?

Answer

The County Council's external auditors are Grant Thornton. The organisation responsible for appointing external auditors to local government is called Public Sector Audit Appointments. The external auditors are responsible for providing assurance that the Council's annual accounts present a true and fair view of the council's financial position. They are also responsible for conducting a Value For Money assessment as part of their annual audit. This is designed to ensure that local authorities make proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in their resource use. For the last audited accounts (which were 2023/24) there was a basic fee of £447,000 for external audit services, with a further £15,000 payable in respect of other services provided (such as the Teachers' Pensions end of year certificate). The external auditors are starting their preparatory work for 2024/25 right now.

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Thursday 22 May 2025

Question by John Moreland to the Leader of Kent County Council

In Tunbridge Wells West there is a village, Ashurst, which had its only bus service cut, forcing parents to drive their children to school and lose valuable working hours.

Please can the Executive confirm that the BSIP funding due to be received in Summer will be used to reestablish and promote bus routes between rural villages and larger towns?

Answer

The BSIP, due to be received in June, is already committed to maintaining a significant number of services across Kent; many supporting a school route, supporting the cost of the Kent Travel Saver for 25/26 and funding a small number of service improvement initiatives in line with the published programme agreed with partners and the Department for Transport.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 22 May 2025

Question by Tim Prater to the Leader of Kent County Council

The Folkestone Road of Remembrance is a key link between the harbour and main town of Folkestone, and a key part of our proud World War heritage. Its closure following a landslip has now lasted over 18 months and has been disruptive to residents and businesses. It's clear due to lack of activity of site that it will not be opened soon, and the ongoing closure through this summer's Folkestone Triennial is disappointing in the extreme.

As the road is a Kent Highways responsibility, can the Council confirm the timetable for the required remedial works to re-open the Road of Remembrance, including an expected start date of works and re-opening date?

Answer

On 27 January 2024, a landslip occurred on private land north of the Road of Remembrance, blocking the road with trees and soil. KCC immediately closed the road on safety grounds and to protect the public from future landslips before commencing removal of the trees and soil.

Since then, geotechnical investigations, ecological assessments, geospatial mapping, and an unexploded ordnance survey have been conducted to support the design of a permanent solution. Progress on this work has been interrupted by further landslips and although the design and planning of such a major engineering scheme typically take several years, this work is largely complete.

Technical approvals and costing are underway in anticipation of securing of a specialist contractor to undertake the remedial work. As such, it is not yet possible to commit to a start date for the stabilisation work or to confirm when the road will reopen.

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Question rejected by Chairman

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Question by Antony Hook to the Leader of Kent County Council

There are now 22 locations in Kent where air quality is so poor it is legally required to be monitored and there are many other locations where air quality is a concern to local people. Air pollution is estimated to cause 40,000 early deaths per year in the UK and costs the economy £20 billion.

Does the Leader agree that every person in Kent deserves to breathe clean air and will the new administration commit to take new action to improve air quality, whether that be KCC acting itself or do so in concert with other councils and agencies?

Answer

There is strong evidence associating air pollution with adverse health effects including development of coronary heart disease, stroke, respiratory disease, lung cancer and exacerbation of asthma (Public Health England, 2019).

Through the Environment Act (1995 and 2021) as a County Council we are required to proactively engage as soon as an air quality issue is identified with District Councils. District Councils are responsible for assessing local air quality including Annual Status Reports (ASRs), designating Air Quality Management Areas (AQMA) and preparation of Air Quality Action Plans (AQAP).

The Environment Act 1995 requires us (KCC) to:

- Provide District Councils with proposals for particular measures we will take to contribute to the achievement and maintenance of Air Quality Objectives, including a date by which each measure will be carried out.
- Deliver the actions we are responsible for as set out in the Air Quality Action Plans, to the timescales defined
- Provide assistances to the District Council to coordinate action across neighbouring local authorities and with other public bodies

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Question by Mark Hood to the Leader of Kent County Council

The council has been very successful in attracting external funding for renewable energy infrastructure thanks to the hard work of officers, notably for our Bowerhouse2 and Kings Hill solar farms which provide the energy for every streetlight in Kent and they deliver funding for other services.

Does the new administration agree that the council should continue to ask officers to bid for additional funding for renewable energy projects as appropriate where it makes economic sense for the council and not allow political dogma to stand in the way of delivering further economic benefit for our council tax payers?

Answer

The two KCC-owned solar farms, which were funded with over £16m of grant funding through the Public Sector Decarbonisation fund are examples of how environmental benefit is being driven through economically sound projects with the result delivering significant benefit to both KCC and Kent residents.

Kings Hill solar farm generates enough electricity to power 750 homes as well as an annual net revenue for the Council of c£135,000. The Kings Hill site was a previously disused pig farm with significant land contamination that not only provides clean energy supply but also significant biodiversity improvement.

The site provided jobs and skills development to the local community during its construction and continues to do so through its ongoing management.

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Question by Geoffrey Samme to the Leader of Kent County Council

The Leader has promised to fix the potholes. In 2021 there were £600million of road maintenance issues in 2025 the figure is £950million. Where is the money coming from to be able to fix Kent's roads? In answering the question could the Leader outline which non statutory services she will cut first?

Answer

As I think I've made clear, I will not be committing myself to any cuts to services at this stage. My team is already looking at new ways in which to bring in extra revenue which could be ringfenced to fix our potholes. The state of our roads is a very old problem which we are exploring new ways to fix.

As KCC's Highways Asset Management Plan for 2021/22-2025/26 has set out Kent's local road (and other highways assets') deterioration is the symptom of long-term underfunding of highway maintenance across the country for many years.

The 2025 Annual Local Authority Road Maintenance (ALARM) Survey Report estimated that it would take a one-time investment of £16.81bn to clear the backlog of road maintenance across England and Wales – and that it would take 12 years to complete.

Our 2024/25 estimate of the backlog of road maintenance in Kent is £625m, and for all highway maintenance is over £1bn.

Over the last five years, the level of highway capital budget has remained static at approximately £65m. This has comprised of around £40m in grant funding from the DfT, supplemented by £25m of KCC's borrowing. It should be noted that these funding sources are for the maintenance of all highway assets, not just roads.

This financial year, KCC received the Local Highways Maintenance grant, which is a one-off award of £14.2m. However, 25% of this £14.2m has been held back by central government until KCC demonstrates its delivery of highways maintenance/pothole delivery at which point the remainder of the funding will be released.

The Government has yet to announce funding levels beyond 2025/26.

The majority of our spend on road maintenance is on planned works to prevent potholes occurring in the first place. This includes £25m on major resurfacing and £10m on road surface preservation. We also carry out scheduled safety inspections and ad-hoc safety inspection in response to reports from the public.

The additional £14.2m of government funding this financial year presents an immediate opportunity.

Therefore, it is intended that this funding will be spent on a range of activities, from small hand-laid repairs through to medium- to large-scale preventative patching, to small/medium size machine-laid resurfacing.

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Question by Alex Ricketts to the Leader of Kent County Council

During the election, Reform promised to make sure the bins were collected once a week. Is the cabinet member aware that bin collection is not a responsibility of this council but of the two Kent district councils who still collect once a week cost the Kent taxpayer £11 million. What would be the cost of disposal of once a week collection across Kent to taxpayers in Kent?

Answer

Yes, thank you, I am aware that bin collection does not fall under our remit here at KCC.

This function is carried out by the waste collection authorities at district level, policies and decisions over the frequency of these collections, is not made by KCC.

The £11m quoted, is based on a waste composition analysis, estimating savings based on whether every item was recycled within residual waste bins across the county. This figure is a county wide estimate, and not just based on those who have weekly waste collections.

We do not have existing data, regarding the cost of waste disposal if waste collections were carried out throughout Kent weekly. However, anecdotally following a reduction of kerbside residual collections from weekly to fortnightly by one district in 2017, the residual waste collected at kerbside reduced by 22%, which was a reduction of over 3,600 tonnes, and if considering the cost of processing residual waste in isolation, this resulted a saving of over £430,000 per year.

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Thursday 22 May 2025

Question by Colin Sefton to the Leader of Kent County Council

Local tips (HWRCS) are a KCC service much valued by local residents. The previous administration proposed closing four tips but rightly withdrew this proposal after challenge from the opposition groups and others

Can the Leader reassure residents that all tips will be protected, and none will face closure or reduction in service under this administration?

Answer

There is currently no policy regarding the closure of HWRCs

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