

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

CABINET

MINUTES of a meeting of the Cabinet held in the Council Chamber on Thursday, 8 January 2026.

PRESENT: Mr B Collins, Mrs B Fordham, Mr M Fraser Moat, Ms L Kemkaran, Mr P King, Mrs C Palmer, Mr P Webb, Mr D Wimble and Mr P Osborne

ALSO PRESENT: Mrs G Foster (Substitute for Miss D Morton)

IN ATTENDANCE: Dr A Ghosh (Director of Public Health), Mrs S Hammond (Corporate Director Adult Social Care and Health), Mrs A Beer (Chief Executive), Mr D Shipton (Head of Finance Policy, Planning and Strategy), Mr B Watts (Deputy Chief Executive), Mr M Scrivener (Head of Risk and Delivery Assurance), Mr M Wagner (Chief Analyst) and Georgina Little (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

120. Apologies (Item 1)

Apologies were received from Miss Morton. Mrs Foster, Deputy Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Public Health was in attendance to provide an update on the portfolio.

121. Declarations of Interest by Members in items on the agenda (Item 2)

No declarations of interest were received.

122. Minutes of the Meeting held on 19 November 2025 (Item 3)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 19 November 2025 were a correct record and that they be signed by the Chair

123. Cabinet Member Updates (Item 4)

1. Mrs Georgia Foster (Deputy Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Public Health) provided an update on the following:

- (a) The annual Kent Adult Social Care and Health Awards took place at the beginning of December. The event recognised individuals for their outstanding contributions across adult social care, public health, commissioning, and frontline services. It provided an opportunity to acknowledge staff dedication, boost morale, and express thanks, marking the start of the festive season.

- (b) Miss Morton, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Public Health attended a launch event at the House of Commons for an Assisted Technology Programme aimed at enhancing the skills and competencies of the 21st-century workforce. The sector had previously faced challenges due to limited investment in skills and professional development. The new digital skills project sought to train and upskill staff across adult social care, supporting people to remain in their own homes, reducing hospital admissions, and ensuring the workforce was future-proof.
- (c) Miss Morton, together with Deputy Cabinet Members Mrs Foster and Mr Mulvihill, visited Kenwood Trust in Maidstone, Kent's leading alcohol and drug residential rehabilitation facility. The visit provided valuable insight into the vital work being delivered to support recovery and long-term wellbeing, and there was a commitment to ensure that Kent residents were referred to the service where appropriate.
- (d) The Kent and Medway Suicide and Self-Harm Prevention Conference took place on 27 November, which was opened by Mr Mulville. The event was emotional and thought-provoking and highlighted the wide range of support available across the system. Reference was also made to Blue Monday, falling on 19 January, which the Samaritans referred to as Brew Monday to promote prevention and conversation rather than a narrative of doom or panic. This approach encouraged colleagues to take time for a chat over a cup of tea, recognising the value of simple connections.
- (e) January was also highlighted as a time when many people choose to make lifestyle changes. Kent's One You service offered a range of resources and apps, including Couch to 5K, NHS Drink Free Days, a Quit Smoking app, and support and advice to assist individuals on their wellbeing journey.
- (f) Kent and Medway Mental Health NHS Trust recently launched the 2025 Dementia Friendly Kent Awards (its eighth year). Each year, exceptional individuals and organisations were recognised for going above and beyond to ensure people living with dementia felt valued and supported. Nominations were encouraged for anyone considered deserving of the award.
- (g) Cervical Cancer Prevention Week, running from 19 to 25 January, was highlighted. Members were asked to remind female family members and residents to book and attend their cervical screening appointments.
- (h) Miss Morton, together with Mrs Foster and Mr Mulvihill recently met Adam Doyle, the new Chief Executive of the Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board. He was welcomed to his new role and brought a fresh perspective and strong energy to NHS reform, with a clear three-pronged focus: moving care out of hospitals and into communities, embracing digital technology, and shifting the system from treatment to prevention.

1.1 Further to questions and comments from Members the discussion included the following:

- (a) In response to queries raised regarding the use of technology within the care sector for vulnerable residents and whether anything was being done around

AI, noting its cost-effectiveness. Mrs Foster confirmed that several initiatives were underway, including the rollout of Magic Notes to 864 staff since September. Magic Notes was an AI-powered platform that allowed Social Workers to maintain eye contact with residents while the system transcribed and wrote reports. This approach saved time, improved the quality of care, reduced administrative burdens, and delivered cost efficiencies.

- (b) A question was raised regarding patients being discharged from Medway Hospital without care packages in place and whether there was any update on this issue. Mrs Foster explained that the Short-Term Pathways Team in Adult Social Care provided assistance to residents leaving hospital, working closely with the Acute Trust and community health providers to ensure individuals had the right health and social care support on discharge, ideally in their own homes. The process had been improved as a key priority, and plans were in place to implement an Integrated Transfer of Care Hub. This hub would involve a dedicated team working with the Acute Trust to provide professional decision-making and planning for complex discharges. Members were asked to share any examples where this had not occurred so that learning could be applied and appropriate assessments ensured.

2. Mr Paul Webb (Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services) provided an update on the following:

- (a) The Trading Standards Department had a particularly busy period over Christmas, which included running a campaign across multiple channels, including a new TikTok account. The campaign focused on heating hazards, electrical gifts, and counterfeit toys and had already achieved strong engagement. Impact statistics were expected later in the year.
- (b) Trading Standards officers had also supported the BBC Scam Safe Week by attending a roadshow at Ditton Community Centre, where they offered advice and gave interviews for broadcast.
- (c) Trading Standards secured convictions against three individuals for offences related to solar energy sales. Two received suspended sentences and 240 hours of unpaid work, while the third was sentenced to three years' imprisonment and banned from being a company director for seven years
- (d) Dartford Borough Council's Environmental Health team had partnered with Trading Standards to provide formal advice to businesses under the statutory Primary Authority scheme. This initiative created a one-stop shop for food businesses seeking to expand beyond Kent's borders
- (e) Kent Scientific Services continued to provide food and feed testing nationwide and was supporting the National Food Crime Unit. Recent cases included supplements containing prescription drugs and illegal colourings in herbs and spices.
- (f) The Registration and Archive Services team continued to operate throughout the holiday period, supported by out-of-hours duty managers and qualified staff officers providing 24/7 coverage. Over Christmas, the team responded to

an urgent end-of-life marriage request, ensuring all arrangements were completed so the couple could marry late in the day, with the ceremony concluded by 10:30 pm on Christmas Eve. Despite the sad circumstances, the team demonstrated diligence and commitment in delivering this important moment.

- (g) Community Wardens supported seasonal initiatives such as warm hubs, which extended beyond libraries into community spaces. A new pilot in Gravesend targeted young people to reduce anti-social behaviour and poor choices, addressing a key concern for residents. Stagecoach offered free bus travel to all uniformed KCC wardens, enabling engagement with the public on buses. In one recent case, wardens accompanied an elderly lady who was anxious about travelling alone, helping her gain confidence to go out independently, which significantly improved her quality of life. The Cabinet Member expressed his thanks to the team.
- (h) An update was provided on the Polhill site, the smallest Gypsy and Romany Traveller site in West Kent and Sevenoaks. The project was scheduled to conclude by the end of January, generating a small capital receipt for KCC.
- (i) The John Downton Awards celebrated their 25th and final year, receiving 453 entries from 36 schools, including six SEN schools for the first time. The judging panel, chaired by Clare Wallace, showcased the artwork online, with awards evenings scheduled for mid-February at County Hall. Members were invited to attend and meet the young artists, their families, and teachers.
- (j) The reopening of the Dover Discovery Centre was attended and celebrated by the Leader, Ms Kemkaran, alongside the Cabinet Member, Mr Webb; Deputy Leader, Mr Collins; Deputy Cabinet Member, Mrs Lawes; and Cabinet Member for Environment, Coastal Regeneration and Special Projects, Mr Paul King. The centre reopened following major improvements and now featured a new library, adult education centre, family centre, the Good Day programme, and additional space for the District Council Museum. The venue was described as vibrant and active, with basement ruins accessible to the public.
- (k) January marked the start of the National Year of Reading. With reading enjoyment in the UK declining sharply, Kent Libraries and Education joined forces to promote reading for all ages. The National Literacy Trust's 2025 survey indicated that only one in three children enjoyed reading in their free time, and just one in five read daily. Internationally, England lagged behind, with only 29% of pupils aged nine to ten reporting that they liked reading, compared to a global average of 46%. This decline continued into adulthood. Kent County Council was committed to reconnecting people with the joys and benefits of reading, and the Cabinet Member announced plans to participate by reading in one of the county's libraries, with details to be confirmed.
- (l) Kent Archives was highlighted twice by the National Archives in 2025. Notably, the *Hope: Weaving Communities Together* exhibition, led by Elaine Foster-Gandey, promoted creativity and inclusion. In addition, the Dover Castle folio was added to the collection. The valuable historical record included a register of authorisation and ordinance, munitions and field carriages supplied to Dover

Castle, and expenditure authorised by the Privy Seal letters dated 4 October 1625.

- (m) The Playground Festival would take place in May 2026. This ten-day celebration for babies, young children, and families would feature over 150 events across more than 20 venues in Kent, including performances, workshops, and creative installations. International artists from six countries were confirmed to participate, promising a vibrant and diverse experience. The full programme was scheduled for release in early 2026. The festival was funded by the Arts Council.
- (n) The Coroner Service welcomed the High Sheriff of Kent to Oakwood House in Maidstone to view the facility dedicated to coronial judicial functions in Kent and Medway.

2.1 Further to questions and comments from Members the discussion included the following:

- (a) A question was asked about the administration's current plans for libraries in Kent. It was explained that all libraries across Kent were being reviewed, with plans to co-locate many Family Hubs within library buildings. Several projects were nearing completion. Works at Stanhope were completed last year; Temple Hill and Cranbrook were expected to finish in January; Sittingbourne was scheduled for completion in February; and works were due to start at Queenborough and Cliftonville libraries in February. The aim was to expand the library network and integrate family hubs and potentially Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Units within these facilities.
- (b) In response to queries raised regarding the funding cuts to Seashells on the Isle of Sheppey and what reassurances could be offered along with potential funding options, Mr Webb noted that the Isle of Sheppey and Swale were among the most deprived areas in the county and nationally. However, whilst full details could not yet be provided, an announcement regarding Seashells was anticipated in the near future.
- (c) It was noted that the previous administration reduced Community Warden numbers from 70 to 35. In response to the current administration plans concerning this service, it was explained that numbers had increased by two, with additional funding from parish councils and plans were underway to seek corporate sponsorship to support further expansion. Stagecoach had offered free bus travel for wardens, enabling greater public engagement. Members were advised that further expansion was being explored.

3. Mr Paul King (Cabinet Member for Environment, Coastal Regeneration and Special Projects) provided an update on the following:

- (a) The impact of the September international rail event continued, with Cabinet Members attending Ashford Borough Council's 'Bring Back the Magic' event. Support was expressed for efforts to restore international rail services stopping in Kent. The APBG HS1 subgroup had established a working group with stakeholders and held its first meeting to develop proposals for competition on

HS1. It was noted that introducing competition was considered the most likely way to achieve international rail stops in Kent.

- (b) Significant progress was reported on plans to bring new nuclear energy to Dungeness. Mr King, Mr Wimble, (Cabinet Member for Economic development and Special Projects) KCC officers, and various stakeholders held meetings in Westminster and at Sessions House with key organisations, including the senior team from GB Nuclear and international SMR providers.
- (c) The integration of larger and start-up loan processes earlier in the year improved the efficiency of the Kent and Medway Business Fund. To date, 31 loans valued at £3.1 million had been issued, including 10 approved in November and 5 in December across sectors such as Agri-Tech, food and drink, energy, digital, transport, and logistics.
- (d) The Skills Bootcamp continued to be successful. Since its launch in July, 220 learners had started, 62 completed, and 24 secured new jobs in sectors such as construction, social care and creative industries. The programme was funded by the Department for Education, and further funding was anticipated for 2026-27.
- (e) The Connect to Work programme, a government initiative delivered by KCC, supported disadvantaged groups such as ex-offenders, the long-term unemployed, and those with long-term health conditions to return to employment. The programme had been running for 12 months, with 55 recorded job starts to date, and further updates were expected as payroll data was finalised.
- (f) An update was provided on Brand Kent, the new in-house model replacing Locate in Kent and Visit Kent. Work was underway within the new team and a workshop had also been held, attended by Mr King and Deputy Cabinet Member, Mr Henderson, which demonstrated the teams proactive approach. Positive outcomes were anticipated from the initiative.
- (g) The No Use Empty (NUE) scheme continued to deliver positive outcomes. In November, the Cabinet Member visited a long-term derelict site in Folkestone, vacant for 11 years, which had been redeveloped with NUE's support. Two new buildings were constructed to meet the needs of people with learning disabilities, mental health needs, and other adult social care requirements, featuring wheelchair access, intercoms, and carer facilities. Services were provided by EHSL, and CareTech.
- (h) An update was provided on the Environment, Coastal Regeneration, and Special Projects portfolio. Priorities included maintaining high-quality services for Kent residents and businesses, expanding recycling and reuse opportunities at household waste recycling centres, supporting businesses in managing waste effectively, and enhancing services at Kent County Parks. The focus would be on efficiency and cost reduction, working with district and borough councils to reduce non-recyclable waste, ensuring contracts were effective, and creating opportunities to monetise Kent's natural environment. Other priorities included supporting rural and coastal communities, food security, investment in coastal regeneration through Kent's Plan C, tackling fly-

tipping and environmental crime, delivering the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, protecting historic and cultural assets, reducing flooding risk, investing in green spaces, and holding water companies to account on water quality.

3.1 Further to questions and comments from Members the discussion included the following:

- (a) The Leader thanked the Cabinet Member for referencing the September event at Ashford and Ebbsfleet, noting its success and emphasising the importance of maintaining pressure on Government to restore international rail services stopping in Kent. The Leader welcomed Ashford Borough Council's contribution and expressed hope for positive news soon. The Leader also highlighted the importance of getting people back into work and supporting farmers and food security, encouraging these to remain priorities within the new portfolio.
- (b) A question was asked about the success of the No Use Empty scheme and whether it was applied equally across boroughs and districts, as well as the existence of a national programme. In response, it was explained that some boroughs, such as Folkestone, Dover and Thanet, had engaged strongly with the scheme, while others had struggled. Work continued with local authorities to promote the benefits of NUE, including an upcoming visit to Herne Bay with Canterbury City Council. Nationally, Wales and Scotland operated similar schemes, but England did not. KCC, as an exemplar, had supported other areas and asked the lead officer to contact the Minister to explore a national approach, noting the scheme's low cost and significant regeneration benefits.

4. Mr David Wimble (Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Special projects) provided an update on the following:

- (a) The Kent and Medway Local Nature Recovery Strategy was launched at the end of November following 18 months of work across two administrations and input from over 1,000 stakeholders. The strategy set out a county-wide plan for protecting and restoring nature, designed to feed into local plans and link with biodiversity net gain funding to ensure delivery on the ground.
- (b) At Sittingbourne Waste Transfer Station, the team designed and installed a new food waste bridge, significantly improving the handling process. The innovation made operations faster, cleaner, and virtually eliminated spillage, delivering cost savings and attracting interest from other operator.
- (c) Progress was reported on Plan Tree, which secured additional funding to accelerate planting that boosted biodiversity using disease-resistant stock, including Dutch Elm Disease-resistant elms supported by Elm Heritage Kent. At Swalecliffe, over 1,500 whips were planted using the Miyawaki method to create dense, fast-growing mini woodlands. Volunteers, including scouts, students, and local tree wardens, played a key role, demonstrating strong collaboration with community groups.

- (d) The Feed Your Foodie campaign continued to encourage food waste recycling, reducing costs and cutting general waste. Small behavioural changes across households were noted as having a significant county-wide impact and delivering savings.
- (e) The Pilgrims Hospice Christmas tree recycling initiative provided a practical, popular, and environmentally friendly solution that also raised significant funds for the hospice.
- (f) Mr Wimble recorded thanks to Matt Smyth, Helen Schulver, and the Environment team for their support throughout the portfolio tenure. It was noted that certain aspects of the role would be missed, but that exciting projects were underway within his new role as the Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Special projects. He further outlined priorities for the Special Projects portfolio, with focus on practical policies and clear delivery. Three major initiatives were highlighted:
- Environmental Access Charge – a proposal to develop a framework for an environmental tax on foreign vehicles entering Kent, aimed at fairness, enforceability, and income generation, to support transport resilience and infrastructure.
 - Energy Policy – to support credible bids for new nuclear in Kent while opposing solar developments on prime agricultural land, prioritising brownfield sites and rooftops.
 - Brand Kent – to create a joined-up vision for business and tourism to market Kent as a place to live, work, and visit, streamlining systems to support business growth and the visitor economy.

4.1 Further to questions and comments from Members the discussion included the following:

- (a) A question was asked about progress on introducing an environmental tax on foreign lorries. In response, it was explained that work had been ongoing for over three years, including engagement with haulage companies and review of European models, with the Swiss system identified as the most practical. It was noted that Kent County Council could not implement the scheme alone and would need to work with National Highways and government, as trunk roads were nationally managed. While some revenue would go to central government, the proposal could still generate significant income, with estimates based on Swiss charges of £35 per lorry per day. The initiative aimed to ensure fairness, reduce road damage, and address environmental impacts, and further work was planned to make the scheme practical and enforceable.
- (b) The success of reuse shops was praised, however, confirmation was sought as to whether Sittingbourne would have one. In response, it was explained that reuse shops had launched at New Romney and Allington and were operating successfully. The ambition was to roll out three or four additional sites over the next 12 months where space allowed. It was noted that donations could be made without appointments, and items such as bikes were refurbished through partnerships with organisations including HMP Elmley, supporting the circular economy and reducing waste. Members were advised that plans for Sittingbourne were being explored.

5. Mrs Beverley Fordham (Cabinet Member for Education and Skills) provided an update on the following:

- (a) Approval was granted by the DfE for the two special educational needs schools, which were to be situated in Swanley and Whitstable. This outcome was long-awaited and warmly welcomed despite the delay.
- (b) Over the past three months, work had focused primarily on statutory matters, particularly relating to special educational needs. Although the government paper was expected in the spring, the team had an indication of its direction and had been working closely with schools to facilitate and support them in the anticipated transition. The rollout of the new provision was anticipated to begin shortly, with plans to publish details to show where provision would be available. This was expected to benefit children and families requiring interim support, those not ready for mainstream education immediately and not complex enough for specialist schools.
- (c) School visits had taken place, including Dartford Grammar School for Boys, which had extended its admissions to accommodate more young people from the Dartford area, a positive development for Kent. However, it was noted that the government would cease funding the International Baccalaureate from 2026/27, removing the 20% additional funding for that curriculum. This would require sixth forms, including Dartford Grammar, to review their future provision for 2026 - 28. Lobbying efforts were already underway, and further support was planned to seek either a delay or mitigation of the impact on state-maintained schools, as the private sector would continue to offer the curriculum. Mrs Fordham confirmed that KCC's support in lobbying the government further would be undertaken.
- (d) Visits had been made to several primary schools, including West Hill and Oakfield Primary Schools in Dartford, which were part of an inclusive Trust providing strong support for children requiring additional help. Further visits had included Dymchurch Primary School and Lydd Primary School, where positive observations had been made regarding pupil behaviour and handwriting standards. Mrs Fordham was also invited to attend the nativity play which was thoroughly enjoyed. The visits were valuable, and it was confirmed that a further 15 to 20 school visits had been scheduled up to March, with updates to follow.
- (e) The Kent Commissioning Plan had been released, outlining school capacity across Kent. The work had been completed in the background, and meetings had been held with district leaders and their planning teams to review the plan and ensure clarity. Feedback had been gathered on emerging issues, and the process had provided an excellent opportunity to understand how different councils approached housing growth strategies and future planning. The plan had remained publicly accessible online, allowing councillors and members of the public to view school capacity and the methodology used by KCC.
- (f) Attendance had taken place at several Schools Funding Forum meetings, where sector representatives had reviewed budgeting, special educational

needs funding, and mainstream inclusion support. Discussions had included approaches such as top slicing, which had already been considered, and the early development of the 'community of schools' model. This model aimed to encourage schools to collaborate, assess community needs, and review practices, with KCC facilitating the process and considering budget and funding implications. Work had continued pending the release of the government white paper, which would determine the final funding arrangements.

- (g) The post-16 sector (16 -18 year olds) had been highlighted as a critical area, with concerns that failure to address issues over the coming years could result in more young people becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training). At the time, there had been no dedicated funding for NEETs, and previous providers offering support had largely ceased operations due to lack of resources. Remaining providers had continued to request funding, but none had been allocated. Two national initiatives had been identified: the Youth Transformation Fund, a pilot for high-deprivation areas, and the Youth Guaranteed Trailblazer across eight regions. Kent had not been included in either scheme. Plans had been made to review the reasons for exclusion and to lobby government, as it was considered that Kent met the criteria and its young people should not receive less support than those in other areas.
- (h) Despite the challenges, significant work had been underway within schools, the sixth form sector, and other providers through an initiative called Pathways for All, which focused on 16-plus pathways. This initiative had brought together the Kent sector and KCC to develop a range of options for young people who did not meet mainstream education standards or where college and sixth form capacity was limited. The work had aimed to ensure sufficient places, support for vulnerable children including those with SEND, and improved outcomes to prevent long-term negative impacts such as unemployment and dependency on benefits. Early intervention was essential, and there was a strong starting point.

5.1 Further to questions and comments from Members the discussion included the following:

- (a) The Leader offered assistance in lobbying the government for youth schemes, emphasising the importance of targeting the 16–18 age group. It was also suggested that lobbying should include the continuation of funding for the International Baccalaureate in state schools, as it provided a valuable alternative pathway for pupils. The Leader also expressed support for the creation of 220 additional places in special educational needs schools, noting that this was an excellent development.
- (b) A question had been raised regarding recent government changes to the school curriculum, including the removal of funding for the International Baccalaureate, and whether Dartford Grammar School for Boys had raised this issue during the visit. It was confirmed that the school had raised the matter, noting that its entire sixth form curriculum was based on the International Baccalaureate, which required additional resources supported by a 20% funding uplift. The removal of this funding was expected to impact state schools significantly, while the private sector would continue

to offer the curriculum. It was confirmed that lobbying efforts would be undertaken to address this issue.

- (c) With regard to the Kent Commissioning Plan for Education, clarification was sought on how KCC made decisions on education infrastructure to support housing growth and how it responded to unexpected large developments. It was explained that decisions had been based on evidence including birth rates, NHS registration data, migration patterns, existing school capacity, parental choice trends, and district housing plans. New developments could only be factored into the Kent Commissioning Plan once planning approval had been granted. The plan was updated annually and developed in collaboration with district councils to avoid surprises and ensure sustainability.
- (d) Queries were raised in relation to KCC's responsibilities in supporting NEET young people and the initiatives available, particularly in rural and coastal areas where NEET levels were high. Mrs Fordham clarified that KCC were responsible for ensuring suitable provision for 16 -18 year olds and safeguarding vulnerable young people, including those with SEND. While KCC had not directly commissioned provision (except for SEND), it had worked with providers and developed 16+ pathways to improve engagement. Plans had also included closer collaboration with other departments to promote skills and training, ensuring a more joined-up approach to support young people and reduce long-term risks of unemployment.
- (e) In response to what actions had been taken by the Cabinet Member since her appointment to address reduced school places and improving placement outcomes on the Isle of Sheppey, it was confirmed that meetings had been held with residents to understand concerns, and issues with the admissions process had been reviewed. Attempts had been made to secure short-term solutions, including contacting the local MP and writing to the Minister for Education to seek intervention on oversubscription criteria, though legal restrictions had prevented prioritisation by postcode. Subsequent actions had included improving the admissions website, providing councillor training, and delivering additional support to parents through school communications and visits. Work had continued with schools on and around the island to explore options for increasing capacity ahead of September 2025.
- (f) A question was raised regarding improvements or initiatives within the EHCP process. It was confirmed that, while the 12-month rolling completion rate had remained above the national average, a slight dip had occurred due to Educational Psychologist (EP) shortages. Officers had implemented the Synergy SEND Proof of Concept Project, which reviewed the 0 - 6 week process to improve efficiency. A pilot conducted in August had achieved a 51% time saving, which enabled resources to focus on better outcomes for families and children. This approach had been rolled out across Kent by Christmas, and work had commenced on improving the 6 - 20 week process. Future plans included exploring investment in technology, software, and AI to further enhance SEND processes

6. Mrs Christine Palmer (Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services) provided an update on the following:

- (a) The inaugural meeting of the new KCC Youth Council was held on Saturday, 22 November 2025. Approximately 140 young people had attended and received guidance on their roles and the process for applying for leadership positions. Elections for key roles were scheduled for February. The meeting had been noted as highly engaging, with strong enthusiasm and ambition among attendees.
- (b) Mrs Palmer attended the Risk Outside Home Conference on 3 December in Maidstone, presented by Michelle McManus of Manchester Metropolitan University. The event had brought together experts and practitioners to explore research, practice tools, and innovative approaches to tackling child exploitation and safeguarding outside the home. The conference had included keynote sessions, interactive workshops, and networking opportunities, and had highlighted multi-agency strategies aimed at improving safeguarding nationally. The event was highly valuable for informing future initiatives in Kent.
- (c) A meeting had been held with Ingrid Crisan, Director of Operational Integrated Children's Services on the Start for Life initiative, to review progress. It was reported that plans for implementation had been finalised and the project was progressing well. Appreciation had been expressed to the team for their significant efforts in securing grant funding and coordinating delivery arrangements.
- (d) On 8 December, Mrs Palmer and Mrs Williams (Deputy Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services) visited a commissioned charity supporting young carers. The session involved children aged 8 -11 participating in an art workshop. The visit had highlighted the challenges faced by young carers, including low self-esteem, and reinforced the importance of children's services in building confidence and resilience. The experience had been described as inspiring and a reminder of the value of ongoing support for vulnerable children.
- (e) It was confirmed that two properties had been purchased to bring children's homes back in-house. Planning permission had been approved, and renovation work was expected to commence shortly, with the aim of opening the homes as soon as possible.
- (f) During December, residents had contacted the member out of hours regarding two care leavers in difficulty. Upon notifying officers within the care leavers team, both cases had been resolved within hours. Thanks were expressed to the social work teams and front-line staff for their swift and effective response.

6.1 Further to questions and comments from Members the discussion included the following:

- (a) In response to what benefits would be offered to families in Kent from the Best Start in Life grant, Mrs Palmer explained that the initiative had focused on

children aged 0 - 5, aiming to identify developmental milestones early and provide timely support for both children and families. Early intervention for issues such as physical delays or speech difficulties had been emphasised as critical to improving long-term outcomes. The initiative also facilitated quicker assessments and, where necessary, the implementation of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), ensuring significant benefits for children as they progressed through their education.

- (b) Reasons were sought regarding the plans to bring children's homes in house. Mrs Palmer advised that the decision to bring children's homes back under the remit of the County Council had been driven by the complex needs of certain looked-after children, including physical and behavioural challenges. Specialist external services had been extremely costly, and bringing provision in-house had aimed to improve monitoring and support while delivering greater cost efficiency. This approach had been considered an 'invest to save' strategy, ensuring children received the right care when needed while reducing long-term expenditure.
- (c) Thanks were expressed to both the Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services and the Cabinet member for Education and Skills on the significant work they continued to do. In response, it had been acknowledged that while both Cabinet Members worked hard, they were supported by highly skilled teams who provided guidance and expertise. The Leader had added thanks on behalf of the Cabinet to all involved, including Adult Social Care, noting that these portfolios carried some of the most emotionally demanding responsibilities.
- (d) A question was raised as to why the process of obtaining an EHCP for military families failed if the application was not completed before a parent received a new posting. It had been explained that the issue was under review. When a child from an armed forces family was partway through the EHCP process, a new posting could result in the family moving to another county, where the process often restarted from the beginning. This had occurred because existing assessments were not always transferable, possibly due to legislation or local policy differences. Some counties had managed this better than others, but practices varied widely. The matter had been identified as a significant challenge and was under review, with updates expected in due course. The Leader had agreed that this was an important area requiring attention and suggested exploring best practice from other regions to improve support for military families

7. Mr Peter Osborne (Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport) provided an update on the following:

- (a) Thanks was expressed to the gritting teams for their efforts during the recent cold weather. Teams worked mornings and evenings to grit roads, ensuring Kent's roads remained open and safe for drivers.
- (b) An update was provided on investment for bus infrastructure. Over £3 million in grants was being allocated for improved bus shelters for district and parish councils. Councils would match this funding, making bus waiting areas more comfortable and safer.

- (c) Dover's first fast-track electric bus fleet was scheduled for launch on 30 January. Provisional funding from the Department for Transport included over £48 million in capital and £42 million in revenue over the next three to four years, enabling significant enhancements to the Kent bus service network.
- (d) An update was provided on investment in the road network. The largest single contract awarded by KCC was signed last year; a 14 year agreement with Ringway, extendable by seven years, worth up to £2 billion. The contract was due to commence in May and was expected to deliver faster repairs, higher standards, and better value. In addition, £30 million was invested in the road surfacing programme last year, completing 160 major projects and refreshing over one million square metres of road. A further 10 sites were scheduled for treatment by March.
- (e) The Pothole repair programme had delivered strong results and would continue into 2026 with a Capital Highways Maintenance grant of £56 million, representing an additional £2 million compared to the previous year.
- (f) A total of £274 million was due to be invested in highways and drainage over the next four years. Since May, drainage teams had cleaned 65,000 gullies, and major flood-prevention projects were underway in Broadstairs and Dartford, with East Malling next in line. These measures not only continued to keep roads dry but also ensured the safety of road users, which remained the overriding objective.
- (g) A new pedestrian refuge has been installed on Bearsted's A20. This improvement was expected to slow traffic and make crossings safer for pedestrians.
- (h) The Safer Road Users team continued to make road safety engaging for Kent's youngest residents, with Kip the Bear who led preschool lessons. Over 4,000 children were expected to benefit from the initiative.
- (i) Mature driver courses were had also expanded, and road safety sessions were promoted nationally.
- (j) KCC had secured a multi-year funding settlement active travel (walking and cycling), totalling just over £1.6 million in revenue and £5.2 million in capital for 2026 and 2027.
- (k) The update concluded with recognition of staff achievements. The Recharges team, comprising just four members, recovered over £1 million in repair costs last year for KCC assets damaged in collisions. Kent Highways was shortlisted for a national award for most improved performance. Individual successes included Sharon Woodman-Clues securing a BTEC Level 4 Diploma and Manon Butler being shortlisted for a Women's Engineering Award. Additionally, Don Wills was commended for helping a young SEND learner master a tricycle and gain independence, highlighting the positive impact staff make beyond major projects. The Leader added congratulations to award winners and to the staff member who supported the learner, noting the importance and heartwarming nature of such efforts

7.1 Further to questions and comments from Members the discussion included the following:

- (a) Clarification was sought regarding KCC's role in the recent speed limit enforcement on Sheppey Bridge and the issuing of fines. It was confirmed that the road was managed by National Highways and KCC had no involvement. The speed limit had been in place for around 15 months, but enforcement was delayed due to non-functioning cameras. Police were expected to issue refunds following errors. Mr Osborne agreed to support an open letter to the responsible authority.
- (b) In response to how many potholes had been repaired compared to the previous year. It was reported that since May, 35,091 potholes had been filled, which was higher than the previous year's total. It was noted that the previous administration had repaired fewer potholes in 12 months than the current figure achieved in nine months.
- (c) Members asked about support from Folkestone & Hythe District Council towards costs for reopening the Road of Remembrance in Folkestone following a landslip. It was reported that discussions had taken place and the District Council had offered £40,000, significantly below the requested contribution of £1 to £1.5 million. Mr Osborne confirmed that efforts would continue to secure additional funding, noting that the two-year closure anniversary fell on 27 January.

8. Mr Matthew Fraser Moat (Cabinet Member for Local Government Efficiency) provided an update on the following:

- (a) An update was provided on the actions taken to date regarding the budget. It was noted that the current year's budget had been set by the previous administration and had significantly underestimated the actual costs and pressures associated with delivering statutory adult social care services, some of which had experienced double-digit inflation. The budget had also required £121m of savings and increased income to be delivered during the year. Forecasts indicated that approximately £100m would be achieved by year-end, with the remaining savings being reset into the next year's budget. Members were advised that, over the preceding six months, KCC had introduced a range of measures to ensure a more cost-conscious and value-for-money approach. These actions, outlined in the Quarter 2 monitoring report to the previous Cabinet, focused on delivering efficiencies while maintaining service provision. Measures included tighter procurement and contracting, market intervention, the introduction of caps and red lines, and clearer delineation of organisational responsibilities, all supported by strengthened financial management and enhanced oversight. It was reported that further efficiency savings had been identified across services to support delivery of a balanced budget for 2026-27. Mr Fraser-Moat placed on record his thanks to Cabinet Members and the officers whose hard work and commitment had enabled this progress. The Leader added her thanks to Cabinet Members for their efforts over the previous eight months in supporting the development of the draft budget and acknowledged that significant work remained.

- (b) The plan for the next 12 months included, oversight of the new Commercial Strategy, activity to increase revenue generation, and further efficiency savings within adult social care and children's services. A number of IT initiatives were also planned, alongside initial work to review functions such as finance and administration, treasury, and pensions. These areas were identified as the key priorities for the forthcoming period.
- (c) The KCC Supplier Day was scheduled to take place on 27 January at the Kent Event Centre in Maidstone. The event, which offered free admission, would serve as the formal launch of the Commercial Strategy to Kent suppliers. It was noted that proceedings would begin at 9.30am and include eight scheduled speakers, providing an opportunity for suppliers to learn how to do business with KCC. Full details had been published on the KCC website. Members were advised that, as of that morning, over 600 suppliers had registered to attend.

8.1 Further to questions and comments from Members the discussion included the following:

- (a) A question was raised as to how the Administration's decision to withdraw the Climate Emergency declaration had affected processes relating to jobs and contractors in Kent. In response, Mr Fraser-Moat advised that it was too early to assess the impact, as the most recent data pre-dated the Council meeting at which the decision had been taken. It was reported that, as at September, 63% of KCC's spend was with Kent-based suppliers, 23% with Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs), and 16% with Kent-based SMEs. These figures were considered a positive baseline, and performance would continue to be monitored over the coming months and years.
- (b) Mr Fraser-Moat responded to queries regarding the cultural changes required to support greater efficiencies, including the use of IT and AI, alongside the implementation of the new Commercial Strategy. He advised that work had begun by returning to core processes and making structural changes to enable procurement to operate more effectively. The decision to withdraw the Climate Emergency declaration, followed by the introduction of the new Commercial Strategy, had provided the foundation for this work. A "Kent First" approach had been introduced, whereby, in cases where contract bids were equal in value and all other factors, preference would be given to a Kent-based supplier. Within KCC, changes had been made to decision-making flowcharts to simplify processes, and opportunities for automation and the potential use of AI were being explored. Adjustments to reporting lines had also been implemented, and the impact of these changes would continue to be monitored, with further developments expected over the next 12 months.

9. Mr Brian Collins (Deputy Leader) provided an update on the following:

- (a) Mr Collins opened his update by thanking and recognising the officers present, noting their considerable effort and contribution over the preceding week, as well as their consistent dedication throughout the year. He also reiterated his appreciation for Cabinet Members, observing that it had been encouraging to see themes such as “providing” and “community” becoming increasingly prominent in their work, reflecting the core responsibilities of the Council. He commended all involved for their ongoing commitment.
- (b) The budget for 2026-27 was close to being finalised and again, Mr Collins expressed his thanks to Dave Shipton (*Head of Finance Policy, Planning and Strategy and acting s151 officer*) for his significant contribution to the work. He noted that early indications were positive and commented that, while organisational change could be likened to turning an oil tanker, there were clear signs of progress emerging, which would become evident over the coming weeks. He stated that this was encouraging.
- (c) Progress on property disposals had been positive. Mr Collins advised that a recent marketed asset had significantly exceeded expectations, and achieved a sale price of £1.5m against an anticipated £400,000. He noted that this was not the first property to surpass its projected value and confirmed that such outcomes provided valuable capital resources for the Council.
- (d) Mr Collins referred to the earlier discussion regarding the Discovery Centre in Dover and highlighted it as another positive example of progress. He reported that he had visited the site with the local Member, Mr James De Friend, to review developments since its reopening just over a month earlier. He noted that staff had been highly positive about the centre’s operation, with strong footfall and favourable public feedback. He commented that the model of co-locating multiple services within a single building demonstrated the direction the Council should continue to pursue, reducing isolated service locations and bringing provision together where appropriate.
- (e) To conclude, Mr Collins provided an update on the position regarding Folkestone Library. He acknowledged that the matter had been contentious but confirmed that work had now commenced at 14 Sandgate Road to establish the temporary library provision. He noted that the existing temporary site offered limited visibility, restricted access, and insufficient space for the library stock. He reported that the new leased premises were expected to open by May and would provide a modern, accessible, and well-spaced facility. The new site would also have capacity to accommodate additional services. Drawing on the example of the Dover Discovery Centre, he commented that co-locating services represented the direction of travel for the Council. He added that, contrary to public concerns, it was not the Administration’s policy to close all libraries in Kent.

9.1 Further to questions and comments from Members the discussion included the following:

- (a) An update was sought regarding the short and long-term plans for Blackburn Lodge site in Sheppey following its closure in November 2023;

and also, an update following recent engagement in light of the proposed closure of the East church GP surgery. Mr Collins advised that the information was not available at the meeting but confirmed that a written update would be provided in the coming days.

- (b) It was noted that the timing of the Fair Funding Settlement had placed additional pressure on local authorities in setting their budgets. In relation to the flexibility of funding, Mr Collins advised that the majority of funding was ring-fenced, leaving very limited scope for reallocation. He further confirmed that the Fair Funding Settlement was set for a three-year period and, while the increased allocation was welcomed, additional funding would always be beneficial.

The Leader thanked the Cabinet Members for their updates.

124. Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement *(Item 5)*

Dave Shipton (Head of Finance Policy, Planning and Strategy and acting s151 officer) was in attendance for this item.

1. Mr Shipton (*Head of Finance Policy, Planning and Strategy and acting s151 officer*) provided an update on the Fair Funding Settlement, and noted that although publication on 17 December was consistent with previous years, the 2026-27 settlement was unusual in its scale and complexity. It included significant reforms to both the data used to determine funding allocations and the methodology applied, and this was the first time local authorities had been able to see the detailed impact of these changes at an individual authority level.
2. The settlement included the first reset of the retained business rates baseline since 2013–14. As a result, the national local government share of business rates had been redistributed according to the revised formula for relative needs and resources. Authorities whose formula allocation exceeded their local share would receive a top-up, while those whose share exceeded their formula allocation would pay a tariff. For Kent, this meant that all business rates growth accumulated since 2013-14 had been reset to zero and redistributed, with only future growth from 2026-27 onwards being retained locally until the next reset. This reset accounted for around two-thirds of the funding increase received by Kent.
3. The second major change involved the consolidation of a number of separate grants into the Revenue Support Grant (RSG). Mr Shipton advised that both the RSG and retained business rates were fully discretionary funding sources, making this consolidation particularly significant. Unlike the full and immediate reset of the business rates baseline, the changes to the RSG would be phased in over three years. In the first year, one-third of the RSG allocation would be based on the new formula and two-thirds on the previous distribution. In the second year, this

would reverse, with two-thirds based on the new formula. Full implementation would follow in year three. Kent's gains from this transfer into the RSG would therefore be introduced gradually over the three-year period.

4. It was noted that the national settlement continued to be presented as core spending power, and Kent's spending power was increasing at a higher rate than the national average owing to the gains from the reforms. Mr Shipton clarified that the council tax figures shown in the spending power calculation were government assumptions and did not predetermine the Council's own decisions.
5. Mr Shipton advised that, in addition to the transfer of various funding streams into the Revenue Support Grant, a number of other grants had also been consolidated into four larger funding blocks:
 - the Children, Families and Youth Grant;
 - the Crisis and Resilience Fund;
 - the Public Health Grant; and
 - the Homelessness, Rough Sleeping and Domestic Abuse Grant.

These broader grants replaced several previously separate allocations. Although each remained ring-fenced with overarching conditions, the consolidation meant that the individual requirements attached to the former standalone grants no longer applied. This provided authorities with greater flexibility to prioritise spending within each grant area. The consolidated grants had been announced as part of a three-year settlement, which offered increased certainty over future funding levels. This multi-year approach was the first since 2016 and would significantly support medium-term financial planning by providing a clearer view of projected resources over the coming years.

6. Further to questions and comments from Members the discussion included the following:
 - (a) It was confirmed that all local authorities had received the settlement on 17 December. No authority had been given advance indicative figures, despite consultations having begun in 2017 and the most recent consultation taking place over the summer. A policy statement issued in November had outlined the Government's response to the consultation, but it had not included authority-level allocations. Officers advised that, prior to 17 December, they had only been able to model potential scenarios to estimate the likely impact.
 - (b) In response to questions regarding the impact of the business rates changes on Kent businesses, Mr Shipton explained that the most significant effect would be the re-evaluation of all rateable values. He noted that, whereas re-evaluations had previously taken place every five years, they would now occur every three years, and this represented the principal

change for businesses. He confirmed that the wider retention arrangements did not directly affect businesses at this stage. Mr Shipton advised that future growth in the business rates tax base would, however, benefit local government. Under the current system, 50% of business rates growth was retained nationally by government and 50% was retained locally. Of the locally retained share, 18% was received by KCC, 80% by district councils, and 2% by the fire authority. He emphasised that, for individual businesses, the main impact remained the revised rateable values resulting from the re-evaluation.

7. It was RESOLVED that Cabinet agree to:

- (a) Note the provisional settlement including the reset of business rate baseline and consolidation grants, and impact on draft budget 2026-27 and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2026-29; and
- (b) Confirm the delegation to the s151 Officer to finalise any response, in consultation with the Deputy Leader

125. Quarterly Performance Report, Quarter 2, 2025/26
(Item 6)

Matthew Wagner (Chief Analyst) was in attendance for this item

- 1. Mr Wagner outlined the report for Quarter 2 (Q2, 2025/26) which covered the period July to September 2025. Of the 39 KPIs reported, 20 were rated Green (three more than the previous quarter) 14 were rated Amber (two fewer than the previous quarter) and 5 were rated Red (one fewer than the previous quarter). With regards to Direction of Travel, 8 indicators showed a positive trend, 25 were stable or with no clear trend, and 6 showed a negative trend. It was further confirmed that the number of red and amber ratings had also decreased compared to the previous report. Mr Wagner addressed the 5 KPIs that were rated RED.
- 2. Work was underway with services to review the KPIs for the QPR for the next financial year, including the annual updates to both the indicators and their targets. The resulting proposals were scheduled to be presented at the Cabinet meeting on 26 March, alongside the next quarter's report
- 3. Further to questions and comments from Members the discussion included the following:
 - (a) It was highlighted by Mrs Foster, Deputy Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, that 47% of complaints had been responded to within the required timescale, however, it was highlighted that more complex cases, where an extension had been agreed with the customer, were still recorded as late. It was queried whether a separate KPI could be introduced to ensure there is a clear distinction between the cases. Mr

Wagner advised that a review was underway regarding next year's KPIs and that this issue would be considered as part of that process.

- (b) Mr Watts (Deputy Chief Executive) highlighted performance in relation to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and Subject Access Requests (SARs). He noted that while two KPIs were rated red, it was important to recognise that the Council had achieved four consecutive quarters with FOI response rates above 80%, reflecting a considerable amount of work across the organisation. This improvement had been delivered despite a 35-50% increase in the volume of FOI requests received and without any corresponding increase in resources. He further reported a marginal improvement in SAR performance, largely driven by colleagues within CYPE, with ongoing work in that directorate to continue to raise performance.
- 4. It was RESOLVED that Cabinet agree to note the Quarter 2 Performance Report and the actions being taken to address areas where performance was not as targeted

126. Corporate Risk Register

(Item 7)

Mark Scrivener (Head of Risk & Delivery Assurance) was in attendance for this item

1. Mr Scrivener presented the Council's annual Corporate Risk Register. He explained that the Register had been developed following engagement with the Corporate Management Team and Cabinet Members, both individually and collectively. He outlined that risks entered the Register through two main routes: a top-down assessment of strategic objectives and statutory obligations, and bottom-up risks emerging from services that could have wider corporate impact.
2. Mr Scrivener noted that while the report set out the headline risks, substantial work sat behind each entry, including regular detailed engagement and scrutiny with risk owners and their teams. He added that, in recent weeks, he had met Cabinet Members individually to sense-check the risks, and it was clear that ongoing conversations were taking place between Members and risk owners, even if not explicitly framed as risk discussions.
3. He confirmed that he periodically reviewed the Council's top-level risks against those of other local authorities across the region, and, aside from one or two risks specific to Kent's geographic context, there was strong alignment, with many risks being sector-wide.
4. The Register represented a snapshot in time. As it had been prepared before Christmas, several key financial risks would require revision in light of the Council's financial position and the Local Government Finance

Settlement, with further work to be undertaken with the Corporate Management Team. There would also be alignment between the Corporate Risk Register and the more detailed Budget Risk Register developed alongside the budget setting process, providing an important backdrop for decision-making throughout the year, including the budget process.

5. Mr Scrivener also highlighted key events referenced in paragraph 1.3 of the report and noted that further potentially significant developments were expected, including awaited detail on SEND reforms, progress on the Schools White Paper, and possible developments in local government reorganisation, listed as a draft risk in Appendix 2. He further noted that the Council had strengthened its in-year spending controls in response to its financial position, which would require close monitoring.
6. In terms of next steps, the Register would be submitted to the Governance and Audit Committee and subsequently considered at the March round of Cabinet Committees, where relevant risks would be allocated for further discussion with risk owners and Cabinet Members.
7. It was RESOLVED that Cabinet agree to note the report.