KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

CABINET

MINUTES of a meeting of the Cabinet held in the Council Chamber on Thursday, 25 June 2026.

PRESENT: Ms L Kemkaran, Mr B Collins, Mr P Osborne, Mr C Hespe, Mr P Webb, Mrs B Fordham, Mrs G Foster, Mr J Henderson and Mr C Burwash (Substitute for Mr R Palmer)

IN ATTENDANCE: Dr A Ghosh (Director of Public Health), Ms S Hill (Director of Operations (Long Term Support)), Mr K Kasaven (Director of Children's Countywide Services), Mrs C Head (Head of Finance Operations), Mr B Watts (Deputy Chief Executive), Mr J McKay (Acting Chief Accountant) and Mr M Wagner (Chief Analyst)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

138. Apologies
(Item 1)

Apologies were received from Mr Palmer and Mr Wimble.

Mr Burwash, Deputy Cabinet Member for Communities and Regulatory Services was in attendance to provide an update on the portfolio on behalf of Mr Palmer. Mr Henderson provided up an update on behalf of Mr Wimble, Cabinet Member for Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Special projects.

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

No declarations of interest were received.

140. Minutes of the Meeting held on 26 March 2026
(Item 3)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting on 26th March 2026 were a correct record and that they be signed by the Chair.

141. Cabinet Member Updates
(Item 4)

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

    (a) An update was provided on KCC's internal work to develop the draft Kent SEND Reform Plan for the Department for Education. She noted a fuller update would be presented to the CYPE Committee. It was explained that the plan was a Kent-wide, sector-led document, developed collaboratively with partners to meet the SEND Reform White Paper requirements. Contributors included education and children's services, Kent Association of Leaders in

Education (KALE), Kent Special Educational Needs Trust (KSENT), Kent Parents and Carers Together (PACT,) NHS Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board (ICB), health providers, Early Years settings, schools, Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and post-16 providers. Mrs Fordham highlighted that KCC's role would increasingly be to convene the system over the next decade, while continuing its statutory duties. She acknowledged the leadership of Craig Chapman (Interim Deputy Director for Education: Access and Inclusion), supported by David Adams (Interim Deputy Director - Effectiveness, Sufficiency and Skills), and gave particular thanks to Sophie Dan (Assistant Director SEN Strategy and Quality Assurance) for coordinating the plan and bringing together evidence, data and partners despite sector-wide challenges.

The Kent SEND Reform Plan had been developed and submitted to the Department for Education (DfE) on 19 June, following the close of the public consultation on 18 June. No feedback had yet been received from the DfE.

It was noted that the DfE would review submissions from all local authorities and determine any required amendments, with an outcome anticipated in September. The approval of the plan was highlighted as critical, as it was linked to addressing 90% of the high needs deficit and to future funding arrangements. This presented significant financial, operational and reputational, risks. It was confirmed that a more detailed update would be provided at the CYPE Committee and subsequently at Scrutiny following the DfE's response. Members were advised that further information could be discussed outside the meeting if required

(b) Mrs Fordham attended a workshop in Gravesend, delivered by The Ground in partnership with Gravesend Grammar School for Boys. The session brought together pupils from local schools to share their views on issues including mobile phone use, health and wellbeing, and the curriculum. It was highlighted that young people's perspectives closely aligned with those of employers. Key themes included the need for stronger focus on life skills such as financial literacy, budgeting, workplace experience, enhanced careers guidance, greater employer engagement, and increased vocational and practical learning opportunities. Participants also expressed a desire for earlier access to these experiences, rather than waiting until post-16 pathways. The workshop demonstrated the insight, ambition and engagement of young people, and reinforced the importance of ensuring future policy development reflects these priorities to improve outcomes.

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

(a) The Leader noted that the workshop initiative was an excellent model for promoting pupil voice and skills development, and a meeting was welcomed to explore how this approach could be expanded across Kent. The importance of resilience, preparation for adulthood and vocational skills was emphasised as a key priority for the administration.

2. Mrs Georgia Foster (Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care), provided an update on the following:

(a) Mrs Foster introduced herself in her new role and expressed appreciation to the directorate management team and wider staff for their support during her five-week induction. Thanks were also extended to her predecessor, Miss Diane Morton, for her contributions. It was noted that the induction period had been very positive.

(b) Recent visits undertaken were outlined, including to Cliftonville Library, which had been refurbished. It was noted that the refurbishment included the installation of a Changing Places facility, providing accessible features such as wider doors, a hoist and a changing bed. Reference was also made to information available on the KCC website to help residents locate such facilities across the county, supporting improved accessibility and inclusion.

(c) Mrs Foster visited West View Integrated Care Centre in Tenterden, accompanied by Mr Chapman as the local member. It was noted that the centre was one of four owned by KCC and supported patients following hospital discharge through rehabilitation, physiotherapy and reablement, with the aim of enabling individuals to return safely to their homes. The dedication of staff was highlighted, with particular thanks given to the activities organiser for her compassionate engagement with residents. Positive service user experiences were also reflected in the number of messages of appreciation displayed at the centre.

(d) Furthermore, Mrs Foster reported on a visit to Milton Hague day services in Gravesend. The service supported around 50 individuals from Gravesend and Dartford. It was noted that KCC supported staff to gain qualifications, demonstrated by a staff member who progressed from apprentice to duty manager over 20 years, providing a strong testament to this approach.

(e) It was noted that Carers Week took place from 8th to 14th June, recognising the vital contribution of unpaid carers across Kent in supporting families, friends and neighbours, and their importance to health and social care services. A Carers' Coffee Morning was hosted at Sessions House on 10th June by Mrs Foster, Mrs Palmer (Deputy Cabinet member for Adult Social Care) and Mr Evans (Vice Chairman of the Council), which provided an opportunity to thank carers and recognise their often unseen contributions. Members were also signposted to information available on the KCC website to support carers and assist with enquiries from residents.

(f) Learning Disability Week took place from 15th to 21st June. KCC supported Mencap's campaign, recognising the valuable contribution of people with learning disabilities and the importance of ensuring they were listened to and fully included. The work that continued to take place across Kent to break down barriers, challenge stigma and support people with learning disabilities to live full, independent and meaningful lives was welcomed. An exhibition, "Do You See Me," was held at Sessions House. During the visit, information was shared about the Learning Disability Partnership Board, through which people with lived experience helped to shape services. The opportunity to speak with the Co-Chair, who had lived experience, was welcomed. It was noted that the Board met at locations across Kent and would welcome offers of suitable venues for future meetings.

(g) Loneliness Awareness Week took place from 15th to 21st June, which promoted conversations about loneliness and encouraged community connection. Members were also signposted to information on befriending services available on the Kent Connect to Support website.

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

(a) The Leader welcomed the Cabinet Member to her new role and noted the support received during her induction. Tribute was paid to Miss Morton for her contributions. It was also noted that KCC's support for staff development and qualifications was important for both career progression and service delivery. Appreciation was expressed for unpaid carers across Kent, recognising their vital and often unseen contribution, and the support provided to them

3. Mr Chris Burwash (Deputy Cabinet Member for Communities and Regulatory Services), provided an update on the following on behalf of Mr Richard Palmer:

(a) Community Wardens had delivered a water safety programme for young people, reaching approximately 100 participants.

(b) The Community Safety Team had successfully passed four reviews.

(c) Trading Standards had secured a significant sentencing outcome, resulting in a 10-year sentence, and had prevented substantial financial losses, including saving £89 million for businesses and £42,000 from nine residents targeted by doorstep scams. Enforcement activity had also led to the closure of over half of illegally trading tobacco shops in Maidstone.

(d) Libraries were noted to be performing well, with Folkestone Library having reopened after three years, alongside refurbishments at Cliftonville and Queenborough.

(e) Improvements to accessibility were highlighted, including the provision of wheelchair access to the Leysdown footpath for the first time.

(f) Progress was also reported through the Active Kent and Medway scheme, which had supported increased physical activity, including free sessions for over 50s and participation by 400 girls.

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

(a) The Leader thanked Mr Burwash for highlighting the reopening of Folkestone Library, noting that it was the first new library to open in 14 years. It was highlighted that, despite previous proposals to reduce library provision, the administration had not only retained existing libraries but also enabled new openings, reflecting a strong commitment to literacy and reading in Kent.

4. Mr Jamie Henderson (Cabinet Member for Environment, Coastal Regeneration and Public Health), provided an update on the following:

(a) An update was provided on the current heatwave conditions across Kent. It was noted that a Met Office Red Extreme Heat Warning had come into force for western and north-western areas of the county at 9.00am on 24th June, initially until 9.00pm, with the potential for extension. For the remainder of Kent, an Amber Extreme Heat Warning had been in place since 22nd June and had been extended through to Saturday.

It was highlighted that the UK Health Security Agency had advised that such warnings indicated a risk to life, including for otherwise healthy individuals. Residents were urged to stay informed of forecasts and to check on vulnerable groups, including older people, young children, those who were unwell, and expectant mothers, particularly those who may be unaware of overheating.

Advice was given on keeping cool, including closing curtains during the day, opening windows at night, staying hydrated, using sunscreen, and seeking shaded areas. Caution was also urged around open water, with residents advised to take care and avoid entering water alone.

(b) Mr Henderson was accompanied by Mr Mulvihill (Deputy Cabinet Member) on a visit to a residential drug and alcohol recovery service operated by Change, Grow, Live. It was noted that residents spoke of their optimism for the future and appreciation for the support received in overcoming dependency. The importance of these services was acknowledged, and a commitment was given to support their continued delivery, particularly in coastal areas where need was greatest.

(c) Meningitis B vaccinations would be offered to eligible students in Kent ahead of starting college or university in September. It was noted that meningitis could spread through close contact, including sharing drinks or vapes, kissing and shared accommodation. The programme was described as a one-off initiative aimed at providing reassurance to young people and their families. Eligible individuals would be contacted directly via the NHS app, text, email or letter, with appointments available in July and August for two doses administered at least four weeks apart

(d) It was reported that, following a further water supply issue in May, the Leader had announced the establishment of the Kent Water Resilience Partnership to address water security and support collaborative action across the county. An inaugural meeting was scheduled for 8th October, bringing together leaders and senior officers to consider strategic challenges and identify key priorities, including those highlighted in the cross-party water-focused inquiry. It was also noted that £170,000 of funding had been secured through the EU's Pathways to Resilience programme to support climate resilience and adaptation. This work would be aligned with the Water Resilience Partnership and the Kent Water Strategy.

(e) Preparations for the waste conference scheduled for early July were underway, with strong interest from partners wishing to participate. The conference would bring together key stakeholders to address fly tipping and identify practical, collaborative actions. The importance of joint working between borough councils, and the County Council as the waste disposal authority, was emphasised, noting the significant cost of fly tipping to council taxpayers.

(f) It was reported that a new, more cost-effective and simplified booking system had been launched across Household Waste Recycling Centres, which went live on 17 June following a full procurement process. The system made it quicker and easier for residents to book visits and removed the requirement to create an account, addressing issues such as forgotten passwords and duplicate accounts. Further improvements, including integration with the restricted vehicle voucher system, were planned.

(g) Significant improvement works had been completed at Ashford Waste Transfer Station. The original concrete floor had reached the end of its usable life, and a strengthened concrete base had been installed alongside new bay walls to meet waste separation and storage standards. The site had remained accessible for much of the works and fully reopened on 23 May. The investment ensured the facility remained compliant, resilient and fit for long-term service delivery. The works were completed on time and within budget, despite increased complexity, and thanks were extended to those involved.

(h) A Repair Café conference had been held on 19 June, bringing together volunteer repairers and organisations from across Kent to share best practice and strengthen local repair and reuse networks. This work was noted to support cost savings for residents, reduce waste, and promote a circular economy.

(i) It was also noted that reuse shops at Romney Marsh and Allington continued to receive positive feedback, with additional pop-up reuse shops held at other Household Waste Recycling Centres.

(j) Circular South East had been selected by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) as one of eight national pilot projects, which provided Kent with access to expert support to develop opportunities for businesses and communities to reuse materials. It was noted that initiatives such as this would support local schemes, including community reuse projects, and would contribute to reducing waste, increasing reuse, supporting local charities, and strengthening the evidence base for future circular economy activity across Kent and Sussex.

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

(a) The Leader noted that a hosepipe ban had been imposed by South East Water and advised that this would be discussed further following the meeting. Appreciation was expressed for the focus on supporting individuals recovering from drug and alcohol addiction and encouraging personal responsibility. The establishment of the Water Resilience Partnership and the forthcoming meeting in October were welcomed, alongside the upcoming waste conference. It was noted that both would provide valuable opportunities for collaboration, and the Leader expressed a commitment to working closely on these initiatives.

(b) In response to whether there were plans to expand reuse shops further, Mr Henderson reported that there had been interest in expanding such services, including an enquiry relating to Thanet and a request from an MP for provision in Faversham. While facilities were not available at every Household Waste Recycling Centre, it was confirmed that collection points were in place at many sites. Ongoing work to increase provision, where financially viable, was also highlighted

(c) Mr Henderson confirmed that Ashford Waste Transfer Station was fully operational and open to residents booking appointments. It was noted that extended access had been maintained for much of the works period, and that, despite additional issues identified with the condition of the floor, the project had been completed on time and within budget through the recycling of materials.

5. Mr Henderson provided an update on behalf of Mr David Wimble (Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Special projects):

(a) An update was provided on broadband connectivity, noting that correspondence had been sent to the Telecoms Minister and a press release issued outlining concerns regarding Building Digital UK’s decision to scale back 10 Project Gigabit contracts. It was highlighted that almost one in four properties in Kent did not have access to gigabit-capable broadband, with coverage for commercial premises at approximately 53%. It was emphasised that achieving the Government’s target of over 99% gigabit coverage by 2032 was critical, particularly given the importance of digital infrastructure to economic growth. Concerns were raised that alternative technologies would not provide sufficient capacity if delivery was not achieved. An urgent meeting with the Minister had been requested to seek clarity and a plan to ensure Project Gigabit delivery in Kent and to support affected residents and businesses.

(b) Progress on mobile connectivity was reported, noting its importance, particularly in emergencies. KCC had worked with a neutral host provider to address longstanding issues at Kings Hill, where mobile network operators had not delivered a solution. A provider had been secured to invest in the infrastructure, with planning permission granted for a new mobile mast at Kings Hill Golf Club. The lease agreement had been finalised to enable construction, and a press release had been issued to mark this investment.

(c) Attendance at the UK’s Real Estate Investment and Infrastructure Forum in Leeds in May was reported, where the in-house Invest Kent service was formally launched. Investment opportunities across Kent and Medway were promoted through an investment prospectus, generating additional leads for the investment pipeline. It was also noted that Kent’s growing viticulture sector had been promoted, and valuable connections had been established with government departments and other UK regions.

(d) Mr Wimble had attended the Straits Committee in Hague, where discussions had taken place on opportunities for collaboration with Dutch agriculture, including the use of fully automated farming equipment and the potential establishment of a distribution hub in Kent.

(e) The Kent and Medway Business Fund had supported the creation of 48 new commercial units in Whitfield, Dover. In addition, loans had been approved for three small businesses operating in the waste management, sports and leisure, and early years childcare sectors.

(f) It was reported that the Kent and Medway Growth Hub continued to play a vital role in supporting businesses across the region to grow and adapt. Since 1 April 2026, the Hub had supported 481 businesses and delivered extensive in-depth support to help them progress.

(g) The Skills Bootcamp Wave 7 had commenced on 1 April and had progressed well, creating 430 training places through £1.5 million of Department for Work and Pensions funding across key sectors including media and digital, agri-food, construction, early years, schools, and health and social care. Approximately 150 learners were near completion, with further cohorts due to continue through to February 2027. It was noted that around 75% of participants from the previous year had progressed into positive outcomes, including employment or self-employment.

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

(a) The Leader welcomed the action taken to raise concerns with the Minister regarding broadband connectivity, noting that current provision in parts of Kent was unacceptable. The progress of the Skills Bootcamp programme was also commended, highlighting its importance in supporting young people to develop skills for employment and transition into adulthood.

6. Mr Paul Webb (Cabinet Member for Children's Services) provided an update on the following:

(a) Since his appointment on 30th March 2026, the Cabinet Member had commenced his induction through a programme of meetings with officers and a series of visits across services and the county. These had included visits to Oak Manor Reception Centre, Acacia Court, as well as attendance at the County Youth Justice Board away day on 26 May.

(b) Participation in a Member refresher session was noted, which provided the opportunity to engage directly with children in care and gain a deeper understanding of corporate parenting responsibilities, alongside the services that support children in care and care leavers.

(c) A number of family hubs had been visited, including those in North Ashford and Maidstone, in addition to attending the Temple Hill Family Hub Open Day, which showcased the range of support available to families.

(d) It was further reported that a visit had been undertaken to the Athena Project home in Ashford, with a further visit planned to a completed home in Sittingbourne. A recent visit to Windchimes, Fairlawn and Lodges Short Break units was also highlighted, where the Cabinet Member met with staff and observed the high standards of care being delivered. The dedication, professionalism and compassion of staff in supporting children and families were particularly commended.

(e) It was reported that the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act received Royal Assent on 29 April 2026 and represented a significant and transformative development in children's legislation. The Act introduced a range of measures, including a requirement for local authorities to offer family group decision-making, strengthened information-sharing duties, enhanced roles for children within education and safeguarding processes, and the establishment of multi-agency child protection teams. It was noted that the Act also sought to support children in achieving safe and stable home environments, including the introduction of a statutory framework for the authorisation of deprivation of liberty in settings other than secure children's homes, strengthened regulatory powers for Ofsted to address breaches of the Care Standards Act 2000, including in unregistered provision, and measures to limit the use of agency social workers. Further provisions aimed to reform the care market, including the establishment of regional care cooperatives to improve planning and commissioning of placements, alongside powers to cap profits of non-local authority Ofsted-registered providers where necessary. These changes were intended to strengthen children's wellbeing and provide greater protection for vulnerable children.

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

(a) The Leader noted that she had recently accompanied Mr Webb on a visit to a family hub in Maidstone, and highlighted the quality of work being delivered and the ongoing work to further strengthen the role of family hubs within communities. The importance of stable parenting and care for children was emphasised as fundamental, and it was reaffirmed that the administration would continue to support parents and carers to achieve the best outcomes for children.

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

(a) It was reported that the Department for Transport (DfT)had increased requirements on transparency, with performance now directly influencing funding. Work was underway to compile data and refresh the Highways Asset Management Plan ahead of the 10 September deadline, with a key decision expected by the end of the year.

(b) Bids had been submitted to the Department for Transport's Structures Fund for Thanet Way (A299) and Galley Hill, with feedback awaited. Progress at Galley Hill was noted, with design, planning and mitigation works advancing and Members being kept updated. It was further reported that, alongside the funding bid, efforts were ongoing to pursue compensation in relation to the cliff failure.

(c) Mr Osborne reported that consolidated funding from the Department for Transport had been received, which would support highways maintenance, active travel and bus services. Work was underway to develop detailed delivery plans ahead of the October 2026 deadline, with a focus on maintaining and improving services.

(d) Applications for the Kent Travel Saver bus pass had reopened following a short delay following the decision being called-in to Scrutiny Committee, and the scheme remained a strong value offer for families.

(e) A free shuttle bus service would be provided for the County Show between Maidstone and Sittingbourne. The service aimed to improve accessibility for attendees and support reduced car usage, helping to ease congestion and promote more sustainable travel.

(f) It was reported that preparations for winter were already underway, including the introduction of a higher specification gritting fleet, replenished salt supplies, and a new salt barn at Faversham. Training had commenced to ensure readiness ahead of the winter season.

(g) With regard to Summer traffic management, increased summer pressures were anticipated, particularly around Dover and the Eurotunnel. Operation Brock was expected to be implemented from mid-July, supported by additional traffic management measures to maintain flow where possible. It was noted that border checks continued to cause delays, with partners working to minimise disruption.

(h) Implementation of the new highways maintenance contract with Ringway was progressing well, with delivery now evident on the ground. Local maintenance activity had increased, and demand for pothole repairs had reduced significantly.

(i) To prepare for the winter season, new gritters were being introduced, supporting UK manufacturing, and a naming competition would be launched for the 61 vehicles.

(j) To conclude, it was reported that the inspection team had been integrated into highways operations, to help improve clarity, responsiveness and efficiency in identifying and addressing issues.

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

(a) In response to a question regarding progress under the new highways contract, it was clarified that white road markings indicating potholes were associated with local maintenance contractors rather than the Ringway contract. It was reported that maintenance activity was progressing well, with works being carried out at pace despite high demand. Positive feedback from residents had increased, reflecting improved service delivery, and it was noted that markings often indicated planned resurfacing works as part of ongoing efforts to address backlog issues.

(b) A question was raised regarding the A299, including potential reimbursement for recent emergency works and the timeline for lifting the temporary speed restriction. In response, it was confirmed that the restriction would be lifted once interim works were completed, with progress reported to be over halfway. It was noted that reimbursement for emergency works was unlikely as these had been met from existing budgets. A bid for £64 million had been submitted to the Structures Fund to support long-term works, with a decision expected in August or September.

(c) In response to guarantees on pothole repairs, Mr Osborne explained that temporary repairs undertaken during periods of severe weather were not guaranteed, as they were intended as short-term measures and were more susceptible to failure. Permanent repairs, however, carried a two-year guarantee, with any failures within that period being rectified by the contractor at their own expense.

(d) The Leader welcomed the update on the Kent Travel Saver bus pass and noted that, while scrutiny played an important role, it should not impede the delivery of essential services. Members of the public were encouraged to visit KCC's stand at the forthcoming County Show, where Cabinet Members would be present throughout the event. The forthcoming implementation of Operation Brock during the summer period was acknowledged. The Leader noted the value of public communications explaining the impact of the arrangements and clarifying that Operation Brock was a National Highways and Government-led traffic management system, in which KCC had an operational role. Appreciation was expressed for efforts to keep residents informed and to help minimise disruption during the school holiday period. The importance of securing funding through the Structures Fund for works at Galley Hill and on the Thanet Way was also emphasised, with the hope that decisions on the bids would be progressed without delay given their significance to Kent's residents and infrastructure.

8. Mr Chris Hespe (Cabinet Member for Local Government Efficiency and Reorganisation) provided an update on the following:

(a) Mr Hespe reported that the draft DOLGE Strategy had been completed and was due to be considered by the Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee on 2 July, before being presented to Cabinet on 22 July for adoption. He noted that the strategy represented the second phase of DOLGE's work, focused on collaboration between Members and officers and the delivery of local government efficiency following the setting of KCC's own budget. Thanks were extended to officers and Members who had contributed to its development.

(b) It was reported that there had been significant interest in DOLGE's work from other local authorities, with presentations delivered to a number of councils and further engagement planned through the Local Government Association Conference and with other authorities considering similar approaches.

(c) An update was provided on current activity, including continued reduction of long-term debt through treasury management, increased embedding of the Council's commercial strategy, a reduction in procurement waivers, and the introduction of key performance measures. It was noted that 62% of third-party spend was now with Kent suppliers, an increase of 4% over the previous year and above the national average.

(d) Further work was underway with senior officers to establish key account management arrangements for the Council's larger suppliers and contracts. It was reported that an incentive scheme to encourage income generation across services and directorates would be launched shortly, with initial decisions expected in September. Greater emphasis was also being placed on understanding and monitoring unit costs through Contract Management Review Group meetings to support value for money and informed decision-making. In addition, a commissioning pipeline was being developed to enable procurement expertise and appropriate scrutiny to be applied at an earlier stage in the commissioning process. Exploratory work had also commenced to identify and reduce any duplication of effort across the authority, including a review of potentially unproductive committees, building on work undertaken during the previous year

(e) With regard to Local Government Reorganisation, Mr Hespe reported that the Council was awaiting the Government's decision which was due on or around 16th July 2026. It was noted that the County Councils Network had raised concerns with Government regarding the timetable, process and potential impact on the resilience of key services. Discussions had also taken place with Essex, Suffolk and East Sussex County Councils to share perspectives and approaches.

(f) To conclude, Mr Hespe advised that Service Complexity Assessments were continuing at pace. There has been completion of 165 assessments to date, with the programme expected to conclude by the end of July. Thanks were extended to officers involved in delivering this significant piece of work. It was emphasised that preparations were continuing despite the pending Government announcement

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

(a) In response to a question regarding the priority given to reducing inherited debt, it was reported that the authority had inherited long-term debt of £732 million, which had since been reduced by £142 million under the current administration. It was noted that the authority would continue to require a level of borrowing and that a balanced approach was necessary. However, reducing debt and associated interest payments had been a key priority, with reference made to debt interest costs of approximately £84,000 per day when the administration took office, and the significant reduction achieved through the Deputy Leader's efforts.

(b) The Leader welcomed the draft DOLGE Strategy, describing it as a pioneering approach to local government efficiency and noting appreciation for the contribution of officers across the authority in embedding its principles. The positive impact of the Council's commercial strategy was also highlighted, particularly the increased proportion of spending with Kent suppliers and the proposed introduction of key account management arrangements for major contracts. The importance of prioritising Kent businesses and strengthening contract management was emphasised, alongside recognition of DOLGE's role in driving improvements across the authority. Thanks were also extended to officers for their work in preparing for Local Government Reorganisation.

(c) Mr Hespe placed on record his thanks to Mr Chamberlain for his significant contribution to the development of the DOLGE Strategy. The Leader endorsed those comments and expressed appreciation for the partnership between Mr Hespe and Mr Chamberlain in progressing the DOLGE programme

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

(a) Mr Collins expressed his appreciation for the support, advice and expertise provided by officers, noting the positive working relationships that had been developed over the previous year.

(b) Referring to the earlier discussion on debt reduction, he reported that the administration had reduced long-term debt by £142 million, resulting in annual savings of just under £1.2 million in debt interest. He acknowledged the work of Treasury Management officers and noted that further progress may be possible later in the year, subject to circumstances.

(c) As Deputy Leader, Mr Collins reflected positively on the progress made by the administration during its first year in office, noting the increasing confidence, expertise and effectiveness of Cabinet Members in delivering priorities and outcomes for Kent.

(d) Mr Collins also highlighted recent investment in library services, including the opening of the new Folkestone library, the first new library provision in Kent for 14 years. He noted that, although the administration had inherited proposals for widespread library closures, its approach would be to consider libraries on a case-by-case basis. Opportunities to integrate library services with hubs and other community facilities would continue to be explored where beneficial, but it was confirmed that wholesale library closures would not be pursued.

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

(a) The Leader thanked Mr Collins and officers for their work in reducing the Council's long-term debt, noting that this had resulted in annual savings of approximately £1.2 million in debt interest for Kent taxpayers. The progress made by the administration over the previous year was also recognised, with particular reference to the strong teamwork, competence and delivery of outcomes demonstrated across the Cabinet and wider authority.

The Leader thanked the Cabinet Members for their updates.

142. 26/00030 - Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring Report - Outturn 2025-2026
(Item 5)

Cath Head (Head of Finance Operations) and Joe McKay (Acting Chief Accountant) were in attendance for this item.

1. Mr Collins, Deputy Leader of the Council, introduced the report on the Council's 2025–26 financial outturn position. It was reported that the revenue budget had overspent by £22.7 million (1.5% of the total budget), representing an improvement of £13.8 million from the Quarter 3 forecast. The outturn included £1.1 million of roll forwards, including £0.3 million of unspent Member Grants.

   The year was described as financially challenging. Underspends had been achieved within Growth, Environment and Transport, the Chief Executive's Department, the Deputy Chief Executive's Department and Non-Attributable Costs. Adult Social Care and Health had overspent by £42.9 million due to continued demand pressures, complexity and undelivered savings, while Children, Young People and Education had recorded an overspend of £0.9 million.

   Capital expenditure for the year totalled £260.8 million, representing 69% of the approved budget. The underspend included £135.5 million rephased into future years. The report also included a review of the capital programme and proposed amendments to capital cash limits. The position on Schools' Delegated Budgets continued to reflect pressures arising from Special Educational Needs demand and would be managed through the Dedicated Schools Grant Adjustment Account.

2. Cath Head (Head of Finance Operations) noted that this was the fourth consecutive year in which the Council had recorded an overspend, and each overspend required drawdown form the reserves, therefore impacting the Council's future Medium Term Financial Plan. The importance of managing and mitigating any forecast overspends during 2026–27 was emphasised in order to support the development of the 2027–28 budget and maintain the Council's financial resilience. Mr Collins noted that the forecasts inherited for 2025–26 had been developed under the previous administration. He emphasised that the administration was now working closely with officers on financial forecasting and delivery, and stressed the importance of each directorate achieving its agreed savings targets to support the Council's financial position and resilience.

3. Mr Watts (Deputy Chief Executive) noted that, between Quarter 3 and the end of the financial year, considerable work had been undertaken across the Council, supported by spending controls, to improve the financial position. While a number of directorates had delivered underspends and the Adult Social Care position had improved from that reported at Quarter 3, he emphasised that the effort had been shared across the whole organisation. It was further noted that these measures had not been without consequence. Capacity pressures within the organisation remained significant, as highlighted in the Annual Governance Statement, particularly given the range of initiatives, statutory duties and expectations placed on the Council alongside ongoing financial challenges. Nevertheless, he

recognised the substantial work undertaken across the authority to improve the outturn position, while noting that any overspend continued to present challenges for future years' financial planning and resilience.

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

   (a) The Leader highlighted the reported £9 million underspend on Home to School Transport as a positive indicator that improvement measures were having an impact. The Leader also noted that, although general reserves remained below the preferred level, forecasts indicated that they would exceed 6% during 2026–27, providing reassurance that the Council's financial management was moving in the right direction despite ongoing challenges. In response, Mr Collins noted that the target range for general reserves was between 5% and 10%, ideally towards the upper end of that range. He reported that reserves were currently above the 5% threshold and that budgeted plans were in place to replenish them gradually over the year. It was further noted that strengthening reserves formed part of the wider financial strategy, alongside the reduction of long-term debt, with both contributing to the Council's overall financial resilience.

   (b) Reference was made to the DOLGE Strategy, which included a principle of avoiding unnecessary growth of the authority and maintaining an appropriate balance between priorities, resources and service delivery. It was noted that the administration had sought to achieve this balance during its first year, contributing to improved financial stability. In response, Mr Collins agreed that the focus should be on delivering efficiencies rather than reducing services wherever possible, emphasising the importance of providing the same services in a more efficient and sustainable manner.

   (c) In response concerns raised regarding the costs associated with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, it was noted that KCC bore costs relating to former unaccompanied asylum seekers beyond the age at which government funding ceased. Mr Collins commented that it would be fair for the Government to recognise these ongoing costs and provide appropriate financial support to the Council in meeting its responsibilities.

5. It was RESOLVED that Cabinet agree to:

   a) NOTE the revenue and capital outturn position for 2025-26 detailed in the report, and accompanying appendices

   b) AGREE that £0.8 million (£800,000) is rolled forward to fund existing criteria (per Appendix)

   c) AGREE that £0.3 million (£300,000) is rolled forward to fund member grants (per Appendix)

   d) AGREE the drawing down from General Fund reserves to fund the 2025-26 overspend

e) AGREE the capital slippage / re-phasing from 2025-26 will be added to the 2026-27 and later years' capital budgets (per the report)

f) NOTE the review of the capital programme

g) AGREE the proposed capital cash limit changes (per Appendix)

h) AGREE the changes made as a result of a reserves review (per the report)

143. Quarterly Performance Report, Quarter 4, 2025/26
(Item 6)

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

1. Mr Wagner outlined the report for Quarter 4 (Q4, 2025/26) which covered the period up until the end of March 2026. Of the 39 KPIs reported, 18 were rated Green (the same as the previous quarter) 12 were rated Amber (three fewer than the previous quarter) and 9 were rated Red (three more than the previous quarter). With regards to Direction of Travel, 7 indicators showed a positive trend, 28 were stable or with no clear trend, and 4 showed a negative trend. Mr Wagner addressed the KPIs that were rated RED, the reasoning and the mitigating actions for these were set out in the report.

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

   (a) A question was raised regarding the Customer Services Performance Report, specifically the KPI rated as red, and whether it was appropriate for complaints with formally agreed extensions to continue to be recorded as late. It was suggested that this did not fully reflect performance, particularly where an initial response had been provided within the 20-day target and an extension had subsequently been agreed with the customer. Clarification was sought on whether information could be provided on the number of such cases. In response, it was explained that the KPI was designed to provide a consistent measure of response times across services and therefore recorded all responses completed beyond the target timescale as late, regardless of whether an extension had been agreed. However, it was acknowledged that, particularly in Adult Social Care, some complaints were more complex and required additional time to investigate. It was further noted that agreeing an extension in advance generally provided a better customer experience than failing to communicate delays. Mr Watts (Deputy Chief Executive) confirmed that he would work with Mr Wagner to review the information available and provide a further response to the Cabinet Member. He noted that some of the data requested was not currently collected or reported in that format, but that recent discussions at the Governance and Audit Committee had considered how performance information was captured and presented.

(b) Clarification was sought on the significant increase in Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and whether this reflected increased scrutiny of the new administration, together with the implications for performance indicators. Mr Watts advised that FOI request volumes had increased significantly beyond the levels originally anticipated for the year. It was noted that, despite this increased demand, performance had improved considerably, with response rates increasing from 70% to 86% - 89%, which represented some of the strongest results achieved in recent years. Substantial work had been undertaken across the organisation to improve the handling of requests, although the volume of enquiries continued to create considerable pressure, as each request required officer time and resources to process. It was noted that, where multiple requests related to similar subjects, efficiencies could sometimes be achieved through quicker responses.

(c) In response to whether the demand for FoI requests would reduce over time as the administration became more established, it was advised that there was currently no clear evidence of a sustained reduction in request volumes. While occasional month-to-month decreases had been observed, these were often followed by new areas of public interest generating additional requests. It was further suggested that increased public awareness of FOI rights, together with the growing use of artificial intelligence tools to generate more detailed and complex enquiries, may have contributed to demand. Officers noted that many of the highest monthly volumes of FOI requests recorded had occurred within the previous twelve months and agreed to provide further detailed statistics outside the meeting.

(d) Clarification was sought on whether more information could be proactively published to reduce the number of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, including the possibility of making frequently requested information more readily available. In response, it was reported that a range of measures were being explored to improve access to information and help manage demand. A searchable online disclosure log was already available and work was underway to improve its visibility and accessibility through internet and AI-assisted searches. Additional information had also been published online, with Council and committee papers now appearing more readily in search engine results. It was noted that many FOI requests were highly specific in nature, which limited the scope for a traditional frequently asked questions approach. However, officers agreed to consider this suggestion as part of ongoing work to reduce demand and improve access to information.

(e) Concerns were expressed By Mr Osborne (Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport) regarding a number of performance indicators rated red, particularly those relating to highways services. It was noted that performance against targets for attendance at emergency highway incidents within two hours and responses to enquiries within 28 days had been affected by exceptional demand and external factors, including severe weather conditions. Context was provided that the volume of highways-related complaints had increased significantly compared with previous years, peaking at around 580 complaints in a single month and remaining consistently above 250 per month, compared with approximately 100 per month previously. It was reported that this had placed considerable pressure on the Customer Feedback team and had impacted performance against the relevant indicators. It was emphasised that, despite these challenges, highway services continued to respond to a wide range of incidents and enquiries within existing resources.

(f) In response to comments regarding performance indicators rated red, it was noted that KPIs provided a consistent framework for monitoring performance and understanding the factors influencing service delivery. While performance figures provided an important measure of outcomes, it was equally important to consider the wider context behind the data, including service demand, organisational capacity and financial constraints. The quarterly performance report enabled Members to examine both the performance results and the reasons underlying changes in performance, supporting informed discussion and decision-making.

(g) Further explanation was provided in relation to highways performance, where it was noted that a number of indicators had been affected by periods of short, sharp and severe weather. Such events generated a high volume of emergency incidents within a compressed timeframe, making it more challenging to meet target response times than when demand was spread more evenly across a reporting period. It was also highlighted that the quarterly performance report supplemented the KPI data with narrative explanations and details of actions being taken to improve performance. These included the implementation of the new highways maintenance contract, the impact of which would continue to be monitored through future performance reporting.

(h) Clarification was sought on the timetable for the introduction of the Government's national performance framework and how it would align with the Council's existing performance reporting arrangements. In response, it was explained that the Local Outcomes Framework had been announced in February and a report would be presented to the Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee on 2nd July, setting out the proposed national metrics, how they aligned with KCC's current performance measures, and where differences existed. It was noted that KCC reported in greater detail in some areas than the national framework would require. While a national benchmarking tool was expected to be released later in the year to enable comparisons between authorities, no confirmed publication date had yet been provided. Members were advised that the forthcoming report would also highlight any caveats associated with comparing KCC's performance with that of other authorities.

(i) Further clarification was sought on whether the introduction of the national framework would require a review of KCC's existing KPIs. In response, it was agreed that the Council's performance measures should be reviewed to ensure appropriate alignment with the national framework, while retaining indicators that were of particular relevance to Kent. It was noted that consideration would be given to where KCC already held more meaningful or detailed local measures and to ensuring that performance reporting continued to focus on priority areas requiring the greatest oversight and scrutiny.

(j) A question was raised as to whether there were measures in place to prevent Freedom of Information (FOI) requests from being used maliciously or in excessive volumes, and whether there were limits on the number of requests an individual could submit. Mr Watts advised that FOI requests were a statutory right and that the Council was required to respond to the overwhelming majority of requests received. While legislation allowed requests to be refused in limited circumstances, such as where they were deemed vexatious, this was subject to strict legal tests and applied only in a very small number of cases. It was noted that the purpose of the legislation was to ensure public access to information and enable scrutiny of public bodies. Although significantly more information was proactively published and readily available online than when the legislation was introduced, the statutory right to request information remained in place and continued to be exercised by residents.

(k) With regard to the extent of increased Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and volumes compared to the previous administration, it was reported that FOI requests had increased substantially, with some periods showing increases of between 30% and 100% compared with previous levels. It was noted that, as requests were processed without regard to the identity of the requester, it was not possible to definitively attribute the increase to any particular group or cause. However, there had been a clear rise in demand, reflecting increased interest in the Council’s activities. Officers agreed to provide Members with further information illustrating trends in request volumes. It was also noted that similar increases were being experienced by other authorities and organisations, suggesting that a range of factors were contributing to the growth in FOI requests.

(l) Clarification was sought regarding the Public Health KPI relating to the number of eligible people receiving NHS Health Checks, which had continued to fall below target. Concern was expressed that this could undermine preventative health measures, and further information was requested on the reasons for the decline, including whether it reflected issues around appointment availability, public uptake, or particular demographic trends. It was also suggested that targeted public health messaging may help improve participation. In response, it was noted that the KPI measured the number of eligible people receiving NHS Health Checks rather than the proportion of those eligible who had been offered them. While there had been a 6% decrease in the number of checks delivered during the previous quarter, 92% of eligible individuals had been invited to attend a health check during the last financial year. Officers agreed that further analysis would be useful, including consideration of the eligible population, uptake rates and demographic information, and undertook to liaise with Public Health colleagues and provide additional information outside the meeting.

3. It was RESOLVED that Cabinet agree to note the Quarter 4 Performance Report and the actions being taken to address areas where performance is not as targeted.