

Framing Kent's Future

Our Council Strategy 2022-2026



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LEADER'S FOREWORD

I am pleased to introduce our council strategy for the next four years - Framing Kent's Future.

The aim of this strategy is to support the Council and the County to meet both the immediate challenges that we face over the next four years, but also build a solid foundation for Kent's long-term success.

Unlike previous strategy, many of the assumptions that have underpinned our budget and our service delivery over the last ten years, such as low inflation, low interest rates, resilient supply chains and a strong provider market, are under threat from a fragile global economy and rising international tensions.

At the same time there is a need to meet head on the many social, economic and community issues that we face as a county, some of which have been around for generations but have been brought to the fore by the pandemic. An increasingly ageing population is driving more complex and more costly social care demand. New housing growth places pressure on Kent's physical and social infrastructure, impacting on quality of life for existing residents. Our environment faces challenges not just from climate change, but in some communities from overdevelopment. Our residents and businesses need support to develop a workforce with the skills to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing global and local economy. And recent events have thrown into sharp relief how Kent's status as the gateway to Continental Europe can result in severe pressures on our roads, our businesses, and the quality of life of our residents.

Although many of these challenges are profound, they can be overcome. There are significant opportunities for the council if we do things differently in response.

We can build stronger relationships with our partners to meet the needs of Kent residents and communities as a place, rather than just as a collection of individual services. We can redesign and commission our services differently, with service users, with partners, and with providers working together and more collaboratively to design better and more resilient services. We can invest in new technology and automation that allows us to transform the efficiency and productivity of the council. We can reshape our estate to reflect how residents want to access our services and how our staff work flexibly. We can engage with Government to seek the devolution of the powers and resources to support Kent succeed.

This is why we have built this strategy around our four key priorities, which will shape and frame Kent County Council's response to the challenges and opportunities of the next four years:

- *Levelling Up Kent*
- *Infrastructure for Communities*
- *Environmental Step Change*
- *New Models of Care and Support*

Each of these priorities presents an area where the Council makes a significant difference to the quality of life of Kent residents both now and in the future. It would be wrong to imply that the next four years will be easy; they will not. The financial position of the council is unlikely to improve, as government funding is stretched ever further by competing priorities. The scale of the changes necessary to our services and how we work may be difficult for some residents, users, staff, and elected Members to initially accept.

But change will be a pre-requisite if the council is going to deliver successfully for Kent and place itself on a sustainable footing for the medium and long-term. The council is at its best when it can focus its skilled and dedicated staff on delivering services that they know will make a difference to the lives of the people of Kent.

I look forward to working with you all – the residents, partners, elected Members, and staff – to support the delivery of this strategy, and collectively and successfully, framing Kent's future.

**Roger Gough,
Leader of the Council**

KENT'S STRATEGIC CONTEXT

Kent is a fantastic county. It is an attractive place for so many people who choose to make their lives here. This is because we have many fundamental strengths and assets not found anywhere else. However, our distinctiveness can also bring challenges to the county's success and the quality of life for people who live here. Some of these are new and others are more ingrained but have been brought into sharper focus through recent events including the Covid (COVID-19) pandemic. This section sets out some of the main factors that make Kent the place it is, and that have shaped the priorities set out in this strategy.

Kent is uniquely positioned

Kent's geographical position brings with it some major advantages that the county can continue to capitalise on. Our transport infrastructure quickly connects Kent to both London and the Continent through the strategic road and rail network, with Kent enjoying the benefit of the UK's only High-Speed rail line (HS1). As the country's gateway with Europe, Kent is strategically important to the nation on issues like the security of our borders and the success of trade and inward investment. This brings huge opportunities, but it also brings unique challenges which the county has been managing for many years. This includes the impact of queuing lorries when there are border delays and the strain on our resources of supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arriving at our shores. While no other county could have coped as well as Kent has, this comes at a cost – for our residents, our businesses and the image of our county. To protect Kent's quality of life and economic prosperity, fair solutions must be found to these national issues.

Meanwhile, the issues of being a peninsular economy can exacerbate workforce challenges across both the public and private sector, with employers struggling to recruit to critical roles, especially when London remains an attractive employment market. However, post-Covid changes to working and living patterns represent a huge opportunity. As people work from home more and commute less, the economic benefit from the commuting population can shift to local towns and villages rather than being gained by London. This more flexible approach to working also brings the opportunity to address some of the workforce challenges in parts of the Kent economy, by attracting more of those who can work flexibly to choose to live in Kent. Moreover, as businesses look to relocate outside of the Capital, Kent's strategic location, proximity and transport infrastructure can be used to secure new inward investment.

Kent is large and diverse

Kent is the largest county in England. This scale gives us resilience and a strong voice at the national level, but it masks an even more important strength, which is the county's diversity. The towns and villages of Kent have their own identity and heritage which makes them attractive local communities. As such, the needs of our communities are often very specific, with local challenges requiring local

solutions. The wide array of voluntary organisations, amenity societies and community groups are reflective of this diversity and give Kent a collective resilience beyond the sum of its individual parts. This was tested to the extreme during the pandemic, but through working at both county and local level, across statutory services and the civic society, Kent's response was second to none.

Our scale can also mask significant differences in factors that fundamentally affect people's lives, such as their skills levels and their health and life expectancy. These social and economic inequalities exist both within Kent, particularly between the East and the West of the county, and between Kent and the rest of the UK, particularly compared to the wider South East. Our geography, particularly in East Kent, and the challenges of isolated coastal communities can reinforce pockets of intensive deprivation, which are too disconnected from economic opportunities available in the rest of the county. Government's Levelling Up agenda presents a renewed opportunity to address these long-standing economic and social issues and catch up with the rest of the South East where Kent lags behind, whilst ensuring that we build on the success and potential of our more thriving communities. However, we face a significant risk that the relative affluence of Kent and the wider South East will mean that the Government's Levelling Up agenda overlooks the needs of some of the most deprived communities in the country which Kent is home to.

The county's diversity is reflected in our economy where there is no one dominant business sector or employer. Our proximity to London gives us a strong commuter base, our rurality gives us strength in agriculture, the channel crossings and ports give us strength in logistics whilst our countryside and coastline gives us strength in tourism. But the mainstay of the Kent economy are the many thousands of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) that provide employment for Kent residents. This economic diversity allows the Kent economy to successfully adapt to different economic cycles and pressures. We also have a diverse school system that promotes excellence, and a range of further education institutions and universities with national and international reputations. However, Kent is still lagging behind the UK and South East in some indicators of economic success, including productivity, skill levels, and innovation, which is limiting the potential of individuals and the county.

Kent is growing

The attractiveness of Kent as a place to live, work and study, enhanced by relative housing affordability compared to the wider South East, has led to rapid housing development in some areas of the county. This places pressure on our physical and social infrastructure, particularly our local transport systems, but also on our natural environment, for example through pressures on the water supply available for Kent agri-businesses. The disconnection between planning control and the delivery of infrastructure, inherent in all two-tier local government areas, is particularly marked in Kent where high levels of development are being managed across twelve Local Planning Authorities and a single County Council.

Like many areas of the UK, we have an ageing population, but this growth in older people is particularly focussed on some coastal Kent communities popular with retirees, which can reinforce local service challenges. Access to health care is exacerbated by the challenges faced in the east of the county to attract and retain GPs and nurses, with the training and development opportunities for healthcare professionals dominated by London.

Kent is affected by national and global challenges

Kent faces many of the fundamental challenges that all local areas face today, but local factors can mean that these are felt more intensely in Kent than in other counties.

Cost of living pressures caused by global issues such as rising fuel prices may be harder to bear for Kent's residents, where we are affected by relatively high costs, but lower earnings in some areas of the county than the rest of the South East. With many people and businesses still recovering from the impacts of the Covid pandemic, people in Kent are facing a tough time, with some falling into financial hardship that could put them and their families at risk of deprivation which has lasting impacts on their wellbeing and life chances. Kent County Council (KCC) cannot remove these pressures on people, but we can work with our partners to support people to cope, as we have done through our 'Helping Hands' initiative for households in financial hardship through the pandemic.

Whilst the internet and digitalisation has transformed society, it has harmed the vibrancy of many of our high streets. Without a single city or metropolitan area dominating the retail sector, Kent's towns had an established and strong retail offering. The proximity of London and Bluewater as major retail destinations, alongside Kent having the physical space to expand out-of-town retail parks, means our high street retail offer has been hit particularly hard and this has had a visible impact on the look and feel of many Kent towns. However, areas of Kent that have a strong independent retail sector are doing better and there are opportunities to support this in other areas of the county and harness our cultural assets to reinvigorate our high streets and drive footfall.

Kent cannot be immune from the inevitable impact of climate change, even whilst we transition to a greener economy. Over the last 30 years, Kent has lost more land to urbanisation and housing than any other county, and this increases the county's risk to being impacted by major weather events such as flooding. Kent's natural environment is one of the county's greatest assets, providing benefits for our quality of life and economy, and must be protected and strengthened. The council has made significant progress towards its ambition to reach Net Zero for its own services and estate by 2030 and is working with partners on Net Zero for Kent as a whole. Work to reduce energy and carbon emissions also reduces costs and so contributes to meeting the challenge of rising costs as well as improving energy security. The ongoing challenge is the trade-off between immediate cost pressures and the investment required to fund environment

projects that save money, adapt to existing climate change and mitigate against future adverse impacts.

Kent cannot keep meeting rising needs with stretched resources

Alongside the rest of the public sector, KCC is seeing exponential increases in demand for services that help individuals, including in adult's and children's social care. Funding is not keeping pace with the demand, and we are also facing the impacts of the global economic shock such as inflationary cost pressures and increases in interest rates. KCC has protected our people-based services as much as possible because we believe that providing support to people who need it is the right thing to do. However, as demand continues to rise, we cannot continue to do this indefinitely. This has also limited the resources we have available for functions like economic development which can help improve conditions for everyone in the county and are vital in tackling some of the big issues affecting quality of life for the whole population of Kent. There are hard financial choices ahead for KCC and our partners.

We recognise the challenges that Kent is facing, and the enormous pressures being felt by many of Kent's residents. We feel them too in the continued pressures on our services and on other public services in the county. We must balance the demands on our budgets, but in doing so we must not undermine the critical outcomes we want to deliver for Kent's people, economy, infrastructure and environment to make our county a better place now and in the future. We cannot solve all of the challenges, and we cannot face any of them alone. But there is an array of opportunities available to Kent to find a way through, drawing on all that our remarkable county has to offer, and through an honest conversation with people in Kent about how we can do it. The next section sets out how we will work differently to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities over the next four years and beyond.

OUR RESPONSE

This is how we will work differently to respond to the challenges and opportunities that Kent faces over the next four years.

1. We will have honest conversations with Kent's residents, businesses and communities

No one knows Kent better than the people who live and work here. In the past, we have tended to engage with residents, community groups and businesses about proposed changes and financial challenges on individual services. As we navigate through the challenges Kent faces, we need to have honest and ongoing conversations with people in Kent about their needs and expectations for all the services that we provide collectively, so we can better prioritise the way we use our resources. The pressures on our budget are significant, and we cannot serve the residents and businesses of Kent without being in a stable financial position, but there are real opportunities to achieve this by changing the way we work, such as reducing our operating and office estate to reflect the shift to digital and hybrid working. This will bring changes that will be very visible for our local communities, for our service users and for our staff, and we want to plan and implement this alongside the people it will impact from the start.

2. We will understand and act on people's needs

We can only plan and deliver services and prioritise our resources effectively if we have a full and detailed understanding of what the people in Kent who draw on our services need, both now and predicted into the future. Underpinning many of the opportunities for delivering change is a continued focus on improving the council's use of data and analytics to inform our service design and decision-making. The council must make better use of its own data and information provided by organisations delivering services on our behalf across the full range of our services, be able to share data with other public sector partners who are serving the same residents and local communities and use this to predict future trends. This does not just include quantitative metrics; qualitative data, including feedback from staff and providers, service users and residents, plays an important role in giving a fully rounded picture. This approach will also allow us to understand the impact of preventative action and invest in what has been proven to reduce future need.

3. We will have a strong focus on equalities

Kent's diversity is its greatest strength, and we need to ensure that no one is left behind or disadvantaged because of who they are. Most of what KCC does, in the services it provides and the improvements it seeks to make to Kent residents' quality of life, is aimed at improving equity of opportunity and outcome. Many of the priorities and actions set out in this strategy aim to tackle equality issues whether they exist in our county, our local communities, or our council. As a public authority we have a statutory duty under the Equality Act to publish a set of Corporate Equality Objectives for the organisation and report on progress

each year. By setting out the new Corporate Equality Objectives in this strategy (at the end of this section,) we are making a clear statement that tackling inequality is a fundamental and underpinning priority for the council.

4. We will be an open, fair and committed partner to those we work with

No single organisation in Kent can solve the complex challenges that Kent faces. KCC has a strong history of working with our partners in the public, private, voluntary and community sector, and this has been strengthened through our response to the Covid pandemic. Working more closely than ever with our partners gives us all the best chance of delivering better outcomes for Kent while making the most of our resources collectively - taking a view of what the county needs that is wider than our own organisation's services and budgets. It will help us to find innovative ways to meet people's needs and join up services and share resources so they work better for the people we collectively serve. KCC will continue to invest in its capacity and capability to deliver with and through its partners, particularly through earlier engagement on the development of strategies and service changes where a more collective and joined up approach may open up opportunities to do things better.

5. We will invest in and listen to our staff

KCC's dedicated and skilled staff are the backbone of the council, and we would not be able to deliver services to Kent's residents and communities without their continued hard work and commitment. Our staff are closest to the people we serve, and by listening to their experiences and ideas, we can benefit from this wealth of knowledge to improve how we do things. We are incredibly proud of how our staff have adapted through the Covid pandemic, finding ways to provide services in difficult and uncertain circumstances, and we will continue to support and invest in them as we settle into new ways of working. Through our new People Strategy, we will be an employer of choice within local government, where our staff feel supported and motivated to collaborate, innovate and deliver to the best of their ability every day. Our hybrid working approach, building on our previous initiatives will provide flexibility in how staff work, and we will continue to support their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. Our managers will be confident to support change and accountability across the organisation. We will develop clear pathways for young people to enter and build their future careers in KCC.

6. We will find better ways to deliver services for Kent

Commissioning is the way that we understand people's needs and design and deliver our services to meet them. The majority of KCC services are purchased from third party providers across the public, private and voluntary sector. Given the challenging market environment our providers are facing and the changes and opportunities around integrated ways of working, we must adapt our commissioning approach. We need to shift more of our focus to understanding people's needs and the design of services, with greater resident, user, staff and provider engagement so that the full range of options available to meeting need can be properly considered. In doing so we want to build a strategic relationship

across service users, partners, and providers, with less of a focus on sourcing the provision of services through competitive procurement. We will also focus on the wider social value that our significant spending power (both individually and collectively with our partners) can achieve. Whether that is through a focus on new apprenticeships, upskilling the existing workforce, or preferring local Kent businesses throughout the supply chain, the spend across the Kent public sector should be leveraged to support the Kent economy.

7. We will make the best use of digital technology to improve how we work

The most significant opportunity to reduce cost but also improve user experience is from further digitalisation of our service offer. This will support a greater shift for users online, which is the way most Kent residents prefer to access services, but critically, also underpins greater ability to automate more of the processes and interactions our residents have with the council. Greater focus on automation can transform our services so that they are better prepared to meet future demand whilst improving accessibility and consistency for users and freeing up more of our time and resources so we can focus on providing better service. We will further invest in our ICT platform to support the transformation of our services and strengthen our cyber security. We recognise that a digital-first approach will not be suitable for everyone, and we will continue to provide other options where these are needed, while supporting people who cannot access digital options, for example due to lack of skills and confidence or due to digital poverty, to be able to use digital options if possible.

8. We will stand up for Kent nationally

Government has set a clear focus on leadership at a place level to deliver many of its priorities, including Levelling Up. While this is challenging in a place as large and diverse as Kent, there are new opportunities emerging that could allow Kent to secure powers and funding from Government to allow us to take more control across a range of issues, including skills, transport, planning and economic development. This would allow us to tailor the services that we and our partners deliver in these areas to meet Kent communities' specific needs. This is particularly important in Kent where national border issues affect us so directly. We will build on our relationship with Government to put forward a persuasive case for devolution in Kent that meets the county's distinctive needs. We will seek to strengthen the collective public service voice in Kent, so that it can clearly articulate and advocate Kent's needs as a place back to central government. We will also work with our partners to promote the county's strategic assets more effectively as an attractive offer to draw and retain investment, businesses, jobs and talented people towards 'Brand Kent'.

Corporate Equality Objectives

KCC's Corporate Equality Objectives for the next four years are:

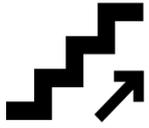
- Continue to be an inclusive employer which provides fair, open and equitable access to career progression and a trusted environment in which staff feel confident to call out discriminatory behaviour.
- Attract and retain a diverse workforce at all levels of the organisation which reflects the communities that KCC serves.
- Strengthen our equality data collection and analysis across our services to better understand people's needs and the cumulative impact of the council's actions on people with protected characteristics.
- Work with our strategic partnerships to understand and support the diverse needs of our communities.
- Promote equality, diversity and inclusion through our supply chains, including our trading companies.
- Ensure council information and services are accessible for everyone including those who are digitally excluded.

The council will publish an assessment framework as to how these equality objectives will be measured and monitored over the course of this strategic statement.

PRIORITIES FOR KENT

These are the priorities that KCC will deliver for Kent over the next four years. They have been shaped by the challenges and opportunities Kent faces and by the ideas and feedback we have received from our elected Members, partners and stakeholders. Each priority includes specific commitments and supporting objectives and will focus our efforts both as a council and collectively with our partners to meet those challenges and improve quality of life for our residents, businesses, and communities. They are:

<p>1. Levelling up Kent</p> 	<p>2. Infrastructure for communities</p> 
<p>3. Environmental step change</p> 	<p>4. New models of care and support</p> 



Priority 1: Levelling up Kent

Our commitment is to support the Kent economy to be resilient and successfully adapt to the challenges and opportunities it faces over the coming years.

Kent is a diverse county with a diverse economy. We have unique strengths and opportunities for economic growth including our nationally significant transport infrastructure, an attractive and distinctive natural environment supporting a strong visitor economy and important concentrations of innovation and high-value activity, such as at Discovery Park. Our position as the Gateway to Europe brings with it significant challenges, particularly when there are delays at the border that can bring parts of our road network to a standstill, impacting on residents, businesses and the image of our county. We must work with Government to find fair solutions to these national issues. While we have a dynamic and entrepreneurial economy, Kent overall falls behind the South East average in workforce skills levels, productivity and conventional measures of innovation. The county also has significant inequalities between its different areas, limiting the potential of individuals, local communities and the county as a whole. In the coming years, Kent's economy will experience significant challenges and opportunities as we adapt to demographic and workforce changes, changes in working practice, advances in technology and automation and managing the transition to net zero. Kent and Medway's Economic Strategy aims to develop a Kent economy by 2030 that is productive, sustainable and inclusive. Partners in business, learning institutions and government have a crucial role to play in making this happen, and KCC is well-placed to convene and lead this activity, getting the conditions in place for success and prosperity that everyone can benefit from.

We will:

1. Challenge Government to fully assess, recognise and meet the needs that KCC's strategic location presents – seeking a specific national infrastructure assessment by the National Infrastructure Commission.
2. Rebrand Kent to attract national and international investment by promoting all that the county has to offer for business, learning, leisure and tourism.
3. Support strategic opportunities for growth through the delivery of sites and premises and support for new investment and business expansion, where it will deliver higher-value jobs and increased productivity and contributes to our net zero target.
4. Back SMEs and entrepreneurs to start-up, grow and drive adoption of new technology to improve productivity through increased GVA (Gross Value Added) and higher wages.

5. Strengthen Kent's innovation 'ecosystem', working with our universities and businesses to increase knowledge exchange and opportunities for innovation.
6. Work with District Councils to regenerate town centres and promote independent retail, building on each town's strengths and the needs of the local area to re-establish town centres as economic and community hubs with renewed purpose and identity.
7. Unlock the potential of arts and culture as drivers for economic growth and to generate pride, identity and creativity in local communities.
8. Work with partners to develop a better co-ordinated approach to economic development across the county, joining up the strengths of the County Council, the Kent Districts and Medway. As part of this, we will explore opportunities with Government to gain control of more of the resources and decision-making that shape economic growth in the county.

Our commitment is to work with partners to develop a skills system for Kent that delivers skills that are resilient to changing workforce needs and opportunities and supports people to higher level skills.

Skills are the driving force behind a successful and productive economy. Kent lags behind the rest of the South East region on economic outcomes including productivity and average wages, and one of the main reasons for this is that our workforce has lower skills levels than the rest of the South East, particularly in our more deprived communities. Narrowing this skills gap will be essential to levelling up Kent, and we must ensure that individuals and communities who are being left behind are not excluded from opportunities to catch up because they are within the generally affluent South East. There are opportunities now to bring real improvements in skills levels, create high-quality employment opportunities and attract talented people into the county. KCC has a good track record of working with partners and providers from the further and higher education sectors, schools, and employers, recently strengthened through our actions to mitigate the impacts of Covid on employment in the county. We will build on this momentum, convening action to improve skills provision across partners and providers, utilising funding and devolution opportunities from Government, and using our rebranded Kent offer to promote the county as a great place to work.

We will:

1. Develop the highly successful Employment Task Force, so that it has the capacity to identify and tackle barriers to high-quality employment across the county and convene action between partners that will drive economic growth.
2. Respond to and build on the Local Skills Improvement Plan (piloted in Kent by Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce), which gives businesses including SMEs a stronger voice in local skills planning.
3. Regularly commission the Workforce Skills Evidence Base to provide information about the Kent economy, businesses and skills requirements

and inform the Action Plan that will coordinate interventions to improve skills levels and seize opportunities for new jobs and skills.

4. Maximise the use of national skills funding, including the apprenticeship levy and the lifelong learning entitlement to create real opportunities for people to access training opportunities throughout their lives that lead to employment in vocational and technical fields.
5. Seek the devolution of the Adult Skills Budget so it can be better used to meet the short-term skills requirements of local employers.
6. We will work with the skills sector, building on recent models of collaboration, to develop the post-16 education system to better meet the needs of young people as well as the local and wider economy.
7. Use our rebranded Kent offer to attract a range of high-quality employment opportunities that will help Kent retain its talented graduates.

Our commitment is to maintain KCC's strategic role in supporting schools in Kent to deliver accessible, high quality education provision for all families.

Kent is known for its excellent school system which is an asset to the county. Schools are often at the heart of Kent's communities, particularly in rural areas, and play a wider role in bringing communities together. The school landscape, and the role of Local Authorities within education, has shifted significantly over the last decade, with schools rightly gaining more autonomy to meet the needs of their pupils and communities. KCC places high value on its enduring relationship with Kent's schools and continues to play an active role in supporting school standards. As national Schools Improvement Grant funding is removed, this will become an increasing pressure for KCC to manage in order to maintain a choice of high-quality education provision. In the coming years it will also be vital to ensure that children and young people are able to recover from and catch up on missed education and opportunities due to the Covid pandemic. We have already begun to address this through our successful Reconnect Programme which has provided activities and interventions such as online home study support sessions and giving quicker access to counselling. The longer-term impacts on children are still emerging, and sustained, coordinated activity will be required to mitigate these and support this generation of children to achieve their potential and develop into successful and resilient adults.

We will:

1. Maintain improvement support services for all Kent schools, including maintained schools and academies, to maintain Kent's high-quality education system.
2. Call for Government to fully fund our Schools Commissioning Plan to ensure both sufficiency and choice of school places for Kent's families.
3. Explore opportunities arising from the schools White Paper, including increasing our involvement in academies and the potential for KCC to

sponsor a Multi Academy Trust for maintained schools to more directly support them to improve and meet local needs.

4. Maintain our support for rural maintained primary schools, recognising the wider role they play in local communities.
5. Call on Government to close the funding gap on capital education requirements given the rising need for school building and refurbishment projects.
6. Monitor the long-term implications of lost learning and opportunities due to the Covid pandemic and lobby for more funding to secure sustainable legacy initiatives from the Reconnect Programme to meet additional needs and prevent children, especially those that are vulnerable, from being left behind.
7. Maximise the National Youth Guarantee to support activities and facilities for young people in all areas of Kent including deprived areas that may not otherwise take it up.

Our commitment is to see significant improvements in the economy, connectivity, educational attainment, skills and employment rates and public health outcomes in deprived communities in coastal areas so that they improve faster than the rest of Kent to reduce the gaps.

Coastal communities are a proud and distinctive part of Kent's identity and heritage. They are home to thousands of Kent residents and attract thousands more visitors to our county every year. However, some of our coastal communities face significant and long-standing economic and social challenges. People living in these communities experience some of the worst outcomes in health and life expectancy, educational attainment and skills levels, employment and life chances compared with the rest of the county. We cannot level-up Kent while these areas are falling behind. We want to work with our partners to deliver targeted action tailored to the needs of deprived communities in coastal areas that will bring accelerated and sustained improvement. To do this we will take an asset-based approach, starting with the community's strengths and opportunities. While we will expect to see rapid improvement in the metrics used to measure outcomes, we will also ask people in these communities about their quality of life and life satisfaction to ensure that the actions we take are making a real difference to people's lives.

We will:

1. Develop an assets-based approach to planning and delivering action to help deprived communities in coastal areas with our partners, starting with an assessment of the strengths and opportunities, identity and heritage that each area has to develop tailored actions for rapid improvement that will be sustained over the long-term.
2. Work with partners to regenerate the physical environment of coastal towns, maximising the opportunities of assets such as ports, improving the

infrastructure and improving the attractiveness of the local area to draw investment.

3. Work within the East Kent health partnership to analyse the local issues and publish a health needs assessment focussed on the issues of East Kent's coastal communities. This analysis and accompanying action plan will form a template for future work with other areas within the Kent and Medway Integrated Care System.
4. Take forward the lessons and recommendations of recent reports on health and wellbeing in coastal towns including the Chief Medical Officer's Annual Report 2021, KCC's Annual Public Health Report 2021 and academic research by the University of Kent.
5. Expand our [CrowdFund Kent](#) offer to support small community projects that respond to community needs, focusing on accelerating improvement in the health and wellbeing of people who live in deprived communities in coastal areas and creating strong communities.
6. Use our knowledge and experience as a coastal area to influence Government's forthcoming national strategy on coastal communities and align our activity to it.

Our commitment is to work with our partners to hardwire a preventative approach to improving the health of Kent's population and narrowing health inequalities.

A healthy and resilient population is essential for a successful and thriving county. Good mental health is as important as physical health and the two are interconnected in their impact on our wellbeing. A consequence of the social and economic diversity across Kent is significant variation in the health outcomes and life expectancy of people living in different areas or belonging to different groups. A vital component of levelling up Kent is taking action to narrow the gaps in health outcomes by supporting people to lead healthier lives. The factors that impact on people's health extend far beyond the availability of healthcare, and include education, employment, housing, and financial security, including increased risk of fuel, food and bed poverty. KCC therefore plays an integral role in delivering these wider determinants of health, as well as our targeted Public Health duties and actions to protect and promote the health of the Kent population. We can direct and influence many of the drivers of health and therefore play an essential role with our partners in the Integrated Care System (ICS) in improving the county's health, particularly through prevention. KCC will seize the opportunities that the new partnership arrangements present to align our activity so we can achieve more, sharing our intelligence and resources to target interventions.

We will:

1. Align our Public Health services and activities to deliver a strong system-wide preventative focus through the ICS for Kent and Medway by developing a five-year system-wide Public Health Strategy for Kent in

which every part of the system has a role to play, to reduce health inequalities and achieve better health and wellbeing outcomes.

2. Jointly deliver ICS population health initiatives, focusing energy and resources on the most deprived 20% of the population, other population groups experiencing poorer than average health outcomes (e.g. ethnic minority communities) and support the prevention of the five key clinical areas of health inequalities: maternity, severe mental illness, chronic respiratory disease, early cancer diagnosis and hypertension case finding.
3. Broker the involvement of all partners in Kent in the activities of the ICS so their valuable contribution to promoting health and wellbeing can be maximised, including the role that Parish and Town Councils can play in improving health in their local communities.
4. Adopt an unrelenting focus on reducing cardiovascular disease in our population by continuing to focus on healthier behaviours, stopping smoking, taking up exercise and healthier eating.
5. Work with partners to tailor approaches to improve mental health and wellbeing across the whole population and support the Kent and Medway Better Mental Health Pledge and building on initiatives such as Live Well Kent that provides free mental health support for people aged 17+ and is delivered on behalf of KCC and the NHS.
6. Seek to build on the legacy of our Helping Hands programme by exploring the sustainability of piloted partnership schemes that better identify, refer and support families and individuals in financial hardship to stop them falling into crisis.



Priority 2: Infrastructure for communities

Our 'Infrastructure First' commitment seeks to ensure that new development provides the appropriate physical and social infrastructure necessary to support new and existing communities' quality of life.

Kent is experiencing rapid growth to accommodate our rising population. Housing growth that comes without the necessary social and physical infrastructure that new and existing communities need brings unacceptable damage to quality of life. We firmly believe that meeting nationally set housing targets, without the correct infrastructure, is not right or acceptable for Kent. An 'Infrastructure First' approach is critical before further housing growth and we must be increasingly ready to challenge developments where this is not the case. We are committed to building our capacity to drive strategic planning and regeneration at a countywide level, using our perspective and position to provide a strategic overview of the development and infrastructure needs of Kent as a whole. It is important that we are bold in our communication and negotiation with Government and its agencies about housing and economic growth ambitions and work with local planning authorities and our partners to clearly articulate and secure the subsequent investment required to ensure new development is properly embedded into thriving, connected and supported communities.

We will:

1. Challenge inappropriate development which does not have the appropriate physical or social infrastructure necessary to maintain the quality of life of new and existing Kent communities.
2. Strengthen our capacity to support strategic planning across the county to provide an oversight of the county's plan-led development and infrastructure needs, learning from innovative new models of spatial planning across local government.
3. Seek change so that our key strategic policies (Growth & Infrastructure Framework, Kent Design Guide, Developer Contribution Guide) have a statutory basis and as such are material to planning decisions.
4. Work with Government to secure Kent's 'Infrastructure First' Infrastructure Proposition with Government.
5. Seek to champion reform to the national system of developer contributions to make it entirely fit for purpose and continue to build a more robust relationship with planning authorities to ensure that the right infrastructure for all essential services such as education, health, social care,

communities and utilities (including waste, water and high speed broadband) is in place for developments to be approved.

6. As part of its Levelling Up ambitions, encourage the Government to reconsider its approach to assessing housing need in order to rebalance housing targets away from the South East.
7. Support local communities to have more involvement in shaping their own Local Neighbourhood Plans.
8. Through the Kent Design Guide and other relevant strategies, encourage housing that is designed with health and wellbeing built in to promote healthy lifestyles, respond to the impacts of climate change and changing work patterns, while being sensitive to Kent's cherished built, natural and historic environments and identity, and support greener ways of living and access to green and natural spaces.

Our commitment is to improve digital connectivity and access across Kent by supporting the delivery of both Government-led and local programmes.

Digital connectivity matters. Increasingly, almost everything we do requires a mobile or broadband connection, whether it is learning new skills, running a business, looking after our health or staying connected with our friends and family. Advances in technology – whether it be for domestic, business or industrial applications means that we will need faster and higher capacity digital connections. This will be essential if Kent is to remain a great place to live and work. To date, our work with Building Digital UK (BDUK) has helped over 150,000 homes and businesses that would otherwise have been left with no or slow broadband connectivity. Therefore, we are supporting the Government's ambition to deliver nationwide coverage of gigabit-capable broadband as soon as possible to ensure that Kent's homes and businesses have access to fast and future-proofed broadband connectivity. We must ensure that a digital-first approach does not exclude or disadvantage people who are unable to use digital options due to access barriers or digital poverty and support them to access digital options if they are able to. We have already begun this during the pandemic through our Helping Hands programme which has created various inclusion projects with partners to help keep residents digitally connected, and we will work with our partners to continue providing support for digital access as this continues to become a bigger part of life.

We will:

1. Encourage telecoms providers to go as far as possible with their own upgrade programmes, providing market-led investment in gigabit-capable networks and assisting telecoms providers with local delivery.
2. Support BDUK on the rollout of their new £200 million 'Project Gigabit' programme in Kent to connect around 100,000 homes and businesses that cannot currently obtain a superfast broadband connection or will not be covered by existing upgrade programmes.

3. Work with Building Digital UK and mobile network operators to support the rollout of mobile connectivity upgrades across the county, including the Shared Rural Network programme.
4. Work with our partners to develop and build a coordinated approach to digital inclusion across the county that will benefit residents, businesses, and those organisations supporting them, as digital technology and services evolve in a post-pandemic world.
5. Explore sustainability options so that our work through the Helping Hands programme to improve public access to Wi-Fi for communities in need can continue.

Our commitment is to support our rural communities and businesses in meeting the distinctive challenges and opportunities that they face.

Kent's rural areas make up around 85% of the county. Our unique identity as the 'Garden of England' is one of the county's greatest assets and Kent's rural communities and businesses have a history of innovation and enterprise. However, rural communities face their own challenges including areas of deprivation, which, along with other areas, will be exacerbated by cost of living increases such as rising energy and fuel prices. Kent's land-based businesses are facing significant challenges following EU transition, including employment and supply chain issues, and the need to adapt to climate change and changes in land use, but they also make a substantial economic contribution to the county and have strategic importance in terms of food security. Community action, often facilitated by active Parish Councils, is strong in many rural areas and is an asset that can be harnessed to tackle some of the issues rural communities face, including meeting the needs of an ageing population, social isolation, transport and access to services and opportunities. In order to support a modern and prosperous rural Kent, we need to ensure that Kent's rural areas have the social, physical and business critical infrastructure in place that communities, businesses and individuals need to succeed.

We will:

1. Reconstitute the Kent Rural Board into a dynamic, output driven group, bringing partners together to identify and work on key priorities to deliver outcomes for our rural communities and businesses.
2. Invest in Kent's high-quality landscapes and rural environment, protecting and enhancing productive farmland and protected landscapes and working with our partners to tackle climate change challenges such as the growing demands on water supply as our county grows.
3. Support a resilient and profitable land-based and food growing and production sector through encouraging continued diversification and promoting the growth of Agri-Tech and research and development to enable sustainable production, reduce emissions and enhance the quality of the rural environment.

4. Foster community capacity and resilience in rural areas, extending our [CrowdFund Kent](#) offer to enable local voluntary and community groups to take forward projects that will meet the specific needs of rural communities, enhance access to local support networks and services.
5. Explore innovative ways of delivering services in rural areas, including for example working more closely with Parish Councils, and using new technologies to improve the support people receive in more isolated areas.

Our commitment is to ensure residents have access to viable and attractive travel options that allow them to make safe, efficient and more sustainable journeys throughout Kent.

Transport and connectivity are vital to ensuring a good quality of life for Kent's residents, impacting accessibility of employment, education, health provision and leisure. The distributed nature of Kent's towns and villages creates challenges in providing a commercially viable public transport network and will naturally encourage more reliance on car travel. We need to be realistic about making car journeys work better while also working with our partners and providers to strengthen alternative travel options. Kent cannot afford to cross-subsidise transport routes that are not commercially viable in the same way a metropolitan transport authority would be able to. However, we are committed to working innovatively with partners and providers to ensure that the required infrastructure exists in new and existing communities to support flexible, reliable and integrated transport systems across Kent. This includes innovative transport technologies and active travel options such as walking and cycling, that can ease pressures on busy Kent roads while positively contributing to health and environmental outcomes for the county. The quality and condition of our highways, cycle paths and footpaths is key to resident safety. Therefore, it is essential that we commit to a highway maintenance approach that successfully balances efficiency and responsiveness with long term planning and sustainability.

We will:

1. Explore new models of delivering highways maintenance to enhance our highways responsiveness.
2. Invest in the condition and safety of Kent's highway assets, maximising funding opportunities from Department for Transport where possible.
3. Deliver our ambition to reduce fatalities, serious injuries and the number and severity of collisions, including on the county's rural roads.
4. Tighten the management of permits/lane rental to prevent excessive or unnecessary damage and disruption and to ensure good quality reinstatement of asset once work is complete.
5. Accelerate priority local road improvement schemes to tackle congestion and air pollution.

6. Incentivise people to choose alternative travel options to the car by prioritising the maintenance and creation of safe and accessible walking routes and cycle lanes, and providing bus priority where appropriate.
7. Support the development of zero emission/new technology public transport projects, for example zero emission buses, to increase efficiency and sustainability of public transport options.
8. Work with our partners through the Kent Enhanced Bus Partnership and with Government to explore sustainable and commercially viable options for providing bus transport to meet people's needs, making the best use of Bus Service Improvement Plan funding.
9. Strengthen our position and levers in regard to strategic transport links in the county (e.g. Eurostar, Eurotunnel and HS1) to maximise opportunities and benefits for Kent, such as lobbying for the reintroduction of international rail stops at Ashford and Ebbsfleet.

Our commitment is to help all Kent's communities benefit from having a strong social fabric which underpins family, community and personal resilience.

Kent's places are not solely defined by physical infrastructure; social infrastructure has an important role to play in creating strong communities where people can come together and support each other and improve the place they live. Whilst KCC and other public sector partners play a role in this, it is often the informal support and the myriad of local organisations, community networks, community leaders and local volunteers (we call this 'civil society'), that help to make a community and create a sense of identity. The Covid pandemic brought significant additional pressure on the civil society, but also highlighted the enormous force for good that it can bring, and we want to ensure that all of Kent's communities, existing and new, can benefit from this. It is often these very local groups and individuals that know their community best, and we want to create the right conditions for them to respond to communities' needs; for communities to be active and empowered. We have committed to this in our Civil Society Strategy. KCC also has a role to play in making Kent's communities safe and inclusive for everyone who lives there, improving civic pride and quality of life, but we also recognise that to be successful we must do this in partnership. One of the ways we can do this is to support a strong social sector (voluntary, community and social enterprises) in Kent, building on the strengthened relationships and partnerships that have been created through working together on Covid response.

We will:

1. Commit to funding a diverse infrastructure support offer for the social sector in Kent, which enables organisations to have access to the support they need to thrive, whilst ensuring the sector has a voice to influence and advocate for the people and communities they support.

2. Enable a coordinated, properly resourced and sustainable volunteering infrastructure across the county, including building upon the Kent Volunteer Partnership pilot project.
3. Expand our successful [CrowdFund Kent](#) Programme, providing funding for small local community groups to take forward ideas to respond to local challenges or improve their local area and enabling local people to back and support local projects that matter to them.
4. Ensure that as we redesign the way we deliver our services and adapt our physical presence in communities, we make these places accessible and inclusive for local community groups and the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector, offering a space for people to meet or use these assets to deliver activities.
5. Work with civil society and other partners to find ways to tackle social isolation and loneliness, including 'social prescribing' to community groups and activities that help people connect with others, building upon the successes of the Connected Communities project and through our Community Wardens, targeting them where they are most needed.
6. Continue to coordinate Government-sponsored refugee resettlement programmes including those for Syrian, Afghan and Ukrainian nationals and support them to settle into Kent's communities.
7. Create the right conditions to ensure there is a community-based offer of activities for young people that is led by the community and meets the needs of a diverse population.



Priority 3: Environmental step change

Our commitment is to consider Kent's environment as a core asset that is valued, strengthened and protected.

Kent's proud identity as the Garden of England is one of our greatest assets, and one that we must protect, both for the benefit of the county's nature and biodiversity but also for the enjoyment and wellbeing of our residents and the success of our economy. This is becoming more crucial given the cumulative impacts and pressures upon the county caused by factors such as a growing population, increasing urbanisation, a changing climate and an increase in extreme weather events. We are already making good headway; for example virtually everything that is thrown away in Kent is treated, recycled and produces energy, and we are taking a focused approach to protecting and improving our biodiversity. But we need to ensure these actions are not taken in isolation from interrelated challenges; for example, we must take a strategic approach to planning which encourages stronger links between local and spatial plans and our environmental targets to ensure that they are mutually supportive. We need to work with Government and our partners to bring about action that will make a lasting impact on how we safeguard Kent's unique environment.

We will:

1. Work with districts to produce harder and stronger action plans under air quality management areas where they are required.
2. Improve access for our residents to green and natural spaces especially in urban and deprived areas and through our Public Rights of Way network to improve health and wellbeing outcomes.
3. Continue our work establishing new trees across the county to deliver Plan Tree's ambitions of 1.5 million trees and a 19% canopy cover over the next ten years to support the recovery of wildlife, provide nature-based climate solutions, and enrich people's lives.
4. Work with Districts to deliver quality biodiversity net gain across the county's developments and land management that makes a meaningful contribution to the recovery and enhancement of nature in Kent.
5. Lead the development of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Kent and Medway, which will identify priorities for the restoration of biodiversity, map existing valuable areas of nature and make specific proposals to create or improve habitat and wider environmental goals.
6. Be a community leader in action for pollinators and develop KCC's own estate for the benefit of these vital insects.

7. Work with partners to protect and enhance Kent's coastlines, focusing on schemes that will make our coastal environments attractive, safe, and sustainable for both our residents and our wildlife.
8. Continue to work with our commissioning partners to create the infrastructure and jobs that enable us to reprocess waste materials and produce energy within the county, in order to maintain a closed loop local economy.

Our commitment is to work towards Kent being Net Zero by 2050.

KCC is committed to working towards Net Zero for the county by 2050 and recognises the challenges we have to overcome to achieve this transition, particularly as pressures such as energy price shocks become more pressing. The greatest proportion of carbon emissions come from domestic and commercial buildings and transport and we must identify practical and affordable solutions to reducing them, including encouraging the transition to low carbon technologies that can also benefit individuals and businesses. KCC has been leading the way through the Low Carbon Kent initiative, which supports SMEs to invest in decarbonisation. We need to build on this and encourage the development of a green economy in Kent through economic activity and technological developments that bring about reduced carbon emissions and pollution, and enhance energy and resource efficiency. Therefore, not only will KCC lead by example in working towards Net Zero across all of our areas of business by 2030, but we will grasp the opportunity to take a coordinated approach with partners across both the public and private sectors to meet the county's Net Zero ambitions.

We will:

1. Set detailed emission reduction pathways to Net Zero by 2050, with significant reductions by 2030.
2. Develop a full carbon footprint for Kent and Medway with consumption targets and reduction measures integrated into existing carbon budgets.
3. Establish a full assessment framework for commissioning, procurement and policy decisions to support our services in contributing to Net Zero targets and minimising the impact on Kent's environment.
4. Explore opportunities for financial support for local environmental projects and groups.
5. Explore creating a large-scale retrofit programme that is cross-sector and area-based, covering both business and communities.
6. Use our commissioning and procurement power to support Net Zero and the green economy, reduce our carbon miles and prioritise buying local goods and services where possible, and to further support green economy jobs in Kent.
7. Support residents and businesses to take action to reduce their carbon footprint and consider where KCC could use its purchasing power to lower the cost of Net Zero solutions and climate change adaptation.

8. Turn the curve on transport emissions and road pollution by developing approaches to road space, parking, public transport and electric vehicle infrastructure with a presumption towards more sustainable and low carbon travel modes.

Our commitment is to support Kent to become a leading county for carbon zero energy production and use.

Working towards Net Zero requires adopting alternative sources of energy generation and the ability to explore and maximise new forms of energy in order to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. This transition needs to be pump-primed to accelerate the development and deployment of alternative energy sources, and the right conditions put in place to encourage this within our county. As a council, we are already pursuing and supporting ventures in alternative forms of energy, and as a county, we can go further. The adaptable and diverse nature of Kent's economy gives us an advantage in fostering research and development across the public and private sectors, and could put Kent on the map for developing and using affordable, clean and sustainable energy sources. The county already has over 5,000 businesses classed as being part of the 'clean growth' sector which equates to over 37,000 employees and £3.18 bn in GVA – the equivalent in employment and output to the manufacturing sector. We have the ingredients we need to pioneer the production and use of carbon zero energy – we need a coordinated approach to truly realise the potential of a flourishing green economy.

We will:

1. Develop a joint Future Energy Investment Programme for Kent and Medway looking at hydrogen, nuclear, green gas, decentralised energy in new developments, community energy generation, and other emerging energy technologies.
2. Explore opportunities for Kent to host small scale nuclear reactors, building on our strong nuclear legacy at Dungeness.
3. Undertake a renewable electricity and heat energy generation opportunities study for Kent and Medway that informs the deployment of alternative energy sources.
4. Make use of low grade land (e.g. landfill, low grade agricultural) through use of solar and wind farms.
5. Encourage and showcase 'energy positive' new developments and communities which produce more energy than they consume.
6. Work with universities, green businesses, and research & development organisations to explore the potential of the creation of a sector cluster in Kent for carbon zero energy production.

Our commitment is to ensure the county is well placed to adapt to climate change.

Kent is predicted to experience hotter, drier summers and warmer, wetter winters which will bring more frequent extreme weather events of flooding, storms, and high temperatures, all of which bring significant health and economic risks. These risks are particularly pronounced in Kent – as a peninsular county we are particularly vulnerable to flooding, and the risks are exacerbated by urbanisation which has weakened some of the environment’s natural resilience to the effects of a changing climate, and increased demand for water. Since formally acknowledging the environment and climate emergency in 2019, KCC has been a key partner in projects to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change. We fully support the use of nature-based solutions that sustainably utilise the county’s natural resources, including supporting wetlands, hedgerows and woodland to capture carbon dioxide, and moderating the impact of heatwaves by bringing nature into urbanised areas. We are keen to see nature-based solutions brought into planning, so that growth within Kent no longer contributes to climate change impacts. Making the county more resilient to climate change can only be achieved through working in partnership including with Local Planning Authorities, nature partnership organisations and water companies.

We will:

1. Invest in our natural capital to maximise nature-based solutions that assist in adaptation to, and mitigation of climate change impacts.
2. Develop a County Adaptation Guide that can inform the preparation of Local Plans to ensure that new developments are designed with adaptation to extreme climate and weather in mind.
3. Strengthen contingency planning to ensure that our assets, services and infrastructure, as well as communities, businesses, transport links and utilities are resilient to climate risks.
4. Develop and support approaches to alleviate fuel poverty for our vulnerable residents, including support for retrofitting schemes.
5. Working with partners, improve the safety and wellbeing of Kent’s residents and the economy of Kent through appropriate flood risk management, including the promotion of sustainable flood risk management practices in development, regeneration and land management, utilising natural processes where appropriate.
6. Work with the water companies, Local Planning Authorities and the Environment Agency to establish sustainable water management solutions to mitigate water stress caused by domestic, commercial and agriculture pressures.



Priority 4: New models of care and support

Our commitment is to seize the opportunity of integrating our planning, commissioning and decision making in adult, children's, and public health services through being a partner in the Kent and Medway Integrated Care System at place and system level.

The health and social care systems have been straining under exponential increases in demand for many years – a consequence of people living longer and with more complex needs, which has also been greatly exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic. As demand for our social care services has outstripped funding year on year, KCC has prioritised maintaining these services because we believe it is vital that we protect and support people who draw on social care. However, it is impossible to continue this indefinitely, as it creates pressure on other services important to Kent residents' quality of life. The time and opportunity has come to fundamentally rethink the way health and social care services are provided, both to manage the urgent resource gap health and social care jointly share, and to provide more preventative, coordinated care to the population we both support. Government have set a clear direction for the integration of health and social care and the creation of the Kent and Medway Integrated Care System (ICS) cements this shift. KCC is entirely committed as a partner in the ICS and will work to maximise opportunities to join up the planning and provision of health and social care services and the pooling of resources. We will work as an active partner at strategic and place-based level within the ICS structures to deliver this critical opportunity to create a sustainable and effective health and social care system for Kent.

We will:

1. Explore all opportunities to integrate our commissioning of services to improve health and care outcomes, for example enablement and intermediate care, joined-up hospital discharge services, jointly commissioning care home services, and technology enabled services.
2. Develop shared workforce priorities and move towards a shared workforce model, making caring roles a properly valued career of choice with a clear pathway for career progression, in order to recruit and retain a talented health and care workforce.
3. Support the development of Local Health and Care Partnerships, which will work in collaboration with local people and communities to identify their own outcome priorities and agree action to achieve them from April 2023.
4. Work within the system to ensure a strong focus on preventative community services, building a strong strategic relationship with the social

sector in Kent and their role in supporting a system wide focus on prevention.

5. Ensure that our public health function is shaped to support the ICS at system and place level and support the shared objectives of the ICS and council in regard to delivering effective population health management.
6. Explore the opportunity to develop a shared analytics function across the ICS, building on the strength of the Kent Public Health Observatory.

Our commitment is to support the most vulnerable children and families in our county, ensuring our social work practice supports manageable caseloads, reflective learning, joined up safeguarding and effective corporate parenting arrangements.

Protecting vulnerable children and families from harm and supporting them to live safe and fulfilled lives is one of our most important roles, reinforced by our statutory duties around safeguarding and corporate parenting. Like all of our people-based services, demands on children's social care services are increasing as the complexity of issues that children and families are facing grows, which has unfortunately been exacerbated by the impacts of the Covid pandemic. The best way we can manage this is to work even more closely with our partners including through the ICS to find joint approaches to helping children and families with complex issues that often span across our services. We are committed to making rapid and sustained improvements in the support we provide to children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and their families, where we know that support has too often been lacking or delayed. As the number of children with SEND continues to grow, the deficit in funding through the dedicated schools grant to support them is also growing, and the financial pressure on KCC to provide the support that these children and families need is significant. We will work with our partners including schools and with the families of children with SEND to find sustainable solutions that provide the tailored support that these children need to access appropriate education and opportunities that will help them lead a good life.

We will:

1. Commit to taking forward joint commissioning of services for children with NHS partners through the ICS, led by KCC strategically at county level – for example improving neurodevelopmental assessment pathways for children and young people.
2. Act as a good Corporate Parent for those children in the care of KCC and improve support for young people as they transition into adulthood, whilst also improving support for those who transition into the Adult Social Care system.
3. Support further improvement in the quality of social care practice through investing in our children's social care workforce, ensuring appropriate

caseloads and reflective learning time available for our social workers, and further developing the Kent Social Work Academy.

4. Embed our 'One front door' approach, working with partners to ensure referrals to children's social care are efficiently and consistently managed to provide the child or family with the right help at the right time.
5. Embed a whole-family approach, tackling the underlying problems that might cause concern in a child's family, such as domestic abuse, substance misuse and parental mental health.
6. Respond to national policy changes on SEND provision, work with SEND families to rapidly improve the service provided to SEND children and work with mainstream schools so more can accept and meet the needs of children with SEND, increasing choice and proximity of school places.
7. Work with the ICS to support children's mental health needs so that they are met with the right level of support in a timely manner.

Our commitment is to ensure that adults who draw on social care support lead the lives they want to live, by putting their needs at the heart of everything we do, whilst successfully innovating and responding to the challenges to social care funding.

The aim of our Adult Social Care services is to make a positive difference every day, supporting people who draw on our services to live as full and safe a life as possible and make informed choices. To do this there needs to be a choice of high-quality, responsive, person-centred social care services available that meet people's diverse needs. This is increasingly challenging in the financial situation that we face. Nationally, adult social care reform is bringing long-needed changes in the way adult social care is arranged and funded to create a fairer and more sustainable system. Some of the main changes proposed, including the cap on care costs and enabling self-funders to request that we arrange their care bring with them a significant increase in workload and financial burden for KCC. While urging the right Government support to meet these costs, we must find a way to manage these changes while realising the benefits for people who draw on care and their families. We have real opportunities to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of our adult social care services by making full use of new technology and innovations that mean we can better manage demand and focus resources where they are most needed. Adult social care would not function without the vital role that unpaid carers play in supporting their loved ones, and we will go further to involve them in decision-making and support their own health and wellbeing.

We will:

1. Embrace innovations including automation technology to improve and speed up assessment for adult social care services, streamline admin/back office systems and save money to focus on frontline service delivery.

2. Seize opportunities to embed technology and digitally-enabled care and support services in meeting people's current and future care needs.
3. Support our place-based social work practice teams to pool or align resources to support more joined up health and care service delivery, empowering people who draw on our services to make decisions about their care and improving the quality of care they receive.
4. Respond to national changes in adult social care in a way that best meets the needs of people who draw on Kent's social care, including delivering the changes arising from the social care reform white paper such as the cap on care costs and implementing new requirements around inspection of care services.
5. Ensure that unpaid carers have the right information, advice and support to enable them to continue their caring responsibilities if they are willing and able, and involving carers in decision making as equal partners, as appropriate.
6. Provide effective support to those with learning disabilities whose care and support needs change as they live longer, including taking into account relevant statutory guidance from the Downs Syndrome Act.

Our commitment is to reshape our commissioning practice to ensure we build strategic partnerships with our providers, through earlier engagement, more consistent and proactive commissioning practice, and a stronger focus on co-designing services.

KCC heavily relies on the third-party providers to deliver the vast majority of its services. However, the market is facing extraordinary challenges including workforce shortages and cost pressures such as rising fuel prices. Market pressures are particularly acute in the adult social care market, resulting in increased costs for KCC on its biggest area of spend, and risks the continued stability and quality of social care services. We cannot expect that the market will continue to be able to meet increasing adult social care demands in the same way it always has. Part of the solution is to use our significant purchasing power to support a diverse and resilient market. We also need to rebalance our commissioning approach so we focus more on understanding needs and keeping an open mind on the variety of delivery options available before choosing the best solution, which will not always be to buy a service from the market. We will develop a more strategic relationship with providers and more strongly involve the users of social care and their carers to find sustainable solutions for both individuals and providers.

We will:

1. Make better use of data and analytics to understand current and future needs so we can improve commissioning.

2. Ensure the sufficiency of the market of social care in Kent, and work with providers to address the supply issues in certain parts of the county where geographic or workforce challenges impact on provision.
3. Explore options to ensure that residential care provision is fit for the future, responding to reduced levels of demand but increased levels of need and encouraging necessary growth in the specialist services segment of the market including for people with dementia, learning disabilities and mental health needs.
4. Ensure that the voice of social care users and their carers is heard and influences all service design and commissioning decisions.
5. Explore how we can work innovatively with partners such as the social sector to deliver services in partnership, with a more mature and collaborative approach to service design.

HOW WE WILL KNOW WE ARE ON TRACK

This strategy sets out our direction of travel for the next four years. As with our previous council strategies, it is important to have the right mechanisms in place that can tell us how we are doing as we work with our partners towards meeting the priorities and commitments we have set out. To do this we need to have a detailed understanding of the impact that our services are having, and we will ask residents, service users, businesses, staff and providers to share their experiences and views with us so we can get a complete picture.

A **delivery framework** will be established to ensure that progress is captured and monitored through a variety of channels, which will include:

- **Resident engagement:** We will ask Kent's residents about their experiences and perceptions of KCC's services to help us understand how we are doing and how we can improve the planning and delivery of services in the future.
- **Quarterly Performance Report:** The Quarterly Performance Report (QPR) informs KCC's Cabinet and the public about performance on key areas of the council's activity. It is an important tool for helping to deliver openness, learning and challenge to KCC's performance so the council can keep improving. We will undertake a review of the quantitative and qualitative measures in the QPR, and the more detailed Directorate Performance Dashboards, to ensure that there are strong and comprehensive links between them and the objectives within this strategy.
- **Divisional and Service Business Planning:** Business Plans are prepared annually to set out each division or service's priorities and the resources they will use to deliver them. It is important that the Directorates' business plans reflect our commitments and detail how the objectives will be delivered.
- **Strategic Reset Programme:** This is our council's overarching delivery mechanism for its cross-cutting and priority change programmes, and we will review its scope to ensure the key priorities set out in this strategy are sufficiently captured in the Strategic Reset Programme.
- **Equality Objectives Framework:** We will create a framework that will effectively capture and monitor progress against the new corporate equality objectives, so that we can provide robust council-wide evidence on how we are meeting them for our annual Equalities Report as part of our Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act.

The council's established governance channels will allow KCC's elected Members and the public to have oversight of progress against this strategy. Cabinet will receive regular updates on performance, and within the scope of their remit, Cabinet Committees will be able to have oversight of how specific programmes and projects are progressing. Papers for KCC's public committees can be found on our website.