

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 26th May 2022

Question by Dr Sullivan to Peter Oakford, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Corporate and Traded Services

British Sign Language (BSL) is one of Britain's approved languages. Based on official statistics, it is believed that the total number of BSL users in the UK is 151,000[1] (and that 87,000 of these people are deaf), while in Kent specifically, there are understood to be 407 BSL users.[2] However, at present, there is no provision in place which would allow a deaf/hearing impaired Kent resident (or indeed a KCC Member or member of staff for that matter) to be able to watch and understand a publicly streamed council meeting through the medium of BSL without them having to arrange their own interpreter.

With this in mind, would the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Corporate and Traded Services explain what steps have been taken so far to address this issue and would they consider undertaking a feasibility study to explore whether or not it would be possible to include BSL interpreters as part of public meetings, perhaps with input from the Selection & Member Services Committee and in conjunction with the Kent Interpreting Service? I appreciate that this will bring logistical challenges and cost implications but, as I am sure we can all agree, public meetings should be made accessible to everyone, and this means that alternative provision (such as access to a BSL interpreter) should be made available at the point of delivery and should not have to be requested.

Answer

Thank you for the question regarding the use of British Sign Language (BSL) at our public meetings.

I am happy to confirm we are currently reviewing the feasibility of interpreting services at our meetings and in support of our webcasting. Our current webcasting arrangements are in their final year and we have already been exploring how we can make our webcasts and meetings more accessible building on some of the functionality and learning that we gained during the pandemic. As part of that activity, Members will be contacted and provided with an opportunity to provide views on webcasting and meeting facilities and I have asked the General Counsel to ensure this is included in that work.

I am keen to make sure that the paper to Selection and Member Services properly contemplates the potential experience of our meetings by all our residents, communities and Members. Our Corporate Management Team have already established a task and finish group to examine the use of British Sign Language across our services and the skills of our Sensory Services Team are helping to guide the implementation of this work to ensure the experiences of the deaf community are taken into account.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 26th May 2022

**Question by Mr Hook to Ms Carey,
Cabinet Member for Environment**

We know the Council is committed to the goal of Net Zero in Kent by 2050, in accordance with national law implementing the Paris Climate Agreement. What does the Cabinet Member believe would be the consequences of failing to meet this goal and is she satisfied that all Members understand the importance of this?

Answer

I'd much prefer to concentrate on getting on with the work KCC is doing to make our County cleaner and greener including our explicit commitments as an administration to net zero for our estates and operations by 2030, and for the County as a whole by 2050. I don't see that my view of my fellow councillors' beliefs helps in any way with this.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 26th May 2022

Question by Mr Streatfeild to the Leader of the Council, Roger Gough

In Sevenoaks we now have two food banks, one of which is operating in the Leader's division. Others are regularly opening up elsewhere in Kent. In the coming months, many residents will increasingly be faced with the choice between debt or dinner, or heating and eating.

Can the Leader please clarify what information the Council collects regarding levels of poverty in the County and how this information is used? In answering the question, can he please explain what the council is currently doing to help alleviate the cost-of-living crisis?

Answer

The County Council collates several sources of information relating to poverty within the local population on its website. The Deprivation and Poverty page contains data, toolkits and bulletins on the Index of Multiple Deprivation, children in poverty, fuel poverty and homelessness. The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) is the official measure of relative deprivation in England and is part of a suite of outputs that form the English Indices of Deprivation (IoD). The Economy and Employment page contains different types of information about average household income, unemployment, benefit claimants and other labour market statistics.

Separate to these population-level measures, KCC records the financial arrangements of individuals as part of the assessment process for various services and benefits. This is confidential information and not used for other purposes.

KCC has received a number of different Grants from multiple Government departments to support with some of the impacts of Covid-19, including the impact on people's financial resilience. This has helped households in need across a range of areas, for example supporting residents to pay energy and water bills, providing debt advice, funding for food, and support for digital inclusion and accessibility. Across all of these funds, KCC has sought to provide both immediate support for those in need, as well as supporting projects which will have long term, sustainable impacts. In addition, the Helping Hands Scheme has been created to develop projects that support people who are experiencing, or at risk of, financial hardship.

In particular, on 6 October 2021 the Government announced that a new Household Support Fund (HSF) grant would be made available to County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England to support those most in need over the winter. The Fund was issued to support households in the most need with food, energy and water bills. It can also be used to support households with essential costs related to those items and with wider essential costs.

A decision was taken to allocate £4.5m towards providing benefits related Free School Meals over the October half term, as well as Christmas 2021, February half term and

Easter 2022. In addition £2.5m was allocated to KCC services including the Kent Support and Assistance Service to distribute to families in financial hardship.

£4.065m was allocated to support households with energy and water. In keeping with the strong partnership approach adopted by all partners throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, 20% of the funding was devolved to District and Borough Councils to ensure the most appropriate local method of delivery for this funding to residents in need. As a result of this fund, approximately 260,000 awards of support were given out across Kent.

On 23 March 2022, the government announced in the Spring Statement that the Household Support Fund (HSF) would be extended from 1 April 2022 to 30 September 2022. As previously, the Fund has been made available to County Councils to support those most in need. The County Council will allocate funds to support families eligible for Free School Meals, and provide support for households with energy and water with a particular focus on supporting pension age residents. In addition, the County Council is working in partnership with the District and Borough Councils to devolve a proportion of this funding to prioritise within their areas based on their in depth knowledge of local need.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 26th May 2022

**Question by Mr Lewis to Peter Oakford, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member
for Finance, Corporate and Traded Services**

Given the recent controversy surrounding P&O Ferries, can the Deputy Leader please confirm if KCC has any investments in the company or its parent Company (DP World), and if it has, can he please confirm that the Council has withdrawn (or is in the process of withdrawing) these investments?

Answer

DP World is the parent company of P & O ferries and that, in turn, is owned by Dubai World. This is an investment company owned by the Dubai Government and is, therefore, not listed. So neither the County Council (though its treasury management practices) nor the Kent Pension Fund have any investments in P & O ferries.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 26th May 2022

**Question by Ms Grehan to Sue Chandler,
Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services**

According to a report published by Kent Analytics in March 2022 into Elective Home Education (EHE), there were 4,288 children and young people recorded as educated at home between 3rd September 2020 and 31st August 2021. Of these children and young people educated at home, just under a third received SEN support or had an Education and Health Care plan whilst at school. The report then goes on to say that 'the main reason for SEN support for children and young people who receive elective home education is social, emotional and mental health needs (28%)'.

In light of the above, can the Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services please tell the Council whether they are confident that the level of support provided to families who home school children with SEND or Mental Health issues is appropriate? In answering the question, can the Cabinet Member comment on whether they are concerned that families may be choosing to home school their children because their needs cannot be met by local schools?

Answer

The Kent Analytics report is commissioned annually. It enables the Fair Access Team to identify trends and informs the services approach in applying resources where they are most needed, prioritising our most vulnerable families. The report looks at the entire Elected Home Educated cohort, but highlights additional needs including Education, Health and Care plans (EHCPs) and social need.

In 2021 officers in the Council identified a need for closer oversight when parents choose to take a child for whom the Council maintains an Education, Health and Care Plan out of school to educate their child at home. As a consequence of reviewing practice at this time a need was identified for a decision to be made about whether a child with an EHC Plan's special educational needs could be met at home by parents prior to parents starting home education. Of the current cohort of 3462 Children and Young People recorded as home educated, 193 hold an EHCP and 465 are identified with SEN.

Under the new robust process (introduced this year) all children with an EHCP whose parents have Elected to Home Educate are jointly overseen by SEN Services and the Council's EHE team - demonstrating joined up working. The SEND team managers agree whether a child's provision can be adequately delivered in the home, prior to the child's placement in school being ended. If it is considered that a child's needs cannot be met- the Council will work with parents to maintain the child on the roll of a school and will not support EHE.

The new meeting record evidences how the EHE programme will meet each need in the EHCP.

Subsequent to a child or young person with an Education, Health and Care Plan starting EHE and within 3 months, the Council's SEN Service and an EHE team lead carry out a monitoring visit. If there are concerns about a child or young person's education and/or progress at this time an annual review is triggered at which time continuation of EHE may be disagreed and a new school placement established.

The Council does not have the same responsibility for providing education for children who were identified as having SEN Support needs at school. These children's Elective Home Education is monitored through the Council's regular EHE statutory duties, including keeping in contact with families to ensure children are safe and education is provided. Our EHE Support and Advice Officers are on hand to signpost parents who chose to home educate their child to resources that are designed specifically to address children's mental health. These include Mood Sparks, Young Minds, KOOH and Kent Resilience Hub. Where a family may require additional wrap around support, an Early Help referral will be offered to the family. There are, however, families who may choose not to engage with our officers and who do not fall into the categories set out in our policy where we would expect engagement; to ensure we can reach out to all our families, information regarding available resources are published on the Elective Home Education webpage on Kent.gov.uk. All families who come to our attention are provided with contact details for a designated Support and Advice Officer and a welcome pack when the EHE team are notified of the parents' decision to home educate.

In response to Ms Grehan's concern as to whether families may be choosing to home school their children because their needs cannot be met by local schools, parents may choose to home educate their children for a variety of reasons, and they may not necessarily wish to share those reasons with the Local Authority.

As the member will know, there is already considerable work being done on inclusion of children with SEND in mainstream schools, as well as work with Kent Parents and Carers Together (PACT) to increase parental confidence in the ability of schools to support their children.

I have a list of support work going on within schools which I will provide in written format to Ms Grehan following County Council.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 26th May 2022

**Question by Mr Love to David Brazier,
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport**

Nearly six years ago, in 2016, the then Transport Minister, Sir John Hayes, told me at a meeting in Folkestone that the growth and regeneration in the area heightened the need to develop "at pace" a permanent solution to using the M20 motorway as a lorry park. Speaking at Prime Minister's Questions a year earlier, David Cameron said lorry parking on the M20 during cross-Channel disruption was a "serious problem". Yet for over nine weeks, one carriageway of the M20 motorway has once again been turned into a lorry park, following the introduction of Operation Brock on 21st March 2022.

What pressure is Kent County Council able to bring to bear on the Department for Transport and National Highways to deliver the permanent solution we were promised "at pace" six years ago to a problem from which we have suffered for 25 years, and what influence can we exert to have this piece of nationally-significant infrastructure fully reopened for free-flowing traffic to bring confidence to business investors and comfort to our residents trying to go about their normal lives?

**Answer provided by Dan Watkins, Deputy Cabinet Member for Highways and
Transport**

The permanent solution to Operation Stack that was promised by government to be delivered "at pace" in 2015 was the lorry area at Stanford West near Junction 11 of the M20. The government received a legal challenge by objectors to this proposal which it decided it could not defend and therefore cancelled the project. Government then instructed Highways England (now National Highways) to look again at all potential options and a public engagement exercise was conducted in 2018. Kent County Council responded making the case for an off-highway solution; however, government decided instead to proceed with the on-highway contraflow system on the M20 known as Operation Brock.

Operation Brock is different to Operation Stack in that two-way flow on the M20 is possible in the contraflow system on the London-bound carriageway between junctions 8 and 9 with opposing traffic separated by a concrete barrier, while the coast-bound carriageway is used to queue cross-channel freight vehicles. Operation Stack only allowed London-bound traffic to use the M20 and non-port coast-bound traffic had to use the A20.

However, when Operation Brock is overwhelmed and queuing freight vehicles exceeds the capacity of the coast-bound carriageway then the London-bound carriageway is also used and the contraflow is suspended, as occurred around Easter time this year, with further sections of the M20 also needed to queue cross-channel freight between junctions 11 and 12.

At the current time, Operation Brock is the only means to manage queues of freight traffic when there is disruption at the Channel Tunnel or the Port of Dover. However, we continue to make the case to government for an alternative solution that is off-highway to ensure

that the M20 is kept fully open at all times for all traffic so that businesses and residents can go about their normal lives and this is being pursued actively.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 26th May 2022

Question by Mr Lehmann to the Leader of the Council, Roger Gough

In September 2021, Eurostar announced that services from Kent's International Rail Stations would not resume until the end of 2022 at the earliest. Since that time, Eurostar have doubled the number of trains they are running, and service levels are fast approaching their pre-pandemic levels.

The Kent Rail Strategy confirms that KCC will work alongside other authorities to encourage Eurostar to reintroduce services from Kent stations as soon as possible. This would be of great benefit to Kent's business and leisure economies, and of great convenience to many Kent residents.

Can the Leader please update the council on what actions are being taken to ensure the swiftest possible resumption of services from Ebbsfleet and Ashford International?

Answer

Thank you for your question, Mr Lehmann. I share your concern about the current lack of stopping Eurostar services in Kent and I am disappointed that their reinstatement has yet to occur, with Eurostar currently making no commitment and indicating that their return will not be before 2023 and may be later. Although disappointed, I do also recognise that the impact of the pandemic and international travel restrictions throughout 2020 and 2021 have had a significant impact on Eurostar patronage and profitability. This continued through the important 2021-22 Christmas and Winter period due to the Omicron variant. Eurostar have therefore focused their operations on their core London to Paris and London to Brussels services to recover their finances and patronage.

The services Kent has enjoyed from Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International have been an important feature of the County's international transport mix. KCC and its local council partners have worked hard to capitalise on the opportunities those services bring, helping to attract inward investment and economic growth in the County. Since the start of the pandemic, we have maintained regular contact with Eurostar to understand how their travel market is recovering and what conditions they are looking for to return to considering re-introducing stopping services. Most recently, KCC and Ashford Borough Council hosted an update by Eurostar at the Joint Transport Board in March 2022. Since then, Ashford Borough Council has further written to Eurostar and we will participate in any arising discussion with them. We continue to push for clarity on the conditions that Eurostar will deem a return of services to Kent viable, however as a private commercial operator, to date Eurostar have not divulged details of the conditions on which they will determine viability. However, it would be reasonable to expect that the condition would be a return of the company to profitability.

Being a privately operated rail company the UK Government has no shareholding in or control over Eurostar. As such there are no mechanisms available to KCC to directly impact the decision by Eurostar about if and when to resume services. We are however focused on actions to make clear to Eurostar the economic importance of the rail service

to Kent and our future economic growth and regeneration plans. We continue to offer Eurostar our support in gathering insight into the market and potential demand for Eurostar services should they become available again.

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 26th May 2022

**Question by Mrs Dean to Peter Oakford,
Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Corporate and Traded Services**

At its meeting on 4th May, the Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee received reports on the inflationary pressures on the Capital Programme, and the resulting need to vary KCC's Capital programme of works, and Policy on future Property Asset Disposal. Both reports proposed delegations to Cabinet Members and Officers respectively. The requirements for new and expanded schools, highways projects and the provision of community centres which these policies cover are all of immense interest to all Members.

Could the Deputy Leader please explain what opportunity and process there will be for Members to be informed and consulted about proposed disposals and variations, to ensure that the interests of the communities they serve are fully considered before decisions are taken?

Answer

Both these papers reflect the unprecedented financial position which the Council finds itself in and the steps that we must take to ensure that it can continue to meet its statutory responsibilities, to ensure that it minimises any borrowing and protect front line services.

In relation to the inflationary report, the Council allows inflationary increases to be considered for those projects which have already been through the Council's governance process and where appropriate, considered by the relevant Cabinet Committee. This change is essential to enable those projects which have already been through the governance process to go ahead - such as the provision of school places.

You will note that the additional cost pressure as a result of inflation is being funded via slippage on the capital programme; however, this is a short term cash flow solution where the County Council will not need to put additional borrowing pressure on its capital budgets with the associated revenue consequences. Without any additional funding from central grants, further consideration will need to be given to the capital programme to ensure that it remains balanced in the longer term. Whilst we will be continuing to lobby central government to ensure that inflation is captured effectively in grants, the capital programme will be considered as part of the normal process for setting the County Council's budget position and will be considered by Full Council. Individual decisions will continue to be taken in line with the Council's Constitution and the provision for Member involvement.

In respect of the Asset Disposal Policy, the Policy reinforces the Executive's approach when disposing of freehold assets. The County Council will continue to make decisions in line with its Constitution and the Property Management Protocol which enables Members to input into the governance process and for Members to express their views. Paragraph 13.25 of the Constitution sets out its overarching principles. More specifically part (g) requires that comments are sought in all Property Transactions, including Disposals, from

other relevant Cabinet Members, Directorates and Local Members, before the decision is taken to proceed.

In cases over the delegated threshold, the transaction is aired at Policy and Resources before the Cabinet Member takes a decision (excepting where there is a need to decide urgently). For matters delegated to the Director of Infrastructure, all responses to consultation are included in the decision report and considered for the decision. Where those comments are considered more complex, further investigations will be made and as necessary they may be referred to the Cabinet Member.