

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday 28 March 2013

Question by Mike Harrison to

Bryan Sweetland, Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways & Waste

Since asking a question with regard to the present situation with Kent's White Horse Woods I have had numerous requests as to what are the chances of having a roundabout installed at the top of Detling Hill?

As I am unable to answer that question that is why I am asking Mr Sweetland to help me out with an answer as to what are chances if any of a roundabout being put in place now or in the very near future. I am fully aware of the financial restraints but this is a true 'black spot' and just a quick glance at the road traffic collisions (RTCs) in this area will give the very good reasons for the roundabout.

Answer

In 2009 the County Council concluded an in-depth study into the road safety record along the whole of the A249 between M20 junction 7 and the M2 junction 5. As part of this study the safety benefits of a roundabout in the vicinity of the Country Showground and White Horse Wood Country Park entrances were analysed. The study concluded that the implementation of a roundabout in this location would not significantly reduce the number of crashes along the route. The study did identify there were a cluster of crashes occurring just to the south of the entrances to the Country Showground and White Horse Wood Country Park at the A249 junction with Scragged Oak Road. The County Council have therefore allocated £150,000 from its casualty reduction budget to improve the junction and design works for these improvements are currently on going. There have been no recorded personal injury crashes at the entrance to White Horse Wood Country Park in the latest three year period and only one slight injury crash at the Country Showground entrance. In 2006 two different options for roundabouts in the vicinity were estimated to cost between £750,000 and £1,500,000.

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Question by Leslie Christie to

Mike Whiting, Cabinet Member for Education, Learning & Skills

Could the Cabinet Member please say, for Key Stage 4 level, what the attainment gap is between Kent pupils on Free School Meals and those without, and how that compares to our statistical neighbours and at national level? Can he also say how Kent's rate of narrowing the attainment gap at that level compares to that of our statistical neighbours and at national level?

Answer

I am pleased to say the attainment gap between Kent pupils on Free School Meals (FSM) has narrowed since 2010 with Kent, for the first time, exceeding our statistical neighbours' rate of closing the gap.

The rate of narrowing the gap by our statistical neighbours has worsened since 2010 from 31.1% to 34.1% in 2012, whereas Kent continued to narrow the gap from 35.3% in 2010 to 31.3% in 2012. The national FSM gap in 2012 is 26.3%, which is a lower figure, however the national gap has not reduced as rapidly as Kent's since 2010.

The focus of schools has been sharpened by revisions to the OfSTED inspection frameworks and along with support and challenge from Senior Improvement Advisers the initial estimates for 2013 from schools indicate that there will be further progress in 2013 in closing the gap.

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Question by Steve Manion to

Bryan Sweetland, Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways & Waste

Now that the winter storms and heavy snows have passed (hopefully) one cannot help but notice the state of the verges and central reservations of Kent's highways. These pass through some of the most beautiful countryside of these islands. A situation which is even worse on the motorways – which are of course the Highways Authority's and it is up to them to clean them up.

My question is to Bryan Sweetland, which is, just when can the residents of Kent expect to see some major clean up work taking place on these routes?

Answer

The winter weather has taken its toll on our highway networks and this is particularly evident along our major routes where dirt, salt and litter gets washed up along our verges and central reservations. Highway cleansing, including sweeping and litter-picking, is the responsibility of the Borough and District Councils. However, our highways and transportation teams are working closely with their District Council partners to make sure our roads are kept clean and tidy. We will shortly be starting the first of two scheduled rounds of our high speed road maintenance programme. This involves carefully coordinated multi-agency maintenance activity under a single lane closure, where litter is cleared, lines are painted, street lights are repaired, gullies are emptied, grass is cut and litter is picked up.

In addition to our programmed maintenance activity, Members can choose to commission community gangs to carry out additional local action from their Members Highway Fund. This year we are also considering how we can utilise voluntary "community payback" support by working with the probation service.

With regard to the Highways Agency's motorway and trunk road network, I agree that these are in a very poor state and I have recently written to the relevant senior Director demanding urgent remedial action.

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Question by Ian Chittenden to

Bryan Sweetland, Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways & Waste

Question 4 fell as Mr Chittenden was unable to attend the meeting.

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Question by Rob Bird to

Mike Whiting, Cabinet Member for Education, Learning & Skills

I am sure all councillors will agree that good primary school education is crucial to a young person's development. People across the country are alarmed by the latest National Audit Office (NAO) report pointing to the failure in recent years to respond to clear demographic evidence of increasing need for primary school provision.

We have a mixed picture here in Kent with the NAO predicting "severe" shortfalls projected in Ashford and Swale Districts and "high" shortfalls projected in many other areas. In my own division residents are particularly concerned that there has been significant new housing built in the old Oakwood Hospital site over the past 10 years without any significant expansion of local primary school provision. Further new housing is already in the pipeline yet KCC have recently released the site which had previously been earmarked for a primary school despite the local school being full. No viable alternative site appears to have been identified.

Would the Cabinet Member for Education, Learning & Skills kindly advise what steps are being taken by KCC to remedy this situation before it becomes a crisis?

Answer

I am pleased to be given this opportunity to demonstrate that KCC are not only well aware of the population and demographic changes in Kent - locality by locality but we also have a well thought out strategic plan for expanding the provision of school places.

The Kent Education Commissioning Plan published in 2012 contains a detailed analysis of the changing pupil numbers, forecasts for future numbers and a five year plan for school expansions, school by school, and district by district. I have also been building stronger links with the Locality Boards to consolidate information sharing and joint planning between Districts and KCC to ensure we deliver sufficient school places in the right locations for Kent children.

We currently have about fifty schools in the expansion programme - mostly primary schools because that is where the main pressures lie until 2016/17. I am very grateful for the hard work and commitment of Headteachers, school Governors and staff in supporting the programme and managing the challenges of these changes.

Finding the capital funding to deliver the expansion programme remains a significant challenge. Our capital funding allocation for the DfE is intended to provide 80% of the funding required so the gap is being bridged through creative and cost-effective building solutions and by maximising developer contributions.

In relation to the specific area in question, I can give the following reassurance. The school site in Oakwood Hospital was made available to the County Council via the developer, but it was returned in 2005 in line with the section 106 agreement as the County Council had not built a school upon the site. More recently, the County Council has confirmed that it does not wish to purchase the site. This site would only support a 1FE school, and is not well located for the proposed housing developments in Maidstone.

Maidstone Borough Council has indicated that significant numbers of new homes might be permitted in the Hermitage Lane area. The current Local Plan makes provision for a school site East of Hermitage Lane. This is expected to transfer into the new Local Plan. The County Council has informed Maidstone Borough Council that we would be seeking a 2FE school site within the proposed housing development, and a financial contribution towards the building of a new school, in order to serve the community.

St Francis Roman Catholic Primary School has been provided with two additional class bases to enable it to organise on a 2FE structure, and add 77 places in the locality.

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Thursday 28 March 2013

Question by Richard Parry to

Roger Gough, Cabinet Member for Business Strategy, Performance & Health Reform

May I congratulate Mr Gough and his team from ICT for concluding successful the negotiations with British Telecom and also signing Kent's enhanced broadband contract.

However, despite the considerable good news provided in Mr Gough's 18 March letter there remains the concern, in many rural communities including Sevenoaks West the Division which I represent that they will not be included in the favoured 91% or even the 95%.

Given that Surrey County Council, which borders Sevenoaks West, intends to deliver high quality broadband across their county what will our great County do to match the services provided to nearby Surrey residents?

Additionally if you reside in the "5%" area will there be an initial push to at least provide this much slower broadband service in the first tranche of upgrades?

Answer

I recognise the concern of rural communities and I am particularly keen to ensure that no area of Kent misses out on better broadband. The County Council has adopted Government targets for an absolute minimum of 2mbps across the whole of Kent, with the ambition to achieve as much superfast coverage as we possibly can. As Mr Parry acknowledges in his Question, our agreement with BT has exceeded these targets. However, due to geographical remoteness, it will not be possible to deliver superfast broadband in some locations for either cost or technical reasons.

Kent is investing £10m in the contract with contributions from Government and BT together totalling nearly £30m. We currently estimate that delivering superfast solutions to all premises across Kent would require additional public sector investment of at least £30m due to the costs involved. By contrast Surrey is putting in twice as much funding as Kent, achieving much less leverage and serving fewer premises. Our project is more extensive and cost effective.

The approach we have adopted for Kent is to deliberately maximise the rollout of higher speeds as far as we possibly can. Work will now begin on the detailed surveys required to develop an implementation plan for the contract. It will not be possible to confirm the geographical phasing of the rollout until initial survey work has been undertaken and the implementation plan agreed. It is not possible to reach conclusions about which communities, or parts of communities, will be within the superfast or other categories prior to the survey work being completed. In developing

the contract we have specifically not set any such priorities as geographical phasing to ensure we obtain the most economically efficient rollout for the whole of the county, not favouring any one location over another.

I will ensure that progress updates are published as soon as the full information is available for the county so that all Members have the opportunity to contribute to the debate at the most appropriate time.

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Thursday 28 March 2013

Question by Dan Daley to

Bryan Sweetland, Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways & Waste

Park and Ride services have become the established norm for large conurbations throughout England. In Kent, only Maidstone and Canterbury run such services regularly on weekdays at frequent intervals. These services allow mass parking at the edges of the urban areas and go a long way in preventing inner town traffic gridlock.

Benefit of this facility is enjoyed by a far wider group than those who live in the immediate areas and yet the cost of the provision of such services is borne alone by the local taxpayer through Council Tax.

In the event that there may be an operational financial shortfall, then the burden of the loss is felt entirely by the local taxpayer.

If it can be argued that these services are used by many who are not local but do contribute to the economic benefit of business in the served towns, then is it not time to consider that the provision of such services should become a Strategic rather than a Local one.

Could the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways & Waste agree that perhaps now is the time to acknowledge this greater benefit to the County as a whole and that these services should ideally be taken over by the County Council as a part of a County Integrated Transport Strategy; and will he institute a study to consider this suggestion in greater depth?

Answer

I fully recognise the significant benefits which Park and Ride has brought to Canterbury and Maidstone and would like to take the opportunity to remind everyone that the County Council contributed significantly in both cases by funding and implementing some of the associated access arrangements and accompanying bus priority measures. I would also point out that both Maidstone Borough and Canterbury City Councils use substantial revenue generated by parking enforcement, which is a Highway Authority power delegated to the districts, to help fund their operation.

Because of this last point, I do not agree with the Member for Maidstone Central that KCC should take over these services, but I do accept that the County Council should consider taking a greater role in the provision of these facilities and services, particularly in Maidstone, and I have therefore asked the Director of Highways and Transportation to take this forward as part of the work he is doing with the Borough Council on their Local Development Framework Core Strategy Integrated Transport Plan.

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Question by Martin Vye to

Bryan Sweetland, Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways & Waste

Will the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste tell the Council what measures KCC will put in place to ensure that all relevant partners act as a matter of urgency to deal effectively with the disgusting plague of rubbish and litter that increasingly disfigures the sides of our roads in Kent, presenting such a poor image of the County?

Answer

Thank you for your question Mr Vye, I hope you agree that I have provided my view on this matter in my earlier response to Mr Manion.