

**COUNTY COUNCIL**

**Thursday 16 July 2020**

**Question by Dan Daley to Susan Carey,**  
**Cabinet Member for Environment**

2020 is the UN's International Year of Plant Health and as part of this, The Royal Horticultural Society and various other bodies have been renewing efforts to ensure that *Xylella fastidiosa* does not infect the UK. *Xylella fastidiosa* is a bacterium which can cause diseases in over 500 plant species and has already seen major outbreaks across Europe. This has included 600 new cases reported in Italy alone due to normally stringent mitigation measures being neglected during the Covid-19 pandemic. If the bacterium were to reach Kent, it could prove devastating, particularly for the county's cherry and plum orchards. Could the Cabinet Member for Environment please outline the measures which KCC is undertaking in order to minimise the risk of *Xylella fastidiosa* reaching Kent, and include in the response details of what contingency plans are in place in the event of an outbreak of the bacterium?

**Answer**

Thank you, Mr Daley. Kent's geography and 'gateway status' for trade and travel places the county in the frontline of emerging animal and plant disease threats. An acknowledgement of this potential vulnerability and local lessons learned informs our Animal and Plant Health Emergency Plan which has recently been expanded and changed from a KCC to a Kent Resilience Forum document to reflect the cross-sectoral nature of this evolving risk. The bacterium *Xylella fastidiosa* is specifically referenced at page 126 of this document in the risk assessment section.

KCC's Resilience and Emergency Planning Service also maintains a range of innovative e-Learning packages, which enable enhanced awareness of threat and risk across the County Council. A specific Biosecurity in Kent (Animal and Plant Disease) e-Learning resource was developed with the support of the Aspinall Foundation, and once again specifically references the epidemiology of the bacterium *Xylella fastidiosa*.

Regarding highways landscape services, as part of the process in obtaining new street trees, nursery suppliers must demonstrate that they follow strict guidelines regarding biosecurity. Where possible our new tree stocks are grown in the UK and are of good local provenance. Imported trees are required to spend at least one full growing season at a UK nursery, with all trees provided being subjected to a full pest and disease control programme, tested for physiological health and regular DEFRA inspections before they are planted as a Kent tree.

This audit trail allows for a full recall in the event that any pest and or disease problems may subsequently manifest themselves.

Our Tree Officers are experienced and qualified to identify the early outbreak of such diseases. They communicate with other tree officers and statutory bodies on a national level to remain abreast of any prevailing outbreaks and best practice. Our contractors also

have policies and procedures on biosecurity which are assessed during the contract evaluation process and can be implemented if needed.

Additionally, as part of our contingency planning we have purchased equipment which can be used to check trees for stress and vitality so that outbreaks can be diagnosed and picked up early.

If a *Xylella fastidiosa* outbreak does occur, DEFRA will require the removal of all susceptible vegetation within a wide radius and will suspend any movement of material within an area. We will take appropriate advice if such an outbreak occurs. We have had previous experience of such an event when Asian Longhorn Beetle was discovered near Paddock Wood in 2012 and are prepared for any future pathogens.

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**Thursday 16 July 2020**

**Question by Ian Chittenden to Michael Payne,  
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport**

As part of efforts to tackle air pollution and reduce congestion, the government has now legalised the use of rental e-scooters on public roads across England as part of a 12-month trial. This presents a real opportunity to revolutionise the way in which local journeys are carried out, whilst reducing the reliance on traditional motor vehicles. Could the Cabinet Member confirm what KCC is doing to enable and promote the use of e-scooters within Kent, whilst ensuring that they will be used safely and within Government guidelines?

**Answer**

KCC's Transport Innovation team is exploring the potential of an e-scooter trial, as permitted by the new government regulations, which could be implemented in Kent. We are currently in discussion with a number of partners to identify a location in the county that would be most suitable for a trial scheme which would permit a full evaluation of this possible new mode of transport.

We will ensure Members are kept updated going forward.

**COUNTY COUNCIL**

**Thursday 16 July 2020**

**Question by Trudy Dean to Mike Whiting,  
Cabinet Member for Economic Development**

Could the Cabinet Member for Economic Development please say what progress he has made in his enquiries with a) KCC Departments and b) Kent Borough and District Councils regarding ensuring that County and Borough Members are consulted on S106 developer contributions before the conditions are written into planning consent so that they can properly scrutinise what the funds will be used for?

**Answer**

Thank you, Mrs Dean – I start with a couple of general statements and then move onto some specifics to address your concerns.

Development contributions have to be directly related to the impact of a particular development on KCC services and agreed with Districts as the Local Planning Authorities, who have the statutory remit to balance competing considerations when determining individual planning applications.

Members are of course involved in shaping district Local Plans, which articulate the services that will be required to mitigate growth. The allocation of Section 106 monies is then determined by service directorates in accordance with their delivery strategies/policy, for example the School Commissioning Plan which is refreshed on an annual basis.

So far as KCC Departments are concerned - we are in the process of reforming the Infrastructure Funding Group which will involve all relevant KCC Service Departments and Members can discuss individual applications and KCC's overall approach more broadly and on a regular basis. We have also formed an internal Community Infrastructure Level Working Group to consider KCC service requirements. Furthermore, we deal with service providers on a day to day basis when dealing with individual applications. Further Member engagement could be addressed through a local 'pilot' to assess how this might work.

Turning to Districts - Members are consulted on individual planning applications by Districts as the Local Planning Authority. The Kent Planning Officers Group and Kent Planning Policy Forum are long established and again could be used to raise suggested issues. We also deal with individual Districts as the Local Planning Authorities when dealing with each individual planning application and infrastructure requirements. KCC will be producing annual 'Infrastructure Funding Statements' starting from December this year and a subgroup is being set up (chaired by KCC) involving KCC and all Kent Districts to assess and monitor infrastructure funding allocation and spend. Again a local 'pilot' (where we could copy local Members into our 'request' letters to Districts for development contributions for individual applications) could help assess how further Member involvement could be addressed in these processes.

**COUNTY COUNCIL**

**Thursday 16 July 2020**

**Question by Peter Lake to Clair Bell,**  
**Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Public Health**

An NHS health-check is a great way to get advice on keeping yourself healthy and active. The website says if you're aged 40-74 and don't have a pre-existing health condition, you'll receive a letter from your GP or local authority inviting you for a free check every 5 years. At the age of 75 GPs are required to offer an annual check which will include cardiovascular risk assessment.

Will the Cabinet Member for Adult Services join me in welcoming this service especially as the Coronavirus appears to be targeting the elderly and can we use our extensive resources in some way to champion the cause by encouraging them to keep fit and hopefully build up a strong resistance?

**Answer**

Thank you for your question Mr Lake.

I will absolutely join with you in supporting these provisions. Staying fit and healthy is good for all sorts of reasons, not least to protect from COVID-19. There is evidence that people who get COVID-19 more seriously will also have co-existing conditions, particularly cardiovascular disease, diabetes or respiratory illness or indeed risk factors for those illnesses not least being overweight or obese.

KCC resources support health and wellbeing of older residents through a range of opportunities. There is universal promotion through campaigns such as Quit for COVID, Eat Well, Mental Health Matters, Know Your Score and Stay Warm Stay Well.

Commissioned services also play a key role in encouraging health and wellbeing messages through their direct work with local residents. This includes encouraging physical activity via postural stability services and health walks, reducing social isolation via befriending services and access healthy meals with friends at day centres (pre-COVID). Services like care navigation and One You Kent can also play a key role in helping residents access the care they need and encourage them to register with a GP.

Due to COVID many of these services are delivering virtually and stay in touch with clients to have conversations on health and wellbeing and any support they need.

I would urge people to take an active interest in their own health, particularly exercising and eating a healthy balanced diet as these are both essential for good physical and mental health.

**COUNTY COUNCIL**

**Thursday 16 July 2020**

**Question by Gary Cooke to Michael Payne,  
Cabinet Member for Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport**

Kent County Council undertook traffic surveys to evaluate the benefits of a Leeds Langley Relief Road that resulted in the collection of data covering a broad area which demonstrated a cost benefit ratio in excess of the minimum level required for Department of Transport support.

What, if any, impediments exist to prevent the sharing of this data with Maidstone Borough Council in a form and manner that would facilitate it then being used to inform public consultation as part of consideration of the Relief Road for inclusion within the review of Maidstone's Local Plan?

As part of his answer could we also be given assurance that Kent County Council will not obstruct inclusion of the relief road in the Local Plan

**Answer**

I thank Mr Cooke for the question. The technical work relating to a new road connecting the A20 to the A274 has indeed been shared with the Borough Council, however I am unable to offer any clarity on whether it would form part of the public consultation on the Local Plan whilst there remain a number of alternative options for large development sites around the Borough yet to be selected. That is a matter for the Borough Council.

**COUNTY COUNCIL**

**Thursday 16 July 2020**

**Question by Martin Whybrow to Mike Hill,  
Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services**

In light of the latest government guidelines that have resulted in a significant number of commercial businesses being able to open from 4th July, and given the vital nature of libraries to so many Kent residents, would the Cabinet Member be willing to consider an accelerated programme of library reopening from that currently in place, with the ambition of a wider range of services and reopening of all Kent's libraries as soon as possible?

**Answer**

While the Coronavirus is still in general circulation, we, like all public facing service offers, will take a careful approach to our library reopening putting customer and staff safety very much at the heart of what we do. We are pleased to start opening our libraries again and we will do this in a phased approach, similar to many other local authorities. Alongside our buildings, we are also continuing to develop our digital forms of the service which have been so successful during lockdown.

I am pleased to report that 12 of our larger libraries reopened on Monday 13th July and we have further openings planned for the coming months, with the expectation that we will have 30 libraries open by the end of September. We will then review how these buildings are operating before considering next steps. As you will appreciate, we are working closely with Corporate Infrastructure and the Health and Safety teams on these plans.

We do recognise the important role the library service makes to peoples' wellbeing and supporting economic recovery which is why one of the initial service offers will be public computer access recognising not everyone has access to digital at home. We are also offering a 'select and collect' book offer which to date has received 1,200 bookings.

Our service will develop over the next months and we are planning to reintroduce book browsing, restart the mobile library service and open the Archive search room.

Inevitably, our libraries will be different to reflect social distancing and the new normal of living with coronavirus. There is much work for the service to do so dates beyond the 13th of July are indicative but we will update Members on plans as soon as possible.

**COUNTY COUNCIL**

**Thursday 16 July 2020**

**Question by Antony Hook to Peter Oakford,  
Cabinet Member for Finance, Corporate and Traded Services**

In Faversham there are multiple large care homes that have been closed and empty for years, including Kiln Court and Osbourne Court on Lower Road, and Kingsfield on Whitstable Road. Bearing in mind the Council's view that buildings are "no use empty", will the Cabinet Member please advise what steps are being taken to bring them into use?

**Answer**

The No Use Empty scheme is an award-winning empty homes initiative operated by Kent County Council (KCC) which has to date returned 6,326 homes back to use. The scheme allows individuals or companies to seek a loan for the purpose of bringing an empty dwelling or other building into a residential use. Currently loans are capped at a maximum of £25,000 per unit which will be created up to a total of £175,000 for a single building. For the sake of clarity, the scheme's core purpose is supporting the delivery of residential units rather than care accommodation.

With respect to Kingsfield, Kent County Council has no ownership involvement in the site. The site is operated by Care UK Care Homes.

With respect to the Kiln / Osbourne Court site, this is owned by Kent County Council. The site has been declared surplus to requirements and is considered an active disposal which will be brought to the market in due course, the proceeds of which will be reinvested in KCC's capital programme.

**COUNTY COUNCIL**

**Thursday 16 July 2020**

**Question by Ida Linfield to Sue Chandler,  
Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services**

I first asked what steps the Council was taking to tackle the problems of period poverty in December 2018. After that meeting this important issue was handed from Adult Social Care and Public Health to Children, Young People and Education for "a trial". Later, I asked for an update report, which came to the CYPE Cabinet Committee in October 2019. I learnt that period poverty had now been handed to the KCC Libraries, Registration and Archives Service, which had indeed finally launched the 'pilot'. This 'pilot' had started on 1st August 2019 and, although presumably supposed to be applicable to the whole of our County, it in fact took place in two small Thanet libraries. No further report has come back to CYPE. We have just suffered a lockdown the likes of which is unheard of in history and during which the ongoing problems of period poverty have received increased publicity. So, nearly two years after my first question and, keeping in mind the current economic and employment problems especially suffered by the young, I must ask yet again, "What steps is the Council taking to tackle the problem of period poverty in Kent?"

**Answer**

I share Mrs Linfield's concern about tackling the problem of Period Poverty. No-one should be held back from accessing education and improved health and wellbeing due to their period.

Overall responsibility for this is with the Department for Education (DfE) and they introduced a period product scheme in January 2020 to provide free period products for all learners who need them. Learners at all state-maintained schools and 16 to 19 education institutions are now able to have access to free period products in their place of study. The DfE commissioned Personnel Hygiene Services Limited (PHS) to allow schools to order period products and have them delivered when they need them and this has continued during lockdown enabling schools and colleges to continue to place orders and take steps to distribute essential period supplies to students at home.

Prior to the Government's announcement, Kent has had a pilot programme, organised by the Library Service in Thanet, the background of which was shared with CYPE Cabinet Committee Members earlier this year. This programme started in August 2019 with promotion to all local schools including all schools and colleges, Youth Hubs, medical centres and many of the voluntary sector organisations working with young people in Thanet. The initial feedback was very positive, unfortunately this programme has had to be paused due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, but it will proceed again in line with the Libraries, Registrations and Archives recovery programme.

I look forward to the Library Service's Thanet programme being able to move forward again so that we can evaluate that pilot and the outcomes.

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**Thursday 16 July 2020**

**Question by Rob Bird to Roger Gough,  
Leader of the Council**

At this month's LGA Conference the Minister of State, Simon Clarke, stated that the Government is pressing ahead with the publication of its Devolution White Paper in the Autumn. The Minister stated that the Government is aiming for 'many more elected mayors and more unitary councils following in the footsteps of Dorset, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire.' Recently a number of county councils have indicated that they are considering proposals to become unitary authorities; this includes East Sussex, Somerset and Surrey. Would the Leader agree with me that Kent should only consider becoming one or more unitary councils if such a change is clearly in the best economic and social interests of Kent residents and as part of his answer can he confirm agreement that any such proposal for Kent needs widespread consultation and proper consideration by all affected parties?

**Answer**

Whilst we will have to wait for the Devolution White Paper in September or October to see specific details, from comments Ministers and senior Civil Servants have been making both publicly and privately to the sector, it is reasonable to assume that it will continue the 'deal-making' approach established by previous Governments. In short, areas will have to accept some level of structural reform through the creation of Mayoral Combined Authorities or local government reorganisation (or both, the two options are not mutually exclusive) to receive a devolution deal.

It is expected that the scale of devolved powers or funding available to local areas will be directly linked to their willingness to accept structural reform, but the most substantive 'devolution deals' are expected to be reserved for those areas which accept a Mayoral Combined Authority, not just local government reorganisation. Ministers and Civil Servants have recently stated that there will be no 'upper threshold' in terms of council size, normally measured by resident population, for new unitary councils (although such an 'upper threshold' has never been codified in legislation or guidance). Ministers have clarified that a minimum threshold will be "significantly in excess of 400,000".

This has led many County Councils to conclude that they may be able to achieve a devolution deal through unitary reorganisation, without having to accept a Mayoral Combined Authority, the model of which remains controversial in non-metropolitan areas. Local government reorganisation however is not an easy option or something that should be considered lightly. Whilst the long-term financial and service benefits of moving to unitary council operating at scale is well evidenced, in the short-term it is highly disruptive, transition costs are expensive, and transition negatively impacts council performance. There are also major questions to be addressed as to what then constitutes truly 'local' government, the right levels of local democratic representation and what is the best structure for a county of the scale and historic identity of Kent. I have sought to ensure that relationships between local authorities in Kent should be characterised by openness and trust, and that goes for any discussion about future arrangements.

The Secretary of State, as the ultimate decision-maker must consult widely with a range of organisations and bodies in the affected area. I do agree that the best social and economic interests of Kent residents must be the fundamental rationale for any structural reform, though this is always a subjective judgement open to a differing and competing point of view. It is also influenced by the wider operating environment local authorities face, and the impact of COVID-19 on the viability of many councils may well be a factor in this.

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**Thursday 16 July 2020**

**Question by Sean Holden to Roger Gough,  
Leader of the Council**

The outstanding new dimension of life in the crisis has been the rapid adaptation people have made to doing business, public and private, through online, remote contact and meetings. Can the Leader commit to a post-crisis enquiry to find out how much incorporating this new practice into KCC's work patterns could reduce the need for expensive work places and travel costs; save taxpayers' money and staff and Members' time; help the straining Budget; contribute to increased productivity and, potentially, improve the quality of life of staff?

**Answer**

I agree with Mr Holden that the pandemic has necessitated new ways of working and thinking about the future for many individuals, businesses and organisations. Later today, the County Council is considering a paper on the Strategic Reset of the County Council. This involves a new KCC-led Programme to work as one council to design and deliver a cohesive, modern public service offer for all Kent's residents, businesses and communities. It will bring together change projects across the council and create organisational design opportunities to transform the way we work, including our people, assets, technology and service delivery.

This work will be informed by experiences during Coronavirus which has in many ways accelerated trends that were already developing. It will consider, as Mr Holden suggests, how incorporating this new practice can save money and time; improve service delivery and build on those ways of working that our staff have found positive. The recent staff survey asked staff to share their experiences of working during Covid-19. Among a number of other questions, the survey asked how our staff were feeling towards their current and future working arrangements. At the time of completing the survey in June, 61% of those who responded were feeling positive about this so far (rating their experience at 7 and above on a 1-10 scale where 10 was "completely positive"); 70% were positive continuing the arrangements for an extended period and 73% felt positive about them becoming a more regular part of their pattern of work in the future. We are therefore going to work with staff to build the best of the arrangements into future working patterns and ways of working, as long, of course as this supports service delivery and business need. There will also, quite rightly, be Member debate about the shape of the organization and our ways of working as Members.

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**Thursday 16 July 2020**

**Question by Sarah Hamilton to Susan Carey,  
Cabinet Member for Environment**

Would our Cabinet Member for Environment agree with me on how well our Household waste centres seem to be performing in these very challenging and difficult conditions, and do we have any feedback from residents?

**Answer**

Thank you and I agree that the staff at our HWRCs, call centre and Waste team have all done exceptionally well and deserve our congratulations. All 18 of Kent's sites are now open seven days a week accepting the normal range of waste, operating on a booking system which allows us to ensure social distancing to protect both staff and residents. I know demand at Mrs Hamilton's local site has been high with nearly every slot booked by the day of use. Without the booking system we would undoubtedly have long queues disrupting local traffic.

Feedback from the public has been overwhelmingly positive and many have said how much they like the security of a booking. We are undertaking some formal customer surveys and I'll be happy to share these results when they are available.

I am also pleased to report that just last week we upgraded the booking system and added an extra 13,000 slots across Kent so that 32,000 slots a week are now available. This means we've been able to increase the number of visits per household to two per month with the ability to book up to four weeks in advance.