

COUNTY COUNCIL

Thursday, 16th November 2023

**Question by Barry Lewis to Neil Baker,
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport**

In the last financial year, how many fines has KCC issued to utility companies because they have not completed the required works within the stipulated timeframe, and how many of these fines were paid? In answering, can the Cabinet Member please also confirm the total amount of money we have collected from issuing these fines?”

Answer

I can confirm that during the 2022/23 financial year:

- 459 S74 Overrun warnings were issued.
- 132 were subsequently withdrawn.
- A total of 327 fines were issued and paid.
- The total revenue from Overrun fines was £336,682

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Question by Chris Passmore to Tony Hills, Deputy Cabinet Member for Environment

Kent's unique geology means the county has a provision of hard rock, which neighbouring counties such as East Sussex and Essex do not have. The only way Kent is currently potentially going to extract this hard rock through to 2050 is in an area where there is irreplaceable ancient woodland, adjacent to the Hermitage Quarry near Maidstone. Can the Cabinet Member please explain if she is content with the quarrying of hard rock in an area that will cause the destruction of ancient woodland?

Answer

As part of its Local Plan responsibilities, the County Council is required to plan for Kent's aggregate needs. This includes planning for hard rock to meet an identified need of 17.4 million tonnes for the local plan period. In response to the Council's call for sites, the site adjacent to Hermitage Quarry near Maidstone has been proposed for consideration. The County Council is required to consider the site as part of the Minerals and Waste Local Plan work. The site is currently the subject of detailed technical assessment which will determine whether the site should be allocated or not. The impact upon the *Plantation on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS)* designation will be carefully considered as part of this assessment. In the absence of the detailed technical assessment work, it would be premature for me to comment further on the merit of the site

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Thursday, 16th November 2023

Question by Ian Chittenden to Neil Baker
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

In March 2020 a section of the Medway riverbank between Maidstone Town Centre and Aylesford collapsed requiring the public footpath to be sealed off to prevent use by members of the public for safety reasons. This popular section of footpath had been used by a substantial number of residents on a daily basis for walking and cycling and was an important part of Kent County Councils Active Travel initiative.

After a structural inspection and assessment, with the extent of the collapsed bank increasing, the initial cost of repair was made at £800,000, but by 2022 the cost had risen to £1.5million and no doubt will increase further. I have raised the problems in Council and at budget time on a number of occasions, but no action has been taken.

Will the Cabinet Member please advise what action is now being taken, what is the likely cost and whether we have a programme for the work to be carried out?

Answer

Officers are working on a potential bid to Active Travel England via the Active Travel Fund to reinstate the embankment and to widen the footway to 3m between Aylesford car park and just east of the collapsed embankment.

Whilst the estimated cost for this work is £1.5m there is still some work to do to confirm the embankment design which may affect the final costing.

Active Travel England will hopefully announce the schemes to be funded early in the new year and if successful it is envisaged that work could start in the summer of 2024 subject to appropriate ecological approvals.

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Thursday, 16th November 2023

Question by Mark Hood to Neil Baker
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

Does the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation share the concern of the Green and Independent Group that the Government's decision, on 2nd October, to withdraw the guidance for reallocating road space to enable and support the modal shift from cars to walking, wheeling and cycling is contrary to our Local Transport Plan and our commitment, through Vision Zero, to reducing accidents and fatalities?

Answer

Thank you, Mr Hood, for your question.

Although this guidance has indeed been withdrawn, the experience gained by many Local Highway Authorities in England over the last few years shows that it is of paramount importance to have the support of the community when implementing schemes of this nature, and to remember that what works in one area doesn't necessarily work in another. One size does not fit all.

Walking, cycling and public transport are absolutely necessary in a multi-modal transport system and the County Council supports their growth but they are not always the right choice for everyone's journey. I believe that the emerging Local Transport Plan reflects this reality as it recognises that all forms of transport are necessary for Kent to continue to grow. In addition, Framing Kent's Future, and continued in Securing Kent's Future, recognises this as one of our priorities by taking an "infrastructure first" approach to new development and ensuring people have access to safe and efficient travel options. This has to be about choice, not compulsion.

Turning to safety, our Vision Zero Strategy is unaffected by the withdrawal of the guidance, as we have an over-riding statutory duty to make the highway network safe for all users. This includes annual reviews of crash cluster sites, regular safety inspections, a programme of events and regular contact with local communities to understand their concerns and priorities.

It continues to be a challenge to retrofit infrastructure improvements to aid walking, wheeling and cycling in many areas, as limited space dictates what can be achieved. However, I would like to reassure Mr Hood that I am committed to investigating ways to provide active travel options whilst recognising that vehicular use is still the most popular form of transport for personal use and commuting.

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Thursday, 16th November 2023

**Question by Sarah Hamilton to Dan Watkins,
Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Public Health**

The national profile and level of investment in Social Prescribing and community navigation has increased rapidly over the last few years. The concept supports many strategic aims and responsibilities of local authorities within the Care Act (2014) promoting both wellbeing and prevention.

Research continues to tell us that activities involving art, music, exercise and interaction with animals not only teaches how to express feelings, gain confidence, and develop empathy, but also to build relationships and understand sentience. This enhances physical health and emotional well-being which in turn supports much broader social and economic benefits.

Please would the Cabinet Member provide an update on the work of KCC with the Integrated Care System to develop a strategy that promotes the preventative agenda in this way and outline how this will help the most vulnerable in our communities to make connections?”

Answer

The ICS Strategy commits to developing a social prescribing and community navigation strategy. It recognises how beneficial it can be for residents' wellbeing when they connect with community groups and services to support mental and physical health. Social prescribing and community navigation help people to make these connections.

An ICS Social Prescribing and Navigation Strategy has been in development since January 2022. Numerous workshops involving key stakeholders and people with lived experience have taken place. A strategy development board, and a strategy steering group have been meeting to support the development of the strategy. NHS Kent and Medway Communications and Engagement team have undertaken a consultation exercise with the public to gain further insight and information from the public and those involved in delivering these services.

- The strategy sets out the shared purpose of partners to work in increasingly joined up ways to enable the people of Kent and Medway to lead the most prosperous, healthy, independent, and contented lives they can.
- Kent and Medway can are in a good position to now go further by building on what is in place across the existing footprint.
- A “whole system” approach is needed from all partners, to create a more connected society.

The Social Prescribing and Navigation Strategy is close to completion (due to be taken through ICB governance in November / December 2023).

The profile and investment in social prescribing and community navigation has increased considerably, in an environment of national (such as NHS England) and local (pilots and projects) development and funding.

Various projects and funding models are in place across Kent and Medway:

- Red Zebra: NHSE Vanguard funding, testing New Models of Care and CCG funding
- Involve Kent: DHSC pilot money and CCG funding
- SEK and Imago: Jointly commissioned by Health and (KCC - Lead commissioner)
- PCN Link Workers National funding through ARRS (Additional Roles Reimbursement Scheme)

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Thursday, 16th November 2023

Question by Mike Sole to Neil Baker
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

Gas repair works by SGN in Bridge in my division has closed the only road through the village for several weeks. Buses have been unable to access the village impacting residents and school pupils who have had to walk along un-paved and unlit roads to find alternative bus stops. Moreover, residents who drive have faced long diversions to reach their homes.

Can the Cabinet Member please outline how KCC works with utility companies to ensure a speedy completion of any works?

In answering the question, will the Cabinet Member commit to address the issue of this authority's communication about road closures which have caused significant disruption to residents in Bridge, and in many other areas of Kent?

Answer

Thank you, Mr Sole.

KCC operates a Permit Scheme which seeks to coordinate planned works in an attempt to minimise disruption to our highway network. This can be very difficult due to the differing needs and demands of various organisations let alone the prevailing legislation that prevents the highway authority from refusing access.

The Streetworks Teams routinely receive around 125,000 permit applications each year, although most recently we have seen in excess of 155,000 applications. Each one is reviewed in terms of its location, the proposed traffic management, the works duration and timing, as well as other works that are ongoing or already programmed.

Unreasonable durations and requests are challenged with scrutiny of the evidence behind each request, and conditions are placed upon applications where appropriate. This can include the need for manually controlled traffic signals to respond to live traffic conditions through to working extended working hours on the busiest parts of the road network.

Whilst these mitigations can be adopted for planned work, unfortunately where there is an emergency, utility companies can immediately access the highway and as such the opportunity to coordinate and mitigate the impact is very limited.

Regular performance meetings are held with each utility company and if there is consistent poor performance improvement plans are put in place and additional scrutiny is undertaken on their various activities. Where permit conditions are not met it is possible impose a penalty.

In terms of communications, this remains the responsibility of the works promoters to advise people affected by their works. KCC aim to email 4 weeks advance notification of planned road closures to Members, Parish Councils, emergency services, public transport providers and other parties that have requested this information. For emergency road closures notifications are sent out as soon as available. This will always be after the works have started and following receipt of the closure application from the works promoter. In respect to the Southern Gas Networks (SGN) road closure on Bridge Hill, Bridge these were emergency gas escape repairs.

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Thursday, 16th November 2023

Question by Paul Stepto to Neil Baker
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

I commend the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport for instigating the survey of Kent businesses on the effects of the continued absence of Eurostar services at Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International stations.

Could the Cabinet Member please confirm approximately how much the lack of these services is costing Kent's economy?

Answer

Thank you for the question about the international rail business survey. We have launched the business survey to provide us with intelligence about whether the lack of stopping services is impacting the Kent economy. At the current time we do not have the level of data required to be able to answer this question.

I encourage anyone who runs a business day-to-day, or who knows anyone in that position, to take the time to complete our short survey. They can find it by searching the words "kent rail survey" and selecting the KCC rail strategy web page result.

We will use the feedback to the survey and continue to work with partners to construct a full impact analysis to aid our case-making to government, Eurostar, and any potential new operators to re-establish international rail services from Kent's two international stations.

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Thursday, 16th November 2023

**Question by Jackie Meade to Dan Watkins,
Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Public Health**

I have recently been contacted by residents at The Sanctuary in St John's Church Road and Willow Lodge in my division who are extremely worried. Both of these properties are "halfway houses" for adults with mental health issues and learning difficulties. These vulnerable individuals are taught independent living skills for around a year and are then supported in finding and maintaining their own homes. I have been informed that both of these houses are due to close following the withdrawal of KCC funding, and that consequently all residents (approximately 10 in each) will be evicted on 31st March 2024 and will have to secure their own housing despite not receiving the support needed to help navigate the system.

Can the Cabinet Member please explain to what extent KCC can help support these vulnerable adults to find new accommodation, and in answering can the Cabinet Member please explain whether he believes that funding-cut decisions such as this one will actually cost KCC more in the long term, considering that these services help prevent vulnerable people from needing more significant social care support further down the line?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

Live Well Kent and Medway is a discretionary service jointly commissioned by Kent County Council, Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board and Medway Council. The service aims to keep people well and provide a holistic offer of support for people living with and without a mental health diagnosis. The service provides several support interventions, one of which is known as Mental Health Housing Related Support. St John's Church Road and Willow Lodge are both schemes delivering Mental Health Housing Related Support under this contract.

The strategic partners, Porchlight and Shaw Trust are currently developing a new preventative model of support that better aligns to the principles of Live Well Kent and Medway, namely:

- emphasis on prevention
- aim to intervene early to stop escalation of need
- recovery focused
- targeted and focused on health inequalities
- trauma informed
- evidenced based

The new model is planned to go live on 1 April 2024. For those accessing the current model of Mental Health Housing Related Support within Live Well Kent and Medway, including the two schemes enquired about, the Strategic Partners are working closely with existing providers of the service (Rethink and Sanctuary Housing Association) to plan a

smooth transition and future support. This includes identifying whether it will be possible for people to continue their tenancy at the schemes and therefore reduce the requirement for residents to move on. Where this is not possible the Strategic Partners will be working with all partners to ensure those currently accessing the service are moved on successfully, which will include making sure both their housing and support needs are continued to be met after March 2024.

The aim is that the new model will benefit more vulnerable people across Kent, than are currently progressed through the existing Mental Health Housing Related Support service, whilst achieving savings.

This news has been communicated to all current providers of the service, and the Strategic Partners are currently working with them and other key stakeholders on the development of the new provision.

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Thursday, 16th November 2023

Question by Anthony Hook to Roger Gough
Leader of Kent County Council

People in Kent are facing worsening rising cost of living. What is the Council doing to help people deal with this financial pressure?

Answer

As a response to the financial pressures facing people from Covid, the Helping Hands Scheme was created in February 2021 by the Kent County Council Leader, using £10m of Covid Emergency Grant funding, to support projects aimed at helping residents experiencing, or at risk of, financial hardship. From this fund, the Financial Hardship Programme was developed to deliver projects and schemes that support residents. The programme includes the Helping Hands Scheme and expands on this work utilising funding from other sources, such as the governments Household Support Fund which has brought over £55.3m in additional funding to support Kent residents. The programme collaborates with districts and voluntary sector partners to reach as many people as possible across the county to provide wrap around holistic support that aims to provide longer term sustainable solutions.

The Helping Hands Scheme has four key areas: Residential, Digital Inclusion and Capabilities, Crowdfunding and Business. The different streams of activity have been developed to target support in areas which have been most impacted by initially the Covid-19 pandemic, and subsequently by the cost-of-living crisis.

A key part of the council's support for residents is delivered through the Household Support Fund, distributed to councils by the governments Department for Work and Pensions. In the first three rounds of the Household Support Fund, Kent delivered 853,278 awards to residents through schemes such as Free School Meals support, energy vouchers, direct utilities payments and local support delivered through partners. Now in its fourth round of delivery, funding has been allocated to provide targeted support to Free School Meal eligible households, as well as delivering a publicly available voucher scheme to support with food and energy bills and other county-wide initiatives. In the 2023 summer county-wide scheme, over 9,000 vouchers were issued to Kent residents to support with the cost of food shopping.

In the current and previous rounds, 20% of KCC's allocation has been distributed to District and Borough Councils to deliver local initiatives. In the last six months districts have made over 35,000 awards. The support has included initiatives to help with food, energy and water, housing, advice services, as well as wider essentials households in need could benefit from. Partnership working has been key to the support delivered, as well as this allocation from the Household Support Fund, district councils and other organisations have utilised Helping Hands funding to deliver targeted initiatives. We also have a Financial Hardship Task and Finish Group which meets monthly to discuss challenges and activity around financial hardship support. The group consists of partners

from KCC, all district and borough councils, Medway Council, the voluntary sector, and other public sector organisations.

Over the remaining period of the fund, KCC will deliver another county-wide voucher scheme, supplying vouchers to support the cost of energy bills and providing additional provision for those who access regulated debt advice. Further projects are also being planned to provide sustainable solutions to support residents with heating their homes, and subsequently saving money on their energy bills. This includes the provision of boiler repairs and replacements, as well as carpeting and curtains in homes that do not have this provision.

The provision of debt advice has been a key element funded by the Helping Hands Scheme, and this has included the delivery of the Kent Money Advice Hubs which aims to improve the availability, efficiency and reach of debt advice services by providing multiple points of access to support. As part of this work, partnering with Citizens Advice, 5 kiosks have been implemented across the county. From April 2022 to March 2023, the project supported 496 individuals, bringing outcomes of over £550,000 to clients through measures such as re-imbursing, written off debts, and repayment schedules.

The Financial Hardship Programme aims to support people in a holistic way and therefore has a range of projects and schemes, as well as working with partners who deliver services and local initiatives. Within the Digital Inclusion and Capabilities workstream we have a number of schemes aiming to tackle the digital divide, with the aim of improving the financial situation of residents. One of the schemes is the Hardware Access scheme which has provided over 5,000 devices to those in financial hardship who are digitally excluded to ensure they can use online tools and services that support their financial wellbeing. This can support them in education and employment outcomes, as well as accessing services that improve their financial situation such as benefits checkers. The workstream also offers skills support to ensure that individuals have the ability to use devices appropriately.

The programme is also working to ensure people can utilise all the support available to them and the development of a referrals system has enabled organisations to effectively refer residents onto schemes that can support both their financial and other needs. ReferKent now has over 100 organisations on board, supporting residents and efficiently referring through the system onto other support services. This approach aims to ensure residents can access support appropriately and efficiently..

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Thursday, 16th November 2023

Question by Trudy Dean to Neil Baker
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

Could the Cabinet Member please explain why KCC Highways has not, as expected, adopted either the new Medway Bridge at Peters Village or Bellingham Way Spine Road, through the Panattoni Logistics site at Larkfield, when both form an important part of the strategic road network of the county?

Answer

The legal agreement for the adoption of Peters Village Bridge requires the developer to secure deeds of easement that allow KCC as Highway Authority access to the structure for maintenance and inspection purposes to ensure it is safe for the travelling public to use. This is standard practice all over the UK, is in all our agreements, and in that which the developer signed up to.

To date the developers have failed to secure this for KCC, meaning we are unable to inspect and maintain the bridge correctly and leaving KCC having to negotiate with the relevant landowner to carry out its legal obligations.

This would incur unnecessary and inappropriate public expense. The developer needs to provide the deed before the bridge can be adopted.

The developer responsible for constructing the Bellingham Way link failed to ensure that the infrastructure being installed conformed to the required highway design standards necessary to ensure the County Council would not be faced with additional maintenance costs above what would be expected.

To ensure that the opening of this important route would not be delayed, and on the basis of legal advice and with the support of the planning authority, KCC Highways agreed that a planning condition variation would give sufficient surety that the road will be maintained privately, but available for public use in perpetuity.