

COUNCIL UPDATE 1.2026

BRING BACK EUROSTAR

I attended the “Bring Back The Magic” event on 8th January which marked the 30th anniversary of the Eurostar Station opening in Ashford in 1996 following £80m of investment. Restoring international services at Ashford International would mean up to 2 hours faster trips to Paris & Brussels, greener travel (5 million people are within a 2-hour drive of the station), and a major boost for local businesses and tourism, attracting 493,000 visitors. Key points were.

- £16.5m a year saved for residents & businesses
- £2.7bn over 5 years added to the economy
- £534m per year into the visitor economy
- Rail travellers to Europe are forecast to increase from 11m to 35m by 2050 with strong demand from climate conscious customers
- 80,000+ signatures already calling for the return (you can sign it here at <https://www.change.org/p/bring-back-eurostar-train-services-to-kent>)

Virgin Trains are planning to order 12 6-car train units to start service in 2030 (this is 6 operating trains as each operating train is formed of two 6-car train units) and have committed to serve Kent Stations “if they are open”. Other operators (Trenitalia UK, Gemini Trains and Evolyn) are still “in the mix”. Increased competition will increase the chance of opening Ashford (and Ebbsfleet). The DfT have agreed to a working group to look at opening Ebbsfleet and Ashford – the key issues are border staff (and their funding) and new infrastructure at the stations to accommodate new rolling stock including signalling upgrades to European Train Control System (the “Ashford Spurs” upgrades were done in 2019 for the Siemens trains and were never used to the capacity expected); this is estimated to cost £4m. There is a proposal for Eurostar to give up the track access rights at Ashford and Ebbsfleet which would cause additional costs and delays to Eurostar restarting their services that use the Kent stations.

ABC CABINET

The Borough Council Cabinet met on 8th January. Key issues included.

- A revised Council Tax Reduction (CTR) providing Council Tax Support to low-income households for 2026/27 was discussed. Changes were required because the current CTR scheme does not disregard the elements within Universal Credit (UC) attributed to disability and caring responsibilities. This means that residents previously in receipt of Employment & Support Allowance are receiving much less Council Tax support from ABC. KCC has also removed its incentive grant which was paid to cover the cost of managing the CTR. The change will cost ABC £21k. The current CTR scheme details can be found on the website <https://www.ashford.gov.uk/benefits/claiming-benefits/claiming->

council-tax reduction/ The CTR allows a 90% reduction and is fairer as every resident has to contribute something towards local services.

- Work is about start on Swanton House on Elwick Road.
- A car parking strategy was discussed including the Park Mall site. Planning permission for demolition of the existing shopping centre and multi-storey car park was granted in November 2025. It was accepted that there needs to be an element of flexibility when it comes to exploring the longer-term role of public car parks in and around the town centre. Any future redevelopment proposals may contain an element of replacement car parking. It was agreed (amongst other items) to (i) Review CCTV provision in car parks - ensure that clear 'CCTV In Use' signage is in place if relevant, (ii) Install secure cycle storage and pilot a Park and Pedal initiative and (iii) Upgrade lighting and signage to **support safe walking** and cycling, and (iv) Promote walking, cycling, car sharing, and public transport through campaigns and incentives. There will still be cash payment options.
- An externally managed Green Loans scheme for homeowners was discussed. The scheme, utilising Council capital, aims to increase access to financing for homeowners wishing to improve the energy efficiency of their homes, unlocking private investment, reducing energy bills and emissions. Domestic properties account for a quarter of local emissions, making home retrofit a key priority. However, financing is a major barrier for many residents, especially those ineligible for government grant support but unable to self-fund. Nationally, 26% of adults have no savings, and 59.2% have less than £5,000 in emergency savings, making upfront investment in energy efficiency unattainable for the majority. A managed green loan scheme, using a FCA regulated contractor seeks to close that gap and is in line with Ashford Borough Council's Energy Strategy 2025–30, which commits to decarbonising the Borough, but with a focus on shared benefit, equity and accessibility. **Reputational risk exists with any lending alongside financial risk, in loan default, but can be mitigated by a Legal Charge, possibly coupled with a Title Restriction on the property.**

The loans are expected to be over 10-15 years so assist with affordability (noting that longer loans mean more interest). Loans will be made to homeowners only.

- Council satisfaction score shows 59.2% of tenants were very or fairly satisfied with the service provided with Ashford Borough Council. The top two issues are dissatisfaction with complaints handling and repair completion time. There is a link to the two. **The Regulator recommends a continued focus on understanding why tenants report dissatisfaction with complaint handling and how improvements can be made.** Tenants are more satisfied with ASB handling than they were last year.
- A budget of £150k was recommended to cover the design work and planning application for a scheme of 24 modular homes for use as

temporary accommodation. It would be situated on land owned by the Council but not being used by Housing at the current time; they can be re-used when permanent homes are developed on the site later. It is envisaged that the modular homes would be on the site for between 3 and 5 years.

ABC BUDGET 2026/27

Several issues arose during the discussions setting the budget:

- The government's business rates re-set will mean the Council will increase income of £677k.
- Key points to highlight for pubs are
 - Small Pubs, with a rateable value below 15,000, look to be mostly unchanged – In the cases where there is an increase, they are protected in full by Support Small Business – bills capped at £800 increase per year.
 - (ii) Small to Standard local pubs, with a rateable value between 20,000 and 75,000, look to have a double hit of the reduction of 40% Retail Hospitality & Leisure Relief (RHL) and the large increase in Rateable Value. These businesses face a 15% increase in their current bill (e.g. Farriers and Blacksmiths Arms). However, the guidance is yet unclear on this.
 - (iii) National chain pubs, due to not receiving the current RHL 40% relief, look to have lower bills due to the multiplier being much lower than previous.

NOTE: The Treasury set out on 27th January the Government's plans to support some hospitality venues with a 15% discount for pubs and live music venues for 2026/27 to be followed by a two-year real-terms freeze on rates. The Treasury has also said it will review the methodology on which pubs' rates bills are based ahead of the next calculations in 2029.

- There is an assumed growth of £559,000 for temporary accommodation.
- The High Value Council Tax Surcharge (HVCTS – “Mansion Tax”) will not generate additional resources for the Council; it will administer its collection and pass on to the government but does not start until 2027.
- ABC applied the Second Home Council Tax Premium from 1st April 2025; we do not yet know how many owners reclassified their second home as holiday lets to avoid the surcharge and pay a small amount of business rates instead.
- A policy statement released by government shows a notional band D council tax level of £226.60 for Ashford; this is the number used to calculate the government settlement. The assumed level of council tax in the draft budget is £199.37 for a band D property as there is a cap of 2.99% by which council tax can increase; a savings strategy to bridge the funded deficit will be needed. We do not yet know if during LGR the

successor authority will be allowed to disapply the 2.99% cap and leapfrog to the national council tax level – if they do it will be a 12% increase for Ashford (although an 8 year catch up is mooted from the lowest to highest council tax level). The costs of LGR will be capitalised and met over a period set by government by the successor authority; no reserve is therefore created.

- The costs of implementing local government reorganisation, its impact on staffing, recruitment, retention, secondments to shadow authorities are all to be determined.
- Recent Pension Valuation has resulted in a saving to the Council of £1.223m (£683k for the general fund).
- There is a decrease in budget of £502,000 in Refuse, Recycling and Street Clean.
- There are savings of £124,000 in premise costs following the relocation from the Civic Centre to International House.
- There are savings of £436,000 in expenditure relating to the upcoming demolition of Park Mall.
- Leisure contracts have seen an increase in revenue of £600,000 following the management fee income from the operator of the Julie Rose Stadium, Stour Centre and Tenterden Leisure Centre.
- The Port Health service is forecast to generate £250,000 from illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing checks. This is a reduction by £50k as the volume is expected to reduce.
- New threshold test whereby employers proposing 20 or more redundancies ‘at one establishment’ may well be in point for Local Government Reorganisation. This change is part of the Government’s plan to ‘Make Work Pay’ which changes multiple aspects of employment law; most of these changes will be delivered through the Employment Rights Act 2025.
- Allotment charges rose by 70% last year to £17.00. I asked that the 60p (inflation?) increase to £17.60 this year is waived by way of goodwill in view of the 70% increase last year. There are also concerns about an emerging “two tier” treatment. Existing tenants pay from 1st Oct (so any change is pro-rated through the year) but new tenants pay the new rate from the start of the year (so any change applies for the full year). In short, new tenants pay more. (NOTE Under Section 1(1) of the Allotments Act 1922, as amended, a landlord must give not less than 12 months’ written notice expiring at the end of the tenancy year for any change to terms.)
- £2 increase in garden waste is proposed (new charge £62). The charge for the new bins will go up £4 to £57.
- Car parking fees will not be reviewed until October 2026.
- CCTV in Housing will be subject to an audit to see whether they use the Swale operation or will simply record the data ready for downloading to the Police if required but without active monitoring.

ASHFORD HEALTH ALLIANCE

The group met on 14th January. The focus was on Children and Young People (CYP). Key issues discussed included.

- KCC Integrated Children's Services offer baby clinics, drop-in sessions for parents and children, services for children up to 19 (25 for SEND).
- Ashford Community Safety Unit reports that Ashford is consistently one of the safest boroughs in Kent. Its properties are reducing serious violence, ASB, tackling VAWG. It has monthly meetings which I attend and funds Uprising (running alternative education programme for years 10/11 at risk of exclusion that struggle in mainstream setting; its called Aspire+; they have operated since 2011 in partnership with ABC), Charlton Athletic Community Trust, Da Base (using music to engage with young people). This is the first year that the police have not had use their dispersal powers in the town centre. It runs roadshows for year 9 and 12 pupils in February each year – every schools now participates.
- The District Contextual Safeguarding Meeting identifies spaces and individuals at risk of harm (including from their peer network) and puts a plan in place. Projects included clearing overgrown foliage in Victoria Park, lighting in Memorial Park and CCTV.
- The Local Children's Partnership Group brings all organisations together including KCC.
- 150 girls play rugby in Kennington, the largest in Kent.
- Problems include school attendance – absence rates are 7.9% (higher than SE England rate), NEETs (not in education, employment and training) increased in 2024, under 18 conception rate, higher admissions 0-4 years for unintentional and deliberate injuries and ongoing cost of living issues.
- Uprising run a Community Action Team which is a gardening project maintaining communal green spaces across Ashford providing work experience volunteer opportunities. It includes housing assets and could be extended to include Bybrook Nature Reserve (the Friends have invited UASC in the past). I used this as an opportunity to get the code to the lock placed on the Reserve by ABC so the Friends of Bybrook Nature Reserve could re-start their open days.
- Uprising will start operating from the old parsonage on Cryol Road shortly.
- I asked that a Task and Finish Group is set up to discuss with all stakeholders (young people – schools etc, Parish Council, ABC, KCC, third sector, GP practices through their social prescribing group – the Joy Platform) as to what the new Finberry community centre will be used for.

IBF

On Wednesday 17th December 2025 the Planning Inspectorate granted permanent planning permission for the ongoing use of the Inland Border Facility and Border Control Post, operating 24 hours per day, seven days per week.

The Inspector agreed with Ashford Borough Council's overall assessment of harm, including to the local landscape and the setting of the National Landscape, the settings of listed buildings (including the Grade I St Mary's Church) and impacts on living conditions and the Human Rights of nearby residents from light pollution, noise pollution and surface water flooding. The Inspector required the applicant to, first, proactively engage with Sevington with Finberry and Mersham Parish Councils and then, second, to submit fine detail mitigation measures to ABC for assessment and approval prior to implementation. The first meeting with Parish representatives was held on 15th January. The planning conditions are, in summary, as follows.

(within 3 months:)

- Signage strategy. Watermans will be appointed to carry out a review.
- Emergency Use Strategy (disruptions to strategic road network) to include a liaison strategy with ABC, Parish Councils and residents in relation to such emergency use. It was agreed that residents would be contacted to see if they want to be included in notifications of emergency use.
- Litter Maintenance & Management Plan. Additional bins to be installed in conjunction with KCC.
- Entry arrangements to staff car park from Church Road – an investigation into pedestrian / vehicle conflicts to be carried out and implementation of any necessary measures designed to mitigate any conflicts. An intercom to be used to enable reports of any incidences which will enable CCTV to be reviewed.

(within 6 months:)

- Lighting Mitigation & Implementation Plan. Some lights have been switched off and others turned down but a further review is to be carried out.
- Updated Staff Travel Plan (containing use of EV charging and additional EV charging).
- Updated Noise Impact Assessment to include measures to deal with low frequency, tonal noise, beepers, clanging from sliders, exit arrangements etc) together with frequency of use of emergency holding areas. ABC Environmental Services to be contacted and explain the latest complaints.
- Use of 'Tango' parking area – written records of the use of this area to be kept and made available to the Council. If this area is used more than 10 times within a single calendar year (each 'time' being any 24-hr

period or part thereof) then, within 3-months, a detailed scheme for a new acoustic buffer (and / or other measures) for this area.

- Alternative uses of the site to be brought under planning control, meaning limits on parking spaces & total visiting vehicles and staff car parking.
- Air Quality Management Plan.
- Heritage / archaeology interpretation boards. The design and contact to be managed by the parishes with support from Kent Stour Countryside Project and KCC Archaeology.
- Waste Management Strategy. Tankering away of waste/foul water. Note that the offices are on mains sewers.
- Landscape Maintenance & Management Plan. Mott McDonald – who were involved in the original planting to assess the original work and remedial actions required.
- Landscape Ecological Management Plan.
- Enhanced Soft Landscaping Scheme.
- Landscaping enhancement strategy in relation to the staff entrance.
- A detailed SUDs scheme to be approved. An assessment as to whether additional drainage ponds need to be dug.

The Applicant has made obligations to ABC and KCC through a s106 Unilateral Undertaking. These total £6.7m and include.

- Financial contributions towards the cost of the completed J10A works.
- Off-site pedestrian and cycle connectivity improvements in Willesborough.
- Works to St Mary's Church.
- The carrying out of off-site Habitat Enhancement Works involving land to the east of Highfield Lane and thereafter retention of that land as 'Biodiversity Net Gain Land' for a period of 30 years.
- A financial contribution to KCC to deliver a supplementary improvement scheme to J10A involving the widening of the A20 eastbound approach and the signalisation of the A20 westbound approach and the corresponding circulatory carriageway.
- A financial contribution to KCC towards PRoW improvements east of the site involving the AE363 between Blind Lane and Mersham.
- A financial obligation to KCC for PRoW resurfacing contributions in an area near Church Road (£19k).

WOODCHURCH WINDMILL

Councillors discussed Woodchurch Windmill on 15th January. The background to this is that the Council have been putting off things for several years, but things are coming to a head. The Woodchurch Community through the Parish Council asked for the windmill to be put on the register for "Assets

of Community Value". As the clear intention is to dispose of it, the ABC Legal Team advised that the ACV process needs to be followed.

The value of the land upon which the windmill sits is negligible being a very small footprint, and the value of the windmill in its current state is perhaps 50p. On the face of it, someone could bid a £1 at auction and buy it. Due to various covenants and no services with a poor access, no one could convert it and live in it.

The problem for ABC is that the windmill is Grade ii listed, on their watch it has not been kept in a good condition and there has been a failure to seek an insurance claim when the sails were damaged in a storm some six years ago. The sails were taken down as a health and safety precaution, but then for some reason cut up and taken away. In private ownership, the LPA may well have acted by now to get the windmill back up to Heritage England's standard. There have been two, six figure quotes in the early 2020's to get the windmill up and running again, but ABC have not actioned any work at all.

It is inappropriate to 'dispose' of the windmill (however cheaply) to the community, without first complying with their present obligations to get the windmill into a serviceable condition for any community group to take on. The community could however set up fund raising schemes (and maybe Heritage Lottery Application) to future proof maintenance and repair further ahead, but only if they were able to run it as a serviceable windmill with the work needed carried out first.

SOJAN JOESPH MP COFFEE MORNING

I attended Sojan's coffee morning at Evegate on 17th January. Key issues raised included:

- Work to deliver traffic lights on the A20 junctions with 10A has been financed by the DfT. We don't yet know when work will start but Sojan will be involved if the Highways Authority are dilatory.
- The need for support for additional teacher assistants in early years classes. Out of a typical 32 class, 2 or 3 need additional support on nappy changes, holding knives and forks and language skills. A re-introduction of Shore Start was requested.
- Animal checks at the IBF have never been introduced and if they are it will improve welfare standards for animals being transported.
- Action on catapults and e-scooters was discussed, Sojan pressed the need for incidents to be reported following the killing of geese at Singleton last year.

Shazia from Ashford Samaritans was present and the session ended with a commitment from Sojan to run the Kent Spring Half Marathon and from me to run the full marathon!

CENTRAL FORUM

The Forum met on 19th January. The following issues were covered.

- Parking Strategy. The closure of Edinburgh Road (160 spaces – was at 65% capacity) was notified to all season ticket holders; they can park on other car parks except Vicarage Lane / Elwick Place (which should not be blocked by season ticket holders) Business owners do not now have an option to park on a season ticket within the ring road. It is expected that the on-street parking restriction and extent for residents could be reviewed – length of time is 2 hours with restrictions until 11pm, is this too late?) The Bank Street barrier can be reviewed – do we need a pedestrianised area in Ashford; would having an hour free parking (“pop and shop”) in Lower High Street work? We need interactive parking signs which will require ANPR. Pricing in Dover Place could be reduced at the weekend (further discount for “Blue Light” workers? Police Officers pay £3.30 per day). The concept of park and ride will not be considered in near future. Some businesses need one or two parking spaces to enable them to operate; town centre accessibility is important to business (as is the quality as well as the number of footfall).
- Redevelopments of the former Evans (54 Lower High Street) and The Green Man are both moving forward slowly as there are alterations which did not have listed building consent.

SOUTHEASTERN AMBULANCE SERVICE / SOUTH COST AMBULANCE SERVICE COLLABERATION

I attended a discussion on 20th January on progress. The two Trusts have started to work together in people/HR, around recruitment, education, Trade Union relationships. More work is needed on the people side including sexual safety and misconduct. The improvement has been around local empowerment work as this is key when the organisation operates across such a larger geographical region from Oxford to Kent. Future “quick wins” will be around training, economies of scale and skilling up staff for leadership.

The work to date has been around the people side but more needs to be done about clinical best practice, a 3-year programme is being developed including call handling across the trusts to enable better response time.

On Trade Union relationships, I reminded the UNISON rep that there is still a place on the KCC Pension Committee allocated to UNISON that has not been taken up. This is important because there is suggestion from some quarters to make significant cuts in employer pension contributions.

PLANNING REFORMS

I attended a briefing on Planning Reforms on 21st January. In December 2024, the Government published a revised National Planning Policy

Framework (NPPF). The NPPF seeks to address long-standing constraints in housing supply and, by doing this, increase the availability of homes and support economic growth. It contains a range of measures – such as strengthened presumption in favour of sustainable development, stronger local housebuilding targets and requirements for some local authorities to meet their targets by releasing parts of the green belt (with a priority on grey belt land) and controls over floodplain development) for housebuilding – which enable higher levels of housing delivery by making the planning system more predictable, efficient and growth-enabling.

The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) estimates that the NPPF will deliver an additional 170,000 net new homes by 2029/30 and 340,000 by 2034/35. The Planning and Infrastructure Bill (PIB) is likely to support the development of UK infrastructure, the delivery of new homes and business investment, which will also support economic growth.

The OBR's analysis finds that, in the short term, an increase in the construction sector's ability to produce houses will be the key driver of GDP growth. However, from 2030 onwards, growth will increasingly be supported by improved labour mobility, agglomeration effects and enhanced housing services. Over the next 10 years, the residential investment contribution from these reforms is expected to be £153 billion, contributing 0.2% to GDP in 2030 and 0.4% in 2035.

The Government has set out a new housing vision that prioritises modern design, walkable neighbourhoods and flexible living as it seeks to deliver 1.5m new homes. The model includes green routes, mixed tenures and proximity to schools, shops and services. They call this a move away from "cookie-cutter" or historic pastiche towards homes that reflect modern life, including space for home working and adaptable layouts. New guidance also stresses quieter streets, access to green space, and designs that support community interaction, local jobs and reduced car dependency, while maintaining expectations for high-quality, well-designed housing.

There is a welcome step in the new NPPF to widen the scope for affordable housing to be secured on small sites in more rural areas (with a wider definition of 'designated rural areas' for this purpose) than currently. But there is a concern that the new policy will generate general housebuilding targets far higher than is necessary or achievable. This will continue to mean that planning decisions will continue to go the way of the big six builders, who largely do not provide new houses that are affordable to average earners in rural areas. A national decision-making or development management policy with minimum requirements for housing type and tenure diversity, resulting in more affordable homes, built more quickly, and meeting the specific need identified in the local assessment is required in the new NPPF. The new

NPPF puts greater general weight on providing more affordable housing, but there are likely to be problems if the policy doesn't apply until local plans are updated. There is a case for a default affordable housing expectation in all new developments, particularly while plans are being prepared.

The legal duty to cooperate between authorities has been dispensed with but there is still a requirement to consider.

The planning reforms will enhance wildlife safety in new buildings. These include swift bricks, which allow nesting for swifts, and hedgehog highways, which facilitate movement for hedgehogs. While the guidance for councils and developers is not legally binding, it aims to expedite approvals. These measures should be mandatory to protect declining species - swifts have seen a 70% decline over 30 years due to modern housing designs lacking nesting opportunities.

Viability needs to be considered at the time the local plan is set to ensure developers do not start site-by-site viability discussions. This is noteworthy following the planning inspector's decision NOT to uphold the developer for Chilmington Green to dispense with various infrastructure requirements as part of the developing including upgrading the A28 to a dual carriageway between the Tank and Matalan Roundabouts.

ASHFORD'S LOCAL PLAN

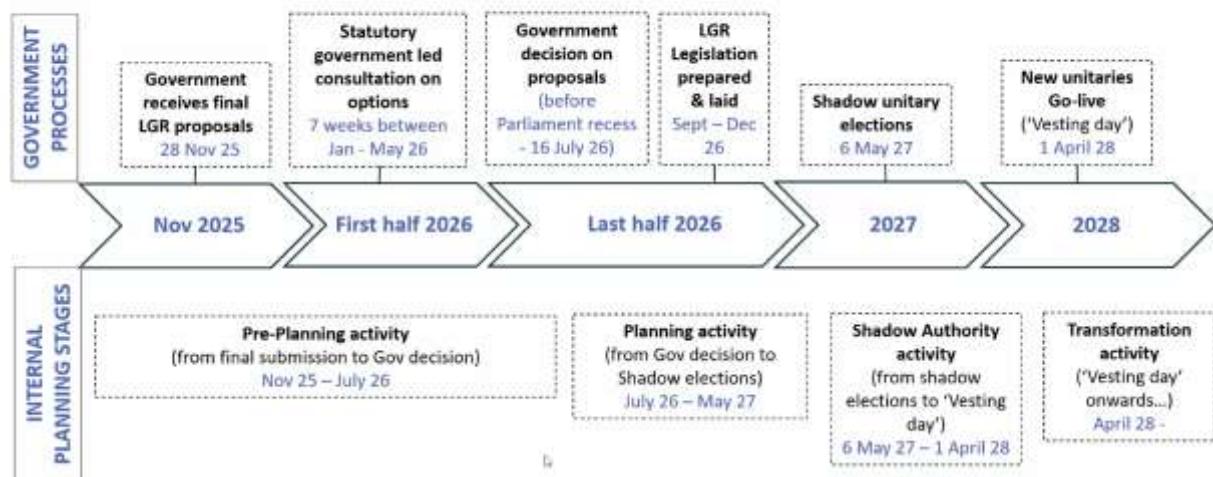
The next version of the Local Plan with finer detail of the sites allocated is intended to be published for consultation in September 2026. But regulations (yet to be produced) may require a scoping document which may or may not be the "Reg 18" consultation that was consulted on in 2025.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION (LGR)

Kent Area Local Council (KALC) Committee of Chairs and Vice-Chairs (I Am Vice Chair for Ashford) met on 22nd January on LGR (how powers and funding that already sit within local government are structured and organised).

Timeline

Timings subject to change at Government's discretion



LGR Consultation

- MHCLG currently working through all submissions
- It is 'expected' that a formal consultation will be launched in 'early February' for approximately 7 weeks
- Government will issue a list of statutory consultees
- It is anticipated that KALC will be on that list
- Any individual or organisation can respond
- Learning from areas that have already been through the process e.g. Surrey
- Will be launched on a 'Citizen Space' area linked to gov.uk
- All options will be hosted on www.kentcouncilleaders.org.uk
- Paper and email responses will also be accepted
- Government decision 'by the summer'

Points raised included:

- If Borough Council elections are cancelled in May 2027 because it will only have authority to act until April 2028, local council elections (parish, Community and town) are still expected to take place alongside the new unitary elections on that day.
- Any shadow town council for Ashford will have access to KALC resources, and an invitation is expected to be issued to join the Area Committee.
- The Government is looking at "Neighbourhood Committees" to give areas like planning (where there is local knowledge) to take decisions at a local level.

- In Tunbridge & Malling, engagement with parish councils (through the Area Committee) has taken place. The CEO & Leader gave a presentation on their views along with a link to the Borough Council meeting. They also have “parish partnership panels” every 6-months which keep parishes regularly up to date (these are like our parish forums). There were two meetings with each of the CEOs and Area Committees of the 4 districts where they explained how the new council may work. In Tunbridge Wells, they have quarterly chair meetings with the borough. In Swale, there is a regular meeting with 8 parish councillors and 4 borough councillors – the leader has been to two area committee meetings.
- Local councils already invest significant funds directly into their communities. It includes youth services, parks and open spaces, community centres, local events, biodiversity initiatives and targeted help for vulnerable residents. Early structured engagement between local councils and the new unitary authorities via joint governance forums and liaison mechanisms are required through the development of local deals to enable the appropriate transfer of services to local councils, alongside support for communities that wish to establish new local councils. This approach reflects the best of place-based governance. It demonstrates how local councils can be trusted partners in reform, not an afterthought. Local councils must be involved from the very start of the process of local government reorganisation and that any transfer of responsibility for assets or services must be backed by adequate funding and capacity support.

NEW TOWN COUNCIL FOR ASHFORD

Councillors met to discuss the outcome of the stage 1 consultation on 22nd January. The consultation results (which ended on 6th December) have suggested the introduction of a Town Council will strengthen local democracy, improve community engagement, and help secure local service delivery. Although the response rate was low (1.68% - 505 responses, 24.26% in favour and 37.03% against). The review needs to be taken forward to a stage 2 consultation with more detail around a proposed Town Council including the warding options, and whether these should be based on county or district boundaries; polling areas could be used which would result in more wards which reflects geographical and community identity with respect for a broadly balanced electorate size.

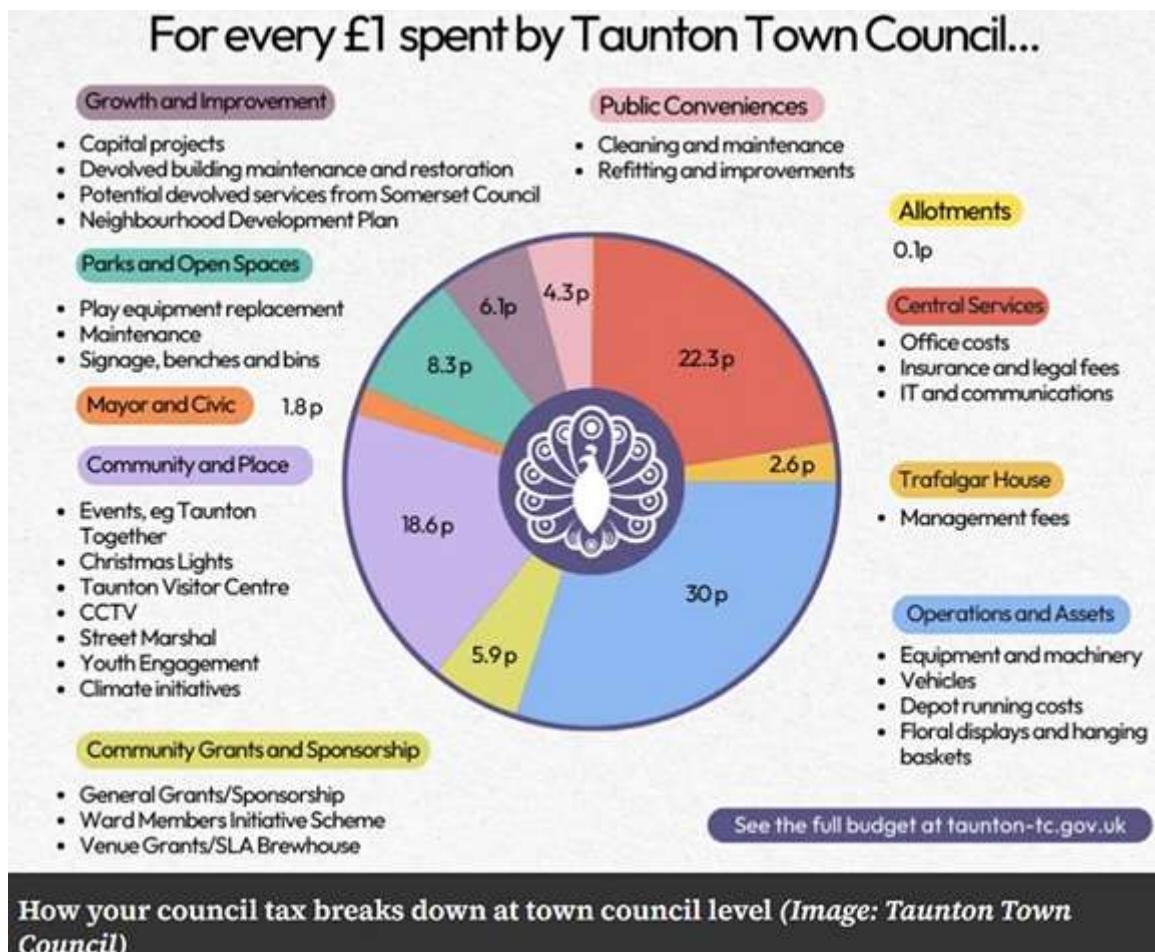
There is no statutory obligation to transfer any assets to a newly created town council except allotments. The legislation for allotments states that newly formed parish or town councils should administer the allotments in their area. Therefore, the allotments should be transferred.

Once a churchyard is closed, responsibility for maintenance falls on the parochial church council (PCC) for the parish in which the churchyard lies (s.215(1) of the Local Government Act 1972). The PCC is required to keep the churchyard in decent order and its walls and fences (including gates) in good repair. A PCC may at any time serve a written request on the local council to take over the maintenance of the churchyard. The council takes over the maintenance three months after the service of the request. ABC are responsible for St Mary's Ashford and Willesborough.

The MHCLG have advised that if an area is parished by the time of Unitary Vesting Day, the Mayoralty automatically passes to the parish/town council. The understanding is that Civic Regalia would pass to the Town Council at that time.

I supported that a Shadow Town Council is created (in much the same way as we had a Shadow Community Council in Kennington before the Community Council was created) to do much of the preparatory work ahead of its first day.

An example of the possible activities is taken from Taunton which has been recently created in 2023.



LOCAL CHILDREN'S PARTNERSHIP GROUP (LCPG)

The priorities of the LCPG were circulated on 28th January. They are focused on community profile:

- Develop an evening and weekend provision across the network
- Work with partners to review uptake of food parcels
- Increase Family Hub network outreach provision
- Increase promotion of the whole systems approach to obesity
- Increased support for families with education transitions

PLANNING

Councillors attended planning training on 28th January. The following issues were covered.

Current National Policy v Local Policy

- Local & Neighbourhood plans are the starting point. As the emerging plan passes through its process, its weight increases.
- Planning Practice sits below NPPF; Written Ministerial Statements (WMS) are material and have weight as soon as the Minister has spoken.
- The requirement to deliver a 5-year housing supply is a principle issue in NPPF but only where it is appropriate and sustainable and is without significantly and demonstrable adverse impact.

Weight Given to Comments

- Parish Councils are statutory consultees; Forums are not and therefore are not required to be consulted. Local residents are not a statutory consultee although ABC do write to local residents; a single well written objection with stated planning reasons carry more weight than 100 objections without valid planning reason.
- If a refusal is made on highway safety, ABC must have strong and robust reasons for refusal such as empirical evidence that the impact is **severe**. If the council cannot provide this evidence, there is a risk of the decision being overturned on appeal with cost awarded. This is because the Highway Authority is a technical consultee, not “just” a statutory consultee.

Treatment of Indicative Plans

- Illustrative plans are there to aid understanding and do not form part of an outline application and the planning committee decision. Most outline applications only ask for detailed consent for highway access, so the committee do not look at illustrative plans of the layout.
- Hybrid applications are a mixture of both detailed and outline. An example is Crown View – approving details for 200 units, the first phase, and outline for the remainder of the site.

Construction Issues

- Concerns over the impact of hours of contractor, noise, dust, routing of HGV traffic, out of hours contact etc during construction can be dealt with by conditions to the development.

Level of Detail for Committee v Officers

- In the main, conditions are delegated to officers to deal with rather than debated in detail at committee meetings.

Viability

- There are two areas of Financial Viability Assessment (FVA) – local plan to deal with infrastructure and then at the application stage (s106 requests from KCC, Stagecoach, etc). A report must be provided by an expert chartered surveyor who can assess the construction costs to determine a profit, expected to be 20%.
- A pragmatic view can be taken, the Crowdace development south of the Bolt, for example, delivered a deferred contribution to ABC of £400k because the development did better financially than originally expected.

Stodmarsh & Nutrient Neutrality for Nitrogen and Phosphorus

- ABC currently take applications to committee asking for a resolution to grant consent subject to an appropriate assessment (AA) for mitigation against the damage being done to Stodmarsh SSSI from nitrogen and phosphorus generated by the occupancy of new properties. Approval of the AA must be for a minimum of 80 years. Credits have previously only been generated from the developers own land (e.g. Church Commissioners taking land they own out of agricultural use). ABC is now at the threshold of developers being able to buy offsite credits through providers including the joint company between ABC & Canterbury City Council. Credits are generated from such things as by sceptic tank upgrades, water control devices, sold to developers and allowing an AA by ABC to get over the Stodmarsh issue.
- This means that more decisions can be made by planning committee without the “subject to” clause.
- Developers can wait until 2030 when the Bybrook upgrade is due to be completed.

New NPPF

- The new NPPF was published in December with consultation closing on 10th March. Policies in the post consultation NPPF should not be conflicted with by local plans and ABC will need “good reason” to diverge from new NPPF. They will be very significant considerations – this has never been couched in this was before (it currently “just” has weight).

QUANTOCK DRIVE VILLAGE GREEN APPLICATION

One issue that I have been asked to resolve to move my application on before the Inquiry Hearing is the background to Ashford Borough Council (through

Landscape Services and now Aspire) maintaining the land for 20 plus years. It is not clear if this has been with the consent of previous landowners or on what statutory basis; I believe this to be ABC's general environmental duty.

KCC also asked who installed the nearby play equipment and who is legally responsible for its maintenance - signs on site (according to the user evidence questionnaires) indicate that it is an ABC facility, yet the land appears to be privately owned.

Following contact with ABC's Open Space and Landscape Officer, I spoke to Aspire Operations Manager on 29th January.

This is important because use by residents of the Village Green Application Site must be "as of right" and not "by virtue of an implied permission". "As of right" can be acquired based on a ***presumed dedication by the landowner*** without force, without secrecy and without permission, peaceable and non-contentious. This presumption of dedication arises because of acquiescence (i.e. inaction by the landowner). In other words, if the previous owner has not challenged ABC's maintenance of the site and building the part of the play area then the use of the Village Green Application Site can be "as of right" and not "by virtue of an implied permission".

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