

## **COUNCIL UPDATE 1.2025**

### **BUSINESS RATES REFORM**

The budget on 30 October 2024 reduced the discount for business rates on retail, hospitality and leisure properties of 75% introduced during Covid-19 to 40%. This represents an increase in rates by 1.4x, a significant burden on business – the average shop's business rates bill would rise from £3,589 to £8,613. Plans were announced to revamp business rates from 1 April 2026 to target the tax on larger units with a rateable value more than £500k. Business rates are based on the rental value of a commercial property, meaning that shops currently pay a premium over online giants such as Amazon. In many cases business rates are as high or higher than rents.

At the time of writing the government has not said if the change would be directed to all properties or just to certain asset sectors but it was assumed the change would be directed to increase business rates on large distribution warehouses rather than large anchor tenants in town centres.

A further uncertainty that is particularly relevant for Ashford BC is the business rates paid on empty property of which ABC have many in Ashford. These include the Civic Centre, KWG, Mecca Bingo Hall, Former Wilko and Macknades and Swanton House – all owned by the Council so any changes may significantly impact the Council's budget.

The current rules are that properties are given three months business rate holiday when they first fall empty (subject to ownership conditions). After three months, the property becomes subject to business rates unless they are used by a charity or are listed. However, when the property is in the process of being refurbished and the repairs or improvements mean that the property cannot be used, business rates are not paid until the building can be used again. This enables the ABC to not pay business rates on its properties "being refurbished" but the issue is how this rule will apply from 1 April 2026 for properties when the refurbishment has stalled or is proceeding at a glacial pace (and there are plenty of examples of this in Ashford!)

A further uncertainty for Ashford's village businesses is how rural rate relief will apply from 1 April 2026. The current rule is that business in an eligible rural area with a population below 3,000 which is the only village general store, food shop or post office, with a rateable value of up to £8,500 or the only public house or petrol station, with a rateable value of up to £12,500 are exempt from business rates. As the burden of business rates increases, the costs of collection (and potentially recovery of bad debts) will increase for Ashford BC.

Agricultural land and buildings used for agricultural purposes, including fish farms remain exempt from business rates (but now are no longer eligible for business property relief from IHT).

### **CIVIC CENTRE LIGHTING**

Lighting for the steps from Tannery Lane towards the station was out of action since before Christmas. They required a new supply to be wired to them and ABC needed to await a design and quote from their specialist contractor which caused a delay in getting these lights up and running again which was achieved by 18<sup>th</sup> January.

### **MATALAN – LORRY PARKING**



There is an ongoing problem whereby lorries park in the entrance road to the Matalan Superstore (Beaver Lane). It is compounded when the webuyanycar pickup trailer is parked on the other side of the road creating a narrow space to drive down, and thus a hazard. The main problem is that these lorries turn a standard two-way road (Beaver Lane), into effectively a one lane road due to their size creating a hazard and potential dangers. On many occasions HGVs park there overnight, and often discard waste including faecal detriment and bottles with urine in.

Currently ABC can enforce any vehicle that blocks a dropped kerb and can also issue to an HGV when parked up on the verge/pavement. Although they are often foreign vehicles that will ignore the fines and continue to park, this will also be the case if further enforcement added like yellow lines as experienced in Cobbs Wood.

The road leading to Matalan is public highway. Any request to change the parking restrictions in this area would, in the first instance, must be made to KCC via the Highway Improvement Plan (HIP) process. If it's a case of excluding HGVs but allowing cars to park, a restricted zone excluding anything over 5T from parking is possible. This is easier to install and maintain as only signage is required. This wouldn't affect vehicles loading (webuyanycar vehicle).

### **JASMIN VARDIMON (JV)**

I had a meeting with management of the dance school on Henwood on 3<sup>rd</sup> January to discuss issues with their school. What is going very well is their engagement with local schools on networking and sharing skills with teachers and encouraging pupil's interest in performing arts and affiliated skills. In addition to dance the operations support technical, costume making, catering and space management. The number of local schools engaging with JV has increased from 6 to 8 in the last year.

Issues to address include lorry parking, particularly at weekends, energy management (KCC is the landlord), student visas and VAT on fees.

### **THE RANGE**

I have asked KCC Highways if a change is needed at the junction A20 Fougères Way. The "crossing" at the junction for The Range currently has no safe way of crossing without having to make a judgement call of when to cross. I have asked if there is scope for installing a Pelican Crossing at this location (in the image below).



However, the footfall in this area is very low, and since KCC records begin in 2010 we have not had a single recorded collision at this pedestrian crossing, let alone involving pedestrians. The average speeds are between 10-20mph so vehicles should be able to have ample room to stop.

### **FINBERRY ENVIRONMENT PLANNING (BILHAM FARM)**

The outline planning permission in 2002 (02/00278/AS for 1100 houses and 70,000 square metres of business floorspace together with mixed use community facilities, access roads, footpaths, cycle routes, landscaping and public open space) included a condition 46 which requires that: "Prior to the approved soft landscaping works being commenced in accordance with the details shown on the approved drawings (or any subsequent variant to that drawing agreed in writing by the Local Planning Authority) a 'soft landscaping implementation notice' shall have been served on the Local Planning Authority

in writing stating the date of commencement of landscaping works and the anticipated date of completion of the soft landscaping works within the relevant planting season.”

An application to discharge this landscaping condition has been submitted by Crest in respect of land south of Captains Wood (Phase B4-B5) stating that landscaping works commenced in December 2021 and will be completed in June 2025. Bilham Farm residents are now being billed by HML.

Comments can be made at

<https://ashfordboroughcouncil.my.site.com/pr/s/planning-application/a0hTw000001ALCIIA4/oth20242397?tabset-9095e=3> and this is be an opportunity to submit details of how Crest can improve the landscaping work. The deadline is 17<sup>th</sup> February.

### **VICTORIA PARK**

The public area for cars adjacent to Harpers Café, nursery and public WCs, is to be re-graded and levelled very shortly. The works were programmed for before Christmas, but the contractor had an injury which he is recovering from. Nevertheless, the works will be undertaken very shortly, which should improve matters. The Heras fencing that was stored in part of the parking area was relocated, freeing up more space.

### **IBF – LIVE ANIMAL CHECKS**

Contractors have started work again on fitting out the facilities at Sevington following the old contractors going bust. Operations are expected to start at the end of the year, but the number and type of the animals is yet to be agreed by HM Government.

### **BRUNSWICK ROAD**

I have reported terrible road conditions at the bottom of Carlton Road with the junction of Brunswick Road. Work was done just over a year ago, but the issue was not resolved (ref 850969).

### **IBF S106 TOWARDS SEVINGTON CHURCH**

I spoke with council planning officers on 7<sup>th</sup> January about the work the Council has done to support Sevington Church on securing s106 funding from the DfT and the previous owners AXA/Friends Life. The s106 covering the payment has still not been signed, there are complexities over a lease granted to SE Power. The expectation is that the sum will be rolled into the new s106 for the permanent use of the IBF which will be submitted later this year. ABC holds the funds but cannot release it until the s106 is signed.

The issue of spire repairs has been discussed with ABC although it is a matter for the diocese. However, a s106 contribution of 186k is due from the IBF which relates to 'Church Works' (CW) and the specification of those works forms the 'Church Works Specification' (CWS). The CWS was intended to ensure that the Church had upgrades to achieve the objective of improving its ability to form part of the industrial / office / logistics Park granted outline planning permission under ref 14/00906/AS and, in so doing, mitigate the harm to the setting of the building resulting from the park.

The diocese should be consulted on whether any submitted CWS could be revised as they might wish to update their plans. Put another way, upgrading the interior to facilitate better use by the local community is going to be hampered by being open to the elements!

### **KENT KARRIER SCHEME**

KCC has been able to use National Bus Strategy Funding to defer the reintroduction of a Membership Fee for the schemes. The KCC funded Kent Karrier (Dial-a-Ride) services is a membership-based scheme for residents who owing to age or disability cannot make use of Public Transport or who live in more rural areas where there are no available bus and rail services.

The Kent Karrier schemes are open only to Members of the scheme who can qualify based on geography (if you live more than 500m from a bus or rail service), age or disability. In recent years Membership has been free of any charge but alongside the wider service changes, it was proposed to reintroduce a meaningful Membership fee of £50 per year from April 2025 when all Membership naturally expires.

However, using Government National Bus Strategy Funding, KCC can defer the need for a Membership fee for a further year enabling KCC to continue to provide free Membership until April 2026. Membership will continue without change, KCC are not proposed to reassess eligibility but expect this to result in an overall reduction in Membership numbers as customers elect not to renew where they have no intention to make use of the service.

### **ENGLISH NATIONAL CONCESSIONARY TRAVEL SCHEME (ENCTS) RENEWALS IN MARCH 2025**

KCC manages the ENCTS (often also referred to as the Older People's Bus Pass) for Kent residents on behalf of central government. There are currently approximately 235,000 ENCTS pass-holders in Kent, who qualify either based on age or disability. Passes are typically issued for five years with an expiry date at the end of March each time, regardless of which month in the year the pass was originally issued.

In March 2025 there are approximately 20,000 passes which reach their natural expiry. Passes which have been used on bus in the last 12 months will be renewed automatically with a new pass sent to the home address before the current one expires. Where older person passes have not been used in the last 12 months, KCC will write to the pass holder offering them the opportunity to renew their pass through a simple online process or by going to a library or using the post.

Holders of disabled person passes will be written to and asked to re-evidence their eligibility either by going to a library, going online or by post. Pass holders whose records have been marked as “permanent disability” will only be written to if they have not used their pass in the last year, otherwise they will be automatically renewed.

Passholders are not required to pay for renewing their passes, unless they need to replace their new pass because they have failed to inform us of an address move and we send their passes to their old address. Letters for those whose pass will not automatically renew will be sent at the beginning of February.

### **FINBERRY VILLAGE CENTRE / COMMUNITY CENTRE**

The Church Commissioners for England (CCE) have full planning consent for the development of the village centre under planning ref 19/01232/AS. Since my last update on the development in March 2024, the CCE successfully marketed the local centre site, identifying a preferred bidder (a local centre specialist) for the main commercial elements. The CCE are continuing to progress contractual matters, and the preferred bidder has also commenced pre-application planning discussions with ABC. A detailed planning application is anticipated being submitted during the first part of 2025, though a fixed programme for this is currently being finalised.

Separately, ABC have also made some progress with the Finberry Community Centre and Sports Courts project with Crest (this one is not with the CCE). ABC have produced a design brief based on the s106 with the aim of setting up the vision for the site and have more structured conversations with Crest going forward. This was shared with Crest before Christmas and ABC have had a positive meeting with Crest and planning on 15<sup>th</sup> January. Crest will now produce revised drawings and costing in accordance with the specification provided. This will take around 7 weeks. ABC have promised to keep me informed of progress and share the plans as soon as they are available.

It is hoped that progress on these issues will help deliver Finberry as originally envisaged on 2002 with the right economic activity and public services, while conserving and enhancing the natural and local environment. Further work is

needed on supported housing and footpath/cyclepath access to the town centre.

## **INTEGRATED NATIONAL TRANSPORT STRATEGY**

Councillors had a meeting to discuss on 8<sup>th</sup> January. Key issues for Kent included:

- Easier commutes with joined up pricing / simplification of fares and ease of purchasing tickets.
- Better integration of modes to give real choices. The traffic around Ashford railway station inhibits bus routes which use (and are delayed) at the forecourt.
- Technology can improve access to ticketing and transport option. Better data on train and bus route usage would include planning of services. Could demand response using smartphones be a real option.
- Roadside charging for EV.
- Return of international rail to Ashford & Ebbsfleet.
- Greater use of sensors to manage the road network including traffic light operations and variable roadside signage.
- Speed of decision making is slow, and example sited was Heathrow Third Runway / Gatwick Second Runway and the Lower Thames Crossing.

## **DEVOLUTION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION**

The government has announced its desire to create a mayoral authority for the peninsula of Kent County and Medway. Both ABC and KCC has had significant discussions as Kent and Medway were asked to consider whether they wished to be part of the “Devolution Priority Wave”. The government is “keen that Kent and Medway are part of the Priority Wave” and Kent & Medway leaders had to confirm their view by 10<sup>th</sup> January 2025. If Kent and Medway are part of the Priority Wave, Kent and Medway would become a Mayoral County Combined Authority (MCCA) until unitaries are created as part of a separate process of local government reorganisation. The mayor would be elected in May 2026. KCC made the request to be in the Priority Wave on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2025 – I voted for that at County Council on 9<sup>th</sup> January why would you not want new mayoral powers ASAP?

There will be things a mayor can do themselves and things that a mayor can only do with the Leaders of the combined authorities (KCC & Medway until unitaries are created - district leaders would have no role). In summary the new powers for the mayor will include a block grant of spending which the MCCA can spend on rail, economic development, adult skills and strategic planning. The new mayor will have a precept raising authority and will presumably continue to raise a precept if the mayor will become the Police

and Crime Commissioner which does raise a precept (as does Kent Fire & Rescue which could also fall to the mayor).

Devolution is linked to local government reorganisation so that two tier authorities are replaced by unitaries which will have a suggested population requirement of 500,000. The reason for this is to improve councils' ability to deliver services. The suggested population of 500,000 for new unitary councils is a “benchmark” and the Government would look at smaller proposals if they had “size and scale to deliver quality services for people”. **Initial proposals for these new unitaries must be made by March 2025** (although further details can follow in September).

**The new unitaries are expected to come into existence in May 2027 or May 2028.** The government are therefore “minded delaying” County Council elections from May 2025 to May 2026 (legally they can only be deferred 12 months, but they might be further delayed depending on when the new unitaries are created). The new unitaries will require shadow authorities in advance of coming into existence in 2027 or 2028; elections to the (shadow) unitaries could be in May 2026 when the new mayor will be elected. The idea of delaying the May 2025 elections is to avoid three elections in subsequent years (KCC in 2025, mayor/unitary in 2026 and ABC in 2027) and the associated “purdah” periods.

The main issues (for me) are with how Ashford gets adequate representation in the new regime. There is a considerable risk of no smooth transition between one arrangement and another, it is down to the current (maybe the last) cohort of councillors to ensure it is done properly. There has been precious little official consultation by ABC with residents.

- (i) It would make decision-making remote from the communities it serves. There is a need for proper consultation with residents, businesses, elected representatives, and stakeholders before any reforms are made. I am concerned that a single unitary council could diminish local representation.
- (ii) Should unparished areas become a parish? Without a Parish/Town/Community Council, how will Ashford Town Centre get represented at the Unitary – we will no longer have an Ashford Ceremonial Mayor unless we have an Ashford Town Council. Would Ashford be disadvantaged and remote from decision making at the unitary level if it remains unparished compared to parish areas (who can be represented through KALC)? If residents want a Community Governance Review (CGR) for Ashford to, say, create a Town Council, the earliest this could be implemented would be the first election after vesting of the unitary, so there would be a gap of four years. If residents wanted to have a CGR in place before the abolition of ABC they would have to either raise a petition of 7.5% of

the electorate in the proposed area to demand a CGR, or get ABC to initiate - but time is very short.

- (iii) A question is should Ashford be in an east or west Kent unitary, split between the two or should there be a single unitary for the whole county (including Medway). Any east Kent authority will be wholly responsible for managing the coastal environment including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and both are a significant cost. An east Kent Unitary will have other issues that arise from the Kent coast including transport access to health infrastructure (the share of the population over 75 is expected to rise more steeply than the national average over the next 20 years) and it includes some of the most deprived areas of Kent which has an impact on the adult social care and children in care budgets.
- (iv) There could be a material impact on council tax levels for Ashford. The ABC part of the council tax is currently at the lower end of charges, but this will increase as we move to the average. If we move to the average, it will mean a 25% hike in district council element of the council tax. We need an evidenced based appraisal of the impact on council tax before we agree where we go.

	Estimated District Charge for 2025/26
Dartford	£190.48
Ashford	£193.58
Swale	£206.70
Tunbridge Wells	£211.30
Dover	£220.79
Gravesham	£237.94
Average	£240.14
Tonbridge & Malling	£245.28
Canterbury	£247.06
Sevenoaks	£251.01
Thanet	£271.05
Maidstone	£301.71
Folkestone & Hythe	£304.81

- (v) What will happen to ABC Reserves? Do ABC keep them and pass to the unitary or spend them beforehand? Where devolution has been done before, debts (not reserves) were allocated by a statutory instrument. A policy on managing reserve use before ABC ends will have to be made by ABC councillors under their fiduciary duty to ensure that the disappearing council (ABC) needs to remain viable. All the districts that will be subsumed into the new unitary will need to work together: we cannot have one district spending all its cash so projects are started in their town creating a legacy burden that the new unitary must follow. Once council (not ABC) has spoken about town centre assets to their existing Town Council.

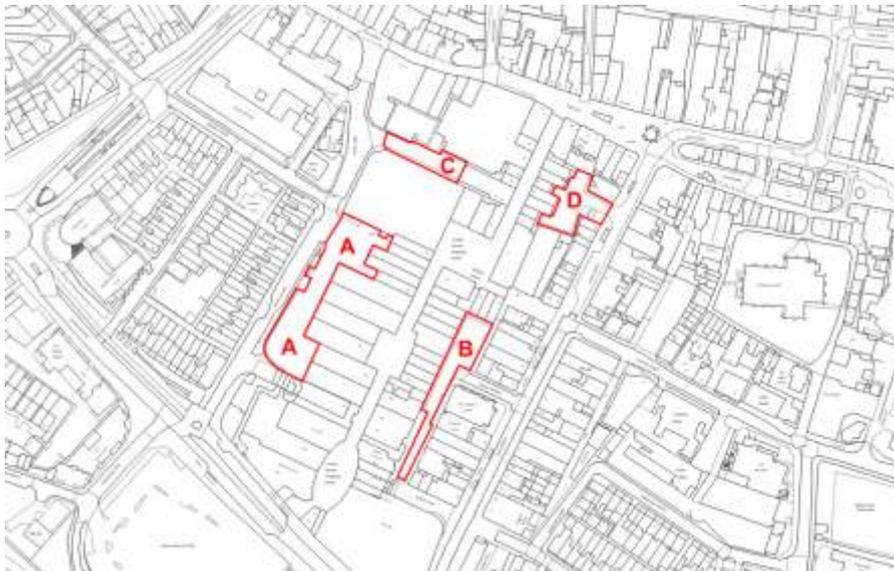
KCC have set up a Devolution webpage which includes the Devolution Priority Programme request letter and the letter to request the postponement of the KCC elections in May 2025. The webpage will be updated as and when further information is available. The link to the webpage can be found here: <https://www.kent.gov.uk/about-the-council/devolution>

### **FINBERRY BUS SERVICE**

The delay in the bus service starting is securing ANPR cameras on the Northern Link Road. The delay is twofold (i) ensuring the ANPR cameras at the Bridgefield Accommodation Bridge can be installed and work (in that there are enough transgressors to enable the project to "wash its face" commercially). The camera installation on the accommodation bridge is delayed due to the developers, Taylor Wimpey / Persimmon, not delivering lighting sufficient to enable KCC and Highways England (HE) to adopt (it goes over the A2070 which is why HE are involved), (ii) securing Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding from HM Government to cover the capital costs for the outlay on the cameras. KCC will not adopt the Northern Link Road until there the viable enforcement system is in place.

### **COUNTY SQUARE DROPPING OFF AREAS**

The following areas are proposed to become areas with parking restrictions in that only collection/delivery from businesses using County Square will be permitted 24 hours, 7 days a week. Comments can be made at <https://www.ashford.gov.uk/parking/general-parking/parking-consultations/>



### **SOUTHEAST WATER (SEW): CHARING TO ASHFORD PROJECT**

I attended a briefing on 14<sup>th</sup> January on the second phase of their project to lay 17 kilometres of new transfer main from just outside Maidstone to Ashford. The next phase of work takes place between Charing and Ashford. The idea

is to transfer water from Maidstone to Ashford to supply reservoirs on the way as there have been issues in the past in the Charing area.

### Project overview

- Connecting drinking water storage tanks just outside Maidstone (near Lenham), Charing and Ashford.
- Two phases
- Phase one recap
  - Just under three kilometres of new water main in the Wichling and Doddington area (not shown opposite)
  - Almost six kilometres between drinking water storage tanks just outside Maidstone and Charing.



south east water

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Pure know how

### Phase two

- Pilgrims Way, Charing, to Ashford.
- Multiple work fronts to minimise disruption
- Majority of work is in private land
- Will need to work within or crossing carriageways or Public Rights of Way. Notices will be placed in advance.
- Roads affected will be:

Pilgrims Way	Amberleaze
Toll Lane	The Street
Junction of Pett Lane, Westwell Lane and Wicken Lane	M20 (tunnelling)
Woolton Lane	Sandyhurst Lane
Multiple locations on Westwell Lane	A20 / Maidstone Road

south east water

5



SEW will be tunnelling under M20 and railway so there will be no impact on these. The A20 will stay open, under traffic lights but side roads (Sandyhurst Lane – 5 days from 21 October 2025) will require closure. Working hours will be in “standard hours” – Monday to Friday and some on Saturday. Work will start in April 2025 and will last to August 2026. A20 investigations are scheduled during February under lane closures not temporary traffic lights.

## **KCC BUDGET 2025/26**

A formula has been established to allocate funding to local councils to reimburse the additional NIC costs for 2025/26. It is unclear at the time of the meeting to discuss the Medium-Term Financial Plan on 15<sup>th</sup> January how much will be paid to KCC. The amount the NIC changes will cost KCC are £10m. Adult Social Care providers to KCC were going to be paid a 3% increase in charges they make to KCC, but discussions are ongoing and a 4% increase as been requested by providers.

Plans for the disposal of land at Stanhope Road are not advanced enough to be discussed at the Policy and Resources Committee at KCC.

There are a number of high value invoices over 6 months old, particularly to/from the NHS, which are impacting this KPI. The Kent & Medway Integrated Care Board faces severe financial challenges and KCC is exploring how best to obtain payment, including the option of arbitration, as there are issues relating to KCC as both creditor and debtor. The amount is estimated at £19m.

## **DOMESTIC ABUSE**

Councillors discussed the new “Kent and Medway Domestic Abuse Referral Pathway”. The Scheme, a countywide offer of sanctuary for survivors of domestic abuse, went live this year. It includes property assessment, security advice and measures applied to a survivor’s home as well as specialist domestic abuse support for adults and children living in the home, extending the Council’s safe accommodation support offer. The Scheme supports people to stay in their own homes, a preference for many people who experience abuse by conducting security assessments, providing professional security advice and fitting security upgrades. The Scheme will enable an estimated additional 2,000 households to meet the statutory definition of safe accommodation and therefore the adults and children residing in these properties will be eligible to access specialist domestic abuse support.

A 3-bed male refuge opened this year. This is for men aged 18 and above who are fleeing domestic abuse and their accompanying children. Whilst residing in the refuge, survivors are provided with support, advocacy, and advice. Upon moving out, resettlement support and assistance is provided for a period of up to 6 months.

KCC recognises the importance of pets for those who are needing to flee. Research shows that perpetrators use pets as part of their abuse, threats to harm them, withholding vet treatment, allowing them to escape, rehome them or using their presence to keep people from leaving is common. The Scheme recognises the importance of pets for those who are needing to flee and committed to raising awareness of support to prevent families fleeing abuse

from having to give up their pets. Flexible funding available to safe accommodation providers, supporting the associated costs of allowing pets into refuge, including the cost for vaccinations, worm and flea treatments and any associated damage to property. This helps to remove the barriers survivors may face in accessing safety and support and recognises the significant role pets can play in deciding whether to leave. KCC works with Dogs Trust to ensure that if the pet needs to go into kennels, the abuse does not be perpetuated by the abuser taking the pet out of kennels.

<https://www.kent.gov.uk/leisure-and-community/community-safety/domestic-abuse#tab-1,2>

## **STODMARSH MITIGATION**

Nutrient neutrality in the catchment for the Stodmarsh National Nature Reserve is having a significant impact on the delivery of homes in East Kent. In Summer 2020, Natural England issued advice to the local planning authorities (LPAs) on the River Stour (Canterbury, Ashford, Folkestone & Hythe, Maidstone and Swale) that meant new developments must not increase the level of nutrients nitrogen and phosphorus in the River Stour, as they are having a negative impact on Stodmarsh National Nature Reserve, a nationally and internationally designated site. These nutrients are in the effluent from wastewater treatment works (WwTW). Any new housing development in the catchment of the WwTW will increase the amount of effluent they discharge and therefore the amount of nutrients that enter the River Stour. To meet current planning requirements, proposed new developments with overnight accommodation must demonstrate that the development achieves nutrient neutrality i.e. the level of nutrients in the river is the same after the development as it was before. Achieving nutrient neutrality is complex but planning authorities cannot approve planning applications for developments including overnight accommodation that cannot demonstrate this. This has effectively put a hold on housing developments whilst mitigation options are sought.

The government awarded £9.8m to KCC in December 2024 for nutrient neutrality mitigation works in East Kent along with revenue grants of £430,000 and a further £100,000 revenue funding to support the catchment coordinator role. The catchment coordinator, KCC, has a responsibility to address the ongoing issue of Nutrient Neutrality to unlock housing development in the area.

Ashford Borough Council and Canterbury City Council are establishing a joint venture company - Stour Environmental Credits Ltd to deliver the nutrient mitigation on their behalf and will be ready to deliver mitigation schemes which will generate credits and be sold to release housing development. It is expected the Joint Venture Company will be ready to trade within the first quarter of 2025.

## **IBF PLANNING APPLICATION**

The DfT held a second round of public consultation events on 17<sup>th</sup> / 18<sup>th</sup> January and Mersham VH and Willesborough WI respectively. The issues I raised included:

- Failure to sign the inherited s106 agreement from the previous site application has prevented ABC from releasing funding. DfT will investigate.
- Long term assurance over the field east of the IBF including a landscape management plan is required noting the number of trees that have died on the bund and the lack of promised “Miyawaki” planting. They need to address water run-off into Kingsford Street.
- Progress of planting in the viewing corridor appears behind schedule and many trees near Church Road have died and need to be replaced.
- Excessive lighting – the DfT are looking at reducing the lighting when swim lanes are not used at night.
- Traffic Operating Strategy is not preventing drivers trying to access the site via inappropriate routes. I asked for the “Sevington Church” sign to be replaced with “St Marys Church” as reference to Sevington is causing confusion.
- Environmental impact from litter around the entrance – DfT will ensure there are sufficient bins on site now additional welfare units have been provided.
- Further archaeological assessment of the east field is required and provision of the information board should include information on the cold war bunker.
- No decision has been made by HM Government & EU on the number and scope of live animal checks.
- Further works is required to mitigate the impact of lorry noise on the exit road adjacent to Highfield Lane / Church Road.

A planning application is expected shortly.

## **POTHLES**

£54m of new funding for KCC has been allocated for local roads. KCC has been asked to collect data on how they can use the funding to prevent potholes forming and £14.3m will be withheld until they can show this is happening. The holding back of funding will create uncertainty as to long term availability of the funding as KCC already spends considerable funds on maintaining highways including preventative measures, more than they receive from government. Greater long-term investment is required to reduce the repair backlog.

# KENT AND MEDWAY INTEGRATED HEALTH AND WORK STRATEGY

Councillors had a briefing on the draft strategy on 20<sup>th</sup> January. Fitness for work is worse on the Kent coast; it improves as you move inland but Ashford has a low rate.

## Why We Need a Strategy:

### People Perspective

There is a mutually beneficial relationship between work and health.

People who are unemployed:



Are five times more likely to report poor health than employees.<sup>8</sup>



Are more likely to experience a detrimental impact on mental health.<sup>9</sup>



Experience a detrimental economic impact.<sup>10</sup>

People who have never worked or are long-term unemployed:



Are more likely to be obese than the England average.<sup>11</sup>



Are less likely to be physically active.<sup>12</sup>



Are more likely to smoke than the England average.<sup>12</sup>

### Economic Perspective

There is an economic impact on the country and employers. Long-term sickness can lead to increased costs for businesses including funding sick leave and hiring temporary employees. Indirect costs may include lowered productivity and the potential loss of business, especially in time critical industries.

#### Employers need skilled staff



- 48% of Kent & Medway employers surveyed in 2023 experienced problems recruiting the staff they needed.
- Of this total, 19.7% said that staff recruitment is a major problem for them.<sup>14</sup>

#### Cost to businesses



- Annual hidden cost of employee sickness has risen by £30 billion since 2018.
- Most of this increased cost (£25 billion) to businesses is from lower productivity among people working through sickness, with just £5 billion down to rising sick days.<sup>15</sup>

#### Long-term absence limits productivity



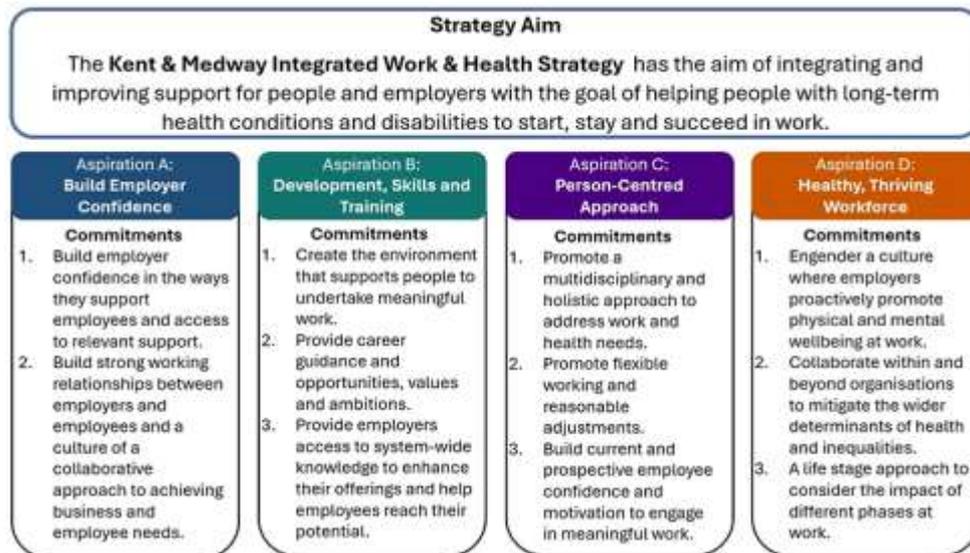
- People with work limiting health conditions are 3 times less likely to return to work within a year than those without health conditions.<sup>16</sup>

#### Tax receipts and benefits bill



- Fewer employees reduces the UK tax receipts & increases the benefit bill, reducing investment in the economy and necessary infrastructure.
- The Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that the cost of sickness and disability benefits will increase by £30 Billion over the next 5 years across the UK.<sup>17</sup>

The work to solve this includes (i) developing apprenticeships, (ii) the NHS empowering people to manage their own health conditions, (iii) reducing poverty and inequalities, (iv) a skills and improvement plan and, (v) changing recruitment practices, (vi) providing DWP advisors in GP surgeries.



Further details are here on the consultation:

<https://www.haveyoursayinkentandmedway.co.uk/work-and-health-strategy/surveys/work-and-health-strategy-survey>

## COMMUNITY WARDEN WORKSHOP

This was held on 20<sup>th</sup> January to understand how parish councils can sponsor a warden for their parishes via KCC. There are two models: (i) the parish or housing association employs their own warden or (ii) the warden is employed by KCC, and funding reimburses KCC for the cost (£40k FTE pa). The advantage of the second route is that KCC provides all the backup as KCC staff – management etc so the service does not change from that provides currently by KCC. Direct employment gives the parish the opportunity to change the scope of services provided by the warden. Ideally the warden would spend at least 3 days a week in the community they operate so they have the best impact, bigger clusters of parishes are better than one of these wardens operating in a single parish or ward. Further details from [communitywardenreview@kent.gov.uk](mailto:communitywardenreview@kent.gov.uk).

## MERSHAM LOCAL NEEDS HOUSING

The recent survey has concluded that there is a need for local needs (affordable) housing in Mersham. English Rural Housing (the housing association that will deliver the units) and the Church Commissioners for England (the landowners next to the existing site) are in negotiations and “heads of terms” are expected in due course. A survey of land will be carried out for access and layout.

## GREEN SOCIAL PRESCRIBING NETWORK

The group met on 21<sup>st</sup> January to review the work done on mapping and increasing green social prescribing opportunities. The following map shows the green infrastructure in Ashford. The two “intervention sites” available for

green social prescribing where there are volunteering opportunities in Ashford at Hothfield and Conningbrook Lakes. There are additional informal opportunities at Bybrook Nature Reserve and Victoria Park but these are not part of the green social prescribing network.

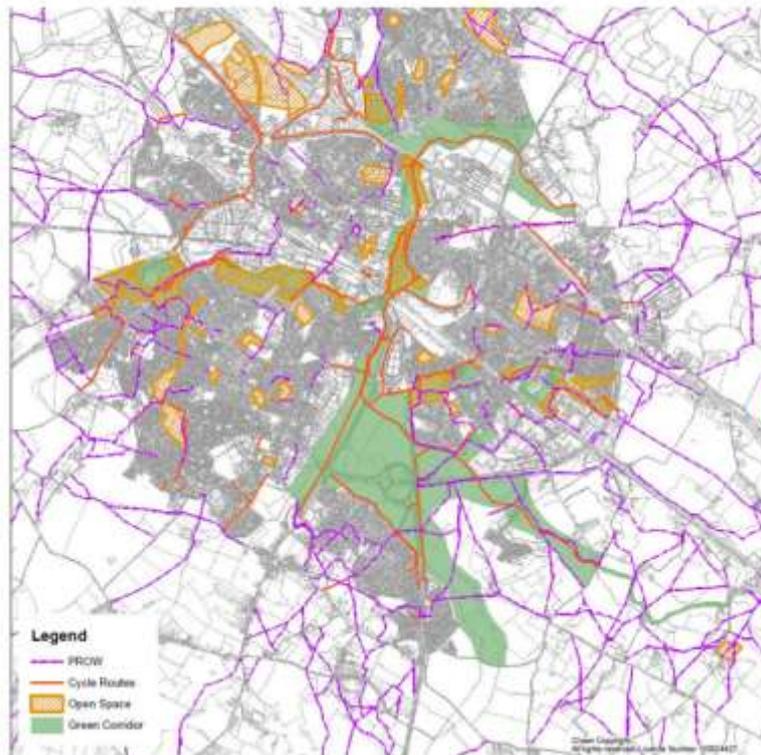
### ASHFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

Green Corridor Action Plan 2017

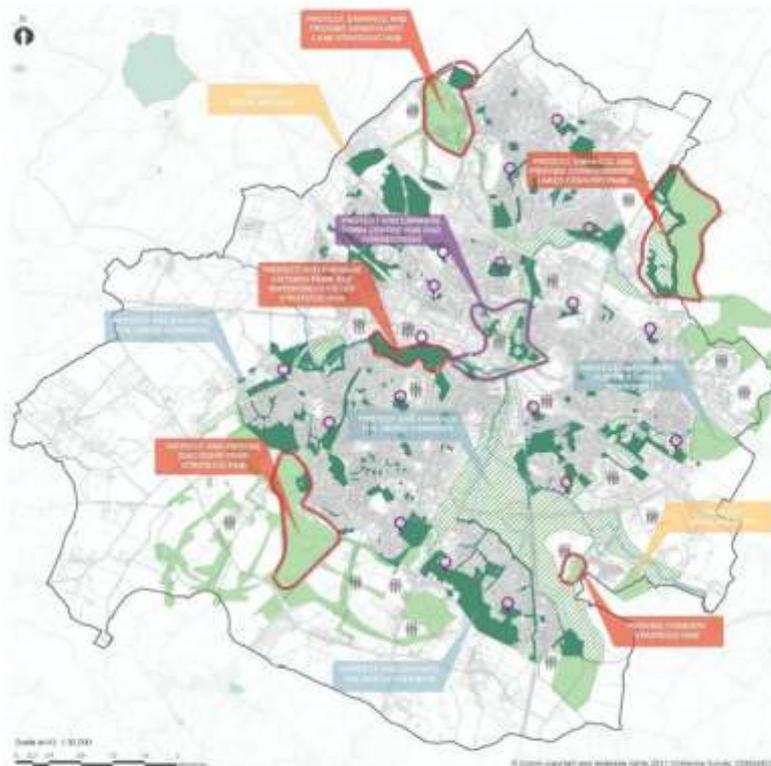
Map showing current Green Infrastructure Network



Map Showing Existing Green Corridor with Public Rights of Way, Cycle Routes and Public Open Space to show connectivity between open spaces.



The Ashford Borough Open Space Strategy



Open Space Strategy Spatial Diagram Ashford Urban Area



GPs are now able to use the Joy Platform (<https://services.thejoyapp.com/>) which also is accessible by the public to access the opportunities that exist. Kent Wildlife Trust have a new “Wilder Wellbeing” programme for 2025. It is available for those facing mental health, loneliness, C-PTSD or social isolation issues. They are a six-week course of mindfulness, learning about nature including how to identify birds and trees. It encourages ongoing connection with the group that completes the course and future volunteering opportunities with KWT. There are new courses for those with perinatal mental health issues. You can sign up at One You in Park Mall. Everyday Active Kent focuses on the over 50’s to increase their healthy lifespan and activity levels (physical, emotional and cognitive). To join the network and receive Network newsletters and information re local/national events, research, information, please visit <https://www.everydayactivekent.org.uk/live-longer-better/>

## NATIONAL PLANNING REFORMS

Councillors had a briefing on 22<sup>nd</sup> January. Key issues included:

- Devolution arrangements in England includes proposals for introducing a universal system of strategic planning within five years. The Government has made clear that it is keen that Local Plans should not be delayed.
- A Standard Method is to be used to set an area’s housing need – it is no longer an ‘advisory starting point’ as in the previous NPPF – and the option of preparing bespoke objectively assessed housing need assessments has been removed. The methodology itself has been amended resulting in some changes to the housing need figure, although this is negligible for Ashford. Ashford must meet its area’s identified housing need.
- The requirement to maintain an annual five-year housing land supply position statement plus a minimum 5% buffer is reinstated, with no exceptions. This can increase to a 20% buffer (essentially a 6 year housing land supply) in cases where there has been significant under delivery over the previous 3 years.
- Affordable housing priority has been reset to ensure social rent options are explicitly considered in housing needs assessments, however **the 10% minimum requirement for affordable home ownership on major sites has been removed**. Government are encouraging mixed tenure (which Ashford already does).
- The benefits associated with renewable energy and low carbon energy generation contributing to meeting a net zero future **should be given significant weight in decision making** and plan making should consider identifying suitable areas for renewable and low carbon development. The question is whether building regulations change – these normally set the bar for planning requirements.

- Additional weight is given to development of infrastructure including health which could give strength to claiming s106 claims.
- There may be a change in the view of Policy HOU5 which is the policy that can permit windfall development on the fringes of villages provided they are accessible to local services.

## **BIODIVERSITY TASK GROUP**

The group met on 23<sup>rd</sup> January.

- One of the themes is the amount of litter around Ashford and the impact this has on the environment. “Trash and Trail” is a new scheme to encourage people to pick up their own litter and encourage litter-picking groups. These activities can be championed by the Parks Foundation – litter picking can be remarkably addictive and has a remarkable positive effect on mental health and tackling social isolation.
- A further issue is enabling community groups to develop community orchards. A key enabler of community involvement are parish councils.
- Nitrogen fixing plants will be planted in Memorial Gardens to improve the soil quality. Information boards are required to explain the reason as it may look unsightly.
- The list of priority species in Kent is increasing from 13 to 140.
- Ashford Borough has: (i) nearly half of Kent’s Lowland Fens, (ii) the highest proportion of land in Kent within a flood zone (12.9%), (iii) the highest proportion of non-developed land at 93.3% in Kent (the land area is 58,062 ha of which 3,744 has been developed) and (iv) some of the darkest skies recorded in Kent are in Ashford Borough.
- The group (and KWT) expressed concerns over the grant of outline consent for Brompton Bikes on the green corridor. However, the balance was on the creation of jobs in Ashford. The EA has put in an objection to the consent because it is on the floodplain so the decision will be referred to the Secretary of State – but they are not expected to overturn the decision. There were 48 conditions on the application, designed to ensure that no other operator will develop the site.

## **HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

The Committee (which I chair) met on 28<sup>th</sup> January. There were three issues of interest.

### *Maternity Services*

Significant changes have taken place following the an independent investigation into 65 baby deaths, the outcome of 45 could have been different. A Multiple Pregnancy Midwife, a Foetal Medicine Lead Midwife, a Maternal Medicine Midwife and consultant obstetricians have been recruited. There are plans to recruit to further doctor posts to enhance the workforce. A concern remains with postnatal care with one in seven not positive; a postnatal care / discharge planning group has been created to assess the

issues about postnatal ward care and look after the discharge process. A bid has been submitted for capital funding for a second obstetric theatre at the QEQM. Student midwives are now sourced from the University of Surrey following withdrawal of the Nursing and Midwifery Council approval of the midwifery service at Canterbury Christ Church University. The Twinkling Stars bereavement suite at the WHH will be moved to a location outside the Labour Ward so that women, babies and their families can be cared for in a more suitable setting later in 2025 - this will be financed by the Hospital Charity.

### *Stroke Services*

The 54-bed East Kent Hyper Acute Service Unit (HASU) at the WHH has been delayed until 2027. Stroke services are currently delivered at the Kent and Canterbury where there is no A&E department. Mechanical Thrombectomy services (required within 6 hours of stroke onset and care for cardiac events which reduce brain damage) will be provided at K&C from April 2025. The delay has been caused by a decision to relocate the unit from a site under the Emergency Department to an adjoining site which enables direct access to the stroke assessment centre with a CT scanner located with the unit giving patients priority use, saving time. The build completion date is now April 2027 – start of work June 2025 (previously March 2026).

### *General Practice*

There are 177 GP practices with 4,802 FTE staff (run by 43 Primary Care Networks) in Kent and Medway each serving practice between 30,000 to 50,000 patients. There are 16 PCNs in the East Kent Health and Care Partnership (there are 4 PCNs in Kent & Medway, the others are Dartford & Gravesham, Medway & Swale and West Kent – suggested by some a blueprint for the new unitary boundaries). During the year ended 1 December 2024 over 11m appointments were delivered, up 0.3m on the prior year. There has been 0.7% increase in GPs and 6% increase in nurses. There are 120 trained mental health first aiders across all practices. NHS England has committed to grow GP speciality training places in 2025/26. New on-line patient registration services have been expanded to all GP practices; all practices now have the NHS App (there is an App optimisation project). A key focus for 2024/25 is to improve the primary-secondary interface including self-directed referral routes.

## **LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT AT FINBERRY (VILLAGE ENTRANCE)**

Crest have submitted a “reserved matters” application in connect with the landscape management of one of the first plots to be delivered at Finberry. It’s the area along Avocet Way between Brambling Way and Robin Road.



Figure 1: Village Centre Landscape Masterplan B10-B11

Its dated February 2024 so must have been in the pipeline for a year. The original planning consent in 2002 required Crest to set out hard and soft landscape elements associated with the amenity landscape which mainly comprises the public realm and streetscape. This application gives the opportunity for comments to be made to Ashford BC on the activities of HML. Details are at OTH/2025/0127, please send comments to [planning.help@ashford.gov.uk](mailto:planning.help@ashford.gov.uk) before the deadline of 13<sup>th</sup> February.

## COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTERSHIP WORKSHOP

A workshop was held on 27<sup>th</sup> January to agree the priorities to reduce crime, fear of crime and anti-social behaviour to make Ashford a safer place to live, work and visit. The key priorities for 2025/26 were as follows:

- Reducing serious violence.
- Tackling violence against women and girls. High risk domestic abuse is higher in Ashford.
- Reducing anti-social behaviour and concerning behaviours – a new Town Centre strategy is awaited.
- Tacking hate crime and extremism (WHH is a concern following a spike of crimes against staff).

- Restoring confidence and supporting communities during the cost-of-living crisis and managing its mental health impact.
- Ensuring all crime, ASB and environmental issues are reported.
- Tackling modern slavery.

Separately the Flour Mills is now the subject of a Community Protection Order requiring the owner to act following reports of entry etc. Otherwise, the fine is £10k. Since when, there have no reported incidences.

## **KALC**

KALC met on 29<sup>th</sup> January. Two new beat officers and a new sergeant have been recruited along with 2 new PCSOs, increasing the strength to 90% of target staff levels. Operation Oden is working on shoplifting with ABC using their CCTV which was referred to as “invaluable”. 7 e-scooters were seized across Ashford recently.

## **A28 UPGRADE**

As part of the Possingham Farm planning appeal, the Inspector supported two A28 mitigation schemes (valued at £1m) the result of which KCC took view that there would be an unacceptable increase in journey time of an extra 7 minutes to the queue at the A28 Chart Road. However, this was not considered a valid reason for the appeal to succeed according to the Inspector. The proposals were to widening exit at roundabouts was said to give extra capacity of 70%.

However, the biggest issue on the A28 Chart Road is the pitch point at the railway bridge forcing traffic to back up to the tank roundabout. The Inspector (incorrectly in KCC view) blamed the traffic lights at Loudon Way for delays. There will be no challenge to the Inspector’s decision by ABC as Inspectors now allow residential developments at almost any traffic cost and this awful decision will make it very difficult to object to any future applications on congestion or journey time delay grounds.

The lesson to learn from this is the Chilmington appeal in February must focus on road safety.

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