

## **SARAH HOHLER'S ANNUAL REPORT TO PARISH COUNCILS APRIL 2010 TO MARCH 2011**

This year has seen the County Council release its vision document for the next four years. Entitled 'Bold Steps for Kent', it is our vision to help Kent's economy grow, to put the citizen back in control and to tackle disadvantage and help the vulnerable. It builds on our successes from the previous four years (such as maintaining KCC as a four star authority and delivering one of the lowest council tax rates of any County Council), but recognises the tough economic times ahead with £95 million savings required this year and a further £65 million next year. The Coalition Government has had to cut public sector spending in order to bring our national debt under control. However, this means the Council has had to take some difficult decisions this year.

Our vision document, along with the budget book which was discussed at County Council on 17<sup>th</sup> February, details our priorities and how we intend to reshape and transform the way we deliver services. The leadership at KCC has ensured there has been prudent financial control, centralising our savings in back-office and management reductions, in order that the effect is felt less keenly by residents and so they still receive the best possible services for the money available.

Indeed, investment has substantially increased in some priority frontline services. An extra £1.991 million has been held as a contingency against possible additional costs arising from the children's social care improvement plan. We have also identified the need for an additional £1 million for placements for vulnerable children (particularly fostering) to reflect the latest information on the pressure for placements.

KCC has also invested in a new state of the art 'Kent History and Library Centre', based in Maidstone, which is due to open its doors to the public in 2012. The archive centre will ultimately be home to more than 14 kilometres of precious documents charting Kent's proud history back as far as 699 AD. Highlights of the collection include letters from Lord Nelson and Jane Austen. There will also be a community history area, archive search room, digital studio, free public internet access and wifi, and a large space for displays and events.

In Thanet, building work has been completed at the Turner Contemporary, the dynamic new visual arts gallery, which celebrates JMW Turner's association with Margate. The gallery, designed by David Chipperfield, promotes an understanding and enjoyment of historical and contemporary art whilst supporting the regeneration of East Kent. Turner Contemporary will open to the public on 16<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

On 21<sup>st</sup> September 2010, Her Royal Highness Sophie Countess of Wessex opened Grange Park School's new building, which was commissioned by KCC and is situated next to The Wrotham School. The architect, Cattell Skinner Design Partnership, produced a stunning design. From its exterior, which blends in with the surrounding environment, to the interior which boasts first class facilities, the school fits the vision of what we want for young people with additional educational needs.

Away from the capital budget, we have had further good news that fatal and serious casualties on Kent's roads have been reduced by half over the last 10 years. Causality and fatality statistics were at an all-time low of 553 last year. This is a result of a concerted campaign by Kent Highway Service (KHS) Officers, who have deliberately

sought to influence driver and rider behaviour by focusing on speed, drink or drug use, wearing of seat belts and mobile phone use.

There has also been an 18% reduction in proven offences by young people across Kent, according to the latest government statistics. Kent Youth Offending Service has been leading the ground-breaking work by running a voluntary programme which helps young offenders after their release from custody to build a new life in the community. This support includes help to improve their education and chances of getting a job. It is also the smaller issues, such as helping them set up a bank account, which are making a significant difference to the young people and their ability to change their lives for the better.

On rail related matters, KCC has produced a draft 'Rail Action Plan for Kent', which aims to make sure that the new rail franchise – due to start in April 2014 – delivers a rail service that meets the needs of the county's residents and visitors. The document draws on the findings from two Kent Rail Summits held last year. Feedback from commuter and rail user groups, MPs and parish, district and county councillors across Kent has been included. A final version of the Rail Action Plan for Kent will be presented to the third Kent Rail Summit on 19<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

In November, KCC welcomed the report by national inspector for health and social care at the Care Quality Commission which stated Kent Adult Social Services was 'performing well' overall for the year 2010. 'Improving quality of life' (being able to take part in activities and use transport as well as being safe and secure at home) was one of three areas where KCC is indicated as performing excellently. The other two areas were 'making a positive contribution' (keeping people involved in local activities, in developing policy and in making decisions) and economic wellbeing (being able to get the income and resources to meet needs, have a good diet and housing, and be part of family/community life).

Unfortunately, Kent County Council was given an inadequate rating for our child safeguarding and looked after children services by Ofsted in October. We realise this is unacceptable and fully accept the findings of the report. All agencies are completely focused on putting right the shortcomings and weaknesses that have been identified. There is no greater priority for us all than the protection of vulnerable children, young people and their families and this is reflected in the budget we have set as mentioned earlier. Malcolm Newsam, the Interim Director of Children, Families and Education, joined the organisation in February to help oversee our improvement and development plan. Having a strong track record of success, having previously turned around Bedfordshire's children's social services department, and having seen his initial work, I am confident the service is and will continue to improve.

This year, Kent's schools were once again celebrating record-breaking GCSE results. The percentage of students gaining five or more 'good' GCSE has increased by 6.3% to 79.3% – 3.2% above the national average. With more than half of students 56.8% (up 4.8% on 2009) achieving five A\* to C grades, including English and maths, Kent continues to improve year-on-year and provide quality education for children in the county. A-level results are also showing further improvement. Calculated on two or more A\* to E passes, the figure is up from last year by 2.1 percent to 93.5 percent with a number of schools (including Longfield Academy and Northfleet Technology College) seeing some great gains.

I am hoping that there will be more good news for students given the ruling by the Judge in respect to Michael Gove's decision to halt certain Building Schools for the Future schemes within Kent which had already progressed beyond the preliminary design stage. The Judge ordered the Secretary of State to reconsider the merits of each project, although the final decision on whether to proceed still rests with Michael Gove.

There was also good news for Tonbridge School, which has, with the assistance of KCC, secured an agreement with Athletics Australia for their team to train at the School ahead of the Olympic Games in 2012.

On a personal note, in the January Cabinet reshuffle my portfolio changed from Children, Families and Education to Education, Learning and Skills. I look forward to continuing the positive partnership working with schools to ensure every Kent child gets the best possible start in life. It will be a period of transition for the Education department as we move forward into a new structure and I look forward to welcoming the appointment of a new Corporate Director for Education, Learning and Skills shortly.

In my role as Cabinet Member, I would also like to urge parish councillors to sign up and help their local primary school by becoming a governor. Kent County Council provides support and training to the 7,000 governors in the county and is looking for more people to volunteer. They are especially needed in Ashford, Gravesham, Maidstone and Tonbridge and Malling. If the demands on your time are too great, you may wish to make the suggestion to other upstanding members of the community that you know.

Another thought parish councillors may wish to consider is how their parish intends to celebrate the Royal Wedding on 29<sup>th</sup> April. KCC has agreed to waive the charges for street parties on quiet residential roads and cul-de-sacs and I would encourage the parishes to give some consideration towards organising celebratory events to mark this special event. Organisers of street parties will only have to complete a simple application process with minimum information required. Please call 08458 247 800 if you would like further information.

Turning towards my member community grant, for this financial year, I have spent money on roof repairs at St Peter and Paul's Church in Leybourne; Kent Crimestoppers Scheme; disabled access programme for the Berry Housing Trust; Christmas activities in Snodland; toilet refurbishment in Offham; a lights update for Snodland Town Council; the Beat Project's 'Urban Soundz'; and disabled trainees recruitment project at Tonbridge Citizens Advice Bureau.

With regard to Highways matters within my division, I initially asked KHS Officers to investigate placing an interactive sign on Bull Road, Birling, given the problems with speeding along that stretch. It was determined that the location does not meet the criteria for an interactive sign (these signs need a minimum distance of straight road to function). I am therefore proposing to install a village gateway feature including priority working signage, hatching on the carriageway and a granite set over run area in Bull Road, which should hopefully reduce drivers' speed. This proposal has now received approval from the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste and works should be starting shortly.

On Taylors Lane in Trottiscliffe, seven bollards will be installed on the smaller island and fifteen bollards on the larger island to protect the verge and encourage lower speeds at

the junction. This proposal is awaiting authorisation from the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste.

Sections of Green Lane (which is a bridleway and public right of way) in Trottiscliffe have been resurfaced to allow better access for walkers, riders and also the residents living in the lane. This work is now complete.

In Offham, I have requested that KHS Officers provide an additional salt bin for the village and three salt bin refills, in light of the difficulties experienced during the severe winter weather. This proposal is awaiting authorisation from the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste.

In Snodland, I have requested an audit to find out who is responsible for the upkeep of the street furniture (barriers, seating, etc) which was installed 15 years ago as part of the major refurbishment of Snodland Town Centre, led by a partnership including Kent County Council, Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council, Snodland Town Council and the Snodland Partnership. The completion of this audit will allow me to contact the relevant parties to develop a maintenance programme.

Finally, I have given a contribution to 'Action with Communities in Rural Kent', which is producing leaflets detailing the country walks along the old Medway Valley railway line. I have specifically requested the money is used towards production of leaflets describing the walks in the Snodland region.