

SARAH HOHLER'S ANNUAL REPORT TO PARISH COUNCILS APRIL 2009 TO MARCH 2010

In June 2009, I was appointed Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education (CFE) and one of my first tasks was to celebrate the success of our students who took their GCSEs or A-levels exams. I am very proud of our Kent students: At GCSE level, 52% of students achieved 5 A*-C grades including English and Maths, a 2% increase from the year before. It was another record year for A-level results in Kent schools with the number of students achieving two A to E passes three percent higher than in 2008.

It has also been a year of substantial change for CFE, but I am confident that we start the new financial year in a robust and strong position.

This year, we have welcomed a new Managing Director for the directorate, Ms Rosalind Turner, as well as a new Director of Children's Social Services and a Director for Learning and Development. Together with the existing senior management team, they have produced a restructure plan for the directorate that is better organised to meet the service demands of the community whilst making necessary efficiency savings. There will be a slim strategic centre, improved frontline service delivery and increased efficiency.

Investment in Kent's school infrastructure has continued at a pace this year, with several school openings taking place. For example, in October 2009 a newly rebuilt St James The Great School, East Malling, was officially opened by the Chairman. This state of the art primary school cost £3.3 million to build and is one of the most advanced in the county. The school, complete with seven classrooms and nursery, was built in just 60 weeks. Some of the new features at the school include automatically adjusting lights, sensors to monitor air quality in the building and interactive whiteboards. It was designed by CTM Architects and each classroom is accessed directly from a 'learning street' which is also home to the school's computer suite and library. The new building for Grange Park School is also well under way and I look forward to opening this building towards the end of 2010.

In December 2009, the Audit Commission published the league table for the performance of all local authorities in England. There are two inspection reports. One report covers Kent County Council as an organisation. The second report covers Kent, the county, in partnership with the public sector, voluntary organisations and the business community. Kent excels in both reports. Kent County Council is joint top among all county councils in England - it is one of only three county councils that are "performing excellently". So, for the eighth year running, Kent County Council has scored the highest possible overall rating. The county is also singled out for exceptional achievement. In the partnership assessment, Kent gets two exceptional accreditations for improving young people's education and skills, for providing job opportunities to match Kent's growing economy and for the Gateways, which bring a wide range of public, community and voluntary services under one roof.

We have also rolled out the Kent Freedom Pass across the entire county of Kent this year. We have also agreed to extend the scheme to those students who live in Kent but attend schools in other local authority areas, such as Medway. The Pass, which costs £50 currently, allows students to travel on any public bus at any time, including weekends and school holidays. It is one of the most generous travel passes of its kind outside of London and is wholly funded by us.

I am sure that everyone has been affected by the heavy snowfall before and after Christmas. Although there are some improvements to the gritting process to be made, on balance, I believe that Kent County Council was well prepared for this event and pleased that we had a sufficient stockpile of grit in order to ensure Kent kept moving. The cold weather is likely to have damaged pavements and roads to some degree and I would urge you to report any damage and potholes to Kent County Council. This can be done by telephoning 08458 247 800. The road repair crews are working across the county and have already fixed 10,000 potholes on Kent's roads in January 2010. The repairs have been carried out ahead of more permanent work which Kent County Council is preparing to spend an extra £1million on from March.

For the first time, each County Councillor has also been given £25,000 to spend on Highways work in their division and I have spent a fair proportion of the fund, but I am open to further suggestions.

Roadworks should also be more streamlined in 2010 as we have introduced the Kent Permit Scheme, which means a company planning to dig up a road must apply for a permit from Kent Highway Services. This will allow Kent Highway Services to better co-ordinate the timing of roadworks, so that gas, water, telecoms, electricity companies and our own crews work on the same part of the road at the same time, reducing the number and duration of roadworks – and minimising their impact on motorists and other road users.

As a member of the Cabinet, I am also engaged in formulating the targets for 'Towards 2014', which will outline the Council's priorities for the next four years. This follows on from our successful delivery of the targets in 'Towards 2010'.

One of the targets in Towards 2010 was the creation of a bi-annual school games event. This year's games were officially launched on 1st October 2009 by Dame Kelly Holmes, along with Hugh Robertson M.P. and KCC Leader Paul Carter at Hayesbrook School, Tonbridge, Bower Grove Special School, Maidstone and Allington Primary school, Maidstone. This event has turned into a great success and has resulted in many children participating in competitive sport on a regular basis: there were 900 children and young people at the opening!

The older and more vulnerable members of society have not been forgotten either. Managed by Help the Aged/Age Concern, but funded by our

Community Safety Unit, we have provided five 'Handy Vans' to work across the county to provide advice and guidance and fit a range of safety and security products for people over the age of 60. Some of the products currently installed include smoke alarms, window locks, door chains, door viewers, mortice locks and mortice bolts. The free service is available to anyone aged 60 years or over, who has disposable savings/assets not exceeding £20,000 (not including the value of their home) and lives in an area where Handy Vans operate. To make a referral please phone 0845 026 1055 or email communitysafetyunit@kent.gov.uk.

For those with health concerns we have established, in partnership with the NHS, 'Kent Health Watch', a service to help local residents express their views about health and social care in the county and get through to the right people. It operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In February 2010, we ran a 'Health Watch' road-show to talk face to face with people to see what issues are important and where. This information will help Kent County Council and the NHS work together to improve the health services.

The budget for 2010 to 2011 will be challenging for the County Council. We are owed a substantial sum of money for the support, care and accommodation we provide to Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children and the Leader and I are lobbying Phil Woolas, M.P., the Minister of State for Borders and Immigration, so we may be refunded for the service we provide on behalf of the Government, as it is unfair that Kent residents have to take the brunt of the costs.

KCC is very excited that the building of the largest new art gallery in the South east, Turner Contemporary at Margate, is on budget and on schedule to be completed by the end of 2010, opening the following spring. It is designed by architect David Chipperfield and one of its aims is the regeneration of East Kent.

Finally, on a personal note, I have spent my local member community grant on disability access at Snodland Town Council; flood prevention works at Ryarsh Parish Council; a new floor for the Scout building in Snodland; helping the farmers market in Stansted; a sight screen at Leybourne Cricket Club; curtains for Birling Village Hall; sports wear for Snodland amateur boxing club; a conference to help Tonbridge and Malling's Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership; Christmas decorations for Snodland; a bus project for Stansted Parish Council; and finally some training courses at Malling.

The Leader of Tonbridge and Malling District Council and I are continuing to press Kent Highway Services so that further improvements are made to the Castle Way junction in Leybourne. The contractor, Jacobs, is undertaking a survey of traffic flow and after this is complete, we will discuss changing the lane layout.