

Council 2 April
Agenda item 9 (Portfolio Holder reports)

1. Report of the Leader and Cabinet Member for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy

Planning

I have been meeting regularly with the planning department. We have issued our 2nd Call for Sites. The first call for sites has already stimulated a great deal of interest, but we need more range and diversity in the sites for our consideration. The Government has increased housing number targets, in their bid to increase housing delivery. The planning department will be working very hard to balance the Government's demand for more housing against the specific requirements of our local communities. The planning department is currently very busy with the normal workload. We are managing a great variety of applications as well as strategic district wide functions. We are in discussions with Central Government regarding our detailed response to the new Government's Planning Reform consultation. Our submission will be discussed and agreed by Cabinet, all Members of the Council have had the draft document and made comments where appropriate.

As a planning authority we have some concerns regarding the Government's desire to streamline the planning process and the possible reduction in the local democratic process that feeds and informs planning. It is worth mentioning that the Government has an ambitious target to build 1.5M homes during this parliament, this should be applauded because, as a nation we are in a housing crisis, but we do not feel that our planning departments has contributed to the problem, we have consistently met the targets the Government have set.

Otterpool Park

I am continuing to meet regularly with MP's, KCC, neighbouring District Council Leaders, Homes England, Developers, Consultants and (most importantly) representatives of the 5 parishes that come together on Otterpool.

The Otterpool team continue to meet regularly with Homes England, we have finally signed a Collaboration Agreement, to work with Homes England for 6 months to see if we can agree a strategic partnership and make a joint bid to Treasury for the funding required. We are in communication with the Government at a high level. We continue to update our two new MPs for Otterpool Park, outlining the latest issues and opportunities. We also continue to liaise with the five parishes that make up the Otterpool site.

We are updating and developing our own piece of financial modelling work, on a daily basis, in conjunction with Homes England, to rigorously test the viability of the overall scheme. We now have a draft Heads of Terms to form a Collaboration Agreement, which, subject to final examination and legal advice we will shortly sign.

The planning application to build the Waste Water Treatment Works has been validated by KCC. We are in discussions with our neighbours Ashford and Canterbury with regard to reducing the impact of Phosphates and Nitrates into the River Stour, the Waste Water Treatment Works will clean the water in the Stour as it passes through Otterpool.

The next 6 months will be very busy at Otterpool, there is still a great deal of work to do in order to progress Otterpool Park and conclude these negotiations to begin the 21st Century New Town.

2. Report of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Governance

Since my last report to Council to the meeting of 19th February, we have met and passed our budget for 25-26. Thank you to all for your scrutiny and support in doing so, and in particular our Finance team in making that happen

I attended A&G Committee on 25th February, and we were delighted to see our Auditors clear all outstanding annual audits, and issue certificates, through to the most recent 2023-24 year. This has also taken the Finance Team a huge amount of work, and I'm delighted we are now fully up to date as a Council on our back audits, for the first time in about 5 years. Our new Director of Finance Alan Mitchell starts (this week) from a much clearer slate than his recent successors!

I also attended full Council on 26th (to discuss and pass the budget amongst other things) the Finance and Performance Scrutiny Sub-committee on 11 March, and the Audit and Governance Committee on 19th March, as well as Full Council and Cabinet on 20th March. I also wanted to thank, again, both the Finance and Performance Sub-Committee and Audit and Governance Committee members: their questions, thoughts and views on the subjects discussed are often insightful and challenging, for officers and me. I like to hear the meetings, and promise we do listen to, and take onboard, that additional insight as much as possible.

3. Report of Councillor Mike Blakemore, the Cabinet Member for Community and Collaboration

Community and Collaboration – March 2025

The first meeting of our Youth Forum was a great success and I was proud to be one of those introducing the event and answering some excellent questions from some of the 45 young people, from schools and colleges all over the district, who filled the council chamber.

As well as explaining what the district council does, we focused on climate and community safety. The aim was very much to support practical outcomes from the meeting. On climate, there was an opportunity for the young people to discuss projects for which they can apply for one of our recently launched Green Grants. On community safety, the young people were invited to explain where in the district they feel unsafe, with an opportunity to follow this with a walk through Folkestone with the community safety team to identify locations.

The agenda for the next Youth Forum, in September, will be based on the most popular suggestions from those attending this meeting.

Next day, I was at Lighthouse on the Marsh for the latest meeting to discuss plans for Romney Marsh Visitors Centre. The centre is due to reopen in May, with a new café concession, but we want this to be just the beginning. Partners will continue discussing exciting ideas to develop the visitor centre, to attract more and more local residents and tourists.

Folkestone & Hythe Health Alliance met again at Hub on the Beach in Greatstone so that we could keep the momentum going from January's meeting. I joined a group looking at service navigation while another discussed transport – both beginning to identify practical steps to ensure people on the Marsh, and elsewhere, can easily access the healthcare they need.

A rather different, happily historical, take on what might be needed from a doctor on Romney Marsh could be found in *The Leech of Folkestone*, a play adapted from Richard Barham's *Ingoldsby Legends*, published in the early 19th Century. I was pleased to attend a preview of Folkestone Performing Arts Company's production, which tells a macabre but humorous tale of a woman so fed up with her husband she sets out to rid herself of him with the help of a local doctor. The play will be touring locally soon and is well worth seeing.

Among events to mark International Women's Day was a Women of the World celebration at South Kent Community Church, Folkestone, staged by the excellent Equator Festivals. A very moving highlight was a performance by the Spivochy Ukrainian Choir, which rightly received a very warm reception. Equator also organised another spectacular Holi Festival celebration at the Nepalese Community Centre in Cheriton. The paint colours shone especially bright in the brilliant sunshine.

I was also pleased to join a less raucous but very enjoyable dinner at the Hotel Burstin to mark Folkestone Nepalese Community's 20th anniversary. A marvellous milestone.

4. Report of Councillor Polly Blakemore, the Cabinet Member for Transport, Regulatory Services & Building Control

A good news story to start: I have been working with officers and residents to pinpoint locations across the district where bicycle storage hangars are needed and would be well received and we have now applied for a share of the Consolidated Active Travel Fund 2025 for this purpose. The waiting list for residents wanting to make use of the two hangars in Clifton Crescent, Folkestone, and the number of enquiries received, is proof of demand.

An update was given at February's Joint Transportation Board on the issue of reducing the speed limit through Densole from 40mph to 30mph, an initiative which is not currently supported by KCC or Kent Police. Members and residents are, however, in favour of speed mitigation along the stretch of the A260 through the village so we will be keeping the issue under review particularly as the recently approved development on the northern edge of the settlement comes forward. There was also a discussion about the Cheriton Active Travel scheme with the result that an onsite walk-through has now been scheduled by KCC officers to give members the opportunity to highlight their concerns. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen circumstances Stagecoach were unable to attend the JTB so their item has been postponed until a future meeting.

Also on buses, the meeting of the District Focus Group began with a comprehensive presentation, which I'd requested as Chair, from officers on plans for the bus station as part of Folkestone: A Brighter Future. This extraordinary meeting had been convened, however, to discuss the allocation of the £10M revenue grant funding awarded by the Department for Transport (DfT) to KCC late last year. The Shepway Bus Users, a group I support, had been asked to present their ideas for service improvements and stepped up to the challenge by researching and proposing improved routes and services. It was therefore incredibly disappointing to learn that most of the £10M has been allocated to support uncommercial but essential bus services (such as our No 10) and there is little left for new service initiatives. There is a thin silver lining in that KCC are making capital

funding available for bus shelter improvements. To this end I have been working with the group to identify locations in need of a shelter or those where the existing shelter requires improvement. The ongoing maintenance of these shelters would be down to FHDC so such decisions need to be carefully planned and budgeted.

Dan Millis, Head of Operations, joined this month's Shepway Bus Users group and gave an informative and candid report on the challenges facing the business including the £1.3M hike in their operating costs brought about by the increase in employers' National Insurance contributions.

I spend a lot of my time working for better bus services, for all parts of our district and community. Communication now exists between Stagecoach, councils and users which was never there before and is genuinely giving our residents a voice.

On the parking front, the Tudor Road, Cheriton, CPZ is set for implementation in April / May. The ANPR (Automatic Number Plate Recognition) trial at Sandgate Road Car Park, Folkestone, will continue for a further year as, due to some teething issues on introduction, it is as yet unclear whether it is worthwhile rolling out ANPR to other council car parks.

We are in the process of revising the Corporate Enforcement Policy, and the Gambling Statement of Principles is currently undergoing its three year review. This latter will come to Full Council for approval in due course.

One thing I've learnt in this role: the economic success of our district increases the load on our parking enforcement, environmental protection, licensing and food safety teams.

5. Report of Councillor Gary Fuller, the Cabinet Member for Resident Engagement and Accountability

This month we're making progress on the customer access strategy now that the consultation on the corporate plan has occurred. I attended a meeting to discuss the current draft last week and hope to have an update for the next meeting.

The Customer Feedback and complaints policy has also been updated and was discussed at Cabinet on March 26th. We're currently achieving our targets for closing both housing service and general complaints within the allotted timeframe.

Information Governance continues to reach monthly targets for FOI/EIR, SAR, and DPA requests closed within the statutory timeframes. This is also true for assessing all potential data breaches within 72 hours. In IT there have been some issues affecting Wi-Fi networks in the Civic Centre which the team are keeping me updated on.

We currently have 85,122 electors in the district and 1,843 draft electors. Nominations for the KCC elections are open and the Hythe North and West by-elections will take place on April 17th. All polling stations are booked, and the count will take place at Three Hills. Where polling stations have changed letters have been sent to affected properties.

Everyone in the various teams continues to work exceptionally hard despite the uncertainty of local government reform. I'm really pleased that we appear to have

turned a corner when it comes to information governance and data protection, in particular. As ever, we should all thank the excellent officers we have that continue to perform above and beyond on our behalf.

6. Report of Councillor Rich Holgate, the Cabinet Member for Place Plan, Heritage, Tourism and District Economy

Tourism

- Maps of Hythe and Sandgate and Romney Marsh are in development with a local illustrator and will be ready shortly. Like the Folkestone map created this will be given out to attractions and hotels and also used online to provide inspiration for visitors.
- We are trialling a new approach to promoting the district and have decided not to continue our investor fee with Visit Kent for 25/26. The saved money will be reinvested into the tourism budget and this decision will be reviewed next year.
- Our *Extraordinary Experiences Await You* campaign yielded positive results including an impressive return on investment from Instagram advertising. A bespoke email newsletter also sent to subscribers of Time Out was particularly successful with open rates and click through rates much higher than the average stats.

Heritage Strategy

The Heritage Strategy was launched for a targeted consultation on 24 February for a four-week period, and will close on Monday (24 March 2025), although if there are groups who still wish to comment we can give them additional time. The team met with heritage groups to launch the consultation and comments are coming in.

Folca

Folca LUF works, A specification has been drafted and work to determine the best procurement route is underway.

Folca 1, The options for Folca 1 will be brought to cabinet for a decision on the 11 June.

Folca 2 occupation plan (incl. medical centre), work continues on the occupation plan for Folca 2, with a report presented to Members in June 2025.

Civic Centre relocation – The option for the Civic Centre has been halted due to considerations of Local Government Reorganisation.

Folkestone – A Brighter Future (FABF)

Jackson Civil Engineering has been awarded the contract to deliver the transformation scheme with work beginning on the scheme on Monday 7 April 2025 and is due to finish in Summer 2026.

A Public Liaison Officer has been appointed by Jackson Civil Engineering to be across all of the public queries about the works and a dedicated email and phone number has been set up for the public to use specifically for this project.

A public engagement event will be held at Folkestone town hall from 10am to 6pm on Friday 4 April and 10am to 3pm on Saturday 5 April. The final designs for the scheme will be on display as well as more detail about the various planned phases of work. A virtual reality experience will also be available for people to try out what walking through the finished scheme will be like and partners from the project will be on hand to answer any queries.

The change of use application for Bouverie Square has been approved by the Planning Committee held on 18th March.

UKSPF

Cost of living support - A total of 450 low-income households in the district have received support via UKSPF funding FY year to date. Examples of support provided include bed and mattress provision, boiler servicing and replacements, oil for off grid homes & white goods. Furthermore, support given to the Rainbow Centre's Mobile Food Pantry has initiated a series of wrap around projects including cookery classes & demonstrations, a money advice service and the provision of warm spaces.

Skills – Our partnership with East Kent College continues, with them delivering fully funded courses in the green, construction & retrofit sectors. They have enrolled over 100 individuals on courses to date and have fully utilised the allocated budget. Target outputs and outcomes have been exceeded.

Similarly, the bespoke skills grant scheme, which was designed to complement the EKC skills offering, has enabled businesses to propose training programs that meet their specific needs, ensuring relevance and impact. Funding has been awarded to 7 businesses/ organisations and on track to spend the full allocation. Businesses benefitting from this include Screen South (Folkestone), Romney Hythe & Dymchurch Railway and Romney Marsh Countryside Partnership.

Rural England Prosperity Fund

The scheme is now closed to any further applications, as the full 2 year allocation of £389,710 has been awarded (including a top-up that was previously agreed).

A broad range of 22 projects have been supported which includes renewable energy initiatives, projects to expand wireless broadband access and diversification projects. The schemes have demonstrated a commitment to sustainability, support for digital inclusion and the creation of new income streams with the aim of increasing tourism opportunities in our rural areas.

Green Grants Programme

The new internally funded Green Grants programme has recently launched, with the first round of applications invited by 21st April 2025. Businesses and organisations can apply for fully funded micro grants of up to £1,000. For other grant types, up to 80% of project total funding can be applied for (up to a value of £20,000). A wide variety of projects can be applied for including rewilding, tree planting, solar panels & establishing local sustainability hubs. Initial interest in the scheme is very encouraging.

Romney Marsh Work

The Romney Marsh Officer has now been filled and we are delighted to say that Jo Wyn Carter will officially take up her new role from March 3RD 2025.

The new role will now enable a dedicated resource to work with local key stakeholders and communities to create a economic action plan aimed at enhancing new opportunities within the Romney Marsh area.

Romney Marsh Visitor Centre:

A stakeholder Group (working group) was established in September 2024 chaired by Cllr Speakman with key local Romney Marsh organisations. The group have met three times to discuss moving forward with the site and have progressed as follows:

The key action from the meetings was to seek a concession for the Café/Visitor Centre and to reopen by the end of May 2025 in time for the summer season.

The approach to ensure that the site is community focused and financially sustainable.

The concession opportunity was promoted by Motis Estates and they hosted open days as part of the process. There has been interest from businesses and their EOI's are currently being reviewed.

There was also an online public survey, launched in January with a press release and the survey was live until Monday 17th of February 2025. The survey findings were reviewed by the working group during their latest meeting in February and this information has been included in the concession exercise to enable the prospective facility operators to consider the survey feedback as part of their bids.

Operators will provide their final and best offer by w/e 21st March 2025.

The offers will be evaluated, with a preferred operator chosen by the end of March.

New operator to open facility by May Half term, giving sufficient time to fit out.

As part of the working group discussions, FHDC are reviewing infrastructure of the site and consideration of steps required to improve access, signage, and parking, including the provision of a designated coach/minibus stop to allow groups to visit the centre and support footfall. A reduction in the current speed limit is also being explored with a meeting scheduled with East Kent Highways w/c 17th March 2025 to support future aspirations for the site.

A further working group meeting will take place in April 2025, date TBC.

7. Report of Councillor Stephen Scoffham, the Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Biodiversity

Raise the rate campaign

I am pleased to say that campaign to raise the district recycling rate to 50% or above continues to achieve results. The campaign started in early 2024 with the introduction of the 'A to Z guide for recycling and waste'. There were also several question-and-answer sessions on our social media pages answering questions from the public on what they found difficult to recycle. From September to November last year, we launched a joint project with KCC to sticker refuse wheeled bins in the district with 'no food waste' labels. The tonnage of food being recycled has now risen to over 15% in comparison with same period in the previous year as a result and has been reported in the local press. The next phase of the project will be focused on paper/card recycling. Discounting the price for a black box for residents is one of the options being discussed.

Great British Spring Clean – Poster competition:

A poster competition for youngsters under 18-year-old was launched recently. The brief is for under 18-year-olds to design a poster that encourages people to do the right thing and bin their litter. The competition will run over the Easter period till 20th April as part of the Great British Spring Clean. The winner will receive a voucher for £50 and will have their design put on the side of two Veolia trucks. The two runners-up will each get £25 each.

Green grants scheme

The Green Grants scheme has now been launched. As reported at the council meeting on 26th February, the aim of the scheme is to promote climate resilience, nature recovery and community well-being in line with the emergency declarations that the council has already made. Details about how to apply are on the Folkestone Works website and the deadline for the first round of applications is 21st April. There have already been a significant number of enquiries and we very much hope that the scheme will attract widespread interest for innovative projects from schools, parishes, community groups, charities and small businesses.

National Lottery Climate Action Fund

Climate officers from Folkestone and Hythe, Dover, and Ashford district have submitted a joint expression of interest for the National Lottery's Climate Action Fund. The aim to 'fund projects that use nature to encourage more community-led climate action.' The proposal is to build on and extend the success of the FHDC 'Sustainable Futures Forum'. At the same time, Dover District has also established a 'Climate and Nature Forum' so there is an opportunity to create a joint umbrella for climate action across Kent, creating a comprehensive network for community groups, local businesses, and charities. This will provide a space for those involved to lead on the sustainability agenda, bolstering their skills and supporting the district's climate change objectives. Should the initial application be successful we will be invited to develop and provide a full project proposal in May/June. An additional strength of the bid is that it involves joint working with neighbouring districts which could well be part of the new unitary authority

Kent Downs National Landscape

Local government reform throws up all manner of risks and opportunities with respect to the Kent Downs National Landscape. A very significant proportion of our district lies within the designated area which is of national significance. Encouragingly there are signs that government policy is beginning to target protected landscapes to deliver national policy. A number of key documents will be published this summer which will provide further guidance and information. One key question is whether the National Landscape will sit under the mayoral or unitary authorities. We can expect further details in due course.

8. Report of Councillor Jeremy Speakman, the Cabinet Member for Assets and Operations

As well as casework and attending meetings relating to my Hythe Rural Ward, I continue to have regular meetings and correspondence with relevant officers and residents on matters specifically relating to my portfolio.

Assets:

- The Road of Remembrance remains closed until August 2025. KCC have completed the ground investigation works on the area of landslip to identify the subsurface conditions. The design works have been completed and are due to be submitted for approval. Works are expected to start on site in early June. Investigation works are continuing for the Coastal Park area above the playground, and engineers are working on possible options to stabilise the cliff face, the Vinery area and the earlier slip above the Cow Path. These works are expected to take place in the autumn of 2025.
- The consultation has concluded to ask the public what they would like to see in the replacement Coastal Park Play Area. Over 1000 responses have been received. Officers are working on the report to present to Cabinet seeking approval for the project. The consultation results will be used to inform the design of the new play area.
- The Grounds Maintenance Team have started grass cutting and works are progressing well. KCC contractors have commenced the cutting of the district highway verges.
- Radnor Park Lodge – East Kent College vacated the premises earlier in the year, dilapidation works have been completed. The Council has selected a new tenant following a marketing exercise. The lease is expected to be finalised in the next month or so to allow the café to be open for the summer.
- Biggins Wood – The sale of the site was completed before Christmas. The scheme will regenerate an old derelict brick works and bring forward 5600sqm of commercial space and 77 affordable homes for residents in our district. Works to build the access road have started and works will soon commence on the 77 homes.
- Ship Street – The planning application is expected to be submitted in the Spring and marketing of the site will run in parallel.
- High View – Legal work is being finalised on the sale of the site which is expected to complete in the next two months.
- The Coast Drive scheme continues on target and the development contract has been awarded. Works are expected to commence at the end of March and complete in the Autumn/Winter this year when the new beach huts will be available to rent.
- Folca development: Officers are working hard carrying out the agreed actions from the last Cabinet report. An immediate priority is to ensure that the LUF funded works are carried out ensuring the building and roof are watertight. These works will be tendered shortly. The wider business case for FOLCA 2 and Options for FOLCA 1 will be considered by Cabinet in June.
- Following Kent Wildlife Trust vacating the Romney Marsh Visitor Centre in July the Council continues to be actively engaged in round table discussions with local organisations and council representatives to gather ideas about how this site could evolve. The lease of the cafe has been advertised, and the assessment of submissions will be assisted by the results of a survey that has been circulated to canvas the views of the wider local community.

Waste Management:

- Ongoing liaison with the public and the Waste Management Team to ensure that day to day issues and complaints from the public relating to refuse collection and street cleansing are promptly addressed.

- Ongoing review of current waste management and collection arrangements to ensure maximum efficiency and value for money for residents.
- Ongoing liaison with enforcement and Waste Management Team to resolve fly tipping issues. Fly tipping in rural areas appears to be on the rise.
- Regular liaison meetings with Hythe Environmental Community Group and other local groups to look at options for the expansion of their e-waste recycling scheme, which has enjoyed much local success.
- The Waste Management Team continues to work on the 'Raise the Rate' campaign, with aim of increasing the district's recycling rate. The most recent project has been the 'food waste sticker campaign' which succeeded in increasing food recycling volumes by around 12%. We hope this increased public participation continues.
- Veolia continue to perform very well in terms of low rates of missed bins, operating well within the contract standard of less than 50 misses per 100,000 collections.
- Management of waste and recycling remains high profile nationally and the team continues to work in anticipation of the changes and additional requirements placed on local authorities by central government.
- The re-route of the garden waste rounds was implemented as planned in February. The purpose of this is to create greater efficiencies to allow for the scheme to grow in terms of subscribers. Thus far there have been no significant concerns raised regarding the changes.

9. Report of Councillor Rebecca Shoob, Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness

I was very pleased to visit the newly acquired HRA properties at Arras Way in Folkestone just before the new residents moved in. The building inside and out is very impressive and I hope they will be great homes for many years to come for the people now living in them.

We have also just completed on the acquisition of 26 new homes to be built in Hythe. This is particularly good news as it is the first time in many years that we've been able to acquire new homes in Hythe.

While new homes for people on the housing waiting list is extremely welcome news, unfortunately this is against a backdrop of an increasing number of households in temporary accommodation and a high level of homelessness approaches to the council. The team continues to work as hard as ever to make best use of our own accommodation as well as working with the private sector to ensure that people don't stay in temporary accommodation for any longer than absolutely necessary.

The winter shelter run by the Rainbow Centre closed at the end of February. Most of the people staying there over the winter have been helped successfully into long term accommodation, which shows what can be achieved when people have access to schemes like the winter shelter and the dedicated support it can provide. It is therefore very good news that the Rainbow Centre has secured permission for a permanent shelter providing emergency and supported accommodation.

I have attended meetings of the Strategic Tenants Advisory Panel as well as the Independent Living Forum and as ever it is extremely helpful to hear directly from tenants and their perspectives.

Finally, I'd like to flag for your diary the annual neighbourhood inspections which start on 20 May and run through the summer. These are an excellent opportunity to meet

with the neighbourhood officers and contractors who work with tenants and properties on a daily basis in each of the wards. Full details can be found on the council's website.