FOLKESTONE AND HYTHE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes for the meeting of the Council held at the Council Chamber - Civic Centre Folkestone on Wednesday, 28 January 2026

Present: Councillors Mike Blakemore, Polly Blakemore, James Butcher, Bridget Chapman, Tony Cooper, Laura Davison, Gary Fuller, David Godfrey, Anthony Hills, Mrs Jennifer Hollingsbee, Anita Jones, Nicola Keen, Adrian Lockwood, Alan Martin, Elaine Martin, Jim Martin, Connor McConville, Liz McShane, Jackie Meade, Tim Prater, Stephen Scoffham, Jeremy Speakman, Paul Thomas, Belinda Walker, David Wimble and John Wing

Apologies for Absence: Councillors Abena Akuffo-Kelly, Clive Goddard, Rich Holgate and Rebecca Shoob

65. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest at the meeting.

66. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meetings held on 19 and 26 November 2025 were submitted, approved and signed by the Chair.

67. **Chair's Communications**

The Chair gave the following communications:

“Happy new year to everyone. I hope that you have all had a good start to 2026.

Thank for your donations for the Rainbow centre food bank this evening.

Before Christmas I attended a number of festive events across the District. Folkestone Symphony Orchestra gave a wonderful family concert at Holy Trinity Church to a full audience. New Romney celebrated with a fantastic lantern parade down the High Street organised by Light Up New Romney. The Mayor also held a brass band concert in the Parish Church. Lydd hosted The Band of the Brigade of Gurkha’s for their Christmas concert. It was lovely to see that this was supported by a number of councillors. Hythe had a vibrant Late Night Shopping Event sadly cut short by heavy rainfall. The Folkestone Nepalese Community hosted a Christmas meal at their community centre.
I was pleased to be invited to Sunflower House to see the wonderful work that the Action on Homelessness Charity do. They feed around 70 people twice a week in Folkestone. The lady who invited me is one of the amazing volunteers - despite being in her early 80’s, she finds it very rewarding cooking for people who are struggling to feed themselves and their families and chatting with them. If you are able to support this charity with either money, food or by volunteering, they would be grateful of your help.

The new cohort of our District Youth Forum met in December. The young people not only asked us great questions, but they also spent time discussing their Priorities for the District, Solar, the Coastal Park play area and the role of Social Media with Local Government. I have shared the priority list with all councillors so that it can help shape their work in the District Council. The Forum will be meeting again in March.

The New Year began with a trip to Margate for the Blessing of the Seas. This is an event by the Greek Orthodox Church to mark Epiphany. This includes a service on the beach where doves are released and a young boy retrieves a cross from the sea. The event is also a good chance for Kent Mayors and Chairs to network and build friendships.

Yesterday I attended the Holocaust Memorial Day event in Folkestone involving students from the local secondary schools. This is always a poignant service and a useful time to reflect on the importance of Peace, inclusion and equality.

In our troubled world, we need to learn from the past and ensure we protect and celebrate all humanity".

68. **Petitions**

There were no petitions to be presented.

69. **Questions from the Public**

There were no public questions at the meeting.

70. **Questions from Councillors**

The questions asked, including supplementary questions, and the answers given are set out in Schedule 2, appended to these minutes.

71. **Announcements of the Leader of the Council**

The Leader gave the following announcements:

"Good evening members.

Storm Goretti

I didn't get an opportunity to answer Councillor Akuffo-Kelly's question, relating to storm Goretti. So I'll do a little bit on that if you don't mind. I was delighted that our officers mobilised so quickly to survey the damage and put plans in place to clear the shingle from the roads and promenades and organise repairs to other coastal defence structures.

I'm pleased to say that the sea defences did their job. While considerable damage was caused, there was no flooding to any homes and none about residents or visitors were harmed or injured.

The sea defences are, in general, in very good condition. The most significant damage was caused to the concrete breakwater at Mermaid Beach in Folkestone. It should be noted though, that the concrete breakwater itself sits on a large rock revetment, which is in the main part the sea defence structure. The rock revetment itself was not damaged and still provides the protection that it was designed for. The placed concrete sections themselves are actually in quite good condition and the officers are working with the Environment Agency to see if they can be lifted back into position and rejoin the rock revetment. Other damage to seawalls included the concrete coping stones which will be replaced in due course and will not weaken the structure
or pose any harm. The beaches have now been surveyed to identify vulnerable areas and the beach regrading of shingle is taking place where necessary to renew our storm protection standard.

The next major planned replenishment of the beach will commence on the 9th of March.

Local Government Reorganisation

Just to confirm, this Council voted to support Option 3a, which groups us in a Unitary with our neighbours Ashford, Canterbury, and Dover together with Thanet. I can confirm the business case document supporting Option 3a was completed, submitted and accepted by the Minister. Thanks again to everyone!

Otterpool Park

Otterpool Park is in a critical stage, the meetings, discussions and communications with Homes England are intense and much is being discussed, I am sure the Council will understand when I say there are a number of those discussions that Homes England do not want me to repeat in public. I can confirm that Homes England are resourcing the project intensively and at a high level.

I realise members will be frustrated by my guarded comments and I am fully understand. I will shortly hold an Otterpool Update when I am able to explain more to members without being tied by confidentiality.

The Road of Remembrance

I was delighted to hear that KCC intend to finally commence the repair works to the Road of Remembrance and the cliff above it. The road has been closed for two years, since last year. Out of frustration, on behalf of this Council, I offered

to make a financial contribution to the works. I waited some time for even an acknowledgement of my offer, but then something happened, KCC sprung into life and were suddenly very interested to discuss our contribution.

Just to make it clear, we have no responsibility or obligation, with regard to the works, we are simply trying to get KCC to do this work and reopen this key road in our highways network.

Southern Water

My discussions with Southern Water continue, and we have taken over the Chair of the Stakeholders Group from Southern Water.

We have had reason to write (again) regarding the overwhelming amount of untreated sewage Southern Water have discharged into our seas, so far this winter.

Ours and many other complaints about Sewage in the Sea have been rather overshadowed recently, by the collective failure of the local water companies to keep the water supply flowing to peoples taps. We have not been badly affected by "water outages" but many other Council areas in Kent were badly affect.

At the last Kent Leaders meeting, an invitation to explain themselves was given to all the water companies, they all sent junior managers to face the wrath of the Council Leaders rather than Managing Directors or CEOs.

FOLCA

I am delighted to say I can give an optimistic report on FOLCA. Officers have been working hard behind the scenes, and I can now confirm that the NHS Integrated Care Board in Kent have confirmed their support to have a medical centre in Folca 2. This will replace the existing outdated Manor Road and Guildhall surgeries. The detailed business case still needs to be submitted for formal NHS approval, but this is a fantastic step forward. Works to the exterior of the building and the separation of Folca 1 will commence in February.

With regards to Folca 1 officers have secured a buyer who intends on restoring the building to its former glory. I'm sure you will also agree that this is fantastic news. Officers have commenced the legal work for the sale and there will be further announcements in due course.

The more detailed business case for Folca 2 was considered at Overview and Scrutiny Committee last night and will be considered by Cabinet next month.

Armed Forces Champion Role

In my role as Armed Forces Champion I attended the armed forces Kent County Forum, which is held annually in Ashford, I also attended the annual Armed Forces Awareness forum in Maidstone. I have been helping the Nepalese Centre negotiate their rent increase from KCC to ensure continued support to our armed forces veterans in our community.

We are hosting our own Armed Forces event.

Supporting our Armed Forces community and celebrating the Folkestone Nepalese Community Centre.

Date & Time: Thursday 5th March 2026 10.30am – 2pm

Venue: Folkestone Nepalese Community Centre, Cheriton.

Purpose: To bring together all the local Armed Forces, Veteran Groups and Charities to highlight what we are all doing in supporting our armed forces and Veteran Communities.

All good stuff, I'm sure you will agree, me doing my job as Armed Forces Champion?

While I was writing up my notes, the President of the United States made his "insulting and frankly appalling" comments about British Forces and their role in the Afghanistan War. I would say to Donald Trump and his British sycophants, that we are still supporting our services people who suffered life changing injuries in Afghanistan, every day in the Nepalese Centre in Cheriton.

I have been invited to an Armed Forces event by our neighbours Dover, at which the legendary Gurkha corporal Hari Budha Magar MBE is the key speaker. I have been fortunate to have met Hari on a couple of occasions; he joined the British Arm aged 19 and knows Folkestone well. He is a frequent visitor to the Nepalese Centre. Hari lost both of his legs in a roadside bomb incident while on patrol in Hellman Province Afghanistan. He became the first above the knee double amputee to climb Mount Everest. A veteran with remarkable determination and dedication to service. Contrast this with Donald Trump's five draft deferments in responding to the American Army Draft for service in the Vietnam War, because he was studying and suffering from "bone spurs".

Members will, I hope, forgive my anger, as many of you know, my son is a serving officer in His Majesty's Navy and I personally know some of his friends with served with honour in Afghanistan, any attack of them is an attack on me.

Attendance

I have attended Kent Leadership meetings, East Kent Leadership meetings, I have attended meeting with developers and businesses from across the District, this Council is a friend to good businesses, I met with KCC on a variety of matters, I met on several occasions with both of our MPs. I also attended the 30th Anniversary of the opening of Ashford International Station".

Councillor Lockwood, Leader of the Labour Group, responded to the Leader and stated:

"Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Councillor Martin, for all those updates and all the you've done in combination with portfolio holders and officers and so on. In respect of the Road of Remembrance, Folkestone Sports Centre, Grace Hill Library and Debenhams, the people of Folkstone have got very used to things closing so it's good to hear there is light at the end of the tunnel for all of these buildings in Folkestone, and let's hope that we can start enjoying things opening again, starting with the sports centre, hopefully in the summer.

I would like to echo your sentiment on the words from the American president, and I think that was disgraceful. We need our armed forces, particularly at the moment. We don't know what for yet, but they're doing a job as we speak, keeping us safe from various dangers that we face. And we have armed forces here in Folkestone, and we're very proud of our local forces and thank you for working with them as we all do.

I'd like to also take this opportunity to thank the teams here that cleared up after the storm of Goretti. I believe credit should also go to people like our beach management contractors and other local contractors who stepped in and the county council who helped with highways. I don't know if that was a glimpse of districts and county providing a joint service, a glimpse of what might be coming in the future. Thank you for confirming that we voted for model 3A, for LGA, but I would just remind members that other models are available!

Can I just say how appalled I am at the statistics you've given about discharges from sewage pipes. I think we should try and maximise our opportunity as chair of that group to exert any influence we have. I know it's very limited, but anything our group can do to support you with our MP, and I know there are other councillors in the room with strong voices like Councillor Chapman. All our voices need to be combined to try and at least make people aware that that's happening as a starter, and then to see if we can do something about it, because that is shocking.

Anything we can do with respect to swimming facilities in Romney Marsh would be good, because as Councillor Hills pointed out last night, at Overview and Scrutiny, people of the Marsh can't even swim in the sea, so we've got to give them some options to think about. Thank you".

Councillor Mrs J Hollingsbee then gave her response and stated:

“I don't know whether it's left me a lot to say actually, but on the storm, well done again to the officers and all the contractors and everybody who actually took part because it was cleared so quickly and so really well done.

I was pleased to see Councillor Prater on the television last night saying all benches would be replaced. I'm looking forward to all that.

On, local government reorganisation, we all know what we voted for. 3A did turn out to be the option that we chose. I was very pleased and my group were very pleased about that. I would just like to say that the briefing that the chief executive hear organised for us from the former chief executive of Cumbria, it was absolutely excellent, and it certainly took us through the process. I think at the end of the presentation, he talked about opportunities.
I left with that thought that there are lots of opportunities, particularly for our staff in this new structure.

On Otterpool Park, I don't really know what to say about Otterpool Park but what I would say is I'd be really pleased when that briefing takes place so that I know exactly what's happening. Time is going by without anything really happening and I understand the confidentiality, but it would really be good to know what's happening.

The Road of Remembrance, I was actually going to put in a question about this, and then I saw that KCC were going to start doing some work, so I thought it was probably not appropriate. It is great that they are going to do some work and I would like to see them start. There are so many people who say, with all the other road works going on in the district, it would have been great to have the Road of Remembrance open because it is the only alternative to go to the harbour. I think you said we were going to make a contribution or offer a contribution. I would be interested to know what that contribution was.

I don't think I really need to say any more about Southern Water. I think Councillor Tony Hills is probably a bit more of an expert on this. He certainly asks questions every council meeting on what's happening. Thank you very much for your report and updates.

In respect of Folca, I'm really pleased to read this. I am a little bit nervous about the NHS because we have actually been through this process before, so I am a little bit nervous about it. I'd be interested to know whether we've got an actual anything in writing, because that would be really good. If that's the case, and I really, really hope it is, that's excellent news for Folkestone.

I was previously the armed forces champion, you took over from me but you are probably doing a better job than I did, I think you are attending more meetings and events, but I don't think there were quite so many going on at that time.

I totally agree with Councillor Lockwood and yourself in terms of Trump. They were awful comments. I think we all felt absolutely disgusted. Certainly, we need to support our armed forces. We do need our armed forces, we need more armed forces. I was very disappointed to see that.

During my time, we set up the Nepalese Centre - we provided some funding and actually wrote the bid to Kent County Council for the Nepalese Centre so I'm glad it's flourishing and I hope it continues to flourish.

I think I have probably covered everything that you mentioned. Thank you for attending all the meetings that you do attend. I would suggest that you go home and have a little drop of brandy tonight. I think you need to have a rest. Well done and thank you".

The Leader then responded to the comments of the two group leaders and advised:

Just to come back on the points made by Councillor Hills, Councillor Thomas and Councillor Cooper, we have been to umpteen meetings with Southern Water, and we have talked for, it seems like years, about leaking cesspits, misconnections, avian poo, dog poo, just about flipping everything. And yet we've got thousands and thousands of hours of untreated sewage going into the sea. I can predict it now, when we get them back in the room, they'll say "oh, no, that's got nothing to do with it", and I genuinely do not know what to do. It's like I'm talking a different language to these people. But anyway, we will continue to fight with whatever weapons we have on that.

Thank you both for your comments.

Proposed by Councillor J Martin,
Seconded by Councillor Prater; and

RESOLVED:

That the Leaders announcements be received and noted.

(The recommendations were agreed by affirmation of the meeting).

72. **Portfolio Holder reports to Council**

The Portfolio Holder updates had been circulated within the agenda pack and noted by Members.

The Chair advised of an amendment to Councillor Shoob's report, in that there were 1250 households on the housing register, not 1450.

73. **Opposition Business**

There was no opposition business.

74. **Motions on Notice**

There were no motions on notice.

75. **Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2026/27**

The report recommended the adoption of a replacement Council Tax Reduction scheme for 2026/2027, which is to be implemented with effect from 1 April 2026. This is because the Local Government Finance Act 1992 requires a local authority to have approved a scheme for the provision of Council Tax Support in 2026/27 by 11 March 2026. Changes are a response to the withdrawal of funding from Kent County Council to provide additional support to the lowest income and most vulnerable households.

Proposed by Councillor Prater,
Seconded by Councillor J Martin; and

RESOLVED:

1. **That report A/25/24 be received and noted.**
2. **That the new Council Tax Reduction scheme be adopted from the 2026/27 financial year as required by S13A and Schedule 1A of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 as amended.**

In accordance with the council procedure rule 17.5, five members present demanded a recorded vote.

FOR: Councillors M Blakemore, P Blakemore, Butcher, Chapman, Cooper, Davison, Fuller, Jones, Keen, Lockwood, E Martin, J Martin, McConville, McShane, Meade, Prater, Scoffham, Speakman, Thomas, Walker, Wimble and Wing (22).

AGAINST: Councillors Godfrey, Mrs Hollingsbee, Hills and A Martin, (4).

ABSTENTIONS: None (0).

(Voting figures: 22 for, 4 against, 0 abstention).

76. **Refresh of the Council's Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults Safeguarding Policy 2025-2030**

The children, young people and vulnerable adults safeguarding policy of the Council has been updated and is attached at Appendix 1 of the report. The policy will run for a 5-year period rather than its usual 2-year period to enable some stability as LGR takes shape. There will be ongoing annual reviews to update the policy with any significant changes in practice or legislation, and ongoing training will enable members to remain updated. This report also highlights the work that has been delivered as part of the Council's statutory safeguarding duties including updates on audits and safeguarding practice.

Proposed by Councillor M Blakemore,
Seconded by Councillor J Martin; and

RESOLVED:
1. **That report C/25/23 be received and noted.**
2. **That the updated safeguarding policy be adopted.**

(Voting figures: 26 for, 0 against, 0 abstentions).

77. **Report to Council on a decision made in accordance with the constitution's call-in and urgency rule**

The constitution provides that, when an urgent decision is made by the Cabinet or Cabinet Member, for which any delay in implementation, likely to be caused by the call-in process, would seriously prejudice the Council's or public interest, then the 'Call-in Rules of Procedure', Part 6.3, rules 1-6 do not apply. Decisions, taken as a matter of urgency, must be reported to the next available meeting of the Council, together with the reasons for urgency.

A Member noted that there was an error in paragraph 1.3, and resolution no.3 was incorrect.

Proposed by Councillor McConville,
Seconded by Councillor J Martin; and

RESOLVED:

1. **That report A/25/22 be received and noted (subject to the amendment to paragraph 1.3, as noted above).**

(Voting figures: 26 for, 0 against, 0 abstentions).

Council – 28 January 2026

Cllr Questions and answers:

1. From Councillor Hills to Councillor J Martin, Leader and Cabinet Member for Planning Policy and Otterpool Park

Since the disappointing decision by the EA to classify Dymchurch bathing beach as poor for the 2026 season, with the damaging recommendation not to bath, this is having a serious effect on the local community and can't be allowed to continue. What does the council intend to do in bringing about change?

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question, Cllr Hills.

For the benefit of other members, I will give some background to the bathing water classification at Dymchurch this year. The Environment Agency tests at the six designated bathing waters in the district throughout the summer season.

Currently, two of the bathing waters are designated as poor, Littlestone and Dymchurch. This year, the Dymchurch results were markedly improved on the previous year.

The Environment Agency, with our backing, undertook a step change appraisal to reassess the rating. Unfortunately, after the reassessment by the Environment Agency, the rating did not change. This is a decision we profoundly disagree with and we believe that they have failed to justify. We continue to push the Environment Agency to explain their decision and if, in their opinion, more needs to be done to explain what that is and crucially take some action to ensure that the responsible parties take the necessary action to put this right.

Other actions for 2026 will in the main be a continuation of work already underway. This will include: -

- Continued pressure on the EA and Southern Water, to extend their out of season testing programme to identify problems in advance of the bathing season. Just to put this into context, in Dymchurch in 2025, we had five alerts for sewage discharge. Already in January this year we've had five alerts for discharge at Dymchurch, but we've also had five alerts for sewage discharge at St Mary's Bay and we've had five alerts for sewage discharge at Littlestone. We've had 27 alerts of discharges at Sunny Sands and we have had, believe it or not, 200 notifications of discharges on the Hythe long pipe. Southern Water have more or less, in 2026, been pouring untreated sewage into our seas continuously since the beginning of the year.

- Investigation of the September spike that impacted test results along the coast particularly at Littlestone. This must include the EA and Southern Water reviewing their tidal modelling for overflow discharges from Hythe Range Road.
- Continued support from council officers to Southern Water's programme of resolving missed connections and leaking cesspits.
- Continuation of the technical group meetings between the EA, Southern Water and our Environmental Protection Team.
- Continuation of the programme of public meetings, with the EA and Southern Water.
- At a strategic level, continued lobbying by this council for greater investment by Southern Water into our local water infrastructure.

I hope this answers your question.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Would the leader agree that all sewage going to sea should be UV, (ultraviolet) treated before release?

ANSWER:

I am not a marine engineer or a sewage expert, but it seems to me to be a very, admittedly expensive, but a very simple step that could reduce the problem significantly.

2. **From Councillor Walker to Councillor P Blakemore, Cabinet Member for Transport, Regulatory Services and Building Control**

Parking has long been a problem in Folkestone and recently resident-led requests for Controlled Parking Zones have increased, as many find themselves unable to park near their homes. However, this has had an adverse effect on nearby streets outside the CPZ who see an increase in parking, and for those working in or visiting nearby businesses or working in residents' homes. A more holistic, rather than piecemeal, approach would be most welcome, as currently the problems are being moved around rather than solved. What will the council's planned review do to balance the needs of residents needing convenient parking and visitors and workers wishing to go about their daily lives?

ANSWER:

Balancing the parking demands of all of our residents, visitors and businesses is a difficult undertaking. We are aware of the displacement parking issues to which you refer, and this is a key element of the upcoming CPZ policy framework review. The draft framework was considered by Overview and Scrutiny Committee last night who were supportive of the proposed changes. The new policy will next be going out to public consultation and then to Cabinet.

The revised framework recommends that we no longer progress CPZ applications for individual roads. Instead, proposed schemes should encompass clearly defined blocks of streets or clusters of roads. We believe this approach will more effectively address displacement issues and help balance the competing demands for parking spaces across the district.

Key to the review also is the proposal to make a limited number of business permits available to staff working in health and social care, education and the emergency services.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Will the review look at expanding the Enforcement Team or the hours they are available?

ANSWER:

Yes, we will look into this to see what more we can do.

3. **From Councillor Hills to Councillor J Martin, Leader and Cabinet Member for Planning Policy and Otterpool Park**

Following storm ‘Goretti’ and the severe damage caused to our sea defence infrastructure particularly at Lydd Ranges with the worst flooding in fifty years. Would it not be wise to set up a cross-party working group to work through our concerns with the Environment Agency, and report findings to the Council?

ANSWER:

Thank you Cllr Hills for your question. Storm Goretti did indeed cause significant damage to our coastline to which we received no prior warning. I am delighted by the response of our officers who mobilised quickly to survey the damage and put clear plans in place to clear shingle from roads and promenades and organise repairs to other coastal defence structures.

I agree with all of your concerns regarding flood protection on the Marsh and I am aware that the Environment Agency officers are surveying the beaches to ascertain what replenishment works are required to repair the defences. My view is that we should allow the Environment Agency officers to carry out this work and inform us of what plans they are going to put in place to mitigate future risk prior to establishing if there is a need for a working group.

I will ensure that our officers keep in close contact with the Environment Agency and that mitigation plans are realised and relayed to you when they are available.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

None.

As Councillor Akuffo-Kelly was not present at the meeting, the following questions (4 and 5) were not asked at the meeting, but written responses were provided.

4. **From Councillor Akuffo-Kelly to Councillor J Martin, Leader and Cabinet Member for Planning Policy and Otterpool Park**

In light of the recent impacts of Storm Goretti, could the council provide an update on the condition of coastal defences, the immediate repair or reinforcement actions planned, and how these will shape the district's long-term coastal resilience strategy?

ANSWER:
Thank you, for your question Cllr Akuffo-Kelly. As per my previous response to Cllr Hills, I would like to reiterate how delighted I was by the response of our officers who mobilised quickly to survey the damage and put clear plans in place to clear shingle from roads and promenades and organise repairs to other coastal defence structures. I'm pleased to say that the sea defences did their job. Whilst considerable damage was caused there was no flooding to any homes and none of our residents or visitors were harmed.

The sea defences in general are in good condition. The most significant damage was caused to the concrete breakwater at Mermaid beach in Folkestone. It should be noted though, that the concrete breakwater itself sits on a large rock revetment which is the main part of that sea defence structure. The rock revetment itself was not damaged and still provides the protection that it was designed for. The displaced concrete sections themselves are actually in good condition and officers are working with the Environment Agency to see if they can lifted back into position and rejoined to the rock beneath.

Other damage to sea walls includes concrete coping stones which will be replaced in due course and will not weaken the structures or pose any harm. The beaches have now been surveyed to identify any vulnerable areas, and beach regrading of shingle is taking place where necessary to renew our storm protection standard. The next major planned replenishment will commence on the 9th March.'

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:
Given the growing impact of coastal storms and climate change, could the council outline how it will consult and inform residents and businesses in vulnerable coastal areas, and confirm the status of funding or grant applications for planned coastal-resilience works?

ANSWER

Thank you for your further question. When the council are aware of extreme weather events we will do all that we can to notify residents. This will include putting out communications via social media and ensuring that our teams are prepared to assist where required. This may include closing flood gates and preparing sandbags. It should be noted that there was no prior warning that Storm Goretti was going to impact the coastline within the district. I can confirm that funding was awarded last year by the Environment Agency to cover the next 5 years of the beach replenishment programme totalling £2.7m. This funding will continue to protect our homes and residents against future storm events.

Further to this, the council is currently updating its Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) to inform its new local plan and any future decisions on planning applications. The government is currently consulting on an update to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The new draft NPPF puts more emphasis on managing coastal change. Local authorities are directed to take account of shoreline management plans, the national coastal erosion risk map, the UK Marine Policy Statement and marine plans in assessing the risks arising from coastal change and appropriate approaches to coastal management. The council will be assessing the implications of the new NPPF and will take this into account in developing its new local plan for the district.'

5. **From Councillor Akuffo-Kelly to Councillor Fuller, Cabinet Member for Resident Engagement and Accountability**

As councils increasingly adopt digital tools to deliver services, the use of artificial intelligence raises important questions about transparency, accountability, and the protection of resident data. Therefore, could the council confirm whether it is using any AI technologies and, if so, which decisions or processes they support or automate?

ANSWER

Many thanks for your question, Councillor Akuffo-Kelly.

Since Councillor Davison's question on this in September 2023, I've had the opportunity to learn more about the practicalities of building AI models. I'm also keenly aware of the ethical, security, and climate change issues that arise from the use of AI.

In my personal view, the firing of Dr Timnit Gebru from Google in 2020 raised questions over diversity and algorithmic bias. The use of Grok to create sexualised imagery and the lacklustre response from xAI earlier this month, meanwhile, have resulted in investigations by EU and UK authorities.

The potential risks of prompt injection attacks that manipulate models into leaking sensitive data, spreading misinformation, or worse, meanwhile, are a growing concern.

That’s coupled with discussions about the potential development of Artificial General Intelligence, with concerns about energy consumption, the employment market, and even discussions around a Universal Basic Income.

Thankfully, these wider issues are beyond my remit, but I can provide assurance on both the council’s current position and its preparedness for the future use of artificial intelligence.

At present, the council is not a large-scale or automated user of artificial intelligence for decision-making. There is no AI system in use that replaces officer decisions, nor any AI that makes determinations affecting residents without human oversight.

Limited and tightly controlled uses of AI-enabled technology do exist, primarily to support efficiency rather than decision-making.

One example of this is the use of automation and pattern-recognition tools within the benefits service, supporting the processing of data received from the Department for Work and Pensions. Electronic files received from the DWP are automatically entered into the benefit system to avoid the need of an officer rekeying the information. However, importantly, this process still requires manual officer intervention and does not make autonomous decisions.

In addition, staff are able to use generative AI tools, such as Microsoft Copilot Chat, which may be used to help draft documents, emails, or reports. These tools do not make decisions, and all outputs must be reviewed and approved by officers before use.

No AI system is currently used to automate statutory decisions, determine eligibility, prioritise enforcement, or profile residents.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Regardless of whether AI is currently in use, we need to plan for a future in which its role will only grow. With that in mind, does a formal governance framework exist to oversee these technologies and ensure it is regularly reviewed and updated in line with emerging risks and best-practice standards?

ANSWER

In respect of governance, the council does have a formal framework in place to control and oversee the use of artificial intelligence. This is set out in the council’s Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence Framework which:

- Defines what AI tools may and may not be used
- Prohibits the input of personal or confidential data into public AI platforms

- Requires Data Protection Impact Assessments where AI use could affect personal data
- Mandates human accountability for all AI-assisted outputs, and
- Aligns AI use with existing information security, GDPR, and data protection obligations

Governance oversight sits within established structures. Any proposal to expand the use of AI must be formally reported through officers to the Corporate Governance Board and to the Corporate Leadership Team and any associated risks would also be recorded through the council's risk management processes.

Finally, the framework is explicitly designed to be reviewed and updated on a regular basis, recognising the rapid pace of technological change and emerging best practice across local government.

In summary, the council's approach is cautious, transparent, and proportionate. AI is used only in limited, supportive ways. There is no automated decision-making in place and a clear governance framework already exists to ensure future developments are lawful, ethical, and accountable.

I've made a point of noting that the opinions on Google and xAI are my own (though I could say "In my personal view, and not that of the Council" if that would be preferable.

6. **From Councillor Tony Cooper to Councillor Mike Blakemore, Cabinet Member for Community and Collaboration**

When can the residents of Romney Marsh expect to have a swimming pool built on the Marsh for them?

ANSWER:

Thank you, for your question Cllr Cooper. As you will be aware, officers presented the high-level leisure investment strategy to Overview and Scrutiny Committee last night. This sets out the council's approach to the shortage of swimming pool provision within the district following consultancy work looking at current capacity and reflecting changes to planned developments in the district, specifically revised timelines for Otterpool Park along with there being new owners of Folkestone Sports Centre.

This first stage of work was also commissioned to assist in making a decision regarding the land at Martello Lakes.

The external advice recommends that the council provides financial support to the Sports Trust to reopen Folkestone Sports Centre and provides capital funding for extensive improvement works to extend the life of Hythe Pool.

Further to this, the early strategy work, suggests that when deciding on any leisure centre development investment in the near future - between Otterpool

and Hythe – the focus should be at Otterpool Park as, in due course, it will have the biggest catchment area, and this is a requirement of the planning permission. The council has limited funds available and these need to be targeted where they will benefit the greatest number of residents.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Can we have a review in due course?

ANSWER:

I know that our residents on the Marsh will be disappointed, and their views were represented and articulated very well by members at Overview and Scrutiny last night. I think the reality is the money we're spending at the moment is on renovating two poles rather than building a new pool. That's the situation and those are the resources we have.

Also, to open a new pool, that pool would need to be viable. It's notable in the Sports Trust report that they quote Swim England as saying 500 pools have closed since 2010, 42 % of them since 2020, so there would be a concern in building a new pool with whether that pool would be viable in the long term.

7. **From Councillor Liz McShane to Councillor Mike Blakemore, Cabinet Member for Community and Collaboration**

In light of Folkestone Town Council's unanimous vote to pursue the purchase of Grace Hill Library, does this Council agree that the building's retention in public use is of significant importance to Folkestone's heritage and community life, and will it support efforts to secure a positive long-term outcome following Kent County Council's decision to sell Grace Hill?

ANSWER

Thank you, for your question Cllr McShane. I am personally delighted that Folkestone Town Council have voted unanimously to pursue the purchase Grace Hill Library from KCC. This council does indeed agree that the building's retention in public use is of significant importance to Folkestone's heritage and community life and will of course support the efforts of the Town Council to secure a positive long-term outcome for the library where it is able to do so within existing budget constraints.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Do you agree the library was gifted to the people of Folkestone, and KCC do not have the right to sell it off?

ANSWER:

Yes.

8. **From Councillor Meade to Councillor Speakman, Cabinet Member for Waste and Street Cleansing and Corporate Health and Safety**

Residents in my ward have recently received letters addressed from FHDC regarding rubbish bins being stored on the pavements outside of various properties stating if they are not moved onto a properties boundary they will be removed by Veolia and that that particular property will be deemed as not needing rubbish removal going forward. Many houses in my ward are terraced with little to no front garden or access to the back of the property to store their bins. Residents are unable to store their large green Veolia bins on pathways to the house as would affectively block access to their property. Can you please advise what residents are supposed to do to comply and not have their service withdrawn (even though they pay for this service) as bringing bins into the house is impossible physically for many residents and since the bin collections have been elongated from one to two weeks, this would pose a health hazard for the residents ?

ANSWER

Thank you for the question, Cllr Meade.

The Waste Team do write to properties where bins are left out after collection day but do attempt to consider if the household has storage space or if this is unavoidable, often for the reasons you mention.

Please email me the addresses of the properties and I will take the matter up with the Waste Team.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Well, I can assure you that they are threatening to withdraw the service because this is the second time I myself have actually received one of these letters, so I'd be very happy to actually send you a copy of the letter and I'll actually send you a photo of my front door where you can see quite clearly I have nowhere to store a Veolia bin, so I will look forward to your reply.

ANSWER:

We are very aware obviously there are lots of properties where it is just impossible for residents. It's very obvious, particularly on terraced properties, there is nowhere to store the bins. The only occasions that we are aware of, where we have approached residents, is where we feel there is space and the resident is persistently leaving the bins outside and we've had complaints to that effect. Obviously, this needs to be investigated further.

We certainly, in what we think are fairly rare instances, would not leave the resident without any bin collection facility. If the bin isn't able to be put there,

then we would provide a purple bag. I do take your point, we need to look into that.

9. From Councillor Keen to Councillor J Martin, Leader and Cabinet Member for Planning Policy and Otterpool Park

I was interested to see that we are going to spend 6million pounds on the refurbishment of the Hythe Swimming pool. A pool that has cost the district copious amounts of money over the years for repairs. However, when the Folkestone Pool went into administration and was subsequently sold to the Folkestone Sports Trust, we as a council stated that we could not afford to purchase the pool and refused to bail the facility out. Can we please have an explanation as to where 6 million pounds was found for the upgrade to Hythe pool and why we could not find £1484,277 to purchase our much loved and needed Folkestone Sports Centre in May 2025. Especially now we are being asked for a £2.4M grant from the Folkestone Sports Trust to carry out work needed to reopen the facility, which at the time of closure was not needed because dedicate staff kept the pool and building serviced and the pool maintained.

ANSWER:

Thank you for the question, Cllr Keen.

I would raise the following points in response.

I would start with a general point that Hythe Pool is owned and operated by the council. Folkestone Sports Centre was owned and operated by an external charitable trust. The approach taken by the council to each facility would always be different because of the ownership. It was never a choice between repairing Hythe Pool or purchasing Folkestone Sports Centre. The district needs both facilities to satisfy demand and if the council had not spent ‘copious’ amounts of money on maintaining Hythe Pool, the district would currently have no public swimming baths.

I would also remind members, that at the time of the former trust going into administration, the council was supporting Folkestone Sports Centre through an annual grant of £150,000 as well as other individual grants. This was a longstanding arrangement over many years possibly even decades. The council supported the former trust until the end, and it entered administration, but there were always limits on what the council could fund both financially and legally (under Subsidy Control regulations) to an external operator. At the end, any additional funding provided by the council would not have gone into the operation of the facility but would have been prioritised to paying the banks and other debtors of the former trust.

After the trust went to administration, there was no real option of the council purchasing and operating the leisure centre itself. The purchase price was always in addition to the substantial investment needed into the facility, which is currently estimated at £4.5 million. I agree that the staff were dedicated, but

it is just not the case that these works were not needed at the time of the closure. We had regular meetings with the former trust at which they advised their concerns about the building and plant. We had helped them with external funding bids to Sport England. Undoubtedly, the closure of the building will have contributed, but there was a pre-existing need for significant investment into the facility.

Finally, the funding of the proposed £2.4m for the grant to help re-open Folkestone Sports Centre will be a combination of S106 funding and capital funding provided by the council. This will be set out in the capital programme that will be presented to Full Council as part of the annual budget next month. The funding proposal is for a capital grant in place of any ongoing revenue grant.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Do we know that it will reopen as a sports centre and not as a costly health club, which would be out of the price range of many residents of Folkestone?

ANSWER:

The intention of the operators, who also currently run Three Hills, is to run community sports facilities and operate them as such. So that's as far as we can go.

There will be certain provisions that we can tie into, but remember that the former trust promised us the earth, but they still went into liquidation and we were left with nothing. Offering guarantees is something that you have to take on advice.

10. From Councillor Keen to Councillor Mike Blakemore, Cabinet Member for Community and Collaboration

I am sure we are all aware by now that there has been a 60% cut from the Age UK budget by KCC, which, besides redundancies will likely lead to a reduction in services. As a District Councillor I am concerned that Reform's decision to cut this money from this much needed service will leave our vulnerable elderly residents especially those needing dementia care at risk. As a district council are we able to help the service with funding and our resources?

ANSWER:

Thank you for the question, Cllr Keen.

The cuts by KCC are very disappointing and will no doubt put these vital community services under further pressure. However, I have discussed the situation with the two Age UK branches within our district and I know they are

working to minimise the impact upon their clients, especially the most vulnerable.

In terms of the funding Age UK receives from this council, I am pleased to confirm that we will continue to support the Age UK operations in our district via the community hub initiatives they run. This amounts to £5,000 per centre. In addition, funding has also been provided by the UKSPF, which is ending later this year. To mitigate the impact of this loss in funding, it is proposed in the draft 26/27 budget to increase the grant funding for each Age UK Centre by a further £8,000. This will make combined total funding of £26,000.

Furthermore, the Romney Marsh Community Hub operates similar services across the Marsh and they have also had some of their wellbeing funding cut by KCC. They also receive £5k and will also lose their UKSPF allocation. The draft budget also increases their allocation by £8k making a total contribution of £39,000 to support these services.

When the details of the new Crisis Resilience Fund are announced by the government we will also consider if further funding is available.

We hope this helps Age UK to continue to provide their vital services to the people who need it most in our community.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

None.