

COUNCIL UPDATE 9.2024

ALDI / BARROW HILL ROUNDABOUT

I attended a site visit to discuss whether railings can be added to ensure pedestrian safety at when crossing New Street. The problem is that traffic enters New Street at speed from the roundabout and railings are thought to make pedestrians safer when crossing. I have added this to my Ashford Central Highways Improvement Plan (HIP).



JOINT TRANSPORT BOARD

The Board met on 3rd September. Key issues included the following.

- I asked about the J10a local traffic enhancements referred to in the Local Transport Plan. This refers to helping traffic from Hythe Road to get onto the junction due to the volume of strategic traffic that joins and exits the junction from the M20. At this stage it's just an issue that needs addressing as a local priority rather than a developed scheme proposal. The consultation ends on 8 October. Overall, the Transport Plan is less ideological and more practical than previous plans. What KCC are doing is providing people with a range of good, reliable transport options, including the ability to use their cars.
- Parishes and County Members representing unparished areas are requested to review their HIPS at least once a year. This is to ensure projects identified are feasible. A fee may be payable by the Parish which raises the thorny issue of double taxation as unparished area HIP costs are met out of general fund.
- Moving traffic violations went live at Beaver Road Bus Gate on 23rd September. For the first six months, drivers will receive a warning notice for a first contravention (no fine). Second and subsequent

contraventions will result in a Penalty Charge Notice (PCN). All contraventions will receive a PCN after the first six months of a camera being operational. The amounts are set in legislation and cannot be altered. If the PCN is paid within 21 days, the charge is £35. After this, the charge increases to £70. If the charge is not paid within 56 days, the case will be passed to a debt collection agency. If a driver receives a PCN and wishes to appeal, they may do so by following the details provided on the PCN issued. The camera on Sackville Crescent will go live on 9th December due to unavoidable SGN works.

- Work to improve the surface on the Beaver Road / Victoria Road / Ave Jacques Fauchaux junction including the bridge over the railway are proposed but are now awaiting UKPN works. I have asked for a yellow box junction as part of my HIP.
- Work on Quantock Drive from Maidstone Road to Malvern Road are proposed for 2024/26.
- Work to remove and replace damaged Aco channels and replace with a better product in Elwick Road are in the process of being planned.
- KCC are yet to hear whether the new government will replicate the funding that the old government provided for the pothole blitz in 2024. If the new government does provide funding it will apply from April 2025. We heard about the process KCC uses to allocate funding across the districts and how it is then spent in each district. All stakeholders have a role, parish / community / town councils, borough and county councillors but the most important stakeholders are the public using the reporting app as that generates the reports which are used to justify funding allocation.

KENT AND MEDWAY ORTHOPAEDIC CENTRE

I attended a preview event on 4th September to see the new Kent and Medway Orthopaedic Centre. The new multimillion-pound theatre complex at Maidstone Hospital provides three operating theatres and 24 dedicated surgical beds to patients undergoing planned orthopaedic surgery for arthritic conditions and soft tissue injuries affecting the bones and joints. It will treat patients from across the region for planned surgical procedures.

The Centre is located separately from the main Hospital building and the Emergency Department. This will enable the Centre to focus on specially designed care for patients, helping to deliver many more operations and reducing the length of time patients stay in hospital. The majority will be day cases, in by 7.30am and out by 8pm.

The new Centre is part of a national scheme to deliver more than 50 new surgical hubs across England, providing around 100 more operating theatres and 1,000 more beds. It is estimated the new hubs will deliver almost two million extra routine operations to reduce waiting lists over the next three

years, backed by £1.5 billion in funding. The Maidstone building cost £39.1m and has resulted in recruiting 170 more staff.



URGENT TREATMENT UNITS

Possible changes were discussed on 9th September bringing services provided Out of Hours Doctors Services (these are booked GP appointments through NHS 111) and Urgent Treatment Centres under single sites under a single provider. Target change is by December 2025 with the expectation that the services should merge, empowering the acute trusts to be more involved with these services.

Kent and Medway UTCs: Current Overview



Medway and Swale UTCs

Medway Maritime Hospital Co-located UTC MCH	GP Out of Hours MedOOC MCH	Sheppey Community Hospital Community MIU KCHFT	Sittingbourne Memorial Hospital Community MIU KCHFT	Minster Medical Group Community GP Walk In
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North Kent (DGS) UTCs

Darent Valley Hospital Co-located UTC DVH	Gravesham Community Hospital Community UTC DVH subcontract to KCHFT	GP Out of Hours IC24: - face to face assessments - home visiting - telephone advice
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West Kent UTCs

Maidstone General Hospital Co-located UTC MTW	Tunbridge Wells Hospital Co-located UTC MTW	Sevenoaks Hospital Community UTC MTW subcontract to KCHFT	Edenbridge Medical Practice Community UTC MTW subcontract to KCHFT	GP Out of Hours IC24: - face to face assessments - home visiting - telephone advice
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East Kent UTCs

William Harvey Hospital Ashford Co-located UTC EKHUF	QEOM Hospital Margate Co-located UTC EKHUF	Kent and Canterbury Hospital Community UTC EKHUF	Mulgrove Park Medical Centre Community UTC EKHUF
Buckland Dover Hospital Community MIU KCHFT	Folkestone Royal Victoria Hospital Community MIU KCHFT	Deal Victoria Hospital Community MIU KCHFT	
Faversham Medical Practice Community UTC	Whitstable Estuary View Medical Practice Community UTC	Herne Bay Queen Victoria Mem. Hospital Community UTC	GP DOH Home Visiting IC24

Together, we can



VULNERABLE PERSONS RESETTLEMENT SCHEME (VPRS)

Councillors had an update on 10th September. The scheme under the old government involved ring-fenced funding under which resettlement in the UK, predominately for displaced Afghan and similar refugees, was managed by KCC in properties identified by district council housing teams.

In January 2024 the old government began a consultation on a Safe and Legal Routes Cap under which local authorities would be asked to submit a figure for the maximum number of refugees they could take for 2025. The result of this consultation has not been announced and whether the new Labour government will continue with the cap policy. What is known is that there are pressures from increased local homeless and recent Home Office indication is that there will be increases in positive decisions for asylum seekers in need of housing.

The contracts placed by KCC for managing resettlement needed to be considered by councillors as they were coming to an end, and it was agreed that the Council would continue in its current role but now with a single commissioned provider for resettlement and integration casework. The casework provided consists immediate assistance to families upon their arrival into the UK with settling into accommodation, assistance to access immediate services and support deemed necessary for a 3–5-year period.

STONESTREET SOLAR

12th September was the closing date for registering as a “Interested Person”. The reasons I gave for registering were as follows:

The Evolution Power application does not address ABC planning policies and guidance. It identifies reasons for refusal that I would present to a planning committee were ABC the planning authority.

The applicant said (at their public meeting on 8th November 2022) that the PINS Inspector, in issuing the SDO, will not be bound by ABC or NPPF policies. I think this was designed to reduce public confidence and to put residents off commenting. I expect PINS will consider both NPPF and ABC policies, alongside the Planning Act 2008 for infrastructure.

Developers are expected to consider the criteria for good design set out in EN-1 Section 4.6 in developing projects. This provides support for my reasons for refusal as the scheme is currently presented.

In summary too much of the development is sited on the high ground of Aldington Ridge; in addition, it is partly located on best and most valuable farmland, areas of archaeological significance and has a considerable impact on biodiversity rich area.

LPA Planning Guidance

ABC Policy ENV10 allows solar development:

- That does not result in significant adverse impact on the landscape, natural assets or heritage assets.
- That does not generate unacceptable level of traffic.
- That does not cause a loss of amenity (visual impact, noise, disturbance and odour) to nearby residents.
- That provides for the site to be restored to its previous use.
- Where the applicant provides for effective engagement with the local community.

The development, if consented, has an operational lifespan of 40 years which is a long period of servicing equipment and vegetation management. **ABC guidance specifies a maximum period of only 25 years so the 40-year term is not acceptable so this application should be turned down on this basis.** This view is strongly supported by National Policy Statement at Para 2.49.12. This section puts a limit of 25 years. This means that ABC guidance is supported by National Policy Statement, and this is driven (in part) by the fact that PV panels have a design life of between 25 and 30 years.

ABC published Renewable Energy Planning Guidance Notes for large scale Solar PV arrays (those > 50kW) which recommends:

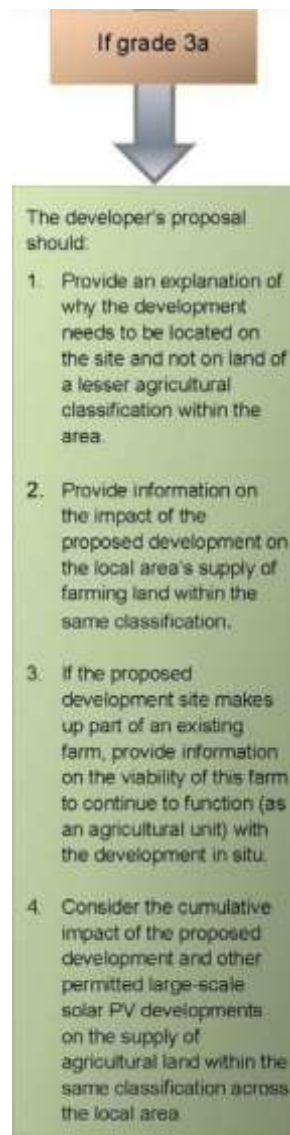
- If built on greenfield land, guidance requires continued agricultural use and encourages biodiversity improvement around arrays. The recommended gap between arrays is 5 metres, illustrated as follows.



This application does not provide for the required gap between the solar panels to support biodiversity and so should be turned down. This ABC guidance is supported by National Policy Statement at Para 2.50.10 which required developers to extend existing habitats and create new habitats (specifically by installing new cultivated strips or plots for rate arable plants). This can only be achieved with the 5m buffer strip between solar arrays.

- Large PV array applications should ensure heritage assets are conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, including views important to their setting. A large-scale solar farm within the setting of heritage assets may cause substantial harm to the significance of the asset. This application is for a large-scale development, disproportionate to the size of Aldington. It is also close to the North Downs ANOB. **I would therefore argue refusal because the development will become a significant or defining characteristic of the village and North Downs ANOB. Guidance says that large scale PV should avoid landscapes designated for their natural beauty.** A wider zone of visual influence should have been considered by the applicant and this is required under National Policy Statement at Para 2.51.2.

- LPAs should take into account the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land (defined as land including grade 3a) and will therefore be a significant issue. The following issues need to be addressed when grade 3a is in point:



The fact that a significant element of the development is on grade 3a is a reason for refusal; the developer argues that the lack of brownfield and suitable agricultural land is a reason for the application to be approved. Their point is unreasonable; the lack of suitable land does not mean that development can be brought forward on unsuitable land.

- A management regime should be prepared by an ecological consultant
- Any application should specify the location of designated and undesignated heritage assets affected by the development

The view of ABC that development is preferable outside the Best and Most Valuable land is supported in National Policy Statement at Para 2.48.13.

Agricultural Land and Soils (Natural Assets)

Agricultural Land Classification of the development is 18.23% Subgrade 3a and 75.09% Subgrade 3b. 1% is grade 2.

Draft NPS EN-3 says that the preference is for solar development on brownfield and non-agricultural land and should avoid the use of Best and Most Versatile Land which includes Subgrade 3a. NPS precludes developments such as this coming forward because this development is partly on Best and Most Valuable land.

ABC local plan seeks to monitor the loss of Grades 1 & 2 to major residential development and requires that solar development should not have an adverse effect on natural assets. I would argue that the loss of Subgrade 3a agricultural land represents an adverse impact on natural assets. This means that **ABC Policy ENV10 precludes this development because it is partly on Best and Most Valuable Land.**

The applicant suggests (erroneously) that because most of Ashford Borough is Best and Most Valuable Land, any solar development of a similar size in Ashford would result in a loss of Best and Most Valuable Land. They say because it is not possible to find an area in the Borough that does not include Best and Most Valuable Land, solar development on Best and Most Valuable land for solar must be permitted in Ashford. This is unacceptable.

The Applicant has not sought to avoid the use of Best and Most Valuable land. Their reference that refers to Grade 3a land as “**potentially** Best and Most Versatile Land” is incorrect as NPS unambiguously defines Grade 3a as Best and Most Valuable Land.

Arguments why this application results in adverse impact on natural assets

The physical supports for the PV units go 3m into the soil. Over 40 years this would result in leaching into the soil which would damage its viability to resume agricultural activity. Any loss of viability to Best and Most Versatile land would be highly significant. Because the frames will be driven 3m into the ground they will be noisy and produce vibration - both of which can affect badgers in nearby sets. The wider ecological landscape should be considered.

The PV panels are 0.8m above the ground and it is proposed that this would allow grass to grow and sheep to graze and so agricultural use will continue. The average height of a sheep is 120cm so I wonder if this statement by the applicant is correct, grass growth would not be sufficient to maintain livestock throughout the year and for that reason there will be an adverse impact on soil quality. **ABC guidance requires the height to be 900mm above ground level. This condition is not met and so is a reason for refusal.** Were this application to be approved, I would ask for a planning obligation that 95% of the land **will remain** in agricultural use is required (not just “**available for**” agricultural use). An annual report should be prepared by the applicant confirming stocking rates month by month.

The size of the development and the limited time allowed for the installation of just 12 months suggests a very intense period of construction so the dust and noise will exist during construction. The proximity of CTRL and M20 (both sources of dust) means that the cumulative effect of dust must be considered. These aspects point to an adverse impact on natural assets (being air quality).

Heritage Assets

Glint and Glare has not been adequately assessed for residents and from vantage points on PROWs including within the North Downs AONB. Long distance views of the site from the Kent Downs ridgeline mean that the panels will be visible. There is potential for adverse glint and glare on nearby residential properties including heritage assets.

There are 77 listed properties near the application site and although there is no list of non-designated heritage assets maintained by ABC, no proper investigation appears to have been carried out on the Mersham Conservation Area, Aldington Ridge and Colliers Hill footpath where there will be a loss of amenity.

Biodiversity

This development should deliver an overall 20% improvement on the current baseline as set out in KCC's aspirations. This is over and above the 10% envisaged by the NPPF. The applicant claims there will be a 100% improvement in biodiversity from the development because the land currently in agricultural use which will be converted to solar is a biodiversity wasteland (which is not true) and that they will be planting additional hedges. This does not take account of disruption to existing wildlife on the proposed site or on adjacent fields.

For the avoidance of doubt, National Policy Statement at Para 2.50.11 considers the previous land management of an application site only where it involves intensive agricultural practice. This is not the case here, so the biodiversity harm created by the existing use is not relevant here. **In addition, Para 2.51.5 requires existing hedges and established vegetation to be retained which is not the case with the application as presented and is a reason for refusal.**

Heritage and natural assets derive their significance from their presence and setting. The hedgerows on the development site provide landscape features that help to create and distinguish the local character and provide a strong sense of enclosure within the local landscape. These characteristics must be protected and there is so far insufficient evidence of such protection. **ABC guidance requires buffer strips of 5m to provide for biodiversity, this condition is not met and so is a strong argument for refusal.**

Planting proposed to provide visual screening to sensitive heritage assets must be natural regeneration, not just planted trees. Examples of these two different approaches are shown below in Sevington:



The one on the right has nightingales, barn owls, whitethroat and lots of lizards and slow worms; it is rich in actual demonstratable biodiversity and rare species. Removing valuable hedgerows must be kept to a minimum and any that are removed or altered should require clear and convincing justification. An annual maintenance plan is required to ensure that new planting gets properly established. It is stated that Backhouse Wood and the East Stour River will be robustly buffered so these comments apply here specifically. The East Stour River is a Habitat of Principal Importance. There is a risk of increased run off from what will become compacted exposed ground. This can cause erosion and pollution into the East Stour with resultant downstream flooding risk. Furthermore, some horizontal direction drilling will be required to cross the East Stour River.

The applicant's plans should provide sufficient area for natural grassland habitat away from the PVs, which if grazed with cattle will bring huge benefits for biodiversity and ease of management going forwards (robust fencing will be needed to protect walkers from the cattle).

It is essential that the biodiversity scheme is designed with specific local species in mind. Brown hares enjoy fallow or short grassy areas; can the scheme not facilitate some sort of targeted beneficial recovery scheme for brown hares? Skylarks could benefit too, if some wider spacing, open areas and corridors were provided within the panel footprint. The developer could put in some decent habitat and then have a proper bird hide installed as an asset for locals to watch wildlife, brown hares, birds etc.

PROWs

Some sort of benefit for the people of Ashford and Folkestone in terms of access as well as biodiversity seems essential. Where the development creates biodiversity areas, it would be good if people can then enjoy them and experience it via a footpath etc. All too often, the paths either lead out onto a road that you don't want to walk down, or you have to go back on yourself, which is just frankly boring, so it would be good if there was a circular route as a gain out of this proposal or perhaps some sensible links/new paths to create circular walks and connections to the current PROW system. The area could be a destination on a walking route and a draw for a local pub.

The proposed link to Mersham via a new bridleway needs to be led by the applicant through contact with the landowners (Church Commissioners for England) to negotiate access and not left to local authorities. Preserving and/or enhancing definitive rights of way should be part of the benefit package the scheme delivers in compensation for the impact it would cause. The applicant needs to recognise this responsibility.

Too many PROWs are at risk of being lost permanently by the scheme. Footpaths follow the historic desire lines and the diversion (and sometimes closure) results in additional distance, inconvenience and are less enjoyable due to the high 3m fencing. These historic paths are part of our heritage, and many new people have moved into the area recently (with more to come) and it is essential that we give all residents the opportunity to enjoy the countryside.

It is important that we use this as an opportunity to support the local tourism industry as there will be a significant effect on the socio-economic system locally. There will be a loss of local activity in the Agri economy both from the loss of a poultry farm and a substantial arable acreage which will have a knock-on effect on local support businesses. Tourism is a significant driver in the area, but people will not want to visit when the landscape changes unless proper mitigation and safeguards are provided.

Level of Traffic Use

The proposed access route during construction via A20 / Station Road is unacceptable due to the crash history at that crossroads. A number of abnormal traffic movements can be expected and the speed of traffic movements at that junction can be problematic – and not just at rush hour. A more imaginative and safer arrangement for deliveries needs to be proposed.

The developer says 80% of traffic will directly access the site from Station Road, 10% will use Goldwell Road and 10% will need to cross Station Road. There is a need to cross Bank Road.

Access to the fields off Laws Lane would have to be either via Bank Road or through Bank Farm, neither of which is acceptable. Bank Road is a single-track lane. It is in constant use, including the various businesses located in the farm buildings and agricultural vehicles. The trenching of Goldwell Lane is unacceptable as is HGV traffic. It appears that access to this part of the site is proposed via the field entrance and is the single most important PRoW in the village. The developer states, 'no traffic impacts on the village' which suggest they only count Roman Road as 'The village' which is not the case. Goldwell Lane and Calleywell Lane are key to the community.

National Policy Statement Para 2.54.7 requires the cumulative effect on the local road network to be considered by the highway authority to protect the residential amenity from multiple solar farm developments from impact of access routes. It goes on to say that applicants of various projects should work together. There is no evidence that this has been done so is a reason for refusal. The view of the highway authority can be considered by the Secretary of State (Para 2.54.9).

Effective Engagement with Communities

There is a lot of support for renewable energy in the UK but the key is making sure this is done in the most effective way and takes into account the views of local people. Villages around proposed solar farms aren't being offered any sort of benefit in terms of their own energy needs, so it's unsurprising there isn't a community buy-in. **The applicant has failed to set out the benefits locally - including annual village funding - that it is prepared to offer the local community.** A £40k annual sum has been mentioned but is insufficient when spread across 4 parishes and at least 2 primary schools.

An analysis of the whole supply chain is essential to properly understand the climate change impact. The supply chain for the panels needs to be assured (In 2019, China made 80 percent of the world's supply of solar panels). Buying Chinese solar panels to reduce emissions is like using gas to put out a fire. China is Russia's top business partner and will continue to increase its purchases of Russian oil & gas, do we really want to support that? The developer said (8 November 2022) China using Slave Labour to build the panels will be "old news" in 3 to 4 years' time as they are improving their record. This is plainly untrue. China represents a systemic challenge to our values and interests and the biggest state-based threat to our economic security. **We need to have a full understanding of the applicant's ESG credentials— and an understanding of the way in which Ashford can be legally assured that the entity that develops out the site, if approved, stands by the same credentials.**

John Pettigrew, the chief executive of National Grid, has said (Telegraph 2 November 2022) said they will "need to build about seven times as much infrastructure in the next seven or eight years than we built in the last 32" to meet the demand for electricity from electric vehicles, heat pumps and industrial electrification, and to enable new renewable energy projects to connect to the grid. National Grid will need to work with local communities who should get the benefits when they're hosting this infrastructure. **How confident are we that EP has any agreement to connect their solar farms to the National Grid?**

ENTRY EXIT SCHEME

Councillors had a presentation on the new Entry Exit System (EES) on 13th September. The ESS which will apply from 10th November on travellers from the UK to France. These changes arise from the need to comply with the new requirement to provide biometric information on entry to parts of the EU. The

issue KCC is addressing is the fact that the time to cross to the continent will take longer, possibly leading to delays on the M20 and in Dover. Brock could be more regularly. A new permitting system was trialled in July / August 2024 which required the HGVs to use Brock to avoid drivers bypassing Brock via A251 etc. This involved HGV drivers collecting a permit at Brock, without which they are refused access to Dover. It was very successful and prevented congestion through Dover.

SOUTHEAST COAST AMBULANCE SERVICE (SECAM)

SECAMB held its annual meeting on 13th September. Kent has trialled a new “Hub” model which will be rolled out to the rest of the southeast coast area. In essence the Hubs at Ashford and Gillingham provide immediate advice on the appropriate route to access the correct healthcare – where there is not the need for an ambulance, patients are navigated to the correct care. Only 13% of calls are from those critically injured and 1 in every 10 hours are spent with patients who have fallen. Core ambulance response for the service is for critical care – not sending an ambulance to see if you need an ambulance.

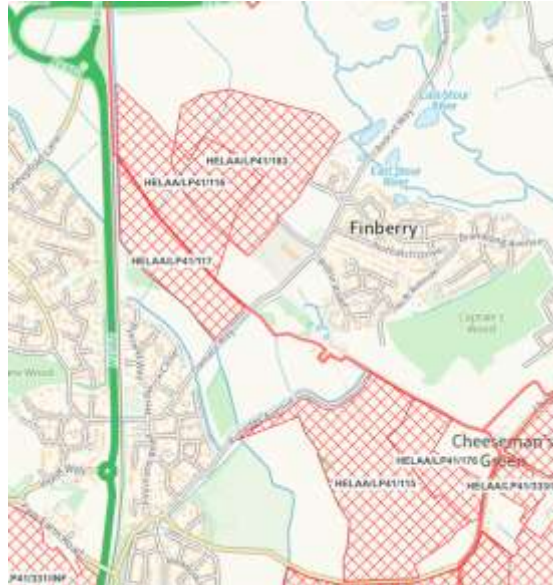


The Darzi report talked about new technology, and this was covered in the meeting. A big theme is ensuring SECAM knows who callers have had previous contact with. A digital strategy is being published later in the year.

ASHFORD LOCAL PLAN TO 2042

The emerging local plan has considered sites within the town centre which includes Finberry. The initial consultation closed on 16th September. One option is extensions to Finberry to the east of Cheesemans Green Lane, the Church Commissioners For England (CCE) has put forward all of their land for development as far and including some in Aldington. This would be a new town of approx. 7,000 new homes and would include much of lower Mersham and Conscience Farm.

A modest extension to Finberry involving an extension towards the Hastings railway / Bridgefield north of the school and on land between Rutledge Ave (Southern Link Road Section) and Cheesemans Green Lane is reasonable. This is shown on the map below.



The sites include HELAA/LP41/183, 116, 117, 115 & 176. Although difficult to assess with any accuracy due to uncertainty over the proposed density, it would be a rough doubling of the size of Finberry. It would probably take until 2042 to complete given consent for Finberry was granted in 2002 for 1,250 homes since when 777 have been built. The key would be ensuring the developer is fully signed up to delivering the required non-housing infrastructure, so the development is mixed rather than mono-housing.

The quantity of homes requested by the CCE in sites such as 175 & 176 east of Cheesemans Green Lane is far more than what is supported by the local plan or is sustainable by the site infrastructure in the area. It is - the size of Chilmington Green. It would be too much responsibility on CCE to deliver such a large proportion of Ashford's new housing need – their track record on delivery of numbers and supporting infrastructure is poor and may leave Ashford at the risk of government sanctions if CCE do not deliver.

COUNCILS UNDER NEW GOVERNMENT POLICY

The key point is that not much has changed:

- Councils are still operating under significant local pressure – only 4% of council leaders are confident of the long-term sustainability of council finances. There is no news (at the time of writing) about a long-term financial settlement but there is a shift in the “mood music”.
- Long term pressure for Adult Social Care (an aging population with a backdrop of reducing life expectancy in Kent due to less healthy lifestyles); homelessness and children services (Special Educational

Needs – including transport – and Educational Health Needs Plan Assessments in particular).

- Kent has additional pressures from unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- The Local Government Information Unit has requested a return to finance on a “needs assessment”. One individual can cost £1m in social care support that falls by chance on one Council rather than another. £500k of costs can arise if 6 new unaccompanied children asylum seekers arrive. The old government had a “fair funding” review that fizzled out in 2019 – local councils do not know how much money they need due to the demand led nature of its activities.
- There is talk about a “National Care System”. Note Gordon Brown has said “we need to empower local government” if only he had ever been in a position to implement that. The Theresa May policy of capping care costs at £86k (due to be implemented in 2025) was dropped at the end of July by the new government, which would have led to a system (however imperfect) of protecting inheritance.
- The new government policies depend on growth but the main leavers they have are housebuilding and regional devolution – although the governments not that clear of what this means on council structure (the old government believed in the Manchester Mayoral model). The elected leader model has been abandoned in Norfolk & Suffolk by the new government as there was no buy in by districts. The new government are looking for proposals and their default is the new government are supporting mayors. The risk is that if Kent & Medway does not decide what it is looking for which means something will be imposed. Kent & Medway is the desired outcome for devolution due to its peninsular area and the fact it is conterminous with Kent Police, Kent Fire & Rescue and the NHS. It is an area of nearly 2m people and is important strategically for the UK including its access to the short straights.

A NEW DEAL FOR WORKING PEOPLE: MAKE WORK PAY

Summary of the changes are below which will affect council workforce. A fair pay agreement is proposed for the adult social care sector which will affect wage and pension costs.

Employment Rights	Pay & Tax	DE&I Reporting	Trade Unions	Enforcement	Immigration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New day 1 rights: unfair dismissal protection, parental leave, statutory sick pay, flexible working • Reform of “fire and rehire” practices • Strengthen redundancy rights and protections including for pregnant women • Right to bereavement leave for all • Strengthened TUPE protections • More clarity on working hours for zero hours workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Minimum Wage: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensuring NMW rates/calculations consider cost of living - Removing age related bands so all adults are entitled to the same NMW rate • No increases to employee National Insurance • Removing lower earnings limit for Statutory Sick Pay 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Race Equality Act introducing equal pay for ethnic minority workers; full right to equal pay for disabled workers • Restrictions on outsourcing to avoid equal pay • Mandatory ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting • Mandatory action plans to reduce pay gaps • Menopause Action Plans • Increased protection in relation to sexual harassment at work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fair Pay Agreement for the adult social care sector • Plan to extend trade union rights to the self-employed • Repealing Conservative legislation re: minimum service levels • New continuing duty on employers to inform employees of their right to join a union • Providing representation to trade unions in their new single enforcement body 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of a Fair Work Agency • Anti-avoidance policies re: exploitative zero-hour contracts • Regulatory and enforcement unit for equal pay • Increasing time limits for employee claims • Business responsibility for compliance across the labour supply chain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No tolerance for employers/agencies who abuse the visa system • Reform of points-based immigration system • Strengthened Migration Advisory Committee

CHANGES TO NATIONAL PLANNING POLICY FRAMEWORK (NPPF)

The consultation on the new government’s changes to the NPPF closed on 24th September. I submitted the following concerns.

- Proposed changes to NPPF could allow significant portions of green belt land to be developed for housing. The new guidelines suggest that councils lacking sufficient brownfield sites may be compelled to build on untouched green belt areas. Had the changes just covered car parks and petrol stations, it would be supported, but I disagree with the proposed grey belt definition and oppose any weakening of green belt policy.
- There is concern over the removal of the previous requirement for at least 10% of new homes to be affordable, raising concerns that developers may exploit this vagueness. The previous NPPF had a target including “First Home ownership” which is being removed. Ashford has always struggled to get developers to deliver affordable home due to cited viability issues.
- I support for the proposed change to ‘mix of tenures’ and removing a requirement for affordable home **ownership** (they could be rented which is fine). I support the introduction of social rent targets.
- LPA should be required to make a local needs assessment to support the demand for local needs housing.
- I support for considering the design of new developments and requesting new homes to be high quality.
- I support the proposal to give weight to renewable energy projects but expressed concerns about the impact this may have on the environment and farmland. The main issue is that these developments are constrained by access to the National Grid rather than suitable land use, areas get designated for development with wind and solar by access to the grid without reference to NPPF without reference to food security.
- I expressed concerns about the deferral of trigger points to deliver infrastructure under s278 / s106. This is proving a challenge to Local

Authorities and there needs to be more support for LPAs in defending what is agreed at grant of consent.

- Transport assessments are permitted to consider future changes in technology; it is wrong and the impact of a development on the area's transport needs to be considered – we are a car driving community with a distributed economy in Kent with a series of small towns.
- I support the drive for New Towns with the strategic planning that is required by this policy. This is because development becomes more visible.

FLY TIPPING

I have reported this fly tipping on the footpath between Queen Street and Elwick Square (ref 21603463).



ACTIVE TRAVEL AND PLANNING

I attended a briefing on 25th September. The idea was to understand how better cycling and walking opportunities can be delivered.

- The old system of “predict and provide” (estimate how many trips will be required by a new development and deliver the infrastructure) is no longer used in planning. Now we “decide and deliver” (decide how you want people to move – modal shifts – and create the opportunities for them to do that).
- A reduction in the number of vehicle movements can be achieved if we deliver high quality street environments – bringing what people need closer to where they live through land use planning.

- A safe route was discussed for visual impaired which involves a route marked with different bricks which must be kept free of A Frames and other street clutter.
- There is a business case from improved public realm – pedestrians spend more per trip.
- Building in the fringes of developed areas was hoped to encourage walking to local facilities but has prevented building in open countryside (which could be walked or cycled to and from) and created density in villages.

KALC

KALC met on 25th September. PC Dan Brown has now joined the Ashford Community Safety Unit (CSU) - Beat Team. He previously worked in Ashford so knows the area well. Sgt Jason Bushell has recently joined the Neighbourhood Task Force, also within the CSU; he is a very experienced operational leader and has some great ideas of how he would like to tackle local policing issues utilising his team. A reduction of anti-social riding has been achieved. Kent Police are planning extra staffing over the school holidays covering Halloween and the Christmas period. They will be holding community engagement events with some being specifically related to the protection of Women and Girls from Violence. Once they have confirmed dates, they will be advertising them to the public and partners.

MAKING SPACE FOR NATURE

I attended a discussion to map potential areas that provide space and access to nature on 26th September in East Malling. KCC has been appointed as the “accountable body” to create spaces which will carry a legally binding commitment. These areas are intended to be areas of irreversible biodiversity gain which will be protected in planning. Essentially the landowners will be told what they can and cannot do with the land. The target date for the process is March 2025; this process and timetable was set up by the old government and although the new government has not said what it will do, there is no reason to suppose things will change.

The areas I proposed included the field east of the IBF in Sevington and the east Stour valley through Mersham between Sevington and Aldington. These sites were suggested due to accessibility – access to nature has proven benefits to mental health and wellbeing, species protection – the barn owls in the Sevington barn owl boxes were ringed in Aldington Frith so the river corridor is a proven wildlife corridor, and it may complicate the assessment of the Aldington Solar project by NCIP, and the “call for sites” land proposed for a Finberry extension.

It is fair to point out that landowners will be able to request their land is removed from the process but much of the land in lower Mersham is owned by the Church Commissioners for England and one questions whether they would do such a thing.....

ABC CABINET

Several interesting issues arose at the meeting on 26th September.

- Parking activity in town has been reduced along with footfall. A series of programmes around play facilities and feature lighting are being developed with some positive views anticipated on new openings before Christmas. Specifically, the poor state of 8/9 Bank St was discussed.
- UK Shared Prosperity Fund provides training for those not in employment, education or training. The funding resulted from a scheme originated by the last government and ends in March 2025. There is no news on the scheme being continued by the new government.
- ABC has agreed with government to allocate its “levelling up” spending of £13.1m to ground and site preparation work on the listed heritage (train shed) buildings. This work will be completed by March 2025. There are challenges in the ongoing delivery of the educational spaces which were linked to the on-site studios. In a reply to my question, it was reported by the Leader as “too early” to say that the studio project will not now progress although an operator has still not been identified. However, we were reminded the site has a pre-existing application for 1,100 new homes so the project to redevelop the brownfield site will continue without the studio element; the housing allocation of which is hoped to be truly 40% affordable. I have concerns over flatted developments such as this due to lack of access to green spaces – the pandemic showed how important this was for out mental health and wellbeing.
- Brompton are still planning to relocate from their current site in 2028, and they are still keen on moving to Ashford.
- Planning enforcement needs to be provided more resources.
- A joint venture is being set up with Canterbury to broker credits for unblocking the nutrient neutrality issue which is holding up planning consent. A bid to cover running costs will be submitted to KCC who has been allocated with funding. Projects creating credits for nutrient reduction include wetlands, taking land out of agricultural use, water saving initiatives and improving sewage treatment.
- The market project in the town centre was allocated funding of £33k to purchase 30 additional gazebos and promotion. Work around potential permanent pitches will last beyond March 2025, due to the requirement for planning and licensing changes so a further report will be brought back in the Spring. The market will support the sale of local produce and local traders, ensuring it enhances the sense of local community. The market expansion would include Middle Row parking bays, the taxi

rank area (High Street between bandstand and Lower High Street) and Bank Street parking bays.



WARREN RETAIL PARK

Chris Morley and I met with representatives of the landowner (BNP Paribas) on site on 27th September. They are working on designs which will improve disabled and wheeled access to the three stores east of the petrol station. This will either be a “zig zag” path near the steps or a new path south of the access road.



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