

KCC Annual Report Dover West Ward

The past year has seen testing times for Kent with financial constraints being dictated by the ever increasing costs of Adult Social Care and Special Educational Needs eating into more and more of Kents budget.

KCC Highways has carried out many road resurfacing and pothole filling on the ward over the last year, for which we can be all extremely grateful, to make the majority of the road surfaces hazard free and fortunately due to another snow free Winter that has not eaten into their £3 million budget to cover the whole of Kent Highways, for the use of much gritting and the resultant damage caused to the road surfaces due to continual periods of snow, however, gritters were still used over the Winter months on major roads to combat the effects of ice.

KCC, being the gateway to and from Europe, has been involved in talks with our neighbouring Counties in Holland, Flanders, Belgium and Haut de France regarding Brexit and freight movements via the rail and sea port in Kent.

I was selected to be one of the Members to represent Kent in many discussions on how best to maintain a fairly free movement of freight traffic between the Continent and our County following Brexit.

At one particular meeting in Arras, Haut de France, where I represented KCC, one of the main concerns identified by European freight hauliers, was knowing and understanding what documentation would be now required for entry into Britain, depending upon the type of goods their vehicles were carrying.

In that four-nation meeting I was able to submit a proposal for identifying the requisite documentation required depending upon the type of goods transported which was accepted by all the Continental neighbours.

There have been several meeting throughout the year with a view to ameliorating similar issues. Clearly, such proposals have to be submitted via Central Government and the diplomatic department too, to ensure toes are not being stepped on.

For the past few years I have been part of a small group involved in an European Interreg Committee called the Les Deux Mers, funded by the EU, concerning improving the air quality in our coastal towns due to heavy fuels used by cross channel ferries and passing shipping, travelling to the North Sea or the Atlantic Ocean via the Channel. The results of such marine traffic renders areas, for example, around Walmer Castle with an inferior air quality compared to the area of Trafalgar Square, central London.

Following attending several meetings at Wimille, France the committee has achieved coercing cross Channel ferry companies to improve the quality of fuel used on their ferries to improve air quality in the Dover Deal area and the Calais, Dunkerque, Ostend port, but we continue to work with our Continental neighbours to clean up the air pollution by tanker and marine container cargo ships.

I chair the International Health Alliance which researches and exchanges information on improving medical practice from around the world, to achieve improved outcomes for the many enduring debilitating illnesses or diseases, both physical and mental.

Last year I attended Ghent, Belgium, where KCC won an award for our radical innovative achievements in supporting those suffering from Dementia. This was a well deserved award for both KCC Public Health and the local NHS at Maidstone which supports the International Health Alliance. KCC also won an award for its work in improving diabetes outcomes.

I sit on committees with the NHS Kent and Canterbury Cancer Back up, the Macmillan Cancer Support and the Citizen's Advice Bureau department which assists those who have encountered financial hardships as a result of being diagnosed with a terminal cancer.

Through being a committee member for all three volunteer charity groups, I realised that more efficiency of service to the patient could be achieved by getting these groups to start liaising with each other, for currently they operate in silos.

I am currently working with Macmillan Cancer Support and the Citizen Advice cancer support at Canterbury and Ashford to find ways that they can work in unison without either charity risking losing any of its funding status.

It is a trying, delicate negotiation, but if I am able to assure and overcome the reticence and concerns of either group's managerial hierarchy that this should not adversely affect their funding or status in anyway, then I believe both groups will have a vital joint rôle to play in order to avoid duplication of provisions, for the many terminally ill patients by supporting them alleviating many of their worries, some financial for their family, that those patients may have in their final days.

KCC financially assists many start up companies and funds established companies that require a cash injection to expand their business. This money is loaned to companies over a set number of years at either a zero or very low interest rate which is more competitive than banks or other financial loan institutions.

One may question if KCC is having testing times financially, then how come it can afford to loan money to start up companies often at interest free rates. This is Central Government money loaned to the County.

The reason, if a company is assisted to start up, it will eventually pay business rates, that money is paid back into the local authority's coffers to support local authority expenditure on services. Business rates help keep domestic rates low. The more money a local authority receives from business rates, the more investment it can make in their area to improve the area.

Most business will, over time, grow and consequently will need to recruit more staff. That is reducing the unemployment numbers. The more people in employment the more purchasing power those people have the more that contributes towards a growing and thriving economy.

As a KCC Councillor I chair the Business Debt Recovery board and sit on the Kent and Medway Business Advisory Board made up of committee members with a good business back ground and proven track record.

Over the past year I have ensured that KCC has recovered substantial amounts of money and supported ailing businesses by various methods such as a simple restructuring of repayments. KCC, with the support from such experienced board members, has prevented many companies from folding by working with the companies to identify issues, advise and support them to return to a profitable venture.

With the COVID-19 pandemic the world as we know it will return to normal, gradually in some areas, but I believe in other areas, such as office blocks, these may become part of our economic history along with mass commuting as many people are encouraged and acclimatise to being able to work from home.

With a few County Councils around England on the verge of filing for bankruptcy I feel confident Kent County Council will not follow in their wake having a good track record for managing its budget in previous recessions, but in the short term things will become very tight, therefore I would advise some schemes submitted to KCC by parishes may be parked until the nations financial health improves before being reconsidered, to allow for monies to be concentrated on the absolute essentials.

If any parish requests that I support a scheme where from my experience in my rôle I know it will be turned down by KCC or DDC due to particular reasons beyond their control such as regulation or legislation, or simply inordinately too expensive for the current budget etc, then I will be pragmatic and state the case at the time, for I find this "can do attitude" I hear some new parish councillors expect from their County or District Councillor quite disingenuous, when from experience a seasoned County or District Councillor will know whether a project is achievable or not and will often advise a parish council to not proceed with a project to save the parish council wasting time and money from their precept paying for effectively a feasibility study which will arrive at the same conclusion.

This concludes my annual report covering the period April 2019 to March 2020.

Geoffrey Lymer
Kent County Councillor
Dover West Ward