

Annual Report to Parish Councils 2025

Michael Hill, OBE, Local Member for Tenterden Division, Kent County Council

- Good evening and thank you for inviting me again to your annual meeting.
- When I spoke to you a year ago I forecast a turbulent year ahead. Well that certainly proved true. The international scene has been particularly chaotic with escalating violence in Ukraine and the Middle East and a seismic shift in American politics following the Presidential election. At home we had a general election which saw the first change in the governing party for 14 years. Little progress has been made in stemming the flood of small boat crossings landing on the Kent coast and our economy seems to be stubbornly flatlining despite all the efforts to stimulate growth.
- For the County Council our financial position continues to cause concern. We set our budget for the next financial year on 13 February, and it proved to be a challenging exercise. We have had great difficulty containing costs this year and will have an overspend at the end of the financial year. Next year we will still be facing the ever-increasing demand pressures of Adult Social Care now exacerbated by the rises in minimum wage and Employers National Insurance contributions. In order to balance the books, we have had to make significant savings which will inevitably have an effect on service delivery and our discretionary activity. We have also had to raise Council Tax by the maximum allowed of 5%. It is a pretty bleak picture, and we are not alone. 7 Councils have effectively become bankrupt, and it has been reported that at least half of all Councils will be in financial difficulty in the next few years. We expect to see the issue of funding for local government rise up the political agenda as the effects of under investment in this sector become ever more apparent.
- The other major issues which have come to the fore in the last few months are devolution and the reform of local government. These are closely linked topics which together represent the biggest change in local government for 50 years. For devolution, the government wishes to establish new strategic authorities in every area of England to be led by elected executive Mayors. These strategic authorities will be given additional funds to carry out a range of devolved powers and strategic responsibilities. A number of these Mayoral authorities are already in place.
- Alongside devolution the government wishes to reform local government to end the two-tier system and replace it with unitary councils each with a population greater than 500k. These unitaries will deliver the full range of public services currently provided by County and District Councils. So we will end up with an executive Mayor for the whole of Kent and Medway and the County Council would go, the District Councils would go and Medway Council would go – all replaced by a small number of Unitary Councils, perhaps 3 or possibly 4.

- This is a flagship government policy, and they are determined to make it happen. The first tranche of Mayoral elections is scheduled for May next year. Kent is not in that first cohort though all our neighbours are. This is a big disappointment for all of us and we have yet to hear a rational explanation of why Kent has been excluded. The best guess on the Kent process is for elections in May 28. The hope is that new arrangements will be more efficient and will receive better support from Central government. In the short term it is going to be very disruptive and require a great deal of work.
- Roads - Coming closer to home I am well aware of the poor condition of our road network, This is a result of years of underinvestment by successive governments in the road network. It is a national issue needing significant funding to get rid of the backlog. However, we will shortly be starting a pothole blitz to which we have committed £14m so I hope you will soon be seeing some significant improvement.
- UASC - We have established 7 reception centres for UASC in order to meet our legal obligations. These are coping well with the current arrivals, but we await the summer weather with some trepidation. Alongside this work we continue to press government for an equitable dispersal scheme to reduce the burden on Kent.
- Election - There will be elections for the County Council on 1st May. My position is that I will have completed 24 years on the Council including 18 years on the Cabinet. I think enough is enough and I am not standing again. I have found my time on the Council very rewarding. I really enjoyed my portfolio responsibilities for the Community Services which do so much to improve the quality of life of our residents but also the interaction with residents in my constituency helping them navigate the complexities of KCC bureaucracy.
- And finally, it has been an enormous privilege to represent this beautiful part of the country on the County Council. Thank you for all your support and my very best wishes for the future.

Michael Hill

Local Member for Tenterden

Kent County Council