

Kent County Councillor Roger Gough's Report to Horton Kirby and South Darent  
Annual Parish Meeting, 14 May 2018

Things have changed a little since last year. Because of boundary changes that came into effect at the County Council elections of May last year, Horton Kirby and South Darent is now part (at the northern end) of the new County Council Division of Sevenoaks North and Darent Valley. This is a large, rural and banana-shaped Division – the second biggest in the County by electors per County Councillor – which runs from Swanley Village to Seal Chart, and it is my privilege to represent it.

I also serve as Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Education, overseeing the Council's work with schools, Early Years, children's social services, youth services and much else.

Highways issues always make up much of my work as a local Member, and that has as always been the case in this Parish over the last year. With money ever tighter – in particular, with social services making ever greater demands on the budget and so putting pressure on areas such as Highways – it is fair to say that the approach taken is inevitably cautious and more restrictive (for example, tighter adherence to Department of Transport guidance) than was the case in the past. This certainly applies in areas such as yellow lines and interactive signs; projects that I would have had supported in previous years are much tougher now. But we try to press on.

During this year we installed bollards outside Millen Court to tackle thoughtless and anti-social parking there, notably when there are big events going on in Westminster Field; they were installed in November.

There have long been concerns about speeds on the A225, and I am pleased to say that, linked to planned reductions in the speed limit on parts of the A20, we are looking to bring down the speed limit to 50mph all the way along the A225 from the edge of Farningham to Sutton at Hone.

We have tried to make progress on the difficult junction of Bull Hill and Horton Road, though there is currently a very sharp difference of view between the Highways Engineer and the Parish Council on the way forward.

The recent severe weather was of course a big test for Kent Highways. Their focus was on keeping primary routes open; these are, as the name implies, quite major roads for which the County Council

is responsible, such as the A225. Secondary routes will often get attention too, but on this occasion the pressures of continuous cold and recurring snowfalls on the primaries meant that efforts were focused on them. Clearly this raises problems for people living on more peripheral roads, and it is something that I will always seek to help through salt bins, deployment of hand salting crews and the like – but there is little scope for deflecting Kent Highways from their core mission when conditions are very severe.

The heavy snowfall has, of course, also worsened the pothole position. Each year, in the spring, KCC puts together various funding sources for the 'Find and Fix' campaign, also known as the pothole blitz. In the last financial year, some £5.2 million was committed, and we covered the equivalent of 18 Wembley pitches, or 117,000 square metres. However, in January we were already seeing 4,000 pothole enquiries – the highest level since the floods of January 2014 – and that was before the Beast from the East. Recently we have been running at some 1,400 notifications per week. The Leader of the County Council, Paul Carter, announced in our February budget debate, that a further £2 million is being released, with more likely to follow.

Our current pothole budget for 2018-19 comes to £7.5 million. Since 1 March, we have filled in more than 16,600 potholes, some 1,821 of them in Sevenoaks District, and carried out 25,000 square metres of patching (for multiple potholes), almost 4,000 square metres of that in Sevenoaks.

Less directly under the control of Highways, parents of students at the Dartford Grammar Schools have been raising concerns about the operation of the Arriva 414 bus. KCC's leverage here is limited, since this is a commercial, not a subsidised or commissioned route; however, given our importance to Arriva, we are always able and willing to take up such issues (for example, during the last year I took up concerns on the implications of timetable changes on this route for Southdowns). Our head of Public Transport, Phil Lightowler, is at my request taking this up at a senior level within Arriva.

With regard to Education, the County Council faces growing pressures on secondary school places as the increased number of children in primary school moves into the secondary phase. On National Offer Day last month, we were able to meet some 80% of families first preferences, and over 95% of families secured one of their preferences – broadly in line with last year, in spite of a significantly larger cohort. Nonetheless, numbers are forecast to continue to grow and so we are looking to school expansions such as Trinity in Sevenoaks and secondary schools in Wilmington.

Earlier this month we saw National Offer Day for Reception Year in our primary schools. We have expanded primary schools – probably the closest to the Parish was Hextable – significantly in recent years to meet rising numbers, and as a consequence of that we have this year been able to offer almost 90% of families their first choice of school. Almost 98% have been offered one of their preferences, and the number of those ‘allocated’ a place – in other words, who have been offered a school that was not one of their choices – is at a record low. One side effect, however, is that on offer day there were significant surplus places at the village school.

The County Council has recently set its budget. Over recent years, with government grants declining and with ever-growing pressures on social services budgets, both for children and for older and vulnerable adults, we have had to realise savings by now of the order of £600 million. In the budget, we have raised council tax by 5%. This is clearly something that we undertook very reluctantly, but the recent example of what has happened in Northamptonshire makes it very clear what the financial risks are now facing local authorities and County Councils in particular.