

Cabinet Member Update – January

David Wimble

Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Special Projects

January marks the conclusion of my first full month in post as Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Special Projects. It has been a demanding but highly productive start to a portfolio that is both broader and more outward-facing than my previous environmental role.

As outlined when the portfolio was agreed last year, this role is focused on delivery, partnership working and economic growth. Combined with my wider involvement in national Reform policy development, it has already involved a significant level of engagement across Whitehall, Westminster, local government and industry.

Earlier this month, Parliament hosted a dedicated “Nuclear Week” at the Palace of Westminster, spanning three days across both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Kent County Council was represented throughout. The programme included presentations and discussions with more than eight nuclear sector organisations, including Rolls-Royce.

During the week, I held direct conversations with the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority and Baroness Bloomfield regarding the potential for a new Nuclear Decommissioning Centre of Excellence at Dungeness. These initial discussions have been positive and are now leading to further meetings.

Work to explore the long-term future of nuclear energy at Dungeness is continuing, with a significant and unique development due to take place shortly. Following discussions at a recent “Meet the MPs” session at County Hall, I spoke with our local MP, Tony Vaughan, and it became clear that we share a common vision for the future of nuclear at Dungeness. As a result, we have jointly agreed to establish a **non-political Nuclear Task Force**, bringing together key stakeholders. The Leader of Folkestone & Hythe District Council, Cllr Jim Martin, has been invited to participate, and the task force will hold its first meeting this week at Westminster.

In parallel, I am now representing Kent County Council within four separate nuclear working groups, ensuring Kent’s interests are fully represented. On a personal note, this work feels like a full-circle moment, having started my own working career at Dungeness following an instrumentation apprenticeship with the former CEGB. I have also attended meetings of the Dungeness Stakeholders Group as part of this ongoing engagement.

Beyond energy, I spoke at the Sustainable Food and Farming Conference held at the Islington Meeting Rooms, focusing on opportunities to strengthen sustainable farming in Kent. During the event, I had a valuable discussion with Dame Angela Eagle on creating more efficient “farm-to-plate” delivery routes, linking Kent producers directly with consumers while improving food waste reuse. This directly led to further lobbying work with Kent MPs around a potential **£20 million funding bid** in partnership with the Kent and Medway Economic Partnership.

I have been encouraged by the level of constructive cross-party working at Westminster and would welcome seeing more of this collaborative approach reflected at district level.

My final Westminster visit of the month was for a Coastal Communities and Infrastructure meeting hosted by Polly Billington MP. Discussions focused on improving access to employment, where I highlighted the significant impact of poor rural transport provision,

particularly in communities such as Lydd-on-Sea and Dungeness. We also explored the reintroduction of regional job fairs and improved employment signposting.

At County Hall, I have continued work on the council's **emerging Energy Policy**, which will replace the outdated 2014 document. This policy has already been referenced during a recent planning application in Sevenoaks and contributed to councillors having clear policy grounds to refuse a proposed 100-acre solar development, specifically due to the absence of grid connection infrastructure. The policy is scheduled to be considered by Cabinet and Full Council by March.

Officers have also begun work on my proposals formerly known as *Brand Kent*, now developed under the working title **Growth in Kent**. This programme aims to drive inward investment following changes to Locate in Kent and Visit Kent. A dedicated leadership team of six full-time staff is now in place, with a clear direction covering employment, investment, tourism and place-making. I will provide a fuller update on this work in my next report.

I have continued to press for the expansion of **Reuse Centres** across the county, building on the successful opening of the New Romney Household Waste Recycling Centre facility last summer. Further sites are expected to come online during the spring.

This month also saw Cabinet take the **Kent County Council budget** to Full Council. For the first time in over a decade, the authority has been able to maintain frontline services while significantly improving efficiency. Kent County Council has delivered a **council tax increase of under 4%**, making it **the only council in the South East not to apply the full permitted increase**.

Over the past eight months, the council has repaid a **£50 million loan** and delivered **more than £32 million in savings**, with further efficiencies already identified. This has been achieved without compulsory redundancies, without closing libraries or household waste recycling centres, and while continuing to protect essential services for residents.

Finally, Kent County Council hosted a **sold-out procurement conference** at the Kent County Showground, attended by more than 500 delegates. Officers outlined how the removal of the former Climate Emergency statement has simplified procurement processes, making it easier for small and medium-sized Kent businesses to compete for contracts without excessive compliance barriers. Since these changes were introduced, **17 contracts have already been awarded to Kent-based companies**, supporting hundreds of local jobs.

This outcome reflects exactly what I stood for at the election: **putting Kent residents, Kent businesses and Kent jobs first**.