

Kent County Councillor Report

New Year Update

David Wimble, Romney Marsh

As many of you will already know, November was a slightly unusual month for me. I was away for several weeks after getting married and enjoying a much-needed honeymoon. I returned to work in mid-December and, like many people, found that the run-up to Christmas was anything but quiet. In fact, it proved to be one of the busiest periods I have experienced since being elected.

Before I went away, I was asked to consider taking on a number of special projects at county level. I accepted this additional responsibility on my return and it has led to a significant change in my role within the administration.

Until recently, I served as Cabinet Member for the Environment at Kent County Council. I have retained responsibility for some elements of that brief, particularly the county's waste and recycling contracts, but I now head up the Economic Development portfolio.

This also includes a new "Special Projects" remit.

For me, this is very much a dream position. It allows me to work across portfolios and get directly involved in some of the biggest strategic issues facing Kent, particularly around energy, infrastructure, and economic growth.

A new energy strategy for Kent
One of the first major pieces of work I returned to – and which occupied much of my Christmas period – has been Kent's new Energy Strategy. This is a substantial and important document, which I am taking to informal Cabinet on 12 January.

The strategy covers new nuclear, onshore and offshore wind, and the future direction of solar energy across the county. It brings together months of work, including my attendance at several Westminster-based forums on both solar and nuclear over the past eight months.

When I stood for election, Reform UK was the only party with a clear and unambiguous stance against large-scale industrial solar on productive farmland.

Our view has always been that solar should be prioritised on rooftops and brownfield land, not across thousands of acres of Kent countryside.

That principle is now being embedded in policy. The new framework sets out our strong desire to see new nuclear power return to Kent, with Dungeness very much at the heart of that ambition.

Alongside the potential for new nuclear generation, the strategy also opens the door for nuclear decommissioning organisations to make greater use of the two existing Dungeness stations, both of which are already in stages of decommissioning.

The aim is to establish Dungeness as a centre of excellence for nuclear decommissioning, training and skills. We are actively exploring several nuclear options and are welcoming partners who are keen to develop the site, including engagement with Rolls-Royce and others involved in next-generation nuclear technologies.

The policy is also clear that Kent County Council has strong objections to large-scale solar farms and associated battery energy storage systems across the county.

At the same time, we do support rooftop solar and business-led solar schemes where the benefits flow directly to local businesses rather than large multinational investment funds.

As part of this, we will be looking at grants and subsidies to encourage more take-up of solar on commercial and industrial buildings.

Environmental Transport Tax on foreign lorries Vans and Cars is another major special project now under way relates to Kent's role as the UK's main gateway to Europe.

Working with partners around the Port of Dover and the Channel Tunnel, we are developing proposals for an environmental charging system based on the Swiss model. This would apply to foreign lorries, trucks, vans and cars entering the UK through Kent.

It is a complex piece of work involving multiple agencies and detailed technical and legal reports, and it could take up to two years to implement fully. However, that journey has now begun.

If introduced, the scheme could generate in excess of £100 million per year for Kent County Council.

Crucially, that income would be ring-fenced for highways and environmental projects, including drainage and gully clearance, road maintenance and large-scale tree planting.

Brand Kent and economic growth
The third major policy area I am leading on is Brand Kent – a purely economic, growth-focused piece of work designed to attract inward investment and raise Kent's profile nationally and internationally.

Brand Kent is about presenting a clear, confident message that Kent is a great place to live, visit, work and do business and very much open to business!

It will support the rural economy, the coastal economy, tourism, and the attraction of national and international businesses to locate here.

An initial £400,000 start up fund has been allocated to this work, with Medway Council contributing a further £40,000.

Together, we are looking at a range of incentives to grow the economy, including expanding the No Use Empty scheme to bring more vacant buildings back into use as start-up business space.

We are also working with district and borough councils across Kent on ways to incentivise new businesses, including streamlined planning processes, coalition working, and fast-tracked support through to initial rate relief. This would then be tapered over time, giving new businesses the breathing space they need to establish themselves, grow and create jobs.

Setting the budget and looking ahead
Finally, Cabinet has now completed its draft budget.

No one wants to increase council tax, but the reality is stark. This administration

inherited a **£732 million deficit, alongside daily loan interest of over £8000!**

Reform is not in the business of cutting services or making staff redundant. Instead, we have focused relentlessly on efficiency and better use of public money.

In just eight months, we have identified more than £82 million in savings while retaining every top-tier service.

The draft budget also includes a long-overdue 5% uplift for Kent Fire and Rescue Service, which has not seen a meaningful increase for over five years and is in urgent need of upgraded equipment.

Had we chosen not to increase council tax at all, the only alternatives would have been to shut libraries and household waste centres and make large-scale redundancies – measures that might have delivered short-term savings, but would have stored up far greater costs in the future, rather like selling the family silver to pay this month's mortgage and then asking what happens when there is nothing left to sell.

To put matters in context, Kent County Council is the only council in London and the South East proposing a 3.99% increase. Other authorities, including Labour-run Medway, are charging the full 5%, cutting services and borrowing tens of millions of pounds under exceptional financial support arrangements.

KCC has an annual budget of more than £2 billion per year and is the largest local authority economy in the UK.

We are paying down historic debt that would otherwise burden future generations, while rebuilding reserves that

were heavily depleted by the previous administration.

Looking ahead, 2026 promises to be a challenging but exciting year.

I am thoroughly enjoying the responsibility and the trust placed in me by the Leader of the Council, and I am working closely with Reform UK colleagues, both locally and in Westminster, to ensure Kent gets the attention and investment it deserves.

I continue to visit town and parish council meetings and look forward to seeing many of you at my monthly surgeries. I am as always available in an emergency and can be contacted via County hall where you are always welcome to meet me or alternatively happy to meet at a local location.

Finally I have attached a link to my last environmental Newsletter as cabinet member. Its worth the read as you can find out about the 6500 trees we are planting along with our Plan Bee, Plan Tree and Plan Sea

Happy New Year

David Wimple

Cabinet member for Special projects and the environmental Development.

Copy and paste this link for my full newsletter

<https://sway.cloud.microsoft/pF82cgfhWYcon15W?ref=email>