

Report from Susan Carey

2022 has been a tumultuous year – for the world; for our country, which lost its longest-reigning monarch and saw three Prime Ministers hold office; and also for all of us here in Kent.

In addition to the effects of the invasion of Ukraine, we have seen record arrivals from small boat crossings of the Channel to our shores; a record-breaking heat wave and failures of water supply on the Isle of Sheppey in the summer (and subsequent water supply disruptions in many parts of Kent in the run up to Christmas); massive pressures on our bus network, at their most intense over the summer but which have not gone away; and frequent reminders of how quickly a range of issues at the Channel border can escalate into a crisis which, even when Operation Brock is in place, can spill over into disruption on our county's road network.

Amid all these pressures and crises, and in the vital day to day delivery of services, our staff at KCC have been there to support residents and communities with dedication and commitment.

The return of war to Europe through Putin's invasion of Ukraine has had a most dramatic effect. People in Kent have responded to this in an extraordinary way; we remain the part of the country which hosts the largest number of Ukrainian guests under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. KCC and our partners have worked to support this, most recently by introducing – ahead of many councils and of any national policy – higher rates of support for hosts. I hope that this move will not only reassure current hosts in these financially challenging times, but also encourage more people in the county to sign up to the scheme. More Ukrainian guests are still arriving every day, and more homes are desperately needed.

The economic havoc unleashed by the invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated already serious pressures on the cost of living. With funding from government, we have sought through our Helping Hands and Financial Hardship programmes to provide help to those most in need, through holiday Free School Meal programmes, support with energy and water bills, financial help and advice and much more. We continue to work with our public sector partners and with the voluntary and community sector to do everything we can to help those most in need – once more building on the spirit and actions of Kent Together that were brought forward during the pandemic. We will maintain this support into 2023.

Economic disruption from the aftermath of the pandemic and from the Ukraine war, the highest inflation in 40 years and severe labour shortages have had a massive impact on the council's services and finances. This will remain a huge challenge for us in 2023.

In the short term, the government's Autumn Statement was a real help. It was particularly welcome to see local government, and social care in particular, being given higher priority. But what we face in local government – and this was the point of the letter that the Leader of Hampshire County Council, Rob Humby, and I wrote to ministers in October – is the lasting crisis of an unsustainable model.

To meet this challenge, and to do more than just struggle to get through the next crisis, we need to do three things.

The first is to put our finances on a sustainable course. That will mean that we still have to take some very difficult decisions, with the focus always on providing our services in the most cost-effective way we can.

The second is to work in ever closer partnership, above all with the NHS. Like areas across the country, we are developing an Integrated Care System for Kent and Medway, working together to make the best use of our resources to tackle the pressures that we face over this winter and beyond and ultimately improve the lives of our residents. What we have done so far – under the phrase

“Together, We Can” – is a good start, and I believe it is one of the most hopeful developments of 2022 but we must take it much further in 2023.

Finally, we must ensure that the County Council is the strong organisation that people in Kent need it to be. Not just to manage the unprecedented risks and pressures that we now face, and not just to deliver our core statutory services, above all to vulnerable people – vital though that is. We must also address the really big challenges that we face as a county: organising and providing public services in times of growing need but with limited resources; addressing the pressures we face as a frontline, border county; securing the infrastructure that we desperately need; continuing to support and champion local businesses and the Kent economy; and helping to achieve energy transition, net zero and adaptation to climate change.

To do this, we have already brought about big changes in how the council is run. We must also respond to changing national policies; both government (through the Levelling Up White Paper, published in February 2022) and the opposition (in Gordon Brown’s Commission on the UK’s Future) have set out plans to change our over-centralised system. We can expect to hear a lot more of devolution and county deals in 2023. I look forward to the opportunity of taking part in and influencing this debate in relation to the future of the county.

2022 has been a tough year, and its challenges are still very much with us. But people across this county responded in an amazing way to those challenges, and we look to 2023 with realism but also with hope and optimism.

Roger Gough,

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