

Parish Magazine piece – February 2023

KCC's annual budget meeting took place last Thursday in Maidstone. There were no cuts to bus subsidies this year, but a combination of rising demand and rising costs meant that there were a number of cuts in other vital areas including adult social care and care for disabled children.

Councillors from all parties expressed concern at the poor financial situation the council is in, and all made it clear that without a significant increase in funding from central government, the council will find it very difficult to make it to the end of this decade. Former KCC leader Sir Paul Carter declared his backing for Kent to be broken up into unitary authorities, arguing that the efficiencies that can be achieved by combining the county council with borough and district level councils would make local authorities far more financially viable.

There are definitely advantages to this approach, but there are also disadvantages too. If Swale were to be absorbed into a unitary authority with some of the surrounding districts, we could see important planning decisions affecting our area made in Ashford, Maidstone or Canterbury (depending on how the boundaries for the new authorities were drawn up).

Without a county level authority we may also have less say on highways issues which would have a knock on effect on our area. At the moment it seems increasingly likely that National Highways will push forward with plans for a Lower Thames Crossing near Gravesend. This will be beneficial for Dartford as it will reduce traffic using the Dartford Crossing, but it has the potential to be hugely negative here in Swale as traffic that would normally reach the coast via the M20 would be far more likely to travel along the M2 and head down via the already overburdened Brenley Corner.

Having said this, perhaps the additional budget that might be freed up by combining authorities - along with the reduction in confusion caused by having two different councils looking after things like waste collection and disposal – would be enough to offset the disadvantages. One thing I think is certain is that we will be seeing a lot more discussion on this topic in the months and years to come.

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#### FINAL BUS UPDATE

The bus services affected by KCC's subsidy bus cuts finally came into effect this month, with services across the area stopping with effect from 12th February. Users in affected villages will have to rely on the Kent Karrier service which costs £3.50 to use even if you have a bus pass and only serves villages on certain days. For Conyer, Lynsted, Rodmersham, Bredgar, Tunstall and Milstead, the bus is available on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays and goes into Sittingbourne. For Doddington, Newnham and Oare, the bus is available on Tuesdays and Thursdays and can take you to either Faversham or Sittingbourne. For more details, please Google 'Swale Kent Karrier' or call 01892 832447.

Any parents unable to get their children to school may be able to appeal for assistance through the Home to School Transport Appeals process. Please contact me at the email address below if you would like further information on this.

Rich Lehmann  
rich.lehmann@kent.gov.uk  
<http://kentgreencouncillors.news/>