

**MINUTES of the CHART SUTTON ANNUAL PARISH MEETING
held at 7.30pm on Monday 28th April 2025 at Chart Sutton Village Hall.**

PRESENT: Cllr S. Waring as Chairman and Parish Councillors V Underdown, J. Killick, W. Gatward and K. Dreger and Mrs L. Windless, Clerk to the Parish Council. They were joined by County Councillor Lottie Parfitt-Rid, MBC Councillor Anne Dawes plus 12 other speakers / attendees.

1. CHAIRMAN’S WELCOME

The Chairman welcomed all those present.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received and accepted from Parish Councillor, Robert Sagrott, Chris Webb and Mark Scholey.

3. KENT COUNTY COUNCILLOR, LOTTIE PARFITT

As this may be my final report to the Parish Council, I want to begin by expressing my heartfelt thanks to the council—particularly to Lesley and Steve—whose support and collaboration have made my time as County Member both rewarding and genuinely enjoyable.

I thought it important to address some of the claims that are being made regarding the council’s finances. Contrary to what is being posted on social media, KCCs debt levels have remained stable—or have been falling—in recent years. We haven’t taken on any major new debt, and much of what we do have dates back 15–20 years. Some of that borrowing was taken out under a central government scheme, where the government later changed the terms. It’s important to understand that all organisations—including councils and businesses—carry debt, much like most homeowners. For Kent County Council, this debt operates much like a rolling mortgage. It allows us to invest in long-term assets such as roads, bridges, and essential engineering equipment—infrastructure that supports Kent for decades to come.

Nobody can pay for everything upfront—not even governments—so they borrow and repay over time. Over the past 15 years, interest rates have been relatively low compared to previous decades, when rates regularly exceeded 10%. In that context, borrowing to support investment over a 50-year horizon has been a sensible and responsible approach.

The headline figure of Kent County Council carrying £740 million in debt may appear alarming at first glance—and perhaps that’s the intention. However, it is essential to approach this figure with proper context and a meaningful comparison. Apples with Apples!

Not all debt is the same. A household with a mortgage taken out to secure a family home is in a fundamentally different position than someone who has accumulated large amounts of unsecured debt through credit cards or gambling, with no clear plan for repayment. The same principle applies to public finances.

Our debt-to-revenue ratio has actually improved, dropping from 12% to 8% in recent years. Some loans have now reached the end of their term, and we’ve chosen not to re-borrow meaning no new debt has been created. A small portion of our existing debt was used to fund large-scale infrastructure schemes such as the Thanet Way. It’s worth pointing out that KCC has avoided the financial pitfalls seen elsewhere—such as failed IT rollouts or wasteful spending on poorly targeted initiatives. Instead, we’ve taken a prudent, balanced approach to long-term financial management, something that the auditor has recognised.

While the headline numbers may look large, that’s simply a reflection of the scale of the council’s overall budget. In proportion to our revenues, our debt levels are well within normal limits, and we continue to manage them responsibly.

Installing QR codes at bus stops provides a cost-effective alternative to traditional real-time information (RTI) screens, which are often expensive to maintain and vulnerable to vandalism. This solution allows residents to access live bus information at any stop in Kent using their smartphones—delivering on a key request from the community. This initiative has been funded through the first tranche of Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding, allocated by central government specifically to support and improve local bus infrastructure in Kent.

There has also been mention of money being “wasted” on a cycle scheme that supposedly no one uses. I believe this refers to the Cycle to Work Scheme—a government-backed initiative that enables employees to purchase a

bicycle through a salary sacrifice arrangement. Under the scheme, the employer (or government) provides an interest-free loan to the employee, which is repaid through deductions from their gross salary. This not only allows the employee to access a bike at a reduced cost, but also promotes healthier lifestyles, reduces reliance on cars, and helps ease congestion. Employers benefit too—through improved staff wellbeing, increased satisfaction, and reduced absence. Far from being wasteful, this scheme supports active travel, sustainability, and workforce engagement at very low cost to the public purse.

As I have consistently reported, there is significant and ongoing pressure on our revenue budget, which presents a major challenge and leads to a series of very difficult decisions each year. The most substantial areas of growth and demand are in Adult Social Care (ASC) and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Together, these two areas now account for nearly 70% of our revenue budget. Crucially, they are statutory responsibilities—services we are legally required to deliver—so they must be prioritised. This means that the remaining budget for other services is increasingly limited, making value for money and prioritisation more important than ever.

Operationally, there are areas within KCC that are not functioning as they should—regardless of what may be officially reported. One area of particular concern is Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Anecdotally, I know that the current system is failing some parents—and failing them badly. I have raised these concerns at the highest levels, but I must be honest: progress has been difficult. This is not an issue that can be ignored or downplayed, and it is one I feel strongly about.

If I am returned to County Hall, I will not let this go. I will continue to press for improvement and accountability, and I will keep fighting for families in our community who are not getting the support they need and deserve.

Once again, I would like to thank you all for your help and support over the last few years, especially over the last few weeks when things have been very difficult for me, your kind words and compassion have meant a lot.

Over and Out, Lottie.

A resident stated that people could be scammed if QR codes at bus stops were covered up with fake QR codes. Cllr Parfitt advised that the QR codes simply give information on bus timings, they are not used as a way of paying fares.

A resident expressed concern at HGVs using Brishing Road as a diversion route during the current Loose Road closure. It was noted that Brishing Road is not an official diversion route but little can be done to stop drivers using unsuitable roads. HGVs should be diverting along the A274 and B2163. Cllr Waring suggested that the resident may wish to attend the next Parish Council meeting to discuss her concerns further.

4. MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCILLOR, ANNE DAWES

Here is an update on my first year as Borough Councillor. I represent you on two committees – the Audit Committee and the Housing and Community Policy Advisory Committee. MBC is in a positive financial situation compared to some other boroughs thanks to borrowing at low interest rates before rates rose. The two largest overspends are on statutory responsibilities – homeless housing and social housing. The budget allocation of £4M was overspent by £1.5M. This is partly explained by a 25% national increase in homelessness. The cost of living crisis is having an impact on people’s lives and adding to the shortage of affordable accommodation. The second largest spend is on social housing. To mitigate this, MBC intend to purchase houses and build their own stock. This is not a straightforward process so will take time.

Some of you have contacted me to question the process of changing bin contractors. I am still chasing MBC for a review of the process.

You have likely heard of devolution, Mayoral authority and the local government review. This was seismic news that shook the political world as well as elected members. We understand there is benefit to having one local authority instead of two and there is plenty of frustration between the two authorities not working hand in hand.

Some of you may be aware that MBC have to produce a Local Plan with the allocation of all the houses that are planned to be developed in the next 5 years with a corresponding rate of delivery. Central government issues these targets and it is central government inspectors who sometimes allow appeals where we would not agree to

build. I have been trying to speak to our MP, Katie Lam about the difficulties we are facing as MBC and KCC have little power over this.

Communication with Kent Highways has been frustrating regarding measures to put in place to slow down traffic on Plough Wents Road. This currently seems unsolvable.

The Police are asking for things to be reported as often people don't report as they think the Police are already aware of it. The Police are not allowed to monitor local Facebook pages and haven't got the resources to do so. Please report via 101 or 999, as appropriate. My Community Voice is a Police mailing list that you join online and gives direct updates of crime and scams in your local area.

Your Parish Council has one vacancy for a Parish Councillor so please consider joining.

5.

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL MEETING HELD ON 22ND APRIL 2024

It was discussed and resolved "**that the Minutes be agreed as an accurate record**". This was **Agreed** and the Chairman was authorised to sign off the official copy.

6.

PARISH COUNCIL REPORT

A copy of the Parish Council Report was provided to all attendees. Copies of the Report including draft receipts and payments figures for 2024/25 will be produced with the June edition of the Village News.

A resident expressed concern at the percentage increase in precept for 25/26. The clerk advised that this represents an increase of 11p per week for a band D property.

7.

REPORTS OF LOCAL ORGANISATIONS

(a) Mr Mike FitzGerald, MBE for The Royal British Legion Sutton Valence and District Branch

The branch has had a very successful year. It has maintained a membership of 42 people and holds regular branch meetings 6 times a year.

We organized 8 community events last year : two coffee mornings, a January dinner, an annual dinner at the Weald, Headcorn, a coach outing to the Eastbourne airshow, a quiz night, an afternoon tea and the Christmas market with the amenities group. We also supported the D-Day 80 celebrations.

We organized the poppies on the green morning, supported the Invicta Wind Orchestra in Sutton Valence School with a retiring poppy collection. We run the Staplehurst Gardening Society quiz, with proceeds to the Legion and we supported the Three Sutton Parish Councils in organizing the three Remembrance Day services and would like to thank the Sutton Valence School and their Combined Cadet Force who were with us at all three services. Our poppy collections coordinated by our two organizers were generously supported by all residents and raised a total of £5,500.

Remembrance memorial services are different for each parish. In East Sutton the village memorial is in the church cemetery, in Sutton Valence it looks over the B174 and requires a road closure for the march past and in Chart Sutton it is inside the church.

Looking forward – now this is a challenge

Like lots of organisations, we are struggling to attract people to come forward and be part of the committee or act as an officer to confirm to Charity regulation. I will be stepping down after 10 years as Chair having agreed to step up when the previous chair had health problems. Our Treasurer is moving away and our secretary will also be retiring, he has served the branch tirelessly for so many years. So, we are at the crossroads, we need people to step up and we have until our AGM in the Autumn to find a solution and I leave this with you.

We Never Forget

The Royal British Legion is here to help members of the Royal Navy, British Army, Royal Air Force, veterans and their families. We're not going anywhere but how much better it would be if we can retain the branch who respond and act locally.

In closing I must thank all the officers, members and friends of the Branch for the support and commitment throughout the year, ensuring the British Legion serve and respond the people it serves. Thank you for listening.

(b) Ms Heather Knowler for St Michael's church, Chart Sutton

Clerical vacancy – Our Vicar, Fiona Haskett, retired in September – we miss her leadership and warm character. We work with three other parishes to maintain a pattern of services and worship in each church. In terms of finding a replacement, as I mentioned last year, this can take time. Our churchwarden, Blair Gulland, is working with the other churches to draw up a benefice profile, which will not only inform any interested applicants about the area, the churches and the communities they serve but will outline the type of vicar we are hoping to attract. This is ongoing.

Services – We continue to offer two main services a month, both 6pm evensong, on the first and third Sundays of the month. We have a regular lay reader from Cranbrook on the first Sunday, John Mulrenan and I read the service on the third Sunday. In addition, special services are also covered – with Holy Communion on Easter Sunday, a Pancake Service and Carol Service in the village hall, the Battle of Britain commemoration service and Remembrance Sunday all being important. Once a week an online Compline service is also hosted at St Michaels.

Heating system – I think I probably mentioned last year that the heating boiler had expired. The decision was made during last year not to replace the boiler, as its location in the semi-basement made it incredibly unreliable. We have opted instead to install a set of heated pew runners, which will warm the person rather than the air in the ceiling. This work has been ordered and we have been exceptionally lucky in receiving a number of grants and donations to cover the work. Two local families have covered approximately half of the cost while the Friends of Kent Churches, the Cobtree Trust and the Parish Council have funded a large proportion of the rest. I would like to thank the Parish Council for their very kind and timely donation. We are looking forward to nice warm backsides next winter!

Churchyard – We run regular, monthly churchyard maintenance sessions during the summer and I would like to thank everyone who has joined us at some stage during 2024. Particular thanks to Jo, Paul, Graham, Michael, Phil, Blair and Tikki. In addition, Steven Waring and his team have carried out some amazing work on the eastern side of the churchyard, which has taken the overgrowth of grass and shrubs back under control. Thank you Steven.

Fundraising – We ran our usual suite of fundraising efforts last year, with the Sale on the Green, Tea on the Lawn (for which thanks to Chris and Sue Webb for hosting this in their lovely garden). We also had two people cycling for Friends of Kent Churches and attended various fetes and bazaars to run bric-a-brac and tombola stalls. The proceeds from these events help to pay for our parish share and the upkeep of the building.

I would like to say a huge thank you to everyone who supports us in these efforts, everyone who comes to the Sale on the Green, buys a ticket for the Tea on the Lawn, attends church or has a standing order to the church for a few pounds a month. It is much appreciated and makes running these events a lot of fun. I hope we will see some of you at our events and services over the next twelve months.

(c) Mrs Joan Johnson Trust

Robert Sagrott had sent apologies but it was noted that the Trust had given small financial gifts totalling £700 to 7 needy residents during the last year. While this exceeded the income of £585 for the year, the Trustees felt it was warranted, given the current economic conditions.

(d) Mr Steven Waring for the Chart Sutton Community Shop (Shop on the Green)

The shop is struggling and a decision will be made in the coming months on whether to close it down. The shop has been open for around 15 years but cannot continue running at a loss.

(e) Mrs Valerie Underdown for Speedwatch

Speedwatch has picked up over the last few months as I have a new toy, a speed gun, which is handheld so doesn't suffer in windy conditions. It is a great little gadget and it picks up the cars from farther away. We are still visible to drivers so they have the option to slow down which after all is our main aim. Speedwatch data is passed to the Police who also carry out regular speed enforcement in the village.

(f) Mrs Valerie Underdown for Neighbourhood Watch

I am still getting regular e-mails from the Police regarding events and notices of fraud alerts. It seems that every week there are 2 or 3 more different frauds which are being carried out. If anyone would like to be added to the list to receive these please let me have your e-mail address.

You may remember back last year when one of the flower pots on the green was stolen. The offender was caught and given a conditional discharge and told to repay us £30. On his review this month he was found to have broken his conditions and the case has been returned to the original officer to decide whether the conditional discharge remains as the recorded disposal, or the case is charged and sent to court.

(g) Mrs Valerie Underdown for the Chart Sutton Book Club

Do you enjoy a good read and a chance to discuss the plot with others? Then come along to Millbrook Garden Centre on the third Wednesday of the month and join us for tea and cakes. If you have any ideas for books to read we are always on the lookout for suggestions.

(h) Mrs Valerie Underdown for the Amenities Committee

The group is still struggling to get people to attend events. At Easter we held an afternoon tea with lots of lovely cakes and hot cross buns. There was no charge, just a donation for the tea and cakes. The total number of guests was 15 which was very disappointing.

(i) Mr Peter Underdown for Chart Sutton Short Mat Bowls

I run the short mat bowls club. We started in 2000 which makes it our silver anniversary this year. Val and I are the only founder members still playing. We are now down to 8 members but always looking for new members to come along and have fun and the usual friendly banter.

(j) Mr Peter Underdown for Chart Sutton Village Hall

I am the Chairman of the village hall committee. We have two yoga groups, dog training, KCC art class, children's dance classes, two sewing groups, Pilates, indoor bowls, Royal British Legion meetings, baby showers, birthday parties. The Amenities Committee hold coffee mornings, jumble sales and a free Christmas meal with all the trimmings for senior citizens.

(k) Mrs Christine Parkes for the Three Suttons Helpline

For over 20 years this group has been giving lifts to residents in Chart Sutton, East Sutton, Sutton Valence, Langley, Kingswood and Broomfield - and to people who attend the surgeries in these villages. The lifts are mainly to local surgeries and hospitals for people who would otherwise have a problem with transport. The scheme is run entirely by volunteers. Very sadly, one of our two telephone coordinators, Sandy, died very suddenly in January and we are missing her very much. Claire has been doing a wonderful job in managing all the calls since then, but we do hope that someone will volunteer to help her very soon. We now have about twenty volunteer drivers and have been delighted to welcome two more recently and another three people have offered to help in other ways. We are very grateful to Chart Sutton Parish Council for their support of this scheme.

(l) Sutton Strollers

Mr Chris Webb had sent apologies. There was no report to read out.

(m) Mr Andrew Hampson for Sutton Scouts

Suttons Scout Group continues to thrive and membership is gradually increasing. We are currently advertising for new members, including young people and adult volunteers. Over the past year, all three sections have delivered inspiring programs to help young people develop skills for life. Activities undertaken include back to basics, creative, health and fitness, international, faith and many more. Recently our Cub Pack visited Maidstone Mosque as part of their Faith badge, which the young people found very interesting. They also visited the Imperial War Museum Duxford to complete their Air Activities 2 Badge. The group have also taken part in various county/local scouting events including a trip to Kent Life, and activity days where young people had the opportunity to try a variety of new activities. In November 2024, the group took part in the Sutton Valence Remembrance Parade and on Sunday 27th April 2025 joined other Maidstone Scout Groups for the St Georges Parade. As part of the Community Impact badge, the cubs made bird boxes from kits kindly supplied by Chart Sutton Parish Council, which are currently being put up around the village. In September 2024, our Beaver Colony held their annual

McMillian Tea Party, where they raised over £40 for the charity. The group also helped out at the Three Suttons D-Day 80th Anniversary Celebrations in June 2024. In terms of fundraising, the group continue to do so via our annual Christmas fair, local fundraising opportunities, and the cloths bank located at Chart Sutton Village Hall.

8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

A resident queried why the village hall address is noted as the Parish Council's correspondence address on the Parish Council website. The clerk stated that she did not want her home address on the website and stated that residents can get in touch via the contact page or by phone or e-mail. A further query was raised regarding the village hall website. The clerk stated that the village hall has its own website but there is also a tab on the Parish Council website containing brief details and a link. She added that search engines may come up with the Parish Council website first as the village hall website is relatively new.

The Chairman closed the Meeting at 9pm.