

Dear Parish Clerks

I am writing this in lieu of giving a brief talk at your annual Parish Meeting which I would normally be attending over the course of this month and I would ask that you circulate it to your councillors and across as wide an audience as you think appropriate. You will understand that under current circumstances the content will be different to normal and will centre mainly on matters relating to the Coronavirus epidemic.

The County Council has many obligations but at present one of its main aims is to provide support for elderly and vulnerable people to prevent additional hardship at such a difficult time. In this regard, in collaboration with central government, local authority partners, the voluntary community and the NHS, the county council has set up a helpline called KENT TOGETHER. This can be reached by telephone on 03000 419292 on a 24 hour basis or by internet at . In the first week 1279 calls were made to the helpline and 2129 different requests were processed. I would encourage everyone to publicise this service.

Indeed the pandemic is resulting in unprecedented liaison between government ministers and our county council leaders in which our Leader Roger Gough has been at the forefront. As well as covering medical and financial issues, grave concern has been expressed over the lack of Personal Protection Equipment for nursing staff in hospitals and care homes. I am glad to say that two deliveries of 14 pallets each were delivered to the council's distribution centre in the week preceding Easter. Council leaders will be pressing for further supplies and distribution will be closely monitored with delivery shared across front line agencies, the NHS and care homes.

As is well known the Chancellor has attempted to provide a lifeline for businesses and individuals but there will of course be those that do not qualify. This is one reason why the helpline outlined above may be crucial. Charities are another area which have suffered a severe loss of income and the recent package will hopefully be an important lifeline particularly for small charities.

All local authorities are facing further pressures on cash flow as income declines and expenditure rises particularly on social care. I am pleased to report that the government is fast forwarding the payment of grants for social care funding but it has been made clear that extra funding will be required in many other areas.

In recent weeks I have been liaising with the committee of the Smarden Community store in their valiant attempts to open the new store and the post office there. Having seen this at first hand I can vouch for the fact that the committee has encountered a wide range of difficulties which through determination and collaboration they have overcome. Probably the most disappointing of these setbacks is the curtailment by the Post Office of plans to instal the computer and to complete final training for the staff. Regrettably this could delay opening of the Post Office until the most serious effects of Coronavirus are behind us. However the good news is that the committee expects to open the shop shortly, initially on a click and collect basis until social distancing restrictions ease.

Looking ahead I am pleased to report that just over 88% of parents of primary school children applying for places in September have been granted the school of their first choice. This is despite the number of applications being the highest for four years.

We are all having to change our lives in this disruption and at KCC we are using technology to have virtual meetings to enable all councillors to participate in and question policy. It is amazing how quickly this is becoming accepted as normal!

I fully understand how difficult life has become over recent weeks for many people but I know that that the sense of community spirit will prevail in the traditional British 'chin up' manner. Good luck to everyone. I can continue to be contacted by email at [charlie.simkins@kent.gov.uk](mailto:charlie.simkins@kent.gov.uk)

Charlie Simkins

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