

## Message from the Chairman of Kent County Council



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### Update

#### October 2017 (1)

Thank you to all those kind people who read the blog and then write to tell me what you think, or grab me in passing at some event or other. A lady in Canterbury told me “I’ve read your blog and you’re just as I imagined”. Seeming to be trying to pass a kidney stone she walked off in disgust. Perhaps she was just trying to be kind.

I’ve visited a couple of libraries in the last couple of weeks. I went to the magnificent Edwardian Carnegie library in Dartford, recently refurbished, and was shown every part of the building by Matthew Kerr, the Service Manager. The restoration has kept many original features like the mahogany bookcases, the beautiful wall tiles and tessera floor in the entrance. All that was absent from the aura of the 1950’s was the smell of lavender floor polish. There was hi-speed broadband and an extensive and gorgeous children’s library, and the Peter Blake Art Gallery. Upstairs is more than adequate office space and archives of local collections. Widely used by outside groups, the library is a magnificent community asset and everything a library should be.

On to Snodland library, where you can park outside free of charge. I met Shirley Sheridan. Occupying a unit in a row of shops and recently refurbished, the library is a widely used centre of community activity. In an adjoining room was an officer from the Borough Council at Tonbridge trying to give advice to callers on questions related to housing, benefits and occasionally matters largely unconnected with local government. Clearly valued locally, the library’s footfall is increasing.

To Folkestone last week to give awards to foster carers, ordinary people who do extraordinary things, devoting sometimes years to neglected and damaged young people and bringing them satisfactorily to the threshold of adulthood, and then doing it again and again. I made a short speech and departed feeling that this was what I should be doing while the chain of office is in my care.

Down to Deal to Betteshanger Park. The last working mine in the Kent coalfield, the site was cleared by SEEDA (remember SEEDA?) and an infrastructure created to encourage business that never arrived. The site was colonised by cyclists and a country park called Fowlmead created. There was a visitors' centre of the most modest description, but now Hadlow College are partners in the scheme to construct a business park based on sustainable energy principles with emphasis on Combined Heat and Power from biomass, a Leisure Park centred on cycling and a museum of mining. All this is centred on a stunning vast new visitors' centre presently being constructed and in use in 2018. The business park will employ 1,000 people; there will be conference facilities for 400 people and up to 880 young people in education on site by 2020. There will be an annual investment of £6.2m into the area.

The renewable energy on the site will be rather elegantly pointed to the transition from old to new energy. The Kent Mining Museum, a separate trust, will cover two floors of the new building dedicated to preserving and displaying the artefacts and memories of the East Kent coalmining communities. The Museum is costed out at £1.8m with £800k yet to find. It'll be unique and very well done; I'll see if I can find some funding.

Betteshanger Park is a terrific complex scheme built in large part on a slag heap, guaranteed success through its ownership by Hadlow College, and a future major contributor to the East Kent economy.

My satnav took me through terraces of miners' cottages to a point just outside the headquarters of Betteshanger Park but on the wrong side of an unassailable steel gate. Already late, the Chairman of the County Council parked on double yellow lines and vaulted determinedly over the gate. The gash to his elbow will heal, but the limp promises to be permanent.