

Councillor Lee Castle

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January marked the start of the new year with important progress at Cabinet, where I supported and voted with colleagues to launch a full local governance review. This work is central to the Liberal Democrat belief in strong local democracy and decision-making that is closer to the people it affects. The review will actively seek residents' views and explore options for new parish or town councils where communities feel they would benefit from greater local representation, accountability, and influence. Later in the year, we expect clarity on the format the new East Kent authority will take, replacing the district and county councils, with elections likely in May 2027 and a year of transition into 2028.

I also attended Full Council, where constructive cross-party working delivered real outcomes for residents. Of particular significance was the agreement of a child-led homelessness strategy, ensuring that the voices and needs of children are placed at the heart of how services are designed and delivered. This reflects Liberal Democrat priorities of compassion, fairness, and early intervention to prevent long-term harm to families.

At **Bekesbourne** Parish Council, members welcomed a new Clerk and discussed a wide range of everyday issues that matter to residents, including bin collection, emergency planning, footpaths, and the management of trees. A key concern raised was lighting and vehicle activity at Highland Court. Following the meeting, I met with the new operators, ISS, alongside their management team and the Highland Court Managing Director. I am pleased that all parties have committed to working constructively together to address residents' concerns, improve communication, and ensure the site operates in a way that respects the surrounding community.

I also attended **Wickhambreaux** Parish Council, where discussions focused on bins, signage, road closures, and the impact of wider local government changes. These meetings are a vital opportunity to listen directly to residents and parish representatives and to ensure local voices shape decision-making at district level.

In **Adisham**, I have continued to support residents with housing casework, alongside longstanding and often complex issues relating to footpaths, trees, and planning. In **Ickham**, concerns around lighting at Forge House, parking pressures, and planning matters have been raised with me, and I am actively following these up.

In **Littlebourne**, the appeal against the refusal of the large Gladman development at The Hill and Bekesbourne Lane will be heard over three days this month, with a decision expected shortly afterwards. I want to wish all residents and representatives involved the very best. This appeal represents a final opportunity in a long, challenging, and often frustrating planning process, and it highlights the ongoing need for a planning system that genuinely empowers communities.

Alongside all of this, I have dealt with a steady flow of casework throughout the month, including housing, bin collections, footpaths, and parking concerns.

Looking ahead to February, I will be attending a Cabinet meeting followed by Full Council, where the annual budget will be set. This budget will be a critical moment to protect essential services, support communities, and deliver value for residents during a challenging financial climate.