

Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 22 October 2014

District Councils Network update

I wish to focus large on the Non-Metropolitan Commission usually known as the "Peace Commission". This was established by the LGA's People and Places Board as an Independent Commission on economic growth and the future of public services in non-metropolitan England. The Commission is chaired by Sir John Peace, Chairman of Standard Chartered and Burberry, amongst other City institutions.

The DCN received a report back on the latest (fourth) meeting from one of our Chief Executive leads. The timescales for the Commission have been set to produce an interim report by October/November this year, and a final report by January 2015. Both dates may slip slightly. A small group from within the DCN Executive will be meeting the commissioners for a round table discussion on 27 November. I have been selected as part of that small team.

The Commission is considering eight areas:

- **Skills** – regarded as area of greatest weakness. Discussion so far focusing on joint working across LA boundaries. There is a possible role for MKIP or TGKP here;
- **Tax** – the Commission doubts the political will by any Political Party for Council Tax revaluation;
- **LEPs and Governance** – LEPs are generally supported by the Commission who are not expected to recommend any realignment based on County Boundaries, (as KCC favours);
- **Transport** – the Commission is minded to consider Transport and Housing jointly (see Housing below). Rural transport is regarded as inefficient and expensive;
- **Digital Infrastructure** – the focus so far has been on support to SMEs (especially in Rural Areas) as they are the main driver of economic growth;
- **Housing** – the Commission is expected to recommend that housing numbers should be determined at a higher level than individual districts (but have not said where). However, a return to Structure Plans has not found support among Commissioners. They may explore the role of combined authorities in non-metropolitan areas, especially in regards to housing and transport;
- **Transforming Public Services** – the Commission recognise the need to redesign services around people rather than organisations. This suggests the need to integrate decision-making, rather than just pooling the budgets; and
- **Social Infrastructure** – this has not yet been discussed by the Commission.

The main issues for the DCN appear to be:

- avoiding being squeezed out by the continuing focus on cities and counties;
- protecting and promoting districts' role in LEP;

- considering a response to proposals that housing numbers should be determined at a higher level – including to continue to argue for the strong district role in delivering planning, housing, and economic growth;
- reference above the County Council Network’s plans for government just published, which seeks a county-leading role in producing Local Plans and determining local housing numbers;
- transport Infrastructure is an agreed priority, but the Commission is not supportive of subsidised rural transport; and
- continuing to work closely with the LGA to ensure DCN voices are heard.

Sittingbourne Town Centre

I last updated Council about progress on Sittingbourne Town Centre Regeneration in October 2013 in response to a question from Councillor Haywood.

Since then, much progress has occurred, and things are moving very rapidly. Quinn Estates have joined the Spirit of Sittingbourne Consortium, and Altyon (who never played a significant role) have left. These and other changes have been incorporated into a formal deed of variation to the Development Agreement, which has duly been completed and signed by all parties.

Spirit have also appointed Guy Hollaway as their lead architect, and his team are progressing rapidly with the planning application for phase 1, which we expect to be submitted within the next few weeks.

The scheme is very much as originally conceived, and has the following major elements:

- a seven –screen multi-screen cinema of some 30,000 ft²;
- restaurants and other leisure facilities associated with the cinema for a further 30,000 ft²;
- a re-modelled square in front of the station, and a revised highways layout that returns the Town Centre to a two-way system;
- a multi-storey car park which will replace the land which is being built on by Spirit. The decision to go ahead with the multi-storey car park was taken by Cabinet on 16 July, and more recently the Director of Regeneration, in consultation with the four nominated Cabinet Members, has signed-off a final decision that the multi-storey car park will be for a total of 310 spaces, and will be funded and operated by the Council. I should emphasize that the decision for the Council to fund and operate this was taken for commercial reasons because it makes sense for us to operate the new multi-storey in conjunction with the rest of our car parking function in the Town;
- residential units on the two car park sites at Cockleshell Walk and Spring Street, and the so called ‘Island’ site behind the Fountain Public House. The plans are to construct some 220 residential apartments on these three sites. These will all be private rented accommodation, and will consist of one and two bedroomed units aimed at the economically active commuter market; and

- as always envisaged, there will be some 'big box' retail units totalling some 40,000 ft² on the site currently occupied by Biffa Waste Management, to the north of the railway line.

This has been a long and complicated saga, and the viability of the Town Centre development remains challenging because of relatively low land values. However, I am as confident as I have ever been that this will now proceed to planning, and will result in real action on the ground in the Town Centre by the middle of next year.

Health update

Following a meeting myself and the Cabinet Member for Community Safety and Health had with the Chief Accountable Officer of the Swale CCG, I have written to the Secretary of State for Health to express our concern regarding the lack of improvement at the NHS Medway Foundation Trust (MFT).

The MFT is the main provider of acute care for both Medway residents and the residents of Swale, and they have been in special measures for 14 months. In July 2014 the Care Quality Commission issued a Section 31 notice giving it power to require immediate action to close or limit the function of Medway A&E at any time.

This was the consequence of a number of inspection visits to Medway A&E since December 2013. On 29 August, the Trust received an instruction from the CQC to reconfigure how the Trust assesses patients arriving at A&E, in order to improve flow through the department. Whilst the Trust did take immediate action, this was as a result of the CQC insisting that it close an area of the A&E Department on the grounds of patient safety. In order to do this, a 12-hour period of ambulance diversions to other A&Es was agreed with the CCGs, South East Coast Ambulance Service, and the other acute hospitals in Kent.

We, as a Borough Council, have been working closely with our CCG within our local Health and Wellbeing Board, and indeed through the Kent County Health and Wellbeing Board, to provide support to the Trust and ensure that the wider health and social care economy is playing its part in the resolution of the problem. A number of actions have been taken by the health and social care community and wider provider community to assist the Trust in providing 'headroom' to make service improvements.

However, it is clear that the Trust is failing to accept its responsibility in remedying the current position, and we are clear as to the ineffectiveness of the regulators in bringing them to the realisation that they have to accept their failings and be more willing to be an active participant in the major changes needed.

To be clear, we believe that the wider NHS in Kent and Medway is taking the Section 31 notice extremely seriously, as an A&E closure, full or partial, would have a very significant impact both on people in Medway and Swale, and on the rest of Kent. It would affect not only people needing urgent and emergency care, but also those expecting planned operations. The impact would also spill out into London, Surrey, Sussex, and beyond.

We endorse the action taken by commissioners and health and social care providers who have developed a plan to change some services for a period of approximately

six months to give Medway NHS Foundation Trust some headroom, during what will be a busy winter period, to make the key changes that will satisfy CQC that care provided by the hospital is safe.

Whilst we support and applaud the efforts of the wider system in coming together to support MFT, we believe that MFT needs to support hands-on clinical care for the people of Swale. In particular, if any plan is to be effective then the clinical behaviours and leadership issues need to be tackled at scale and pace, an area that the regulators seem to have failed to do to date.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Leader