

Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 15 February 2017

Swale Borough Local Plan

As Members will be aware, following the Local Plan Examination in Public in December 2015, the Planning Inspector recommended that in order to make the Plan sound, we would have to address the objectively assessed need for housing in the Borough. Although the Inspector acknowledged that this presented difficult choices, she found no overriding constraint as to why it could not be done.

We were therefore left with a series of challenges to meet a significantly increased housing target, up from 540 to 776 dwellings per annum. The proposed Settlement Strategy, based on the two distinct planning areas for the Thames Gateway and Faversham, was accepted as sound by the Inspector, subject to a 'proportionate boost' to housing provision at the Faversham area.

We have met the Inspector's requirements, after making some difficult choices and careful evaluation of the pressure on the Borough's natural and historic environment, the transport network, and social infrastructure and services. But we recognise that there have been consequential local concerns expressed at the impact of these changes in the areas affected across the Borough.

The latest round of Examination in Public hearings took place at the beginning of February. I believe that the Council's Planning Team have done a sterling job presenting a clear case to the Local Plan Inspector and successfully arguing that we must take a pragmatic approach to the Borough's ability to bring about the level of development that is expected, in the face of further challenge from the development industry who continued to seek even higher development targets and additional site allocations throughout the Borough.

These debates also included substantial representation from local community representatives and members of the public; and moreover, there was a substantial public gallery of interested members of the public on most of the hearing days.

During the hearings, further highways information and evidence was submitted. This highlighted how additional capacity to meet development needs is proposed to be secured to the A249 junctions to meet Highways England requirements. In achieving this, the new work has also revealed the likelihood of previously unanticipated repercussions for the local highway network under the jurisdiction of Kent County Council Highways.

As it will take some time for the current development proposals to start to build out, this will impact beyond the first five years of the Plan. Although the Council had already anticipated the need to start an early review of the Local Plan, this evidence

highlighted the need for setting an early target date for completing the next review. This review will need to be completed by March 2022, and will involve full public engagement and consultation, and continued joint working with Kent County Highways and Transportation, and with Highways England. The review will also need to be accompanied by a new Transport Strategy (prepared in conjunction with Kent County Council Highways) setting out the further transport and highway improvement measures needed to handle the longer term local highway issues.

We now anticipate receiving the Inspector's final report in April /May and, subject to no further Main Modifications being required, we anticipate being able to proceed to adoption of the Local Plan, which will provide a robust framework and housing land supply context for determining planning applications for the next few years ahead.

However, the need to address the transport network, combined with the recent publication of the Government's Housing White Paper, means that we will not be able to rest on our laurels once we adopt the Plan. We will need to continue to be prepared to meet the challenges that growth forecasts and the planning system are presenting the Council with, and swiftly embark on the next round of local plan work to address that.

LG Challenge

At the end of January we hosted the first LG Challenge of 2017, which is the Local Government Association's answer to the BBC's 'The apprentice'. The LGA gather the ten brightest and best officers from around the country each year to take part in a number of real challenges in selected councils, before being whittled down to a final four who present their case to a panel of judges at the annual LGA Conference. The ultimate winner of the Challenge wins a scholarship of £10,000 from the Bruce-Lockhart scholarship fund, which will enable them to make a real difference to their local area, and the sector more generally.

I am really pleased that this year Swale BC was selected as one of the challenge areas for the competition, indeed the first one of the year, and the ten contestants arrived excited but also nervous in Swale in late January. The challenge we set them was to come up with ways of helping to get ex-offenders into employment. This challenge was not just about reducing the burden on us as a council, but the positive impact this would have on wider public services across the district. We were keen to ensure that any ideas that they came up with would also be suitable for use with other vulnerable client groups – if they could crack this problem for ex-offenders similar approaches are also likely to work for most other groups.

The results of the Challenge were really useful, and various teams across the Council are now looking at how we could implement some of their ideas. Look out for the coverage of the Challenge in the Municipal Journal shortly, and I understand that there are a number of film clips from the event available on the LGA website.

As a long-time colleague and friend of Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart I have also been lucky enough to be involved in the decision-making for the LGA Challenge at the LGA Conference in recent years on behalf of Kent CC, and I hope to do so again this year. Sir Sandy was a giant of local government, and I believe that the LG Challenge is a fitting tribute to his contribution to the sector in his time at Kent CC and subsequently at the Local Government Association.

Rural Policing

The Rural Policing meeting continues to meet quarterly, allowing for regular updates to be provided from the County-wide Rural Policing Team on their activities and operations in Swale.

This group has also provided support to Kent Police in the introduction of a number of new Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) cameras, shortly due to be installed, which will be a great addition to our crime prevention and crime fighting resources.

HGV Fly Parking update

Kent Police are seeking to tackle illegal and inappropriate lorry parking through the Kent-wide Operation Kindle. There have so far been 579 graduated fixed penalty notices given across Kent for this issue, resulting in 11 HGVs being immobilised/clamped, and over 3,000 lorries having been moved on.

Areas of focus for this Operation in Swale include the Gate Services and A249 laybys. We also recognise that there has been an increase in lorry parking on other side roads in the area, which we will be supporting Kent Police to address locally.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Council Leader