

Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 29 March 2017

Sittingbourne Town Centre Regeneration update

In my last statement to you in January I spoke about how the Sittingbourne town centre regeneration was entering its construction phase and I am delighted to tell you that the old Princess Street waste depot has now been demolished and the site will shortly be clear and ready for construction of the new retail units. The section 106 agreements are in the process of being signed by all parties. You will also see that the site has been enclosed by black hoardings with pictures to be fitted by Spirit soon.

This site will provide new retail units and parking areas for Home Bargains, Iceland Food Warehouse and a drive through Costa Coffee. It is planned for the units to be ready for the occupier fit out works in early 2018.

The Council is very close to completing its due diligence in order to consider its decision on funding the construction of this retail site and officers will be able to make recommendations in accordance with the delegated authority.

In tandem with the construction of the new retail site Spirit is co-ordinating the essential service diversions for the retail site and also for the Cinema, Restaurants, Hotel and Multi Storey Car Park and these works are being planned in detail with Kent Highways.

To ensure that residents are kept informed the Council's communications team are designing a process to ensure that all disruptive work, particularly highway and service works are properly advertised. They will ensure that information is shared with the public, town centre traders, bus operators, taxi operators, Network Rail and South East trains to ensure that inconvenience is minimised wherever possible.

As you can see this development is entering its critical implementation phase that is requiring considerable detail and coordination.

Transformation update

In 2016 it was agreed to set up a transformation team on a fixed term basis, to enable the organisation to adapt to meet challenges around budget pressures and changing technology. However this is not change for change sake - we envisage improved and redesigned processes will take advantage of the technology rather than using technology to drive the change in processes.

We are clear that the reviews should inform and be part of the work to improve our online offer to residents. This will help to ensure that the reviews explore the opportunities for using technology to improve services and accessibility. The Transformation Team is clear that we are not working to remove any channels from residents, but that we are keen to encourage the use of technology by making digital clearer and easier for residents to use.

It was also agreed that transformation within the organisation should be cooperative and empowering. Where reviews take place there is an expectation that officers from that service will take part in the process. This approach also includes consulting with relevant Portfolio Holders at the start of the review process, and while the scope of the work is under discussion.

To date the team have completed reviews in Print Room, House Superintendents and Licensing. They are currently working with Refuse and Recycling and Housing Options, with an ambitious schedule of work ahead of them.

Volunteer Awards

March 2017 played host to the fourth annual Volunteer Swale Awards. More than 100 guests gathered at The Barnyard, Upchurch to celebrate the work of some of Swale's finest volunteers, who give their time and their expertise free of charge, and in doing so help so many people. Eight winners were selected from over 80 nominations received and it was incredible to see the quality and quantity of nominations continuing to increase year on year. Volunteering helps make Swale a better place to live and a better place to work, two of the Council's top priorities, and it also helps individuals who volunteer in their own feeling of well-being. The Awards provided an opportunity to celebrate the Boroughs unsung heroes who continue to amaze the community by their dedication and passion for volunteering.

The Sunday Times Best 100 not for profit organisations

Whilst some eyes were focused on the Brits being held on the same night I am pleased to report that I, along with colleagues, were at the only real show in town: The Sunday Times Best 100 not for profit organisations. It is with great pleasure that I can record that Swale Borough Council has been ranked in the annual best companies survey as one of the top 100 not-for-profit organisations to work for.

The results are based on a survey, distributed to more than 300 staff, designed to find out how employees feel about their employer, managers and the work they do. The council's results have improved in a range of areas since the last survey in 2015. This year's results are a testament to the excellent working environment and relationships that the council fosters.

The council's officers work tremendously hard to serve the people of Swale so it's gratifying to learn that they feel the organisation is serving them well in turn. We're thrilled with the council's ranking. An engaged and motivated workforce is an effective workforce so making sure our staff are satisfied is vital if we are to achieve positive outcomes for the communities we serve.

At a time when local government organisations are facing pressures on a range of fronts, a strong and well-supported team is vital to help us meet our commitments to serving local people.

Local Government Chronicle (LGC) Awards 2017

I had the pleasure of attending the LGC Awards ceremony in London on 8 March. Along with Councillors Dewar-Whalley and Pugh, and officers from our Benefits and Housing Options teams, we were there as short-listed candidates for the Business Transformation category in recognition of the work the Council had done to improve the customer experience for residents using our benefits and housing services. The project involved many innovative elements, not least enabling customers to submit proof of identity electronically rather than having to present this at the Council's offices in person.

Unfortunately we lost out to a large metropolitan borough council, and it was a record number of entries this year. Nevertheless, the teams did brilliantly in making it this far and it is particularly pleasing that the Council is continuing to be short-listed for industry awards year-on-year. It can only be a matter of time before we take the top prize.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Council Leader