

Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 26 July 2017

Local Government Association Annual Conference and Exhibition 2017

Along with the Chief Executive Mr Mark Radford and Cllr Nicholas Hampshire, I attended this year's Local Government Association Conference in Birmingham. It is fair to say that the lack of local government legislation in the Queen's Speech and the recent tragic events in Kensington and Chelsea set the tone for the conference. Many of you will have read the response to Sajid Javid's speech in the local government press, during which he referred to local government as facing a looming crisis of confidence, with a need to preserve the ties binding local government to its local communities.

We felt this year's conference was framed by a few central themes. Firstly, the question as to how local government is to be financed has been a recurring issue over many conferences, with the most common solution being the need to act more commercially. From the examples given this year, I am pleased to say that Swale Borough Council is well ahead on this journey. Given that the localisation of business rates legislation fell because of the General Election, there is an assumption that at least in the short term it has been confined to the history books. Government suggestion of a 'fairer funding' model from central to local government will require very close ongoing scrutiny.

The second major theme that ran throughout the conference was the all-encompassing question of Brexit and its impact on both central and local government. The capacity within central government to handle anything outside of the Brexit negotiation process is obviously limited. Alongside this we have the current arithmetic in the House of Commons, which means that the ability of Ministers (and indeed any other MPs) to escape the Westminster bubble and engage with the LGA and other bodies is obviously already very limited and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future.

Thirdly, following on from the last two annual conferences was the ongoing discussion on the working relationship/integration between the National Health Service and local government. The Chief Executive of the NHS was present at the conference and I know that both Mr Radford and myself attended different sessions which he addressed. I feel that delegates were fairly restrained in their comments in order not to discourage further interaction.

The recent written ministerial statement on delayed transfers of care, which followed on from the publication of the integration and better care fund planning requirements to 2019, prompted the LGA to announce that due to the sudden and last-minute shift in focus towards delayed transfers, together with the threat of a review of funding allocations to local government if associated targets are not met, it would be

withdrawing its support for the guidance as issued. Overall, this is extremely disappointing and a step back for integrating health and care. Councils are doing all they can to reduce delays in getting patients out of hospital and back into the community, but social care is about far more than alleviating acute pressure on hospitals: it is a vital and essential service in its own right, not least in view of its contribution to keeping people from being admitted to hospitals in the first place.

Councils face an annual £2.3 billion funding gap in social care by 2020 because of pressures elsewhere in the system. This is why it is vital that local government has freedom and flexibility over how additional money which was promised to it in the March Budget is spent. Ultimately, the publication of the planning requirements and the ministerial statement undermine integration, increase the difficulty of making important preparations for meeting winter demand, and are likely to make the social care crisis worse. The LGA is committed to working with government to find a way forward and resolve these issues in the best interests of local communities.

Finally, I know that Cllr Hampshire's view in particular, perhaps supported by analysis of the recent General Election, is that there is a growing inter-generational divide in this country, with the real prospect of today's young people being poorer than their parents across their lifetimes for the first time in the last hundred years. The issue of housing and how supply can be increased to provide young people with the opportunity to own their own home or have greater security over their rental property was addressed at numerous fringe meetings.

It is clear that local authorities will be under increasing pressure to provide housing to meet this growing demand and reduce this inequality in society. It is perhaps this point that was the most poignant given the backdrop of the Grenfell Tower disaster, and much discussion at fringe events focused on what we need to do differently to ensure that such a tragedy can never be repeated.

I myself found much of the conference taken up with meetings of the District Councils Network and other joint bodies on which I represent either Swale Borough Council or the Kent local government family. I found one of the most inspiring plenary sessions to be the address from Andy Street CBE, the elected Mayor of the West Midlands Combined Authority and ex Chief of the John Lewis Partnership. I particularly enjoyed being asked to represent Kent on the judging panel of the Local Government Challenge (the Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart Award) together with the Leaders of Essex and East Sussex County Councils. Some members may remember that back in early spring we in Swale hosted the first round of this year's Challenge. Mr Radford reminded me after the presentation that I had identified the winner as the strongest candidate back at that time, a judgement I had totally forgotten.

Thames Estuary Growth Commission

The Thames Estuary Growth Commission remains on the government's radar and announcements on its future are due after the summer recess. Jake Berry has been appointed the new Minister for place based initiatives and his remit includes the TE Commission work. Officers from the Thames Gateway Kent Partnership are continuing to engage with officials from the Department of Business, Enterprise, Innovation and Skills (BEIS) to help ensure that any recommendations the Commission makes are shared as early as possible with authorities in North Kent.

This should ensure that North Kent is able to respond to government proposals in a swift, co-ordinated and credible way. Additionally, Council Leaders from North Kent, South Essex and East London will be meeting in the early autumn as the 'Thames Gateway Strategic Group'. This will provide the opportunity to review progress to date in the Gateway, set priorities for the future and respond to government proposals as they come to light.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Council Leader