

## **Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 13 June 2018**

### **Sittingbourne Regeneration Programme**

The works on the old Princes Street depot site is now substantially complete. The Food Warehouse opened to trading on 15 May and the Costa Unit was handed over and the whole site Practical Completion inspection took place on 1 June. The ribbon cutting event for the Retail Park is now planned for the end of June/beginning of July when the Food Warehouse, Home Bargains and Costa will all have started trading.

Huber started occupation of the MSCP site on 1 May and has been carrying out site set up, further site investigation works and has been liaising with Spirit, Southern Water and Vodafone to ensure that all of the services are removed/diverted successfully. Contamination has been encountered in the top layers of excavation and Huber is ensuring that this is dealt with appropriately.

The next phase of works in the Spirit of Sittingbourne regeneration programme commenced on 29 May, however, following a risk assessment and feedback from KCC Streetworks, it was decided to pause the road closures until 11 June in order to confirm the most appropriate road traffic diversion routes and also to make changes to our plans for temporary bus stops by the station and Forum.

I am pleased to tell you Nando's have signed an agreement to lease another of the six restaurant units within the Cinema site and a further national operator has expressed an interest in another unit.

### **Air Quality**

Whilst there are some issues that we will never agree on across the different political groups in the chamber, one where I think there is universal agreement is our concern over air quality in the Borough.

The simple reality of the A2 running through the mainland part of the Borough is something we have to deal with on a daily basis.

And it is also clear that no matter the rhetoric around air quality practical and deliverable actions under the control of this Borough Council are limited.

To recognize the seriousness of the issue I asked the Cabinet Member for Environment and Rural Affairs to chair a joint member and officer steering group that will develop a Borough wide action plan.

To ensure that this group can make recommendations based upon a solid basis of fact one of the first actions of the steering group was to commission the support of specialised air quality expert group, Phlorum, to undertake detailed baseline modelling to establish likely No2 (Nitrogen Dioxide) concentrations within the Air

Quality Management Areas in future years. We have had a first version of this report and this was discussed at the Policy and Development Review Committee on 10 April.

Following that Committee and the Air Quality Steering Group meeting some aspects of the work are being modified to include known planned house building along the A2 corridor and this work is being undertaken.

I would like to thank PDRC for the quality of the debate and Cllrs Hampshire and Wright in particular for the submissions they made subsequent to the committee meeting.

We also have to ensure appropriate engagement with KCC as the highways authority.

Cabinet will consider the reports in July and advise officers on the direction they consider necessary for the completion of the Air Quality Action Plan. Moving the work forward will be helped significantly by the creation of a new air quality project officer post funded from the additional funds voted by Council.

The project officer will help implement our tactical responses whilst we finalise our strategic level response.

### **Staffing Changes**

I am pleased to report that the next stages in making permanent appointments has been completed. Charlotte Hudson has been confirmed as Head of Economy and Community Services and Martyn Cassell as Head of Commissioning and Customer Contact. Both have been undertaking the respective roles on an interim basis and have proven themselves to be capable, competent and have made a positive contribution to the senior management of the authority, they both deserve the opportunity to continue to do so in a permanent capacity.

### **Business Rate Retention Scheme**

One of the most important parts of the Budget agreed in February this year was that Kent had received approval to be one of only 11 pilots in the country. I feel that a major reason why the Kent scheme received approval was that included the county's only unitary Council and I'm very appreciative to the political leadership of Medway Council for agreeing to participate.

The pilot scheme means that all business rate growth in the county will remain within it and as the Council which is seeing the largest increases in business rates this will mean that at borough level Swale is the biggest beneficiary.

The basis of the scheme is:

- pilot a 50/50 split between upper tier and lower tier authorities, providing a more sustainable basis for local retention better reflecting the responsibilities of the different tiers,
- channel 30% of the proceeds of growth to collaborative working to stimulate future business rate growth and housing delivery.

The Institute of Fiscal Studies estimate that in aggregate the pilot councils nationally will receive an additional £873m.

At the time of the budget we estimated that the increase in funding from the 50:50 split with KCC in 2018/19 could be as much as £700,000 and we prudently took £250,000 of this in to the base budget. Its early days but if anything the £700,000 could prove to be an under estimate.

What is rather more complicated is the funding that it was agreed in the submission would be shared on a pooled basis for us across North Kent (Dartford, Gravesham, Medway, Swale, Maidstone and KCC).

Leaders have now met a couple of times to discuss this and each of the boroughs and Medway have developed their own draft proposals which broadly follow the line of encouraging future growth in business rates and town centre regeneration. The Swale proposal is for small business units probably located in Faversham.

The final element of the business rate story that I should touch on is that the pilot follows on a highly successful initiative over the last three years of a smaller scale business rate growth retention scheme with 12 Councils participating.

The increased revenue from this is shared one-third to the Council, one third to KCC, One third to a shared pool between the borough and KCC. This shared pool had reached £750,000 and of this £250,000 has been committed to supporting the Visitor Economy Strategy, £200,000 to the Sheppey Lower Road and the balance is being prioritized currently with KCC.

The pilot status was originally granted for just one year and we will need to resubmit for 2019/20; Leaders, Chief Executives and Chief Financial Officers in their cross county groups have already started discussions on this.

We talk probably too much about funding reductions and austerity. Certainly in this borough the extra freedoms granted by Government have meant that we are far more financially self-standing and in a very strong position to pump prime high priority projects.

**Cllr Andrew Bowles**  
**Council Leader**