

Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 25 July 2018

Local Government Association Annual Conference and Exhibition 2018

Attendees this year from Swale Borough Council were co-Deputy Leader Alan Horton, Chief Executive Mark Radford and myself. This year's Conference was held in Birmingham. As Mr Radford accurately remarked the mood at the Conference was low key rather than being downbeat. Low key, due in no small degree, to the number of big questions hanging over Local Government at this time. There was a notable reduction in high profile national figures at the Conference although that shouldn't be read as saying that there was not a reasonable national participation.

There are a number of items which are causing the Local Government Association and its constituent members concern. One could almost say alarm. The LGA launched research at the Conference showing that some councils are beginning to crumble and will no longer support residents in the way they have every right to expect. The question as to how Local Government is to be financed has been a recurring issue over many Conferences, most solutions being around the need for Local Government to become more commercial in nature. Central Government are suggesting the introduction of a fairer funding model for Local Government, this will require very close ongoing scrutiny. Social care is already consuming 54% of the total budget for Local Councils and this percentage is forecast to continue to rise rapidly.

The LGA's analysis shows that Local Government will need an additional 7.8 billion pounds of revenue by 2025. This 7.8 billion would only allow us to stand still at the present level of service with no monies to deal with expenditure backlogs such as highways or to consider reopening any of the Sure Start Centres, libraries or leisure centres which have closed across the country in recent times. Allied to this is how we deal with the reality of Brexit going forward. As we get closer to the 29 March 2019 we are increasingly aware of the lack of capacity within Central Government to handle anything outside of the Brexit negotiating process.

As I said earlier, we in Local Government need a new settlement to Local Government. We currently have a very centralised system of Government, far more so than most other western democracies. It must not be allowed for Whitehall to just absorb the money and decision-making powers repatriated from Brussels. By properly funding local services and giving councils the means to work on behalf of their communities, Local Government can be **the** driving force for higher growth and productivity. We need to be set free from central control rather than seeing Whitehall increasingly bind our hands.

The first session of the Conference was, as ever, given over to the political groups within the LGA holding their individual Annual General Meetings. For the Conservative Group this brought the election of a new Group Leader in James Jamieson from Central Bedfordshire who successfully challenged the incumbent David Simmons (no not that one!) from Hillingdon LBC. With a new Deputy Leader in Izzi Secombe, the Leader of

Warwickshire County Council, this was part of a very good showing in securing election to senior posts within the Group from counties and the large unitaries. Indeed, three of the four “at large” top up posts on the Group Executive were won by county leaders. Interesting at a time that more and more counties are seeking to secure unitary status.

Having been re-elected to the District Council Network’s Members Board (i.e. Executive) I sought to attend all District Council meetings and functions at the Conference.

James Brokenshire, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government was the key note speaker in the second plenary session. His speech was far more conciliatory than that of his predecessor last year and recognised the importance of Local Government. He signposted the ongoing financial pressures and informed Conference that he will shortly be publishing a prospectus for a further round of business rate retention pilots for 2019-2020. I trust you are all aware of the importance of such schemes locally, especially as we move to the transition to greater retention from 2020-2021.

The Social Care green paper is to be published in the Autumn. This is seen as another milestone in addressing the pressures on both Health and Social Care Services and in seeking to better integrate these services. 2020 will be a very big year for Local Government, it will bring the outcomes of both the Fair Funding Review and the Spending Review at the same time as we are supposed to see the rate of Business Rate Retention increasing to 75%. The Minister also highlighted the need for modernisation and the smarter use of technology. The pressure appears to be on to move ever further towards engaging our communities through digital technologies and social media.

The other key area emphasised was the Government’s priority on fixing what it sees as the broken housing market. This was addressed not only by the Secretary of State but by the Minister of Housing, Rishi Sunak, MP who addressed the Plenary Session on the second afternoon having previously addressed that days Conservative Group Meeting. The Government is indicating extra financial flexibility and the ability to bid for extra borrowing in order to invest in a wide range of affordable housing. Also giving councils that still have a Housing Revenue Account and Housing Associations, more certainty over their rental income. The affordable homes programme is being redesigned with Homes England having the ability to enter into longer term Strategic Partnership with Housing Associations to deliver affordable homes.

Even a cursory glance over the full agenda for the three days of Conference and the fringe meetings will make it obvious the degree to which Health and Social Services, Housing, and Local Government Funding going forward are currently occupying the minds of senior councillors and council officers. Even in our centralised system it is incumbent for Local Government to seek to take charge of its own destiny rather than to wait to “be done to”. To that end the LGA have released a series of papers under the banner of “moving the conversation on”. It is also to produce (hopefully next month) its own Social Care green paper. I would commend all of these to any of you with any desire to play a leading role in Local Government moving forwards.

Publication of Kent and Medway urgent stroke services consultation reports and the proposed introduction of Hyper Acute Stroke Units (HASUs)

The Joint Committee of Clinical Commissioning Groups has reviewed the public consultation responses, with a final decision on the implementation due to be made by the end of Winter 2018/19:

- **Summer to early autumn:** Evaluate all viable options and deliver workshops.
- **Autumn:** Identify a preferred option and develop a 'decision making business case'.
- **Winter:** Undertake the final assurance process with NHS England and NHS Improvement, and the Joint Committee of CCGs to agree the preferred option for implementation.

Overall there is support, particularly from Swale residents, for the creation of HASUs in Kent and Medway, to provide a localised service that encompasses the Hyper Acute service with acute stroke units and mini stroke clinics to improve access to specialist care and increase the quality of care for stroke patients. It is anticipated that these units will bring local stroke services up to the same standard as those already implemented across many parts of the country.

The preferred option was 'A', to deliver services from Darent Valley, Medway Maritime and the William Harvey Hospital, as these sites are seen as having the greatest reach and accessibility. However, despite an understanding of a 'three hospital model', that accounts for the limitations around specialist staffing, it is widely accepted that this should not drive the final decision, and that instead more should be done to improve recruitment and staff retention. It was also noted that East Kent appears to be at a disadvantage, and that options should be reconsidered to include the Kent and Canterbury Hospital, to ensure the provision of a service with fair and equal access to all residents and to minimise any potential increased travelling times to a specialist unit.

It was noted that the majority of group respondents, including Swale BC, are in support of the proposals, although there are reservations about current and future service provision, in particular rehabilitation services and care in the community, and that this after-care services must be considered as part of the review.

Swale BC has subscribed to the Kent and Medway Sustainability and Transformation Partnership bulletin, and will receive progress updates as the review is further analysed.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Leader