

Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 9 January 2019

Lower Thames Crossing update

Members will have seen that in responding to the consultation regarding the Lower Thames Crossing, I have made it clear the invidious position in which this Council is being placed. The ever increasing, Government imposed housing delivery targets that we face are not accompanied by investment to deliver road improvements which Highways England itself says are required. The preferred scheme for junction 5 does not yet have full funding, there is no clarity over critical improvements to junction 7, and there remains uncertainty about upgrading key junctions on the A249, despite our efforts to bid for Government money.

Highways England's own modelling shows the Lower Thames Crossing will shift significant amounts of traffic onto the A2/M2 corridor towards Dover, making an already unacceptable position worse. We need to see solid commitment to improving the highways infrastructure along the route and without explicit assurances from Government, we simply cannot support the scheme at this time.

Updates from recent meetings attended by the Leader:

In the last week of November I had the opportunity to attend two meetings, one regional and one national. I was able to use these opportunities to explain the Borough's position on the Lower Thames Crossing and indeed the difficulty of delivering a Local Plan with increased government housing figures with little or no funding for infrastructure and in particular highways network.

DCN Members' Board Meeting – Wednesday 28 November:

The key messages other than the discussion on delivering the local plan were as follows:

- Town Centre prospectus came out December, Expression of Interest March and bids in June.
- HIF Grants are oversubscribed, the vast majority will not be granted, most are likely to go to the north of the country.
- Swale need to keep in mind we have a responsibility for food inspections at Sheerness Port, this may increase depending on what is agreed re Brexit.

South East England Councils Executive Meeting – Friday 30 November:

The key discussion was on land value capture, the two main speakers were very theoretical and looked at alternatives such as CIL. Swale Members discussed the different viewpoints on who any increase in land value should go to once improvements in infrastructure have taken place.

The next report was on the Sir Oliver Letwin's review on Housing delivery and planning reform. Cllr Gerry Lewin commented that land-banking by developers has been omitted from the report.

SEEC subscription is going up by 2% next year which I believe is reasonable. However I have concern about the different committees that represent Kent, such as South East Strategic Leaders (SESL), SE7 as well as SEEC and I believe that the South East needs to have a collegiate voice.

Business Rate Pilot update

As has previously been reported Kent was a pilot for 100% business rate retention in 2018/19 alongside 10 other pilot areas. A significant amount of work went in to developing and agreeing a new bid which reflected conversations which officers at Maidstone Borough Council, the scheme "banker", had had with Government officials. These conversations had been very positive about the Kent scheme. In the event Kent has not been selected to be one of the pilots for 2019/20.

Only three areas (outside London and "devo" areas) will continue their pilots from 2018/19 to 2019/20: Solent, Berkshire and Leeds City Region (this time alongside North Yorkshire). Other areas that were unsuccessful from 2018/19 are Suffolk, Surrey, Devon, Gloucestershire, Lincolnshire, and Derbyshire. Commentators have observed that new areas include a number such as Lancashire, Norfolk and East Sussex which have been high profile about their funding difficulties. The Council will be responding to the consultation seeking clarification on why the Kent pilot was not successful. It has been confirmed that the business rate pool previously operated with ten other Borough/District Councils and KCC will be re-established.

The impact of the business rate pilot not proceeding as officers had assumed in presenting the December budget report is a loss of £337k but £113k of Revenue Support Grant will be reinstated leading to a net reduction in funding of £224k. I have written to the Secretary of State asking him to review his decision on the Kent Pilot.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Leader