

Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 21 January 2015

Swale means business

Keeping a flow of new businesses coming forward, whether large inward investors or small but growing local businesses, is underpinning our area's prosperity and this Council's ability to continue to deliver high quality services to its residents, with significant growth in new business rates that we now retain reflecting the success we have enjoyed in recent years. With well over 2million sq. ft. of new commercial floorspace having been built in the Borough since 2008, we have outperformed any other district in Kent and by quite some margin. I am anticipating that we can maintain this success as new planning applications for commercial development keep coming forward, for instance Aldi's proposals at Queenborough, Eurolink Phase 5 in Sittingbourne, and Dane Park in Faversham, in addition to that made by Spirit of Sittingbourne.

The figures for Jobseekers Allowance are currently at 1,761 people showing that Swale has delivered a 34% decrease over the past year, the third highest in Kent and ahead of the national and County picture over the same period. There do, of course, remain challenges, not least for young people; but against a national picture of apprenticeships falling, Swale has managed to largely hold its ground, with the highest number of apprenticeships of any district in the County in the 2013/14 academic year.

Members will also recall that in the first weekend of December we supported local traders in promoting the national campaign 'Small Business Saturday' on 6 December. Local traders tell us that a successful Christmas period is key to their trading year, so as part of this we also provided free all day parking as part of the campaign, followed by 'free after two' parking running from 8 December until Christmas eve, with Sundays free all day. Also on Small Business Saturday the Council gave away 3,500 bags of salt to help residents during any cold weather, the third year of a scheme which has been much welcomed by traders and local residents alike.

Positive future for Sheerness

Looking forward, we will find out at the end of January whether our bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a £1.1 million Townscape Heritage scheme for Sheerness is successful. The bid was submitted in summer 2014, and successfully passed through the regional committee in December, and is now being considered by a Heritage Lottery Fund's Board of Trustees against competition from across England.

December also saw the conclusion of Peel Ports' consultation on its Master Plan for the Port of Sheerness. Peel have been delighted by the interest shown by local people and the generally positive response the document received. We look forward to hearing how they now intend to respond to the issues which have been raised, and to progress some of the opportunities which the company believe will help the Port grow its business and create new jobs.

Delivering the current and proposed Local Plan

A significant milestone has been reached by agreeing to the Submission Draft Local Plan which, following formal consultation, is anticipated to be submitted to the Secretary of State by the end of March 2015.

In line with the emerging Local Plan, significant progress has been made regarding development within the Borough including:

- granted permission for 43,000m² light industrial at Eurolink 5;
- resolved to grant permission for major mixed use development at Love Lane, Faversham, including 10,000 m² light industrial;
- continued development of Neats Court site and further progress on preparing the Queenborough and Rushenden regeneration area for new development – currently subject to a revised masterplan consultation;
- a recent planning application submitted for a major Aldi Distribution Centre at Neats court; and
- in line with the Council's corporate priorities, received a major planning application of the regeneration of Sittingbourne Town Centre.

Joint Waste Contract update

The financial and efficiency improvements derived from the new joint waste collection arrangement with Ashford and Maidstone Councils have already been well documented. It is worth noting now, however, that one year on since the new arrangements commenced, there have been some very pleasing improvements in performance too. With the support of our residents, since the introduction of food waste collections, our recycling performance has improved significantly, from 33% to more than 40%. Similarly, there has been a notable reduction in the volumes of residual waste being collected from households.

Over the forthcoming months we will strive to improve this further still, and to encourage even more households to participate in the improved recycling services we now provide.

Health update

As part of our ongoing engagement with, and scrutiny of, those parts of the Health Service which supply services to the residents of Swale, I and others will be meeting with the acting Chief Executive of the Medway Foundation Trust next week to push for further urgent improvements. The Swale Health and Wellbeing Board, including the Swale Mental Health Action Group, has agreed to support the development of Wellbeing Cafés in the Borough, which have opened at the Pulse Cafe in Sittingbourne, and at the Sheppey Healthy Living Centre.

The cafés will be staffed by a multi-agency team, including voluntary sector organisations specialising in mental ill health, working collaboratively to offer support to Swale residents in crisis. The Wellbeing Café will enable residents to have access to a range of community information on mental health and wellbeing, as well as invaluable peer support which promotes integration into the community.

Housing

Our Housing Department has long been very proactive in preventing homelessness. In some cases this cannot be prevented and therefore a family needs emergency accommodation for a temporary period, so I am pleased to say we are now making full use of the property we took the decision to purchase to prevent homeless households having to be placed in temporary accommodation away from their support network and schools.

We will work closely with the residents in this accommodation to ensure that they are moved on to a more suitable permanent home as quickly as possible. And we will monitor the success of this project to gauge the potential to increase this type of provision in the future as I know colleagues in the Chamber have suggested on a number of occasions.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Council Leader