

Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 18 February 2015

Thamesteel Sheerness

I am very pleased to report that the Council has reached agreement with Peel Holdings, as freeholder of the Sheerness Steel site, and the Al-Tuwairqi Group, who as TS Sheerness Steel Ltd are leaseholders of the site. After many months of legal negotiation, the Al-Tuwairqi Group have surrendered their Lease and vacated the site, leaving it free for Peel Holdings to develop and to return it to a useful and locally valuable commercial use. The Council's debt for business rates has been secured against some of the assets of the site, and we will be working closely with Peel Holdings over the coming months to make sure that the site generates as much employment and local value as possible.

Junction 5 on the M2

As Members are aware, we have been intensively lobbying to persuade government that Junction 5 on the M2 is a major constraint on regeneration and development within the Borough, and that structural improvements need to be made to it to enable further growth. In this lobbying we have been ably supported by Kent County Council as the Highways Authority, and by Gordon Henderson MP.

I am delighted, therefore, that in the Autumn Statement, just before Christmas, the Government included Junction 5 on the M2 within its National Road Investment Strategy, with a substantial funding allocation which is intended to provide a long term structural solution to the problem.

It is encouraging that the Highways Agency has already held a meeting with Swale officers in January. Such a speedy action from the Highways Agency is both unusual and welcome. I am very pleased that it is now firmly on government's agenda as a priority project and plans are already in place for early survey work, although inevitably a major project such as this will take time to come to fruition. I was pleased to be briefed on progress so far on site by officers in the company of Sittingbourne and Sheppey MP Gordon Henderson, Kent County Council Cabinet Member David Brazier, and Ward Councillor Nicholas Hampshire.

Local Plan and Associated Planning Applications

As I mentioned in my last Leader's Statement, the Submission Draft of the Local Plan is on track to be submitted to the Secretary of State by the end of March 2015. The consultation has now closed and responses are being summarised and collated in readiness for the submission.

We have a number of significant planning applications in front of us at the moment, including the Aldi application for a regional distribution centre at Neats Court on Sheppey, which promises to deliver some 450 jobs and which I anticipate will be in front of the Planning Committee within the next couple of months.

As Members are well aware, the Spirit of Sittingbourne planning application for the Town Centre was formally submitted before Christmas, and we expect it to go to a special Planning Committee meeting in March. The application is for the whole of

Phase 1 of the Sittingbourne Regeneration Project, including a multiscreen cinema and associated restaurants as a leisure hub, over 200 residential apartments on some of our car parking land at Cockleshell Walk and Spring Lane, additional large format retail units on the waste site on Eurolink Way, and a multi-storey car park to replace the car parking spaces which will be lost as part of the development. With a total development value of just short of £50m in this first phase, it will be an enormously important step in securing a prosperous future for Sittingbourne.

Climate Change

The Met Office has recently confirmed that 2014 was England's hottest year, and also the fourth wettest ever. The record means that eight of the UK's ten warmest years have happened since 2002, while five of the UK's six wettest years have occurred since 2000. In August 2003 a UK record temperature of 38.5°C was recorded in Swale, and December 2013 saw flooding across the Borough.

With this news it is timely to remind ourselves of our commitment to both mitigate for and adapt to climate change. Swale has made commitments both at Borough and County level, being among the first partnerships and boroughs nationally to sign up to Climate Local in 2012. We are making good progress towards the commitments and targets as reported in Spring 2014. However, we must not be complacent and so are looking to renew our commitment.

Swale continues to be a key climate change player in Kent, with both members and officers sitting on the Environment Champions Group and the Kent Climate Change Network. The Council will be making a significant contribution to the refresh of the Kent Environment Strategy over the next few months.

As part of raising awareness of the impacts of climate change we have recently published a householders' guide to adapting homes for climate change which you will have received a copy of, so please do share this with your residents when it is launched.

Health

The Better Care Fund Plan for Kent has now been approved by Department of Health. There will be one pooled budget held by Kent County Council (KCC), but with seven distinct chapters for each Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) area, and KCC is looking at the role of local Health and Wellbeing Boards in monitoring and overseeing performance of the Better Care Fund at the local level.

Disabled Facilities Grant funds will go into the pooled budget and will then be allocated back out to Districts for 2015/16, with arrangements for future years' funding as yet uncertain and discussions between districts and KCC are on-going.

We have again met with the Interim Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Medway Foundation Trust to discuss their plans to address the still failing A&E targets of seeing patients within four hours. The Medway Foundation Trust are in the process of recruiting a permanent CEO and will be presenting to Kent Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) along with Swale CCG to put forward their proposed actions.

The local Health and Wellbeing Board continues to meet, with a very packed agenda at our last meeting on 28 January. The Board has commissioned a Health Improvement Partnership (HIP) for Swale, constituted as a sub-group of the Health and Wellbeing Board, to ensure that we can influence local health issues. The HIP will be responsible for developing the Local Health Action Plan for Swale, and has already identified eight priority objectives for the Board to agree and focus on over the next 12 months.

Kent CC are also to develop some new Terms of Reference for the proposed local Children's Operational Groups (which are to replace the previous Local Children's Trust Boards) which will also be a sub-group of the Health and Wellbeing Board. A workshop with key partners will be hosted to determine how everyone can work better together for the benefit of children and young persons.

Canterbury & Coastal CCG have invited expressions of interest to run the Minor Injury Unit (MIU) service at Faversham. A positive response to the notice has been received, and meetings have been held with potential providers to market test the proposals further. The CCG will move forward with procurement once the outcome of this testing has been reviewed. We are pressing for this to happen quickly so that the future of the MIU is secured.

We are currently working with Kent Police on developing and implementing a Mental Health Concordat, which is a partnership agreement aimed at helping people experiencing a mental health crisis to get the right support and access to services 24 hours a day. This involves working with Kent Public Health around suicide prevention, and promoting the 'Live it Well' website. The aim is to have all the CCGs signed up to the Concordat so that all Kent residents can receive the same quality of service irrespective of where they live, which will be of great benefit to Swale residents.

For Canterbury & Coastal CCG, which covers Faversham, implementing new national targets for initial access to mental health services, including counselling and care planning, are now a strategic priority, along with Circulatory Disease, Breast Cancer, Neurology, and detection long term conditions. These are the first national targets to be agreed for Mental Health services, and therefore they are very welcome, but we will continue to challenge both CCGs to not only reach but improve upon the national targets of 75% of adults receiving their first treatment session within six weeks of referral, and 95% treated within 18 weeks. Moreover, we have voiced our concerns about the need for much earlier intervention, which would not only improve the quality of life and outcomes of residents with the need for such services, but surely reduce secondary care costs in the longer term.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Leader