

Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 17 June 2015

Queen's Speech

The first Queen's Speech of the new Parliament set out a positive and wide-ranging legislative and executive programme for the first majority Conservative Government for almost 20 years. There will be a continued emphasis on devolving power from Whitehall to local areas through a Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill, which will enable combined authorities to take on broader roles than just transport and economic development, generally on the proviso that they are chaired by a directly elected mayor.

The combined authority model is a natural fit with large cities with distinct economic geographies, but its appropriateness for two-tier shire-county areas is less well understood. Nevertheless, Swale sees clear advantages for residents in the transfer of Whitehall decision-making power in key policy areas to local representatives, and I will continue to work closely with neighbouring authorities, as well as KCC, to determine how we can best take advantage of these new possibilities.

The government is committed to striving for full employment, aiming to have the highest proportion of people in work of any G7 country. The Queen's Speech set out some of the ways the government intends to accomplish this, including reducing the working-age benefit cap to £23,000 per household and investing the savings in an expansion of the apprenticeships programme, which has already benefitted hundreds of young people from Swale since 2010. There will also be an expansion of the Troubled Families programme, which has already seen 321 Swale families with the most complex needs and highest cost to the public purse being 'turned around'.

There will also be significant changes to planning law, including a new statutory register of brownfield sites, and a target of 90% of suitable sites to be covered by a local development order by 2020, as well as new rights for self-builders to benefit from local authority support in identifying suitable plots. Further sensible measures in the Queen's Speech which will affect Swale include the banning of the production and supply of so-called 'legal highs', a consultation on tightening up public agencies' duties to protect the most vulnerable children, and the reform of the statutory complaints system, with a single new public service ombudsman to replace, among others, the current local government ombudsman.

Finance update

No Administration since the Council was formed in 1974 has achieved five years of no Council Tax increases. I am proud as Leader of this Conservative-led Council that we have delivered this wonderful achievement while at the same time delivering improvements and protecting services and jobs.

Every budget since our successful election in 2011, I have said that due to Government cuts in our funding, it is really tough to deliver the services our residents deserve. Budget planning against a background of uncertainty makes life very difficult. We do not always know from year to year what our settlement will be. The Chancellor has already said they are only half way through their austerity programme, and we can expect continued cuts of unknown levels to Local Government over the next five years.

The challenges for the future are going to be many, but one certainty is that we have proven ourselves over the past five years, and we will continue to overcome whatever challenges we face in the next four years of our Administration.

Best Council Results for Swale

Swale participates in the 'Best Companies' survey as a means of benchmarking our level of staff engagement with other top employers. The most recent survey was conducted in late 2014, with results available shortly before the election. The benchmarking is based on the total staff engagement score achieved by the organisation, out of a possible 900 points. Scores above 600 give the organisation 'one to watch' status, while scores above 660 translate into a 'star' category.

This year Swale achieved a score of 637, confirming our 'one to watch' status and leaving us only 23 points short of 'one star' status. This is our best ever result, being a 3% improvement on our 2013 score, and a 12% improvement on our 2008 score.

Among the statements with which Swale employees most readily agreed were 'I believe I can make a valuable contribution to the success of this organisation' and 'My work is an important part of my life'.

As in previous years, we are developing an action plan in response to the feedback from the survey, which will include better support to staff on stress management, and the introduction of the 'developing everyone' framework to ensure that all staff have access to the right development opportunities to achieve their full potential.

Housing Enforcers programme

As some of you may have seen on the BBC recently, our Housing teams took part in the Housing Enforcers show. Officers who participated thoroughly enjoyed being able to showcase their work, and it really demonstrated the variety and complexity of their services. The feedback from partners and customers has been very positive, and the programme definitely gave us the opportunity to show the public how committed Swale Borough Council staff are to delivering excellent services.

Faversham Minor Injuries Unit update

I am very pleased to announce that after a great deal of work by Canterbury and Coastal Clinical Commissioning Group and partners, including SBC Members, Faversham's Minor Injuries Unit will remain open and offer x-rays at its current location in Faversham Cottage Hospital.

A three year contract has been awarded to Faversham Medical Practice to run the service, starting at the end of August, with an option to extend for a further two years. The Minor Injuries Unit will be equipped to provide x-rays locally, and this facility is expected to be available within six months of the August contract start date. This is because modifications need to be made at Faversham Cottage Hospital to accommodate the x-ray machine. The x-ray facility will be for both injuries and for GPs to refer patients to, so that local people will not have to travel out of the Town to have an x-ray. The new service will be open from 8am to 8pm seven days a week including all bank and public holidays. As soon as the x-ray facility is operational, x-rays will be available, as a minimum, for six hours a day, Monday to Friday.

I believe this to be the best possible outcome for Faversham residents, and I would like to extend my thanks to the members of the MIU steering group who have made this happen. It is a great example of how we take our community leadership role seriously, and work with the NHS and local people to decide what facilities and services are needed in our Borough.

Magna Carta Rediscovered exhibition

The 'Magna Carta Rediscovered' exhibition, which opened on 23 May, has, I am told, received something over 7,000 visitors of all ages. It consists of a mix of interactive displays setting out the importance of the medieval Magna Carta to today's concepts of the freedom of the individual, democracy, and society. With Magna Carta as the centrepiece, the exhibition highlights the rest of the Faversham Charter Collection and the Town's civic regalia. I am pleased to say that this was made possible in part through a grant of £9,950 from Swale Borough Council towards curation and development of this exhibition, which goes on tour from 28 June.

Additional events have included 'Any Questions' with Jonathan Dimbleby; a series of Alexander Lectures on Magna Carta and its role in the emergence of democracy and human rights, including the likes of Professor Louise Wilkinson, Professor of Medieval History, Canterbury Christ Church University, Richard Eales, former Head of History, University of Kent, Stephen Bowen, Senior Lecturer in Human Rights, Kingston University, London, and the inimitable Dr David Starkey, constitutional historian and presenter of BBC 2's David Starkey's Magna Carta; a gala concert of a new work, Toads on a Tapestry, on 6 June; and the Magna Carta Weekend, just gone, where the streets around Faversham's historic Guildhall came alive with the sights and sounds of medieval England, and the Faversham Youth Choir, supported by adult voices and Faversham Chamber Orchestra, performed Trial by Jury by Gilbert and Sullivan as their contribution to Faversham's Magna Carta celebrations.

Overall it has been a really tremendous and indeed successful exhibition, that has showcased the Borough, and Faversham in particular, to the world.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Council Leader