

Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 29 July 2015

LGA Annual Conference – Harrogate 30 June – 2 July 2015

This year's Annual Conference was held in Harrogate 30 June – 2 July, with over 1,400 delegates in attendance. Swale Borough Council was represented by myself and Cllr Ken Pugh, as well as by Chief Executive Mr Abdool Kara, and Mr David Clifford, Policy and Performance Manager. The conference took place 50 days into the new Government, halfway through their crucial 'first 100 days' of office and at a time where spending decisions are being made which will affect local government for years to come.

Outside of the main plenary sessions, I tended to concentrate my time on those sessions which were centred on devolution and the whole spectrum of the change agenda with regard to in particular combined authorities and any potential review of Local Enterprise Partnership boundaries.

Councillor Pugh concentrated especially on those sessions, of which there were many, which were focussed on the ever important health agenda. Having said that, we both attended, and were engaged by, the presentations from Secretary of State for Health James Hunt MP, and NHS Chief Executive Simon Stevens. Cllr Pugh has drafted his own report on the Conference which I am sure he will be willing to share with any Member who has a special interest in this policy area.

Delegates had a timely opportunity to challenge and debate the progress made by the new Government with Ministers and shadow spokespersons alongside other key players from central and local government, and private and voluntary sector partners. There were also notable speeches by Greg Clark MP, Lord Michael Hesletine, and as previously mentioned Jeremy Hunt MP, and NHS Chief Executive, Simon Stevens.

The main themes of the conference can perhaps be summarised as Devolution, Deficit and Digital. Many of the headline speakers in the plenary sessions talked about their experiences of – and expectations from – devolution, and it is clear that influential figures in central government, including at HM Treasury, are recognising the constraints an over-centralised political system imposes on the economy.

This was brought home particularly powerfully by Greg Clark, whose passion for and commitment to local government will, I am sure, make him an excellent Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. Within Swale I will ensure that we continue to press the case for Kent to be at the forefront of this agenda so that our residents and businesses can derive maximum benefit from the devolution deals on offer.

In terms of the deficit, it was repeatedly made clear that the Government intends to continue to focus on reducing the deficit, and the overall national debt as a proportion of GDP, and the significant role that local government will be expected to play in that as a non-protected department.

Whilst unsurprisingly Ministers were not giving any details away, the central message was that local government had to plan to make broadly the same level of savings in this Parliament as had been asked for, and I must say delivered, in the last, even if this ask of us was wrapped in warm words about how the rest of the public sector could learn from councils about how to deliver cost savings without reducing public satisfaction in services. I am certain that once again Swale Borough Council will rise to whatever challenge is put before us when the Comprehensive Spending Review is published, likely to be on or around 25 November this year.

As a local politician with more years' experience than I care to remember, I was impressed and heartened by the palpable sense of realism, optimism and ambition that was on display throughout the conference this year.

LGA - General Assembly

As usual conference was preceded by the annual meeting of the General Assembly. The meeting formally welcomed Cllr Gary Porter as the new Chairman of the LGA. Our near neighbour Councillor David Hodge, Leader of Surrey County Council, has taken over from Gary Porter as Leader of the Conservative Group on the LGA.

As a consequence of his new political leading role at the LGA, Cllr Hodge has stood down as Vice Chairman of South East England Councils (SEEC) and did not stand for the Chairmanship, which Cllr Gordon Keymer CBE, Tandridge Borough Council, had to relinquish as he had served his maximum term of office.

As a result of this SEEC has a new leadership team: Cllr Nicholas Heslop, Tunbridge and Malling Borough Council, is the new Chairman, with Cllr Roy Perry of Hampshire County Council as the new Deputy Chairman, and Cllr David Monk, Shepway District Council, as the new Treasurer/Secretary. I know Cllr Hodge very well having worked closely with him both on the SEEC Executive and the LGA People and Places Board.

The Assembly also formally welcomed Lord Kerslake as the President of the LGA. Previously Chief Executive of both LB Hounslow and Sheffield, and Permanent Secretary at the Department for Communities and Local Government, and Head of the Home Civil Service, he will replace Lord Best who is standing down as LGA President after ten years in the role.

LGA - Senior Management Changes

The LGA said farewell to Chief Executive Carolyn Downs at their Leadership Board meeting on 15 July. Meanwhile, newly-appointed LGA Deputy Chief Executive Sarah Pickup, currently Deputy Chief Executive at Hertfordshire County Council, will join the LGA on 1 September.

Fixed Penalty Notice Pilot update

As members may be aware, in late March we started a six month pilot project to tackle littering and dog fouling within the Borough. Contracted officers have been issuing Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) to anyone caught dropping litter or failing to clean up after their dog. It is anticipated that this robust enforcement will help to 'nudge' residents into doing the right thing with their litter or dog mess.

At the time of writing this statement I am aware that nearly 600 FPNs have been issued, with a payment rate of around 70%. Those opting not to pay the FPN will be dealt with accordingly through the courts. Both the officers' time and the legal actions are being funded through the FPN income stream.

It is still too early to accurately measure the impact that the project has had on the amount of litter on the street. However, I am aware that this initiative has been received in a positive way by local residents, and this has been reflected in the press. The scheme has also proved to be very popular on our social media pages.

CCG recruitment of young people to take access courses in social and health care

The Swale Clinical Commissioning Group have identified recruitment and retention of a skilled health and social care workforce as one of their greatest challenges going forward, and are working with partners to tackle the issue. In response they are developing a pilot Level 2 Health and Social Care qualification with the involvement of partners, including Swale BC and the Oasis Academy. This is a critical issue and we are pleased to support the Swale CCG in creating training and job opportunities for the young people of Swale.

Community Safety Unit update

The Community Safety Unit continues to tackle Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB), supporting those highest risk victims both during and out of work hours through Operation Endeavour. Total ASB incidents reported to Kent Police for the Borough continues to see a reduction, currently at a 2.3% reduction moving through the busy summer period.

Borough-wide preventative campaigns continue to be delivered through the CSU to tackle burglary, both dwelling and other than dwelling (sheds and outbuildings). The Partnership has also been focusing on Sheerness as a priority area, drawing together resources to tackle crime, ASB, fly-tipping and deliberate fires.

Looking forward, the partnership will continue its 2015/16 strategic focus on tackling crime, ASB, violence against women and girls, and a renewed focus on the needs of offenders.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Council Leader