

Leaders Statement 27 January Council meeting

Sittingbourne Town Centre Update

I am sure that members are already aware of the exciting news that was released yesterday concerning The Light Cinema company signing a deal to join our Spirit of Sittingbourne consortium. This is a watershed moment for the realisation of our Town Centre regeneration vision, with construction of the cinema planned to start in October 2016, and completion set for early 2018.

The Light Cinemas, one of the UK's fastest growing cinema operators, has agreed to join the £57m Spirit of Sittingbourne regeneration project with its plans for an eight-screen cinema in Sittingbourne Town Centre. The new 24,000 sq ft cinema is planned alongside six new family restaurants as the centrepiece of the new leisure quarter which will sit between the High Street and Sittingbourne Train Station.

This deal will bring one of the most innovative cinema operators in the country to Sittingbourne. Light Cinemas offers something different from other chains, and the decision to make this their first investment in Kent shows their faith in our plans for Sittingbourne's regeneration. It gives us a cinema operator committed to working with the community to provide the high quality entertainment local people want, and will have a positive knock-on effect in attracting other interesting and exciting businesses to both the scheme and the Town Centre area more generally.

A249 Closure

Members will be all too painfully aware of the ongoing closure of the northbound A249, and the impact this is having on the life of our Borough. This road is the most significant north-south axis in Swale, and the only high-capacity route to and from the mainland for the 42,000 residents and the businesses of the Isle of Sheppey. The economy of the western part of Swale is highly dependent on large-scale logistics and small businesses with a need for mobility, both of which sectors are being hamstrung by the road closure. The cost of this closure as a result of lost productivity to local enterprises - and indeed to the public purse - is therefore huge.

I am sure we all accept that emergency works are sometimes necessary, but it seems to me that once those have taken place we should expect an appropriate level of resources to be brought to bear to ensure that the road can be repaired and reopened as expeditiously as possible. Highways England appear to have a different interpretation of what constitutes an appropriate level of resources compared with what I am sure is perfectly reasonably expected by members of this Council.

In view of the economic damage the ongoing closure is causing, to say nothing of the significant inconvenience to which our residents are being put, Cllr Whiting was in touch with the Department for Transport while I was away on holiday, and since my return I have written to Andrew Jones, the Minister with responsibility for roads, to ask him to support our efforts to persuade Highways England of the urgency of this matter. It goes without saying that we will continue these efforts to galvanise Highways England into expeditious action until the road is fully repaired and reopened.

Devolution update

In my October Statement to full Council, I updated members on the early stages of devolution discussion in Kent. Since then discussions have been ongoing primarily at a 'cluster' level – between Kent County Council and separately east Kent, west Kent, north Kent and Maidstone, which is currently negotiating on its own. I have ensured that Swale is represented at both officer and member level at the North Kent Meetings which reflect our current membership of Thames Gateway Kent Partnership. Due to Faversham's historic links to East Kent and particularly the current Health Provision boundaries we have also been invited and attended the most recent meetings regarding future arrangements in East Kent.

I have to say that I believe that the prospects of a Kent-wide deal emerging any time soon are somewhat slim. Most of the discussions have focussed around how districts work with the County, with very little discussion on what I believe to be the more important area of how we in Kent can negotiate freedoms and flexibilities direct with government and its various departments and agencies. Mr Carter is also on record as stating his scepticism of whether the various devolution deals that have been signed elsewhere, for example in Manchester and Sheffield, would be suitable in 'greater Kent'.

Given that, the partners in north Kent have agreed to undertake a piece of work looking at whether Government might be interested in a devolution agreement of some kind on the basis of the population that we collectively serve, focussing specifically on growth and regeneration. Happily in timing terms this coincides with a revival of the Government's interest in the Thames Gateway, presumably as a key factor in realising its aspirations for housing and jobs growth. The local government authorities have no intention of seeking to negotiate a full Combined Authority type approach, but there may be enough that we can put on the table for Government to be persuaded to devolve matters around, for example, skills funding, infrastructure prioritisation, business support, and jobs creation.

Meanwhile discussions have also taken place regarding the situation of Maidstone which, whilst the County Town, is nonetheless too small on its own to be of interest to Government. One proposal is that Maidstone may join the north Kent cluster, and there would be advantages to it doing so, not least the increase in scale, but there may also be disadvantages, including the potential dilution of the Thames Gateway 'brand'. This is a fast moving area, and I will continue to keep members updated as discussions progress. I am well aware that there are also discussions ongoing within some of the political parties in Kent, not just my own. Depending on progress there may come a time when it is appropriate to have a full scale debate on the options and opportunities.

Corporate peer challenge

In early 2012 Swale was one of the first local authorities to volunteer for a 'corporate peer challenge'. The peer challenge is the LGA's own replacement for earlier external inspection regimes, and was one of the means by which the local government sector was able to convince central government that it should be responsible for its own performance improvement.

Peer challenges are carried out by a review team comprised of senior members and officers from other councils, and are generally focused on leadership, governance, resilience, and particular areas identified by each council as one in which it would benefit from external support and challenge.

In 2012 the review team noted Swale's "rapid improvement in a range of areas", its "positive organisational culture", and its "clear focus and ability to be bold and flexible". Many of the systems and processes which had contributed to that improvement were still new in 2012, and in the ensuing years they have matured and become embedded in the culture of the organisation. I am therefore of the view that the time is now right for us to undergo a second peer challenge. Once again, we will be one of the first councils to do this, and have agreed with the LGA that the review team will be in Swale from Tuesday 19 to Thursday 21 April.

I am delighted to be able to report that Cllr Chris Millar from Daventry DC, who was part of the review team in 2012, will once again be part of the review team in 2016, while other reviewers will be new to us. In addition to the areas of focus which are common to all peer challenges, I have requested that this one should focus on our regeneration ambitions, our response to the need become self-funding, and whether we are fully exploiting any potential linkages between these two objectives.

Officers are currently working with LGA officials on the timetable for the review team's time in Swale, and I will ensure that members are kept informed of developments as these details are being finalised.

Changes to Cabinet portfolio responsibilities

I originally notified Council of the responsibilities of each of the Cabinet portfolios for this year during Annual Council on 20 May 2015. In consultation with Cabinet members, I have now decided to expand the remit of two portfolios.

In addition to the localism brief, I have asked Cllr Whiting to take on primary responsibility for income generation, considering new ways for the organisation to increase its income in preparation for the phasing out of revenue support grant, which will take place over the next few years. The need – and in many cases, thanks to the Localism Act, the option – for councils to develop and exploit sources of revenue on a commercial basis is new to us, as it is for our peers across the local government sector, and I am confident that Cllr Whiting will waste no time in learning from the successes and failures of others, and pursuing the options which look to be most promising to Swale.

In addition to the performance brief, I have asked Cllr Wilcox to become more involved in strategic partnerships, with a particular focus on how shared service arrangements are delivering for our residents. This will involve Cllr Wilcox being more involved in developing future policies and making decisions on bodies such as Mid Kent Improvement Partnership Board, South Thames Gateway Building Control Partnership, and the Kent Waste Partnership, whilst not necessarily replacing myself or the relevant Cabinet Member on those boards. I am confident that Cllr Wilcox's professional background and specialist skillset will be of great value in enhancing still further the benefits we are able to derive from sharing services with neighbouring councils.