

## **Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 16 March 2016**

Over the past decade Swale has led the way, delivering more new commercial development than other districts in Kent. This has brought benefits for local residents, creating new opportunities for employment, and also for this Council as we have needed to establish new income streams, not least through retained business rates. Our success in securing growth has helped protect Council services, and we are determined that this continues to be the case.

Infrastructure is, of course, a vital component in supporting our ambition. Meetings with Highways England have shown good progress against the redesign of Junction 5 of the M2, to address the safety and capacity issues, which local residents and businesses must contend with daily. It is anticipated that public consultation will be carried out later this year, possibly late summer. We are also currently in the throes of the consultation on the preferred option for the proposed Lower Thames Crossing, linking Thurrock to Gravesham via a bored tunnel. Given the strategic importance of this, we are actively encouraging local businesses to make their voices heard prior to 24 March, when the consultation closes.

Whilst broadly supporting this route, the Council will lobby for proper consideration of the wider implications for the road network across Kent. In Swale our concerns are focused on the A249 and Junction 5 of the M2, and Junction 7 at Brenley Corner. Whilst both junctions are over-capacity, only Junction 5 is within the current build programme for Highways England. Yet both face the prospect of additional pressure from through-traffic generated by the new crossing and from growth, not just in Swale but also from other parts of Kent. This is something that must be factored into the financial planning for this multi- billion pound investment.

I am encouraged that businesses continue to show an appetite to invest in the area, the result of many years of business engagement and promotion of Swale. Over the coming months the strong market interest that has been shown in Dane Park in Faversham can now be secured, with the S.106 for the development having been agreed. On our largest business park, and indeed one of the largest in Kent, Eurolink, we are seeing positive movement, driven by growing local companies looking to consolidate and expand their operations locally – and I was very pleased that Trenport Investments were able to confirm its commitment to the area at the end of last year by announcing that it will forward-fund infrastructure work on Eurolink, an investment worth around £1 million.

Permission is also about to be issued for a new business park, on land south of Kemsley Mill. To be known as Fulcrum Business Park, this will provide up to 8,000m<sup>2</sup> of smaller, high quality business units, in contrast to the larger sites at Eurolink and at Kemsley Fields. The development also brings with it benefits for the local community, offering the opportunity to extend and enhance Milton Creek Country Park.

On Sheppey, progress continues to be made at Queenborough and Rushenden. 2016 will see the development of the new ALDI Regional Distribution Centre, creating another 400 jobs. We also see continued development at Neatscourt, which to date has created at least 450 new jobs, a number set to grow as a new pub and retail outlets open over the coming months.

On the housing front, we continue to work closely with the Homes and Communities Agency, and I am pleased to say they are currently finalising the procurement of their preferred developer for the first phase of housing development at Q & R.

The Council is also working with the Dockyard Preservation Trust, supporting their efforts to bring the Dockyard Church back into use, potentially as a hub for small businesses. While this is a challenging project, the persistence and ambition of the Trust has the potential to bring something new and exciting to the Island, which would demonstrate how some of Swale's significant heritage assets can be brought back to life.

I would like to touch on the retirement of James Speck, as Director of Kent Science Park, at the end of February. Those who were involved prior to James joining KSP at the start of the recession at 2007 will recall how toxic the relationship between KSP and sections of the local community could be. James must take much of the credit for the massive improvement in this relationship. Under his leadership KSP has secured substantial inward investment (including an estimated £85m foreign direct investment), and nurtured start-up and early stage hi-tech companies. Importantly, employment has grown from c900 to 1,650 employees at the site during this time, and is likely to exceed forecast targets over the next year. Given the recent £95m sale of KSP, along with four other sites, we are arranging to meet the new owners next month to discuss how we build upon this legacy and the Science Park's reputation as a centre for innovation led growth.

To help local young people take advantage of some of the very exciting opportunities that Kent Science Park and other local employers are offering, the Council remains committed to bringing new learning provision to Swale to support the employability of our young people. To this end we have recently had initial very encouraging dialogue on the potential for a new UTC in the Borough, and I anticipate to be able to report positive news on this soon as we move these discussions forward.

To touch on related other matters, Members may be recall that much of the Borough falls within the new East Kent or Mid-Kent LEADER programme areas. LEADER is able to offer grants to support projects which encourage more economic activity and employment in our rural areas and market towns, typically of up to £50,000. After many months of negotiation between KCC and DeFRA, the programme is now live and I would encourage all Members to let our Regeneration Team know about any projects they believe might have the potential for support. Pre-application advice is available, and the programme will run until 2019.

Finally, at the Planning Committee on 10 March the decision on the new community centre at Great Easthall was delegated to officers to approve, subject to the satisfactory conclusion of a small number of outstanding issues. We still expect that, subject to the above, construction will begin in early July. The Centre will provide an excellent focal point for this new community, and local residents are working together to form a Trust to manage the Centre once it is complete. We look forward to the Centre being opened to the community in Spring 2017.

**Cllr Andrew Bowles**  
**Council Leader**