

Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 27 July 2016

Brexit implications and new Central Government changes

Following the Brexit vote and the subsequent resignation of David Cameron we now have, as you all know, a new Prime Minister in Theresa May. Mrs May has moved very quickly to radically recast the Cabinet. Local government has lost four of the five ministers who were previously at the DCLG - only Marcus Jones survives. We will now have to work hard to establish relationships with the new ministerial team. At least the new Planning Minister of State, Gavin Barwell, number two to Sajid Javid, is someone I know slightly, and indeed worked with prior to his becoming an MP. Like the new Prime Minister and at least one other member of the new DCLG team, Gavin is an ex-councillor.

It will take some time for the policies of the new government, and indeed critically those of the new Chancellor Philip Hammond, towards devolution and local government in general to become clear. A large amount of government attention and civil servant time will, of necessity, switch to the Brexit negotiations, to be led by David Davis.

Local government as a sector has been clear that it expects to have a significant voice within the negotiations, and Lord Porter for the LGA has argued strongly that powers transferred to the UK from Brussels must not automatically revert to Westminster, but in many cases should be devolved to local areas. Certainly one of the themes in Greg Clark's last speech to the LGA conference as Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, was that much of the criticism which was levelled at the remote nature of the European institutions during the EU Referendum campaign applies hardly any less to Westminster.

Among the most significant implications of the Brexit vote for local authorities in the longer term will be its effect on the economy, and the fiscal repercussions of this for council funding; and of course the broad range of council activities, from waste collection to regeneration, which are currently influenced to a greater or lesser extent by laws and policies originating in Brussels. However, it is too early yet to be able to make any firm predictions as to how these issues will play out in practice.

More immediately, many local areas in England are concerned about the potential loss of at least part of the £5.6bn of European funding they are due to receive between now and 2020. Of course, following the UK exiting the European Union, the government will have at least double that amount currently paid to the EU to reallocate. For Swale, as a socioeconomically disadvantaged part of a generally affluent area, the most pressing concern is the potential loss of European Social Fund monies aimed at improving skills and employability. Much of this funding is administered by the DWP, but often subcontracted locally to grassroots community organisations. Most of the Borough is covered by a LEADER action groups, and future funding for such rural economic development initiatives could be at risk.

I and senior officers will of course keep Members up to date on developments as more information becomes available.

LGF bidding process

The congestion being experienced along the A2500 Lower Road on the Isle of Sheppey has been causing increasing difficulties for local residents, and as the vital flow of visitors to Sheppey takes off over the summer months, the situation has become worse still.

Swale Borough Council, Minster Parish Council, Gordon Henderson, and the wider community have all been lobbying for a solution, and over recent months we have made progress. In response to the growing concerns, Kent CC had begun some initial design work focused on improving the junction between Barton Hill Drive and the Lower Road, changing from traffic light controls to a roundabout. This was accelerated with the announcement in May of Round 3 of the Local Growth Fund (LGF3) by Government.

Working together, Swale BC and Kent CC have submitted a bid to the South East Local Economic Partnership for £1.264m for the junction improvements, with further funding to come from developer contributions. The scheme has been judged as one of the highest priorities for Kent and Medway and, in turn, the South East LEP as whole. The project will be submitted to Government, via the South East LEP, by the 28 July deadline, with funding allocations to be announced in the 2016 Autumn Statement.

Director of Regeneration

As many of you know, our previous Director of Regeneration, Kathryn Carr, recently ceased her employment with the Council as a result of a number of family issues that make it very difficult for her to continue working in Kent at the present time.

Prior to her leaving this employment she had been on long term sickness absence. As a result, and in order to ensure no loss of momentum on our key regeneration projects, and other work within the Regeneration Department, Mr Kara, as Head of Paid Service, and in consultation with myself, Cllr Cosgrove as lead Cabinet Member for Regeneration, and Cllr Dewar-Whalley as Cabinet Member for Finance and Performance, asked Emma Wiggins to act up into the role for the time-being.

Ms Wiggins accepted the offer, and has been acting up into the role since 1 July. As she was not being asked to cover both roles simultaneously, arrangements were also made to advertise her substantive role as Head of Economy and Community Services.

That process completed on 15 July, and members may be aware that Charlotte Hudson was successful through the competitive process, and has been acting up

into the role since Monday 18 July. Arrangements to cover for Ms Hudson's substantive post are now in place.

We will allow time to let these new arrangements settle in, and will review our position in the autumn. We anticipate that these circumstances will in no way negatively affect the positive momentum behind our regeneration work generally, and the Spirit of Sittingbourne project in particular.

In the meantime, if you have any questions regarding the work of the regeneration Directorate, I am sure that Ms Wiggins will be pleased to assist.

Swale Stars

On Thursday 14 July we had our annual Swale Stars staff awards ceremony at the Consiton Hotel. Madam Mayor, Cllr Ingham, and her Mayoress, Miss Ashlee Brawn, plus Cllr Lewin as Deputy Leader, and myself attended the event, along with around 80 staff from across the organisation. The event was jointly sponsored by AmicusHorizon and Biffa.

Members may recollect that the way in which we use the Swale Stars event to recognise and reward staff was one of the items praised by the assessors in achieving the Investors in People 'Gold' award earlier this year.

A number of awards were made on the night, recognising staff who had significantly contributed to achieving our aims in 2015/16, and who personally lived the values and demonstrated the competencies of the organisation.

A number of external partners were also recognised for their work with our communities, and Tony Henley, the recently retired Borough Chief Inspector and co-chair of the Swale Community Safety Unit, was recognised for his many years of outstanding contribution to the Borough.

The highlight of the evening is always the two main awards. Team of the Year went to the Spatial Planning Team, for all their hard work and effort in taking forward the Local Plan, and not least in servicing the Local Plan Inquiry and robustly protecting the Council's position in the face of some extreme demands from developers. The Employee of the Year award went to Vicky Sedgewick, Environmental Project Officer, for her positive and enthusiastic work on improving recycling, and running our deep clean programme. As with all the winners on the night, these were truly well deserved.

If members are interested to see a list of all the nominees and winners, they are now available in the Council's Intranet, and posters have also gone up around Swale House celebrating the awards.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Council Leader