

Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 21 September 2016

Thames Estuary Commission

The Budget 2016 announced that the formation of a Thames Estuary Commission, to be led by Lord Heseltine and 18 commissioners of global stature in their respective fields. They will over 18 months develop an ambitious vision and delivery plan for North Kent, South Essex and East London up to 2050. This will focus on supporting the development of high productivity clusters, in specific locations, skills and maximising the benefit of infrastructure investment, such as the Lower Thames Crossing.

Starting in July, the Commission has begun work on an interim report setting out its vision for the region, to be published in March 2017 and will then report back to the Chancellor by Autumn Statement 2017 with its delivery plan.

Momentum has gathered quickly, and Lord Heseltine, accompanied by a number of other Commissioners, visited Swale on the 17 August, to look at what has been achieved and the long-term potential of the area. We have subsequently made a written submission by the 9 September deadline, setting out the opportunities and barriers to realising this potential. We look forward to hearing from the Commission and will continue to make the case for substantial investment in skills, infrastructure and the creation of the right environment in which key private sector partners can deliver high quality growth.

Christmas 'Special' Park and Ride

Swale Borough Council in partnership with local schools and businesses is to trial a 'Special' Park and Ride in Faversham, Sheerness and Sittingbourne this Christmas. The plan is, in partnership with local schools and businesses, to operate a free, pick up and drop off, park and ride coach service from locations on the outskirts of each of our main towns into the town centres for shoppers and visitors.

The free service will operate on Small Business Saturday (3rd December 2016) and then again on both Saturday 10th and Saturday 17th December 2016. The intended service times will be from 08.30 until 16.45, with the car parks opening at 08.15 and closing at 17.30.

This exciting new innovation for Swale is to trial how effective a park and ride scheme could be in increasing visitors to our town centres in the busy Christmas shopping period. This initiative is direct action to increase the number of visitors to our town centres in the busy pre-Christmas shopping season for the benefit of local traders and businesses, whose cooperation in the evaluation will be crucial to measuring the success of the trial.

The benefits of a park and ride scheme, particularly a 'Christmas Special' are:

- a significant increase in car parking capacity, allowing for greater numbers of visitors than usual;
- widespread advertising that the Boroughs shops are 'open' for business;
- reduction in the traffic into the town centres improving the shopping experience and benefitting the environment;

- and lastly; it is anticipated the scheme will encourage visitors to make more of their day, to come and stay longer, enjoying the experience and getting into the festive spirit.

The town centre car parks will remain open as usual for those who prefer to drive into the town and pay for their car parking as they would do on any other day of the week.

The trial will be fully evaluated: we will be interested in the views of drivers and passengers using the service; obtaining a clear understanding of the increased overall vehicle usage and therefore footfall in each of our towns; the impact on other car parks and most importantly whether shop keepers, businesses and traders in our towns saw a benefit.

Further details will be published soon throughout the borough and the service will be advertised widely as we get closer to the Christmas shopping season.

Faversham Hop Festival

Faversham Hop Festival Ltd won the festival tender in 2014. At that time the festival had to address concerns over drink induced anti-social behaviour. This had led to families not attending. The statutory authorities were also expressing concerns about future licensing of the event. Working in partnership with the Police and other authorities, the Hop Festival organisers were able to introduce measures to meet the requirements of the Council and the multi-agency Safety Advisory Group. The 2016 festival closed with the best delivery record for the event in many years and this can largely be attributed to the partnership working and appointment of a professional event manager.

Contributing to this success were a number of initiatives: employing professional security and public stewarding operatives, the relationship with the Police and Swale Council's Licensing Office and the adoption of a policy for 'The Responsible Retailing of Alcohol'. This has largely eliminated the historic alcohol fuelled anti-social behaviour and includes a pre-event visit to licensed outlets and all pubs employing Door Staff this year.

Since 2014, crime figures have dropped dramatically. In 2016 the police were able to report an unprecedented ZERO arrests during the festival and festival feedback suggests the public felt very relaxed and safe. A strong health and safety approach to the event led to just ten minor injuries (cuts and bruises) being addressed by the Red Cross.

Additional car parking promotion and a focus on the Festival Car Park at the Abbey School contributed to reducing traffic congestion in the town on both days. Additional toilets and better signage certainly appear to have helped with the anti-social public urination issues. Although the type of urinals were not to everyone's taste, this will be addressed for future festivals.

Street cleansing during and post-festival worked well and all Road Closures were lifted ahead of the 7pm deadline.

The Family Area introduced in 2015 on Central Car Park with the support of the Council again proved popular, was busy and well attended by young families. It helps to diffuse the volume of visitors away from the town centre. The Market Place stage offer was consciously moved to a chilled, laid-back offering for all age groups and was well received.

The South East Coachworks stage continued in its new guise as the venue for local up and coming talent.

The parades proved popular with festival attendees. The Saturday parade was lauded as the best yet. The Sunday parade has developed as a Civic Parade/Church Service

The 'fringe' activities associated with the Festival but outside the remit of the organising committee need to be monitored carefully going forward.

Sponsorship has proved hard to secure but the movement of the festival onto a more responsible and professional footing has given Shepherd Neame the confidence to indicate a wish to offer more support in the future.

A debrief will be set up with the multi-agency Safety Advisory Group to review festival performance and this will be followed by the Council's own Steering Group in the autumn.

Aspire free school

The team behind the Aspire free school, which include founding members of the project Cllr Sarah Aldridge and Donna Smith-Emes, have been working in conjunction with Grove Park Academies Trust on the application. This has been developed over the past 4 years and we are now delighted to announce the DfE have approved their bid.

Aspire free school will be a two form entry catering for children aged 4 - 11 years on the autism spectrum with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and the plans are for the school to be located in Sittingbourne.

Positive outcomes of this mean:

- more choice for parents;
- less travel time for children;
- reduction in KCC Sen transport budget - (currently in excess of 21 million pounds per annum);
- local support for children and parents;
- students feeling fully included within the community; and
- improving wellbeing for students.

As Leader of Swale Borough Council, and as a County Councillor, I look forward to working with the new Trust.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Council Leader