

Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 23 November 2016

Spirit of Sittingbourne update

Progress on the Spirit of Sittingbourne scheme has seen an injection of pace in recent weeks, and we are moving into exciting times. Members will know that, subject to Scrutiny, we have a significant opportunity to invest in Sittingbourne Town Centre - our number one priority, and a manifesto commitment that my Administration was elected upon. As our report to Cabinet made clear, and as we shall emphasise in our testimony to Scrutiny next week, funding and purchasing the leisure and retail elements of the scheme will not only generate income to safeguard the Council in future years, but also breathe new life into the Town, making it a great place for residents to live, work, shop, and enjoy their leisure time.

At our Board meeting on 14 November we heard from Keith Pullinger, the CEO of The Light Cinema company, who spoke passionately about why he wants to invest in Sittingbourne, and the bespoke offer The Light will bring to us, designed around the preferences and demands of our residents. They are rapidly becoming a leading player in the cinema market, with an excellent track record of successful ventures in towns such as Sittingbourne, and I am delighted that they choose to locate here.

Spirit are currently working hard putting preparations in place to begin working on site, starting with the demolition of Princes Street Depot. This will be followed shortly after by utilities and enabling works to the highways, avoiding the Christmas period as we have promised all along.

A precursor to this was the launch of the first of two pilot street markets in Sittingbourne, held on Saturday 12 November. It attracted interest from thirteen artisan traders, showcasing their local Kentish produce and products. Despite the inclement weather, feedback from traders and shoppers was overwhelmingly positive and encouraging, and the next market is scheduled for Saturday 10 December. It is very probable that this market will become a feature of our 2017 calendar, with markets being held on the second Saturday of every month in the High Street.

All of this is good news, and means that we will start the new year off as we mean to go on. I am sure you share with me the excitement and indeed pride that we are now able to bring these developments forward with added momentum as we move into the delivery phase.

MKIP Updates

Since the 4 July co-located meeting of the cabinets of Swale and Tunbridge Wells and P+R Committee at Maidstone, the partnership has been rebranded as Mid-Kent Services. Each authority alternately acts as lead for a period of one year from each September, (i.e. having responsibility for the administration of the Partnership) and, from September this year – this is Swale.

The recruitment process for the new Mid-Kent Services Director is progressing, with final interviews taking place on 23/24 November. The new post-holder will then be involved in the recruitment for the Head of Mid-Kent Legal Service, to take place in the New Year.

Steve McGinnes and Estelle Culligan, interim MKSD and interim Head of MKLS respectively are continuing to act up into those roles. Andy Cole has accepted an offer to become the new Head of ICT at Medway, and so will be leaving his role as Head of Mid-Kent ICT, with interim arrangements to be confirmed. Dena Smart, Head of Mid-Kent HR, is continuing her four-day a week secondment to Tower Hamlets, which is providing an income generating opportunity for the partnership.

As members will be aware, Swale, along with Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells, were successful in securing nearly £600,000 (available only to authorities working in partnership) in funding to transform the way we interact with our customers by completely redesigning our transaction processes: eliminating waste, repetition and duplication. Over the past few months there has been substantial progress made on all three of the work streams within this project, as was discussed at the Members' briefing on Transformation last week, including moving forward with the procurement of Microsoft Skype for Business which is designed to reduce travel requirements and facilitate increased mobile working.

Members can find out more about what has been happening in the MKS Partnership through the Annual Report, Who's Who, and Newsletter, all of which are available in the Members' Room or from the Support Officer.

DCN update

I attended two District Council Network (DCN) meetings last week, which I believe are worthy of reporting to Members. Firstly, on Wednesday I attended the DCN Members (Executive Board) Meeting. Major items discussed at that meeting included the latest feedback from the task and finish group on devolution and transformation in localities. This report was obviously hijacked at least in part by the publication of the recent County Council Network report presented to government highlighting what they consider the major financial savings that could accrue from moving to 27 county area unitaries. The District Council sector is still strongly of the view that any restructuring or clustering should focus on Functional Economic Areas (FEAs) rather than the system of shire counties put in place at the time of Henry the VIII. We also had reports back on the working groups on finance, economic growth, housing, planning, and on health and wellbeing.

The All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for District Councils is planning to carry out an enquiry on collaboration and devolution. This will feature a call for evidence select committee style, with oral evidence sessions, culminating in the publication of a report that highlights innovative practice and makes recommendations to the government and local government sector. In terms of collaboration, the enquiry will be paying particular attention to clusters that can be more aligned to functional economic areas, and deliver more efficient and effective public services whilst maintaining local governance and accountability.

Secondly, on Thursday the DCN held their All Member Autumn Assembly. This edition of the Assembly was focussed on and subtitled 'Building opportunities for Districts to deliver housing growth and economic prosperity'. Both Cllr Lewin as Planning Portfolio Holder and I attended the Assembly.

Among the guest speakers were Gavin Barwell MP, Minister for State for Housing and Planning, and Jim McMahon MP, Shadow Minister for Local Government and Devolution. I know Gavin from way back when he worked for Conservative Central Office, and Jim McMahon is well known to most members from his recent period as Leader of the LGA Labour Group prior to becoming an MP.

We had a very open speech from the Minister, followed by an even more honest and open question and answer session. It was good to get a Minister along to a conference such as this before the civil service have had the chance to get him 'house trained'. We also had examples of local housing companies and joint ventures elsewhere, with speakers from South Norfolk Council, Wealden District Council, and Pendle District Council.

The Minister gave some intriguing hints as to what may be in the forthcoming White Paper: amongst possibilities were that once a planning authority has achieved a NPPF-compliant Local Plan they may be awarded a degree of protection for an unspecified length of time until they achieved a five-year housing supply.

On the always vexed question of the building-out of planning permissions granted, the Minister made reference to numerous reasons behind this, including the delay in preparing and signing off s106 agreements, unacceptable delays from utility companies, but also delays due to developers land banking. The inference was strongly that the White Paper will seek to make it easier for local planning authorities to hold developers to account for delays of their making.

The government is also keen to promote a greater diversity of the number and size of builders, modernising the building methods utilised, and a greater emphasis on small sites and self-build schemes. They are also keen to find ways of helping housing associations to further engage in the new build market.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Council Leader