

Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 21 March 2018

Queenborough & Rushenden - Housing Infrastructure Viability Fund

Queenborough & Rushenden secured £3.5m in principle offer through the Housing Infrastructure Viability Fund, to support land preparation works, to support viability for the balance of the housing land. This offer is subject to further clarifications to be provided to Government, but will contribute to continuing to move this important regeneration opportunity forward.

We are still seeing strong demand for space, both from local firms expanding and new investments. Permission for a second occupier at Eurolink 5 has just been granted, and the completion of the speculative small business units at Precision Park, on Eurolink phase 4 have seen strong demand, with most pre-let prior to completion. Glenmore park, another small unit scheme is also progressing and Floplast has completed its 60,000 sq. ft. warehouse extension.

Sittingbourne Town Centre Regeneration Scheme Update

The works on the old Princes Street depot site continue at pace with the hard surfaces and external road layout being constructed and the units being made water tight with the installation of doors and windows. Although the works were delayed due to the snow the contractor is confident that the units will be ready for handover before the end of March 2018 with full practical completion before the end of April. A ribbon cutting event to open the Princes Street Retail Park is planned for June when the units start trading.

Meanwhile, work continues in relation to Site 4 with work started on the Network Rail Car Park and finishing St Michael's Road Car Park ready for land swap. Final agreements are being negotiated to start the Phase 2 highways works.

Huber continue to assemble the MSCP off site with start on site due Spring this year and completion by December 2018.

Health update

I recently circulated to all Members an email from the Kent and Medway NHS Sustainability and Transformation partnership announcing the establishment of a strategic commissioner function that works across multiple CCGs. The aim is to strengthen how CCGs work together, where doing so can drive service improvements that patients need and expect.

Last week the six clinical commissioning groups across Kent and Medway announced the appointment of Glenn Douglas as their single accountable officer. The appointment covers the clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) of: Ashford; Canterbury and Coastal; Dartford, Gravesham and Swanley; Swale; Medway; and West Kent. The appointment is with immediate effect.

Glenn is currently the Chief Executive of the Kent and Medway Sustainability and Transformation Partnership (STP) and will maintain this role alongside the accountable officer duties.

Next month Cabinet Members will be meeting Mike Gilbert and Dr Fiona Armstrong from NHS Swale CCG to discuss the strategic commissioner function and the potential implications for Swale. Glenn Douglas has also been invited to this meeting.

Recent bad weather

During the recent heavy snow which hit Swale, I would like to thank the Cleansing Team and contractors who worked hard during the snow disruption to keep pathways as safe as possible for users of car parks and high streets. The waste collections were suspended but heavy communications went out about the recovery plan and all refuse was collected that had been missed. I would like to also thank officers across the Council for keeping services running as normal, some having long and difficult walks into work, others either working from home or basing themselves at one of our offices closer to their homes. Our business continuity plans proved very effective and enabled us to maintain services.

Faversham Recreation Ground

The Faversham Recreation Ground Heritage Lottery Fund 'Parks for People' bid was submitted on 26 February ahead of the deadline. This brings to an end a detailed phase of costing and designing the masterplan ideas that were submitted in round one. Officers held a number of public consultation events and communicated with a range of community organisations to help tailor the plans. If successful (with release of results in July 2018), the delivery phase will see major improvements including a bigger playground, improved sports pavilion to include a community activity room, maintenance and restoration of the gardeners lodge and other heritage features and a new live performance space and café kiosk. As well as these physical improvements, the funding will help deliver 5 years of events and activities to really bring the local community back into the Recreation Ground.

Consultation for The Open Spaces and Play Strategy

The Open Spaces and Play Strategy final consultation goes live on Thursday 15 March. Residents and statutory organisations will be given an opportunity to comment on the final principles that will be followed for the next 5 years. The Strategy includes a commitment to spend a further £500k of Swale Borough Council funding on playground improvements in addition to the section 106 funding already secured.

Local Government Finance:

Events in Northamptonshire, together with the likelihood of significant council tax rises in most parts of the country from April, have propelled the issue of local government finance further into the national media spotlight over the past month than those of us for whom such issues have been bread and butter for years are used to. As a result of a combination of rising social-care demand and falling grant support from central government, the LGA has long been forecasting a £5bn funding gap across the local government sector by 2020. Last month Northamptonshire became the first local authority in two decades to issue a section 114 notice, proscribing all but the most essential expenditure in order to bring an in-year overspend under control. It is conceivable that Northamptonshire will not be the only county-level authority to run into serious difficulties in the next few years.

The Chancellor's spring statement included some broadly positive economic news, which in turn will have a salutary effect on public finances. However, the national budget deficit will still be 2.2% of GDP in 2017/18, with net debt peaking this year at almost 86% of GDP, equivalent to around £65,000 for every household in the country. As members will know, our financial strategy within Swale has been based on a combination of prudent budget-setting, rigorous financial management, and the identification of commercial and other opportunities to generate sustainable income streams and move towards a position of self-sufficiency over the medium term. This approach means that we are now in a better position than we might have been to weather the next set of storms which are likely to hit us, including the fair funding review and whatever mechanism is put in place to enable further moves towards retention of 100% of business rates. However, as the Chancellor indicated, while there may now be some light at the end of what has been a long tunnel, none of us should be under any illusions about the need for spending across the public sector to remain under tight control for some time to come.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Leader