

LEADER'S SPEECH TO COUNCIL FOLLOWING ELECTION

Mr. Mayor, fellow Councillors, thank you for electing me as Leader of the Council. It is an honour to serve again in this role under our new "Strong Leader" constitution. I will undertake to carry out this new role to the best of my ability and in the interests of the residents and businesses of Woking.

Before I address the Council on my priorities for the year ahead I would like to explain how I intend to exercise the role of Strong Leader. I think it is important to involve a number of Councillors in managing the Council's executive business. I also believe that, wherever possible, day to day decisions should be delegated to officers within the governance and policy framework set by the Council and by me as Strong Leader. I am therefore, at least for the time being, going to undertake the Council's executive business through similar delegations and arrangements that have served us well under the former constitution. I am signing tonight a scheme of delegation which empowers the Executive and Officers to act. I will arrange for a copy of my determination to be appended to the Minutes of tonight's meeting so that it is clear to everyone how our business will be conducted. I do however, as provided for by the Constitution, reserve the right to vary these arrangements at any time if I consider such action to be in the best interests of delivering the Council's business.

I am therefore pleased to announce that I have appointed Cllr David Bittleston as my Deputy.

I am also pleased to announce that I have appointed the following Councillors to join Cllr Bittleston and me as Members of the Executive: - Councillors Graham Cundy; Gary Elson; Beryl Hunwicks; Anne Murray; Melanie Whitehand; and Richard Wilson.

In light of my decisions I need to ask the Council to agree a minor change to the seating plan that was agreed last week; a copy has been tabled before the Council and the relevant Members have been seated accordingly this evening.

Mr. Mayor, that deals with the necessary formality of my new role of Strong Leader. I would now like to turn to the year ahead.

The elections are over for another 11 months, and it is important that we put behind us the arguments we had during the election campaign and work as one Council. I am of course delighted that the Conservatives won with a good working majority but now we should move on and work together in the interests of the residents and businesses of Woking. They will expect no less and we should not let them down.

The Conservative administrations over the last four years have done well in maintaining services, improving value for money and investing in the future needs of the Borough. But I believe we can do even more. My priority, as Strong Leader, is to ensure that the Council delivers upon the manifesto promises that secured this new Conservative administration.

Low Council Tax

Through continuing to secure value for money in all that we do, we will maintain our pledge to keep any Council Tax increase as low as possible and aim to do so without cutting services. We achieved this last year and with the continued support of officers I am sure we can do so again.

Recycling

The work we have done in improving our refuse and recycling services has already enabled us to build on the recycling performance of previous years. We will maintain this improvement and deliver our pledge of 60% recycling by 2012. I am sure that Cllr Hunwicks will wish us to do even better than 60% and she will have my full support.

Facilities for children and young people

Our record is already excellent and we are committed to do more. We have a programme to provide new play and sports facilities for children and young people and we will deliver it. Cllr Bittleston has been a long-time advocate of quality and affordable facilities for young people of all backgrounds and I am sure he will ensure that our aims are achieved.

Community Buildings

The public response to our commitment to invest in community assets has been most encouraging during the recent election campaign; the Big Society is alive and well in Woking. We will deliver the projects we authorised at the Executive in March which the Opposition pledged to review; we will continue to explore opportunities to meet the needs of communities across the Borough.

Later this year we will see the opening of new community facilities as part of the Hoe Valley project. Prime Minister David Cameron recently inspected this and was greatly impressed with what he saw. What a great improvement for our young people after having to make do with such sub-standard accommodation. The Hoe Valley project is an excellent example of how well both parties can work together when we try – let us hope we can do so on other projects around the Borough in the future.

Community Safety

The Borough of Woking is considered a safe place, but sadly the very few can spoil it for the many. Our young people are generally well behaved but the few who are not blemish the image of the majority. We will continue to work with the police and other agencies to reduce the causes of anti-social behaviour, and to take positive action to address it wherever it occurs.

Economic Development

The economic development of the Borough is the key to enable us to secure sufficient revenue to maintain services and keep Council Tax low. This may require more investment to attract new businesses and jobs. Wolsey Place demonstrates how we

can achieve additional revenue and start to secure a better town centre with higher employment and improved services for residents. I have asked Cllr Elson to help me with this work in assessing the benefit of any new investment. If attractive opportunities arise, I hope all Members will participate in the decision-making process which will have a major effect on the future shape and size of our town.

In addition to these manifesto commitments I would like to comment on the Council's other priorities.

Affordable Housing

Delivery of affordable housing remains a major challenge in the current economic climate. Also, if we are to protect the green belt we must ensure enough homes are built in the existing urban area.

Currently the market is failing to deliver, mainly due to the lack of finance for first time buyers or those wishing to trade up. Equally for lower income families, access to homes for which they can afford the rent becomes increasingly difficult.

Our Moor Lane PFI project remains behind schedule because of changes in the Coalition Government's guidelines and benchmarks but hopefully we will get there. Our proposals for Brookwood Farm are coming forward and local residents have been kept fully informed through the recent public consultations. The Hoe Valley housing project is also progressing and together these projects should deliver some 800 new homes over the next five years. So we are doing a lot, certainly as far as I am aware more than any other Surrey Borough.

Whilst mentioning housing, most of you know my views on the current housing revenue arrangement where, for example, this year the Council will receive nearly £18 million in rents and service charges of which we will have to pay just over £6 million to the government in negative subsidy. I am sure you will agree with me that this is unacceptable year on year as it prevents us spending sufficient money on maintaining our properties. Many of you are also aware that from next April self-financing arrangements being proposed by the government under the Localism Bill will enable us to keep all of our rents and service charges but accept a significant level of government debt which could be of the order of £95 million. Once interest has been paid on this debt, the likely benefit could be relatively small, and every effort will be made by the Council to obtain the best deal possible from government to ensure we secure a fair settlement for the benefit of our residents.

Health and Well Being

We do a great deal already to help maintain the health of residents whether through Centres for the Community, Parks, Recreation Centres, Cultural Venues, Home Support, Home Improvement or community transport to mention but a few of the services that we provide or support. With the emerging changes in the NHS we have already engaged with GP's to see if we can work more effectively together. This and other initiatives under the Woking Partnership should enable us to do more, particularly in partnership with other agencies.

Environment

The Council's Climate Change Strategy is strongly aligned with the Coalition Government's policy commitment and objectives. I hope to ensure that Woking continues to do its part to help the Prime Minister achieve his goal of making this the greenest government ever!

Governance and Transparency of the Thameswey Group

Following Members' concerns expressed at Council on 14th April in respect of the recommendations of the Thameswey Limited Protocol Group, I am very keen that the cross-party working group now in place should meet soon to review the proposed Protocols so that it can report back to the Executive on 30th June prior to consideration by Council on 14th July. It is important that we agree a balanced board representation to give Members assurance that the operations of the Thameswey Group are subject to best governance practice and are fully transparent and open to scrutiny by Members and the wider electorate.

Economic Development

In our manifesto we drew attention to this new and important aspect of the Council's core priorities. Some may consider we should leave the market to its own devices; my view is we cannot. I will do my utmost to ensure Woking's economy gets stronger during my term of office.

In conclusion, we did well last year in a difficult economic climate. For 2011/12, the Conservative administration is delivering no increase in Council Tax, no cuts in services and no cuts in grants to the voluntary sector. The electorate recognised our achievements and has given us a mandate to continue our sound stewardship of the Council. Going forward, I hope we can work together positively and I will do all I can to achieve this; I hope that the opposition will do likewise.

Mr Mayor, again I would like to thank my fellow Councillors for electing me Leader of the Council.

John Kingsbury,
Leader of the Council,
Woking Borough Council

23th May, 2011.