

After the Transport Quarter: What next for the Town Centre; Urban Gravesham Column: Gravesend Messenger Article 19/11/14

So - Kent County Council has finally given planning permission for the Transport Quarter road scheme (Messenger 30/10/14).

The decision on this 2012 planning application was delayed because KCC Councillors simply could not understand what benefits it would bring. They finally caved into pressure from Gravesham Borough Council, culminating in Councillor Colin Caller telling them that they should not listen to Urban Gravesham!

In one single sentence, Councillor Caller dismissed the 400 commuters who had signed a petition, the traders on Windmill Street who had expressed their concerns, and the many who wrote to KCC to make their views known. He even ignored the legitimate concerns of Gravesend Access Group with regard to disabled drivers.

It's what's known as '*the finger in the ear*' approach to public consultation.

However, the scheme has still to pass a value for money test before the Government agrees to fund the £9.8 million cost of flipping the main road from one side of the railway station to the other.

Spent well, £9.8 million is a useful sum. Urban Gravesham could not help but speculate about what could be done with the money to genuinely help the Town Centre. Here are a few suggestions:

- Set up a Business Incentive Scheme like that at Sidcup. There, businesses are being offered incentives (i.e free retail space for a set period) to relocate to Sidcup, while those already on Sidcup High Street are receiving advice on marketing, merchandising, and running their businesses. Grants are available to smarten up shop fronts and improve business premises.
- Encourage speciality shopping in Gravesend High Street. The project to rejuvenate the Market is an exciting start - but more needs to be done. Gravesend has to be a place that people choose to visit and spend time.
- Establish a purpose-built modern Arts Centre and Venue for all the community. It could be a vibrant meeting, performing, and learning space. Or at the very least modernise St Andrews Arts Centre and the Victoria Centre to make them fit for purpose.
- Obtain funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund for a new museum. This would not just house Gravesham's artefacts, but also the Roman and pre-Roman artefacts found at Ebbsfleet- a collection that is rich in variety and quality, and of international significance. Opening all of this in an iconic new building could attract hundreds of 1000s of visitors to Gravesend and instil a new sense of civic pride.
- Or maybe just keep the lights on.

Urban Gravesham is sure that people will have lots of other ideas. If so we would love to hear from you: email secretary@urbangravesham. We will feed all ideas back to Gravesham Borough Council to include in its current review of the Town Centre.

Councillor Caller - you do not have to agree with Urban Gravesham, but it's time to take your fingers out of your ears and start listening to the community!