

'My Business Week ...'

by Sam Blanchard, marketing manager, Kent Business School, Canterbury

MONDAY – In 'planning mode' for 21st birthday celebrations at Kent Business School – they seem very close now. First event is on December 1 and staged jointly with the Bank of England – the Bank's Chief Economist Spencer Dale is coming to speak and have a Q&A with the guests.

It's a sit down dinner for 150 guests; so much to organise and think about and we follow this up with a series of evening events aimed at helping local businesses with current issues.

TUESDAY – Early start on the Eurostar. Our MBA (Master of Business Administration) is being updated to include a European pathway to be held in Brussels.

Having tried to do business with the EU earlier in my career, I know how complicated and difficult it is, so this pathway should be a great start for local and international business people. Thanks to Eurostar, I have time in Brussels for meetings on the Kent University campus there and can be back in time to cook the children's tea – isn't living in Kent wonderful?

WEDNESDAY – Business School launches a new programme in January aimed at owner-managers of local businesses, so we are brainstorming the programme principles.

Great idea, we think, because participants will have an opportunity to work with business school experts to grow and improve their businesses. Programme balances the need for immediate solutions and quick wins while also forming and imple-

menting a long-term plan.

Towards the end of the academics, practitioners and participants become executive directors and form a board to assess each strategic action plan. This will lead to new ideas and solutions and, experience shows, to bonds that turn into long lasting relationships continuing after the programme has finished – brilliant.

THURSDAY – Meetings with local businesses and MBA applicants to promote the part-time MBA. As I did the MBA on a part-time basis in my last job as well as juggling a young family and, during the first week of the course finding out I was pregnant, I am well placed to talk about doing a Masters in Business and how to manage work, study and family life. I believe the MBA has enriched my life professionally and personally and I'm more than happy to talk about my experiences.

FRIDAY – Drawing up plans for our attendance at KOS Media's Business Week Live event in November and I have a great idea to pitch to business editor Steve Loader and his team: to have specialised clinics where local business people can book a half hour session with a panel comprising our MBA students, alumni and academics, who can give immediate advice, solutions and inspirational ideas.



Eyes on the prize as Judith ushers in bright future

ASHFORD "has the potential to be the powerhouse of Kent" according to the town's design champion, Sir Terry Farrell. But while much has been achieved, there is still lots to do and money is now almost too tight to mention for **JUDITH ARMITT**, MD of Ashford's Future – the body charged with working wonders for the once sleepy market town. Then again, if anyone can make the figures work during a nationwide crackdown on public spending then it has to be this former council treasurer and trained accountant.

Business editor Steve Loader asked her about the prospects now for one of Kent's premier projects.



JUDITH ARMITT

FOR a woman known for vision and leadership, it's surprising to learn that Judith Armitt left Oxford University with no idea of a career path.

"All I knew was that I wanted to make a difference to the life of communities," she said. Well, she's doing just that now as MD of Ashford's Future – a partnership of 10 public and private sector bodies – where she has recently overseen the awarding of £35 million of contracts. From her office high up in Charter House – one of the town's tallest buildings – she has been able to watch the big changes her organisation is making and will continue to make when it moves to nearby International House later this month.

And it's clear that Ashford's Future is satisfying that early wish to make a difference: "I have been keen that people can see it. It's exciting that within a few months we can walk down new roads and see a new library. It's very important to me, that tangible delivery. There's more to life than having a particular position in a particular organisation."

THE BIG INTERVIEW

She hasn't done badly there, though. Apart from what appears to have been a frustrating time at the former Greater London Council under both Conservative control and then that of Ken Livingstone's Labour group, she has held key positions in local government. Born in

Manchester and raised in the Midlands, she graduated in philosophy, politics and economics and trained in accountancy. She joined the GLC and recalled: "There was never a dull moment – there was always an argument going on and grand plans being drawn up. The downside was working for an organisation that was always being severely criticised. It can be very wearing on morale."

She left in 1985 to join the Borough of Lewisham as assistant treasurer and was promoted to treasurer within a year. At just 33, she was one of the youngest people in the country to hold such a post and almost certainly the first woman to succeed at that age.

Her duties expanded too when she was made director of finance and support services – and also started a family:

"I had six months off after both pregnancies. At that time it was quite pioneering stuff for someone at that level

JUDITH ARMITT'S CV

- 1975 – various roles with GLC
- 1985 – assistant treasurer with Borough of Lewisham, soon becoming treasurer and later director of finance and support services
- 1997 – first chief executive of new Medway Council
- 2006 – chief executive at Thames Gateway
- 2007 – MD of Ashford's Future

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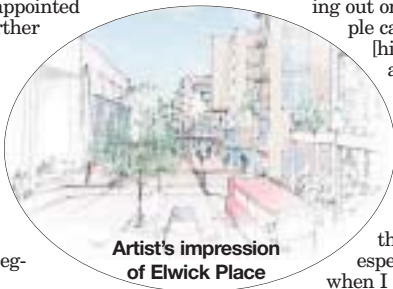
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of seniority to have children and then come back to work. You have to be absolutely rigorous about a work/life balance. So I went from a regime where I would often be working in the evenings to one where I left at 5pm whatever happened, except for emergencies."

Judith then had the chance to fashion an organisation from scratch by becoming the first employee of the all-new Medway Council. She was appointed chief executive and had to add a further 7,000 people to the payroll in seven months so the new authority could go 'live' on April 1, 1998. Despite her continuing drive to make a difference, she admitted that her first task was to ensure smooth transition: "I realised that success would be if people didn't notice any difference, even though we were amalgamating the Rochester and Gillingham councils and cutting a segment from Kent County Council."



Artist's impression of Elwick Place

After that, the new 'super council' appears to have delivered all the right challenges. She stayed nine years before being attracted to the development sector, operating between local and central government.

Her first step was as chief executive of the Thames Gateway, ending after less than year when she resigned after a much publicised falling out with the government.

She then took over as MD at Ashford where a development body had been in place since 2003, but was being reorganised along company lines. "It was what attracted me to this role. We get a degree of autonomy from our partners while working closely with them," Judith said.

She has a small team of 12 working with her, though she can call on expertise from primary partners Kent County Council, Ashford Borough Council, the South East England Development Agency and the Government's

Home and Communities Agency, which holds the purse strings. But how much harder will it be to loosen those purse strings now as the new coalition looks to stabilise the UK's finances?

"It's a bit of a cliché, but it's very much business as usual," she said. "We have reached a stage of progress and commitment where we can go forward even in uncertain times. It's been suggested we should assume we will get a 20 per cent cut, which means we will get 80 per cent of what is currently a £54m programme and that will still allow substantial progress."

She admitted some smaller projects have already had to be pruned, such as the town's new cycle way scheme, though she has not written this out of the grand plan.

But she betrays some concern for SmartLink, Ashford's bid for a rapid bus service: "It ought to be Ashford's trademark in 10 years. It will be smart, clean, attractive to be on, frequent, and free from delays."

But SmartLink – similar to the rapid bus service already operating in Thameside – has yet to get the green light. Though £30m was allocated by the outgoing government, SmartLink is back in the mix ahead of the

coalition Government's spending review in October.

And there's a danger it will be seen by the Treasury as a park and ride scheme, rather than the starter for phases two and three linking and promoting development of two all-new communities in outlying districts of the town. She said: "It will offer those communities a real chance of leaving the car at home and not paying out on parking. Once in the centre, people can go shopping or go on via HS1 [high-speed rail network], Eurostar and beyond."

These later stages would also get cash from the developers of the new communities, but there is perspiration being shed over funding for that crucial primary stage.

But Judith is keen to emphasise the momentum Ashford already has, especially from HS1. She is "stunned" when I admitted I have yet to travel on it.

"It's the most fantastic new rail service – 37 minutes to London, two trains an hour and great connectivity with other services. We had all this talk beforehand about fares being too expensive, but what people have realised is that the extra 20 per cent buys two extra hours in your day, when you would have been sitting on a train instead."

"An estate agent told me that not only are house inquiries up locally, but 50 per cent of inquiries are because of HS1. It's early days but we believe HS1 will enable Ashford to buck the housing market."

She sees HS1 as one of two key strengths for the Ashford plan, the other being how the town has always embraced growth and the benefits of improved facilities. But when I suggest this might be because there is less to be precious about architecturally in Ashford, she counters by pointing first to the

medieval lanes of the town centre and the beauty of St Mary's Church, which is being transformed into an arts centre. She also likes the railway buildings at Newtown, testament to the town's great regional railway heritage and earmarked for refurbishment.

Current projects include redevelopment of the brown-field site at Victoria Way, rebuilding the town's station and library sites and improvements to junction nine of the M20 to pave the way to the Eureka Park development realising its one million sq ft of potential – only a third is built or available to build at present.

She keeps fit by running and orienteering, and closes the interview with an energetic call to arms for Ashford:

"All the indicators are good and it's exciting times for us when there's all this gloom and doom in the national press. Ashford has a really good message: house prices and office rents are a lot cheaper than in London, which is just 37 minutes away. Paris is less than two hours away. If you are a business in Kent, then maybe you should open another office here or move here. And we are very attractive for French and Belgian businesses who need a UK base."



LOOKING AHEAD: Judith Armitt outlines her vision for Ashford

JUDITH'S TOP TIPS

- Make your own future – "I left the GLC before it was abolished rather than wait for someone or something else to make my career decision for me."
- If work is a perpetual emergency then you are not working for a well-run organisation – "When I had started my family, colleagues did find it interesting at first when I said 'I'm going to catch my train and you'll have to walk with me to the station if you want to carry on talking to me'."
- A steady ship is a happy ship – organisations steeped in controversy and conflict are bad for the morale for you and the rest of the organisation. She cites her experiences at the GLC.



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