

SOCIETY MEETINGS

November Meeting

RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

A talk by Nadeem Aziz reported by Derek Leach

Nadeem Aziz, Chief Executive of Dover District Council, made a packed audience sit up and take notice from the outset of his presentation, stating that, despite its natural assets and huge potential, Dover had failed to deliver following its post war decline. He followed this with a string of negatives: Dover is the only town in the south-east declining in population; our people have low aspirations; there is a low wage/low skill economy; earnings are 80% of the south-east average despite the presence of Pfizer; less than 20% possess NVQ Level 4 (or its equivalent) and above; there are health inequalities; our schools perform well, but we export our talented youth; we suffer from inadequate further education opportunities; two-thirds of our jobs are filled by people commuting into the area and spending their money out of the town and we have an increasingly large ageing population with falling numbers of those of work and school age. This was not the picture of a sustainable community.

In Mr Aziz's view Dover was at a crossroads with the choice of further decline or working for a better future with regeneration. Regeneration had been tried before, but this time external key players were on board with essential investment, presenting an opportunity for Dover to optimise its

assets with a number of major projects in the pipeline. This would create jobs that are needed to produce economic benefits: the fast rail link expected in 2009 would give talented, young people the opportunity to live locally and commute rather than move away; the St. James' area redevelopment would begin in 2008; the next phase of the White Cliffs Business Park was underway; the Seaports Centre was under construction; the Harbour Board's ambitious plans for the Western Docks would include links to the town centre; South Kent College would have new buildings and facilities on the same site; many more houses would be needed for these plans to succeed, including the redevelopment of the Buckland Paper Mill and Connaught Barracks sites.

Following the showing of an impressive DVD illustrating these schemes, Mr Aziz tackled a number of questions, including the problems of Townwall Street, the failure to dual the A2 and the lack of any leisure facilities such as a cinema, bowling alley or ice rink, in any of the plans.

We reached the interval wondering whether this was all just a dream or was Dover really on the verge of long overdue, major change. When Burlington House is demolished perhaps we shall start to believe it!