

## **Council – 17th November 2014**

### **Leader's report**

It is now 98 days since the Labour Group formed the Council's administration.

I would like to thank Members of my own Group for the support they have given to me as Leader. I would also like to thank them for all of the hard work they are putting in to build on the knowledge of what the previous coalition did attend to, the things they did not attend to, and the things that we now need to do differently.

When the Labour Group went into the Local Elections, we set out our priorities and the approach we would take. We are now in the process of reviewing the Council's Corporate Plan in order to set out the practical implementation of these important issues.

The first thing to address is the budget. In Opposition we were rightly critical that the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition, with the support of Independents, declined to plan long term. As each week goes by we are more aware of the consequences of one year budgeting. In the short time we have had since taking control, we have started to address this as we said we would.

Our draft budget has been published. We are now in the latest phase of consultation and I would like to thank the 4600 people who responded to the first phase. We have already taken into account many of the suggestions made.

Many projects have long term preparation periods. Then all of a sudden projects take leaps forward. Both the Coalition Government and the Labour Party are considering their approaches as to how to rebalance the national economy. The new proposition is 'Combined Authorities'. Thinking around the roles of constitutions, functions and spending powers is moving very fast. On 3 November 2014, the Chancellor announced that Greater Manchester would be given more control over funding currently administered by central Government. In return, the Great Manchester councils appear to have agreed to the establishment of one directly elected Mayor for the ten local authorities. Discussions between the Black Country Leaders and with Birmingham, Solihull and Coventry will continue in the weeks and months ahead. When specific proposals emerge, these will be reported to Cabinet and, where necessary, to Council. But in the meantime, I will continue to work to secure the best possible outcome for the town and communities of Walsall.

I continue to attach importance to joint working with other Black Country authorities. The Association of Black Country Authorities, the Black Country Joint Committee and the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership all provide useful vehicles for securing the interests of Walsall people.

Members will know of the leading role the Council played some two years ago in seeking to develop a broad approach to shared services across the Black Country. Unfortunately, for reasons outside the Council's control, these various issues stalled. I am pleased to say that this forms an important area of joint working and is again back on the agenda.

We are interested in examining new forms of service provision. We want to increase the diversity of providers. We are keen to empower our staff to take increased responsibility and authority for the service they provide. Accordingly, we are encouraging the establishment of social enterprises, mutuals and other forms of 'not for profit' organizations. Again, reports to Cabinet will be prepared as the specific proposals are finalized.

I want to give a brief mention to a small service area that is largely invisible to most people until, that is, something goes wrong. That is when our Emergency Planning team comes into its own. The team have been a key part of putting right some of the many surprise set backs faced by the Council. From IT failures as a result of a flood in a building, to floods from a reservoir, to rescuing people from a Welsh mountainside, to local gas leaks and evacuations. You can only do this well in an emergency if you have done the planning well in advance. Our team does this well and it has recently been recognized by the West Midlands Police for the role they played in 'Operation Clockface' in response to the recent mosque bombings. Well done to those involved.

We will be looking again at the Council's approach to area working. It is now several years since the current arrangements were put in place. I would hope that other Group Leaders will want to discuss proposals with us.

Councillor S.P. Coughlan,  
Leader of the Council

7th November 2014