

Council – 16 July 2018

Leader's report

I am proud to present my report to the first ordinary meeting of the Council in 2018. This report sets out the extraordinary challenges facing the Council, but also the extraordinary change necessary in our ways of working, how we think, and how we behave, if we are to meet those challenges and deliver on our Corporate Plan. The challenges of diminishing finances and increasing demand are also being experienced by our partners in health, in police and fire service, and in the voluntary and community sectors.

During the course of the municipal year, regular reports will be made by cabinet members on the key issues outlined in this report. There will be time for measured debate and reflection, on progress and proposals.

Council Control

At the Annual Council meeting leadership returned to the Conservative Group and I am proud to be Leader of the Council for the fifth time. The Council has gone through a period of changing political control, with minority administrations that have required the support of other political parties. Multiple political changes over a short period of time have the potential for a series of stop start policy making decisions, initiative overload and poor service delivery. It may well be that the new political status quo is one of no overall control but when looking back at the last Conservative Corporate Plan our priorities were to:

- Support business to thrive
- Improve the health, well being and independence of our people
- Having safe sustainable and inclusive communities
- Improving the life chances of children and having modern and efficient workforce

These are not so very different from the priorities of the previous administration. This is because the needs of people and businesses of Walsall do not change overnight. What does change is how we will achieve those priorities. The administration has inherited a number of things initiated by Labour. Time will be taken time to review those initiatives, maintaining things that are concluded to be useful to local people and those that are not, will change or stop.

Changes in Political Arrangements

Members will have seen that I made some changes in the Cabinet Portfolio arrangements at the Annual Council meeting. These are now bedding down and continuing to develop.

The Council also agreed to the establishment of the Corporate Parenting Board and Education Overview & Scrutiny Committees to bring more rigour to these key areas of work.

Economic Context

I write this report against a backdrop of continuing economic uncertainty, at local and national level. At the end of this financial year, we may be closer to understanding the impact of both the fair funding review and the comprehensive spending review which has the potential to significantly impact on our funding, and of course we will have left the EU; the impact on Walsall businesses is not known.

The retail sector in particular is undergoing a turbulent time as spending patterns shift and 'online' presents a challenge to the traditional bricks and mortar shopping experience. We, like many places, are not immune to those effects in the Borough; indeed, the sad news of Marks and Spencer's impending closure in Walsall Town Centre is a stark reminder of the very direct cost of the restructuring occurring across retail. August 11 will be a sad day for the town and for the employees of the store.

However, we must look to the future. For every challenge, there is an opportunity. My administration will be developing a Walsall Town Centre Masterplan to seek to secure a brighter future for our town. We can be proud of the many great developments we have seen over the past few years – for example, the regeneration of the Waterfront. However there is work still to do, and we need to consider how the town centre might develop further in light of ever changing market conditions. We will develop and deliver a Masterplan by the end of March 2019 to redouble our efforts to regenerate our town centre.

Finance

The Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Autumn Budget 2017 stated that debt was still too high, and it was vital that the Government continues to control public spending and improve the productivity of public bodies and services. This reiterates the Government's intention to seek to continue to reduce the structural deficit and pay down the national debt.

The Prime Minister has on a number of occasions credited Local Government with being the most effective part of the public sector in responding to the 'austerity' measures. Walsall Council has faced many challenges and responded well although some difficult decisions have had to be made to manage those financial challenges. Some of these decisions were not easy to do and not popular with our residents but

have resulted in Walsall being in good financial health with a sustainable future. At this point, credit must be given to the previous Administration for taking some bold and difficult decisions. This was also the finding of a recent corporate peer review which was undertaken by the Local Government Association.

Since 2010 Walsall has lost c£100m in funding from Central Government and has made savings of £173m with a further £55 m of saving required over the next 4 years.

There continue to be cost pressures in areas such as Children's Services and Adult Social Care both due to increased demand and changes in demographics. This is a pressure not only for Walsall, but for Local Government as a whole and it is imperative that a fair, sustainable national funding solution is arrived at to ensure that councils can continue to protect their most vulnerable residents.

I will maintain the priority given to these areas of work. In doing so, the Council has invested £21m in Children's Services over the last 5 years and we will commit an additional £10m investment over the next 4 years.

I also attach high priority to the care of older people. Legal requirements and care practices mean that more people require increasingly complex care packages for longer periods of time, working largely with private sector providers. The increases in the National Minimum Wage have also put additional pressure on this sector as providers had to increase pay which was then passed on to the Council. Adult Social Care has seen investment of £31m over last 5 years with a further £25m investment planned for over the next 4 years.

However, important as these areas are, I have to remind everyone that we represent all of the people of Walsall and for many having decent housing, decent roads, emptying bins, having well maintained open spaces, and a clean environment is really important too. The right balance needs to be struck, particularly as I develop Walsall's offer to new businesses and communities.

Manifesto Pledges

We wish to send a message of zero tolerance to fly tippers and also educate the constituents of their responsibility to know how and where their waste is being disposed. We will seek recourse to residents who ignore this responsibility and we will crack down and prosecute all waste carriers who do not have the necessary licences to carry waste. Enforcement against non-licensed vehicles will also be part of our strategy and a three month trial of free pick up for bulky items is in our plans. We want to discourage items being left on the pavement by residents as this can be considered as fly tipping.

We will investigate ways of encouraging traders resident in the Borough, to use our waste transfer stations and find out why they resist their use. We will look to open waste transfer stations 7 days a week.

More covert and overt cameras to be used to catch illegal tippers and more on the spot fines to people littering our streets. We will seek co-operation with fast food outlets to assist in our clean up campaign.

Illegally tipped waste will result in prosecution with haste.

We will also honour our commitment to Remembrance Day Parades and we will look to reopen Pelsall Library, we await costings.

Corporate Plan and Transformation

I believe it is acknowledged that the recommendations of the peer review struck a resonance - the need for a compelling story of who we are, a vision a purpose, an identity shared. And a transformation programme that is more ambitious and more transformational.

As Laozi said “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”. So I acknowledge the single step taken with the revised Corporate Plan setting out our EPICC priorities (Economic Growth, People Internal Focus, Children and Communities), together with our values of Professionalism, Leadership, of being accountable, transparent and ethical. I and my Group will continue to support the guiding principles of design, as approved in the Corporate Plan in February. The challenge I have put to the senior officers is for a radical transformation programme that is evidence based that has a clear and compelling case for change and a business case that supports it. That case for change will be with my Cabinet to consider in the autumn. These decisions will be based on the evidence as to what the Council does well and what it needs to do to change to be more effective and efficient in the future. Work has already started on this. A refreshed programme that is first and foremost about improving the customer experience, will deliver our priorities, services redesigned by our guiding principles and reduce costs.

Children's Services

Rightly, the nation has no tolerance for the abuse of children. The Council has had to intervene in the lives of young people to secure their safety. In doing so, we acknowledge that the level of demand in this area has increased and our “Requires Improvement to be Good” judgement following the July 2017 Ofsted Inspection places significant pressure on the Council's finances moving forward.

Whilst many of our schools continue to be good or outstanding, we acknowledge that the educational outcomes and levels of achievement for Walsall children could and should be better. To this end, we will place significant effort as a Council in working jointly with all schools in the Borough to improve standards and deliver an inclusive education for all our children and young people. Increasing the aspirations of Walsall communities now and in the future.

Working with our Partners

The Council continues to ensure good services at affordable costs by working well with local agencies. There is a long history of good working arrangements but in order to face the financial and legal requirements ahead, these arrangements will need to be strengthened further.

The Walsall Together Provider Board was established to provide a forum for colleagues across the health and care system to design and deliver innovative integrated care. The Board has a shared vision for improving health and care of the people of Walsall, through providing more cohesive and person centred support that maximises independence and well-being.

The goal of the programme is to ensure, that through effective collaboration, that health and care services in Walsall achieve the triple aim of:

- Improving health and wellbeing outcomes for the Walsall population;
- Improving care and quality standards in the provision of care
- Meeting the statutory financial duties of all partner organizations.

In addition to developing new partnerships, the Board has co-designed the Walsall Model of Care, which describes the way in which we as providers plan to work together; wrapping services around a patient to ensure they are seen by the right service, at the right time in the right place. For many patients we know that the 'right place' is as close to their home as possible.

By April 2018, each Governing Body, Board and the Cabinet had agreed a preferred integration model for Walsall to drive the transformation we want to see. We have collectively identified and agreed population cohorts that will be incorporated into the model in a phased approach, starting with enabling effective support for the frail elderly and adult population. However the end state vision is for the chosen model to serve the health and care needs of the whole Walsall population.

West Midlands Combined Authority and Black Country Arrangements

I am proud to take on the Housing & Land Portfolio at the West Midlands Combined Authority. The region stands in a great place to secure better development, better homes, and better quality. It is a place that the Government wishes to do business with, reflected by the Housing Deal announced at the Chancellor's Budget. A significant focus of that deal will be the Walsall to Wolverhampton corridor – ensuring new developments right across that corridor alongside our work to re-open the train line between Walsall and Wolverhampton with new stations at James Bridge, Darlaston and Willenhall. Ensuring this work and the work on our Town Centre Masterplan are complementary will enable us to secure more investment into Walsall – providing homes for people to live in, new employment opportunities and significant public investment in the Borough.

The Association of Black Country Authorities (ABCA) continues to provide the forum for Council Leaders and Chief Executives to co-ordinate political and managerial activity of common interest. The Council's Chief Executive's office continues to provide the secretariat for ABCA and the Black Country Joint Committee.

The work we do in Walsall through the Black Country Joint Committee, ensures the Black Country continues to prosper. Walsall is the accountable body for the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership's Growth Deal. We manage over £250m of capital funding and are rated by Government as 'excellent' for governance. This position gives us confidence to secure yet further devolution of funding from Westminster and the West Midlands in the years ahead so we can deliver our Corporate Plan ambitions in Walsall.

Voluntary and Community Sector

The voluntary and community sector is a vital part of the infrastructure of Walsall life and I want this to continue in a sustainable way. A bold new vision for the sector is being developed. I am committed to strengthening the voluntary and community sector with great surety on our financial commitment determined by comprehensive commissioning of services, with clearly defined deliverable outcomes.

Councillor Mike Bird
Leader of the Council
16 July 2018