

Council – 11th January 2016

Community, Leisure and Culture Portfolio

Libraries, Heritage and Arts

For Libraries, Heritage and Arts 2015/16 has been a challenging year with change in the air.

Libraries are working to develop closer partnerships with community organisations to enhance the local delivery of services. A partnership with Old Hall People's Partnership in Bentley has delivered a Community Library facility, run and managed by OHPP staff and volunteers. The facility opened in September 2015 and provides book loan services for Bentley residents from the OHPP's building in Wing Close. This will be a model for the development of similar community partnerships elsewhere in the Borough.

The New Art Gallery has been awarded 9,000 EUROS in funding from Culture Ireland, an organisation promoting Irish Arts worldwide. These funds will be used to support costs associated with a major mid-career solo exhibition by Irish sculptor Eva Rothschild. This exhibition will open on 23 September 2016 and will be promoted as part of the Ireland 2016 programme. The Council and New Art Gallery logos will appear in all promotional materials associated with the project thereby extending the Walsall brand nationally and internationally.

The Chief Executive of the Arts Council England, Darren Henley, is due to visit the New Art Gallery on 10th February. This visit is important to the Gallery as an Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation.

The number of school pupils visiting the Leather Museum in 2015 was 11% up on the previous year and the highest for eight years. The museum's programme of hands-on leather activity sessions such as making a Viking purse or a Saxon helmet proved very popular with schools. By using leather donated to the museum by local manufacturers, costs and charges were kept to a minimum. Feedback from visitors indicated that this was much appreciated by local families!

The Leather Museum continues to receive positive feedback from visitors on the Trip Advisor website. Trip Advisor users have continued to rate the Leather Museum as the number one attraction in Walsall and among the top 5% of attractions in the West Midlands. The museum has recently been awarded its third certificate of excellence and has received almost 200 reviews in total, of which 93% rated the museum as 'excellent' or 'very good'. All reviews are promptly responded to by museum staff.

Forest Arts Centre has been continuing the development of the new 8,000 sq ft Auditorium 3 which will offer unique performance space, positioning the Centre as a premier arts resource in the Midlands. New arts partnerships are being explored with significant cultural organisations in London and Cardiff with the intention of those international companies having extended performance residences in Walsall.

Leisure & Community Health

Earlier in the year the offices occupied by the Register Office on the Civic Centre first floor were vacated for the Police to take up their new occupancy. The Register Office is now located entirely on the ground floor which is of great benefit to visitors who have difficulty walking or using pushchairs for young children. Whilst further improvements may be possible this will be subject to the availability of further finance.

Just before Christmas we started the improvement works at the Gala Baths. Extensive asbestos removal works were required, which took place in early and mid 2015. The scheme includes the major refurbishment of the Gala Pool's changing areas, a new reception area as well as the installation of a dividing boom in the main Gala Pool to create a 25m "short course" competition pool and, for the first time, a learner pool. We will also be installing a sauna to complement the health benefits offered by the Brine pool. The scheme will be complete in April and will represent the biggest improvement in the facility's 54 year history. We have made every effort to keep as many parts of the building open whilst the construction works are undertaken.

The Active Living programme to get *"more people, more active, more often"* through building the new centres at Bloxwich and Walsall Wood continues at pace. I had the pleasure of showing Wendy Morton MP around Oak Park in December. Both centres are now at the half-way stage of construction and I look forward to them opening in mid 2016. These facilities will make a significant contribution to helping our residents be healthier and happier and are significant regeneration projects for the Borough.

Part of last year's budget savings was to move the Outdoor Adventure Service (Aldridge Airport Outdoor Adventure Centre & Sneyd Watersports Centre) to a break-even budget position over 2 years. The 6 month review of the first year of this plan has shown that the service is ahead of target to achieve the break-even budget of the borough.

The Council's seven-year children's Free Swimming scheme came to an end on 31 December. A range of alternate offers have been introduced to cushion this, including making use of the successful "Move-It" leisure discount scheme to ensure an affordable swimming offer continues to be provided to the borough's children. Charges for "Move-It" children will be £1 per swim and £2 for all other under 16s.

Area Partnerships and Community Development

Area Partnerships continue to be supported by partner organisations and local communities and groups.

A number of projects have been supported across the borough, including:

- A number of festive events, such as Pelsall Frost Fair, Bloxwich in to Christmas, These have been very popular events and have been well attended.
- In Brownhills / Pelsall / Rushall – Sheffield a partnership to undertake a programme of works to safeguard key open space locations has been established – this will ensure users of the common land areas are safe from traffic and traffic related issues. In collaboration with the North Walsall Area Partnership, joint site visits have taken place to try and address the issue of mini motos in the area – this has seen plans drawn up to re-design entrance and exit sites to reduce accessibility for these vehicles, whilst enabling the safe use of the space by members of the public.
- The Aldridge and Beacon Area Partnership continue to support four networking groups, which have all recently met. A priority identified is the reduction of social isolation, which is being followed up with the Council's Public Health Department. A number of workshops have been held at Aldridge Youth Theatre for young people, which focused on drama, music and movement. Three family fit and fund days were held, which were very well attended by partner organisations and communities.
- An extensive clean up was held in November at the rear of Smith and Thomas House – this was well received by residents and has meant that the area should see a reduction on anti-social behaviour. As part of the Spring Clean week, North Walsall Area Partnership purchased some highly visible anti-dog fouling signs, which are deployed in various situations and are moved around the area.
- A number of community events have been held across the Walsall South Area Partnership, during the summer and a number are planned over the Christmas period. Projects supported include St Mathew's Church Community Centre, Caldmore Community Garden, Park Hall Pool and Open

Green – these have all involved local communities. A range of activities were also held for young people to enjoy, supported by a range of partners.

- The Darlaston and Bentley Area Partnership has been tackling ongoing fly-tipping and anti-social behaviour issues, particularly in the Moxley area. A community cohesion consultation is underway – this will provide information regarding community groups to be included in a local service directory. The Partnership is also supporting the development of locality working relating to early help.
- For the Willenhall and Short Heath Area Partnership, a range of activities has been held to enable young people to engage in activities, including Willenhall Memorial Park and Short Heath Park. A local directory of services has been produced, which has been issued to libraries and other community venues. Working with the Darlaston and Bentley Area Partnership, an event was held to provide information about the various support services available to vulnerable people – this was well attended by a range of organisations.
- All six areas continue to work in partnership at the confidential tasking and co-ordination group meetings to resolve ongoing issues and to agree the deployment of CCTV, based on evidence and local intelligence, to address anti-social behaviour issues.
- During six weeks in May and June, each Area Partnership held a week's Spring Clean, with a number of sites identified and, working in partnership with a number of Council services and partners organisations, many tonnes of fly-tipping and litter were collected, as well as clearance of shrubbery. It is anticipated that a further programme of clean ups will take place during the first week in March 2016.
- The Area Panels have received a number of presentations over the last year, including Site Allocation Document, highways maintenance, Walsall housing group, community safety and anti-social behaviour, children and young people / youth services, health and well-being and economic regeneration. These have been well received and have provided an opportunity for Area Panels to raise any questions with the relevant Council and / or partner service.

Our community organisations continue to deliver a wide range of services and activities for local communities. These range from arts and craft sessions, physical activity, nursery provision, tea dances, vocational and educational courses, activities for all ages, dementia cafes, library services, community gardens and allotments.

The MOVE truck and Reach Up tower continue to be very popular and have been booked at many events, both inside and outside of the borough, throughout the year. Using both mobile projects and working closely with the Area Manager, the Police, detached youth workers and other agencies, a very exciting piece of work has been carried out in the Bloxwich, Birchills and Reedswood part of the borough addressing Anti Social Behaviour issues. The project has been very successful and will continue during the February 2016 half term. Following on from this Bloxwich police have found funding for the MOVE truck to work in the ASB hotspot near Harden Road. So far two very good sessions have taken place; attendance has increased by 400%.

The popularity of the Reach Up climbing tower continues with many bookings taken for 2016 including the very prestigious Ashby show in Leicestershire, Whittington Country show, Alrewas show, Llangollen Christmas event and The Royal British Legion summer event to name just a few.

Councillor Harris
23 December 2015