

## **Council meeting 20 September 2021 – Leader’s report**

I am proud to present my report to the first ordinary meeting of the Council in 2021. This report sets out the economic and financial challenges that we face and how we will meet them.

### **Manifesto Pledges**

Following on from the election in May and as we begin a new municipal year, this report sets out how this administration will deliver its pledges to the residents of the Borough, during the coming year and ensure that we reduce inequalities and maximise all potential including:

- Economic Growth for all people, communities and business;
- People have increased independences, improved health and can positively contribute to their communities;
- All Council services are efficient and effective;
- Children have the best possible start, are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well;
- Communities are prospering and resilient with all housing needs met in safe and healthy places that build a strong sense of belonging and cohesion.

The report sets out the pledges from our election manifesto. These pledges cover a broad range of improved outcomes for the residents of Walsall. This administration will task Council officers to work with partners to make sure that these pledges are delivered effectively and on time.

We will strengthen the communities of Walsall through our pandemic recovery plan. The vaccination programme has been a great success and we will continue to work together with our NHS partners to deliver vaccinations to all of our eligible residents.

Tragically, families have lost loved ones during the pandemic and may need bereavement support. Others have struggled with mental ill health following the lockdown. This Council will invest an additional one million pounds over the next three years to support mental wellbeing in the community.

This administration pledges to make our communities safer. We will tackle crime hotspots with additional CCTV cameras. We will deliver a Transit Site which will make it easier for us to evict unauthorised traveller camps from our parks and our open spaces.

I am sure that all councillors will agree with me that we want to keep this borough clean and tidy. This report outlines our pledge to encourage more litter picking and importantly to support enforcement against fly-tipping. We will retain our ‘Three for a Tenner’ bulky waste collections and we will continue to collect brown bins fortnightly, for free. We are planning a review of the locations and the sizes of our litter bins. We will deliver a safer, stronger, cleaner and greener Walsall Borough – a borough that people are proud of.

We have recently secured £21.3 million pounds from the Government for Walsall town centre and for Bloxwich. We are committed to delivering new railway stations in Willenhall, Darlaston and Aldridge and to tackle derelict sites such as Ravenscourt in Brownhills. We pledge to build back better to create vibrant towns and communities and we will showcase Walsall regionally and nationally through our recently launched “We Are Walsall” campaign.

This report sets out how this administration will create health and wellbeing spaces in our communities. We will design a Garden of Reflection, a memorial to remember those who have lost their lives during the pandemic and to honour all of this Borough’s front line workers.

Through our Green Spaces Strategy, we will provide more outdoor fitness equipment at additional sites across the Borough and we will upgrade our children's playgrounds.

Protecting our environment and green spaces is a priority for this administration. We will plant more trees and we will install electric vehicle charging points with free parking. These proposals will be built into the Council's climate change action plan and budget as necessary.

This Council will ensure that housing meets all people's needs. We will build new homes, 'Brownfield First' to save our Green Belt from development.

Cabinet colleagues are encouraged to consider the areas that fall within their portfolios and to work closely with executive directors to drive delivery and monitor performance as we plan for the future.

## **Economic Context**

I present this report against a backdrop of continuing economic uncertainty, at local and national level. We await confirmation of a three-year Spending Review alongside an autumn budget on 27 October, the first multi-year funding settlement since 2018. This is expected to negatively impact on our funding with no increases in core funding expected. We face continued economic pressures due to increasing inflation and the ongoing effects of Covid on our residents and our businesses.

Whilst we have successfully paid 4,281 grants totalling £46 million to Walsall businesses during the pandemic, Covid has significantly impacted the retail sector in particular, on top of the pre-Covid shifting patterns to more of an 'online' presence, and is changing the traditional shopping experience, with the closure of a number of retail outlets in the town centre.

My administration is taking forward the Walsall Town Centre Masterplan, Future High Streets Connected Gateway Programme and the Town Deal Programmes for Walsall and Bloxwich to secure a brighter and more prosperous future for our town and Borough as a whole. Work also continues to bring forward important employment sites such as Phoenix 10, further setting the pace for recovery.

Future prospects for our residents and local businesses are being improved by the delivery of a set of employment, skills and business support programmes which are vital to strengthen our workforce and business base to meet the ongoing challenges, driving success in our local economy.

We can be proud of the many great developments we have seen over the past few years – for example, commencing the main construction phase of the £78 million complete redevelopment of the M6 junction 10 to improve the infrastructure for the Borough including intelligent traffic signal technology installations along the A454 and A4148 and continued work on a number of new housing development schemes across the borough, with multimillion pound investment secured from the WMCA and BC LEP including strategic sites at Wards Keep, Primrose Lodge, Raleigh Street, Lockside, and Goscote Lane, which in total will deliver 1,195 new homes, including 270 affordable properties.

## **Finance**

As we await the Autumn Budget in October we know that although investment into Health and Social Care is forthcoming, savings and efficiencies across all other areas will be needed to fund this as it affects social care. I will share further details of the local impact of this following the announcement. 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. Between 2010/11 and 2021/22, Walsall has lost c£106m in funding from Central Government. Alongside cost pressures over the same period, savings of c£230m have had to be identified and implemented.

There continues to be cost pressures in areas such as Children's Services and Adult Social Care both due to increased demand and changes in demographics and this continues to be the picture for Local Government as a whole. As such, 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'm also awaiting the implications of the Government's Build Back Better Plan as to the specific impact for Walsall. I will maintain the priority given to these areas of work. In doing so, the Council has invested £26.4m in Children's Services over the last 5 years and we will commit an additional £10m investment over the next 2 years.

I also attach high priority to the care of older people. Covid has had a huge impact on the care and health sector. More people are increasingly needing complex care packages for longer periods of time, there is additional pressure on providing care from freeing up hospital beds as soon as possible, in domiciliary care capacity issues and the pandemic has exacerbated the pressure in these already pressured services. 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 and this will have a further significant impact from the higher NI payable within the Build Back Better Plan which is still being calculated.

Adult Social Care has seen investment of £32.7m over the last 5 years with a further £15m investment planned for over the next 2 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 in supporting our residents, communities and businesses through what has been a tremendously difficult period for many and the economic growth and regeneration that we aim to deliver to put the Town and the Borough on the best possible footing.

The Council received £157m of various Covid funding during 2020/21 and a further £16m in 2021/22 to date which is expected to be fully utilised in supporting essential service delivery to those most in need, businesses and residents through this extremely difficult period.

I am expecting a balanced budget in this financial year due to the success of the transformation programme and the hard work and focus by all staff in delivering the savings that Council agreed. I will be presenting my administrations' plans for the medium term financial outlook and next years' budget to Cabinet in October and again in December.

## **Regional Arrangements**

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. Walsall Council accepted the role of Single Accountable Body for the Black Country LEP back in October 2018, so far we have successfully administered £282m across the Black Country, with £104m directly benefitting the borough of Walsall.

There is around £4m of LEP funds still to be invested across the Black Country with a further £54m Enterprise Zone surplus' forecast, we will continue to develop projects that can compete

for these resources. Examples of Walsall projects currently live include; Junction 10 of the M6 being completely updated to improve current traffic flow and accommodate future demands, the nearby Walsall / Darlaston Enterprise Zone, with many sites, including Phoenix 10 now coming to life, with the capacity to create almost 160,000m<sup>2</sup> of new industrial floor space, and up to 2400 new jobs over the years to come.

We will continue to utilise our Accountable Body skills for the Black Country LEP, but also locally for Walsall, which together with applying our project delivery strengths will ensure the successful administration of key Walsall programmes now being directly funded by government. These include; the Bloxwich and Walsall Town Fund applications which, together with our accelerated programme, have successfully levered in over £44m to deliver a range of exciting projects, that together with the £11m secured from the Future High Street fund for Walsall, will help to ensure their viability for years to come.

## **Transformation and Digital**

### **Technology**

Technology and digital services are fundamental to the success of our transformation at Walsall Council. Through ongoing investment in technology, staff have the best tools, software and systems to be able to carry out their job effectively ultimately helping to serve our residents and businesses. This includes ensuring that staff can work effectively from different locations and supporting them to collaborate and communicate. Our ICT service and the technology this team supports has been instrumental in ensuring council services have continued to be delivered during the pandemic.

Work continues to ensure the council's systems are protected and are resilient, greater customer reliance on self-service access means that the systems we provide must be available and functioning 24x7.

By exploiting the benefits of the technology we have already acquired, we are improving how we share information and manage our documents.

We have acknowledged the successful delivery of the council's ICT Strategy, a 4 year plan which is now being refreshed and developed as a Digital Strategy for 2022-25 and it will support the priorities and outcomes of the Council's Corporate Plan to address areas of digital equality and easier access to online services.

### **Transformation**

As stewards of public funds, it is our responsibility to transform Walsall into a place where employees are Proud to work, where residents are Proud to live and where businesses are Proud to operate.

Walsall's Proud transformation is changing the council's ways of thinking, and the ways of working to achieve a better customer experience, increased employee satisfaction and engagement, and improved service efficiency and performance. Using digital and technology opportunities, the council is streamlining processes and improving service delivery to make it easier for customers to engage and access services quickly and effectively. Our transformation aspirations will see the council deliver £70m efficiencies of three years, on target to deliver £28.9m during this current financial year.

To support the transformation journey, over the last two years we have made changes to our leadership and worked with a strategic partner to enable our Proud transformation.

Our Proud transformation activity is split across several workstreams of activity that focus on specific areas of improvement across the council.

The Customer Access Management workstream is modernising and improving the way our customers can access council services to make information, reporting and access to service delivery readily available through online means.

As a council, we are led by the communities we serve, our customers help shape the services we provide and how they are delivered. In our November 2020 COVID-19 residents survey, 67%\* of respondents who contacted or interacted with Walsall Council from March to November rated their experience as good or very good. The most common method of interacting with Walsall Council throughout the pandemic has been the website, followed by email, telephone and council social media pages.

Back office support services such as HR, Finance, Legal and ICT are also transforming and adapting their services to better meet the business needs of their internal customers as well as the needs of our residents.

Focusing on how the council spends its budgets and generates income and the Third Party Spend workstream is reviewing existing and future supplier contracts to ensure appropriateness and value for money with the Income Generation workstream seeking to identify opportunities to deliver savings for the council and deliver new services that generate income.

*\*2,225 respondents*

## **Communications Marketing and Brand**

The Council is shaping a new team that will focus on Communications Marketing & Brand. A team that will bring together expertise and proactively tell the story of the Council and the story of Walsall.

The staff and members intranet site Inside Walsall has been updated to make it clearer for users and to help increase engagement. Similar work is ongoing to build on the success of our existing Council website.

A major campaign to promote Walsall has been launched. "We are Walsall" is a campaign that showcases Walsall through its people and its vibrant communities. Although Walsall town centre will be the main focus other district centres will be promoted during the campaign.

## **Council strategy & the Corporate Plan**

The 2021/22 Corporate Plan<sup>1</sup> was published on 01 April 2021, which is a refreshed version to the 2018/21 publication. The plan presents the council's continued focus on five (5) priorities - Economic growth, People, Internal focus, Children, and Communities. To ensure we are transparent and accountable on performance, these priorities have been underpinned by 10 outcomes and 20 Markers of Success. These are reported quarterly to Cabinet tracking the level of progress throughout the year.

## **Council Strategy and Policy**

To build in our ability to put Walsall at the forefront regionally, we are developing new Policy and Strategy and Business Insights teams. These will be central teams within the new

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<sup>1</sup> [Corporate Plan \(walsall.gov.uk\)](https://www.walsall.gov.uk/corporate-plan)

corporate hub that will develop corporate strategy whilst supporting consistent policy development, ensuring there is a golden thread throughout the Council that supports our ambition to meet the outcomes for our residents.

This will give us the capability and capacity to more efficiently drive our aspirations for improved outcomes for residents built on better understanding about what's important to our residents. We are keen to learn from others; where best practice can be applied to how we do things and learn from colleagues elsewhere where they have significantly improved at pace. We also have good practice to share that highlights Walsall as a Borough of choice and these teams will provide the opportunity for us to have a wider voice in the region.

Together these two new services will enable us to plan and prioritise more effectively and assure ourselves that all service areas are working towards a shared outcome and reflect the values of the organisation, as we continue on our transformation journey.

I remain as ever committed to open and transparent governance and so during the course of the municipal year, regular reports will be made by cabinet members on the key issues outlined in this report